

The Fête galante:

Fête galante (courtship party) is a term referring to a category of painting specially created by the French Academy in 1717 to describe Antoine Watteau's (1684–1721) variations on the theme of the fête champêtre which featured figures in ball dress or masquerade costumes disporting themselves amorously in parkland settings.

When Watteau applied to join the French academy in 1717, there was no suitable category for his works, so the academy simply created one rather than reject his application.

Watteau specifically created the fête galante painting style as a compromise between two drives. On the one hand, most of his funding came from private individuals, rather than from the government. On the other hand, Watteau wanted recognition from the government-appointed Académie des Beaux-Arts.

The Académie ranked scenes of everyday life and portraits, the paintings most desired by private patrons, as lower than morally educational paintings illustrating history and mythology. By portraying his patrons in scenes reminiscent of the mythologized land of Arcadia, where humans had supposedly lived in leisurely harmony with nature, Watteau was able to get his paintings the highest ranking at the Académie and still flatter his buyers.

Context:

After the death of Louis XIV in 1715, the aristocrats of the French court abandoned the grandeur of Versailles for the more intimate townhouses of Paris where, elegantly attired, they could play and flirt and put on scenes from the Italian commedia dell'arte.

Fête galante paintings are an important part of the rococo period of art, which saw the focus of European arts move away from the hierarchical, standardized grandeur of the church and royal court and toward an appreciation for intimacy and personal pleasures. Nonetheless, the lush, outdoor settings of fête galante paintings were often mined from earlier paintings, especially from Venetian paintings of the 16th century and Dutch paintings of the 17th century.

Pilgrimage to the Isle of Cythera:

The painting portrays a "fête galante"; an amorous celebration or party enjoyed by the aristocracy of France during the Régence after the death of Louis XIV, which is generally seen as a period of dissipation and pleasure, and peace, after the sombre last years of the previous reign.

The work celebrates love, with many cupids flying around the couples and pushing them closer together, as well as the statue of Venus (the goddess of sexual love). There are three pairs of lovers in the foreground. While the couple on the right by the statue are still engaged in their passionate tryst, another couple rises to follow a third pair down the hill, although the woman of the third pair glances back fondly at the goddess's sacred grove. At the foot of the hill, several more happy couples are preparing to board the golden boat at the left.

With its light and wispy brushstrokes, the hazy landscape in the background does not give to any clues about the season, or whether it is dawn or dusk. It has often been noted that, despite the title, the people on the island seem to be leaving rather than arriving, especially since they have already paired up. Many art historians have come up with a variety of interpretations of the allegory of the voyage to the island of love. Watteau himself purposely did not give an answer.

After Watteau's death, his art fell out of fashion. During the French Revolution, some eighty years after the work was painted, his depictions of lavishly set pastoral escapades were associated with the old days of the monarchy and a frivolous aristocracy. This particular piece, which had entered the collection of the Louvre in 1795, was used by art students for target practice; an account by Pierre Bergeret (1782–1863) describes the drawing students throwing bread pellets at it.