

ALLEGORY OF MUSIC - Carle Van Loo (1707- 1765)

On a recent visit to the Wallace Collection in London, I chanced upon an 18th century gold snuffbox decorated with enamel miniatures. The lid featured three musicians, and I immediately knew where I had seen them previously: on a Lauronce fan.



Snuffbox from the Wallace Collection



Lauronce Fan

The catalogue identified the painter of the original design as Carle Van Loo.

Charles-André Van Loo, or Carle Van Loo, as he chose to be called, was one of the most influential artists at the Court of Louis XV. Patronized by Madame de Pompadour, he worked for her until his death, when he was succeeded by Boucher as *Premier peintre du Roi*.

The scene reproduced on the snuffbox and on the Lauronce fan is part of a set of four overdoor paintings commissioned in 1753 by Mme de Pompadour for her château at Bellevue near Paris. They represent the allegories of the Four Arts: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture and Music and had great success at the time.



Painting



Sculpture



Architecture



Music

The use of children to represent the allegories was a novelty, soon copied by other painters, among them Boucher. An engraved version was made as early as 1756, allowing more copies to be produced. So that nowadays it is difficult to know for sure which set is the original one: even more so as the château doesn't exist anymore. It seems that the set in the Victoria and Albert Museum is a contemporary copy and that the San Francisco Museum of Fine Arts owns the real thing.

To humour his patron Van Loo added a personal touch to each painting: the marble head in the Sculpture allegory is Louis XV, the model sitting for Painting is the marquise's daughter, Alexandrine Le Normant d'Étiolles, aged 9, the château in the Architecture allegory is Bellevue. As for Music the painter is said to have based the harpsichord player's features on Mme de Pompadour herself, subtracting a good twenty years to his famous patron's age.

On the Lauronce fan the most remarkable change concerns the age of the musicians: the cello and violin players have aged from children to teen agers whereas the keyboard player is definitely not a

child anymore. Logically if the original depicted a youthful Mme de Pompadour, we should now be watching the marquise at a later age. Yet comparisons with portraits fail to show any tell-tale likeness.



Marquise or not marquise, the fact is that the most original characteristic of Van Loo's painting, the one for which he was acclaimed in 1753, has somehow been lost in the next century. It is all the more surprising considering the large number of Lauronce fans featuring children. I suppose the engraving on which Lauronce based his fan leaf had already made the change. Subsequent copies of Van Loo's paintings had probably slowly altered the original design. More than a century later the buzz created by Van Loo's novelty in having depicted children had died away: it was high time that the armies of cherubs and putti that had invaded the art world should come of age.
