

## COMPASSIONATE REVELLERS - Jacques Joseph Léopold Loustau (1815- 1894)

Born on May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1815 Loustau was a deaf-and-dumb artist who produced portraits, history and genre scenes and exhibited regularly at the Salon from 1842 until his death on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1894, of a stroke while at work in his studio. Critics appreciated his small, witty paintings but objected to the uniformity of his touch.

In 1879 Loustau sent two exhibits to the Salon: '*Inez and Ellen's Escape*', inspired by an episode in James Fenimore Cooper's novel '*The Prairie*' in which the two characters escape from captivity at the hands of the Teton tribe.

An engraving of the second exhibit is reproduced in the '*Journal Illustré*' dated August 24<sup>th</sup>, 1879.



A group of young men and women in fancy dress for a ball or carnival have interrupted their merrymaking to assist a poor beggar woman and her child. Pierrot is holding his hat to a couple in Directoire dress, while a pretty dairy maid out of Marie-Antoinette's Trianon is encouraging her companion, a florid Polichinelle, to dip generously into his pocket. A lady in plumed hat and cloak is addressing some words of comfort to the destitute woman.

The painting features on a Lauronce fan but shows a major change. The woman sitting on the pavement and holding her child has been replaced by a young girl draped in a red shawl, who could be a Little Red Riding Hood or Victor Hugo's Cosette.



How or why this change was made cannot be explained at the moment. The engraving in the *Journal Illustré* is made from a photographic reproduction by Goupil, so it is certain to be faithful to the original painting. This means that Lauronce would be responsible for the substitution. It is not the first occurrence of an original design being altered more than required by the simple technical adaptation of a painting to a fan leaf. [ In the same chapter, see Studies # 21,22,27 and 28]

The change considerably alters the meaning of the original painting. Though the little girl looks forlorn and not very well-off the reference to begging has disappeared from the scene and the theme of compassionate help is lost. We could be watching street artists appealing to the public's generosity after a performance.

At the moment there is only one known surviving copy of this lithograph, on pale pink cotton satin, heavy wooden sticks with a pierced pattern that can be frequently found on other fans by Lauronce. A pencilled inscription at the back of the guard reads:

*"Souvenir du 17 mai 1881. L.L."*



The Paris Salon took place in springtime, and we have seen that Loustau's painting was reproduced in the press as early as the following summer. As fans are fashion items it is quite likely that the leaves featuring the latest Salon exhibits should have been available as early as possible. Yet a good chromolithograph must have had quite a long shelf-life: for instance the 1876 painting "A Fete in the Middle-Ages" by Moreau is to be found on a Lauronce fan as late as 1891 [See the article 'Royat 1891' in the chapter 'Focus on' ]. In the case of this fan, at least two years, even more, considering that the inscription refers to the remembrance of a past event.

Consequently it is possible to say for sure that the fan can't have been made before 1879 but not to know for sure the exact date of the making.

As for the mysterious person who signs L.L. it is of course not possible to identify him/her. The style of the fan itself, its subject, the coarse cotton leaf, the unsophisticated wooden sticks, all rule out, in my opinion, an engagement or wedding present. Moreover a husband or a boyfriend would only sign with one letter, the initial of his first name.

But fans were so much part of a woman's life that they could be presented on any occasion, as shown by these few words scribbled on the lining, barely visible now, vanished like the two unknown shadows from the past who shared a happy memory, safely sealed in the folds of a fan.

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