

LOVE IN THE FRENCH THEATRE / THE INDIFFERENT MAN - Antoine Watteau (1684-1721)

A friend of mine owns a fine Lauronce fan which she refers to as 'My Watteau'. Research has proved her right but has also brought to light an unexpected twist. For if the fan is indeed copied from Watteau, the elements composing it come from two different paintings.



The left side of the fan leaf shows part of *Love in the French Theatre*, a painting now in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin.

The female figure, with her hands to her skirt hinting at a curtsy or a dance step, the wine flask and the white silk shawl draped over the stone margin of the fountain, the couple in the background, all are faithfully duplicated.



L'Amour au théâtre français

The rest of the painting has been omitted: the crowd of spectators and the musicians on the left, the male figure dressed in pink who is 'clinking glasses' with the couple in the background, and all the other figures, including the red-clad suitor, with his hands behind his back, courting the lady from a distance. Instead we find one of the most famous of Watteau's figures: *L'Indifférent* (The Indifferent Man).



L'Indifférent

This intriguing painting has been widely commented upon: even great writers like Claudel, Rilke or Jonathan Littell have tried to unlock its mystery. Interpretations mingle depictions of narcissism, poetic vacuity and sexual rituals.

The aim of this study is not to add another comment to these scholarly writings but to try and understand how such an improbable medley has found its way onto a Lauronce fan.

To start with some differences can be pointed out between Lauronce's *Indifférent* and its model: the hat has a different shape, the rose in the right hand is missing, not to mention the colours, which are just the opposite. It seems that the lithographer has not worked from a reliable source. We have seen in other studies that Lauronce tends to 'copy copies', that is, to use printed versions of the paintings. The more accurate the printed reproductions, the more faithful the fan leaf, the reverse being equally true.

Ever since the 18th century Watteau's paintings had been widely reproduced. His friend and patron Jean de Julienne had the best artists engrave them: Audran, Larmessin, Aveline, even young F.Boucher. But these were high-quality artistic engravings, fit for collectors, not the type of prints to be found at lithographers' workshops one century later.

Illustrated magazines are a more likely possibility when identifying Lauronce's sources. I have found reproductions of *Love in the French Theatre* in two contemporary magazines: the *Illustration Européenne* and the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*. But neither shows any change concerning the male figure.



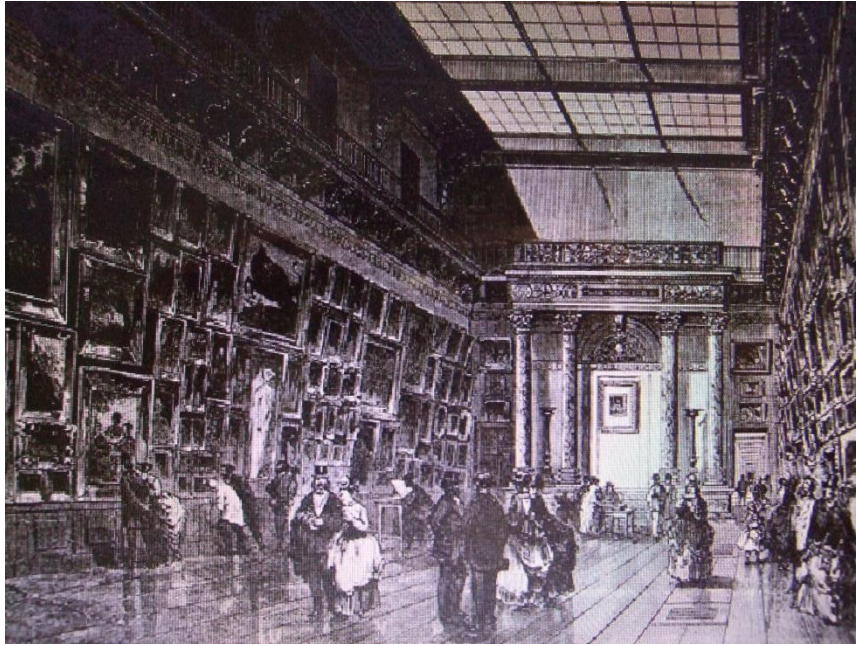
L'illustration Européenne



La Gazette des Beaux-Arts

So the change could well have been initiated by Lauronce himself.

Watteau's *L'Indifférent* was among the 583 paintings bequeathed to the Louvre in 1869 by the great collector Louis La Caze (1798-1869). A true connoisseur La Caze owned masterpieces by great Flemish masters like Hals or Rembrandt. His collection was also rich in 18th century French art and the Louvre inherited major works by Watteau, Chardin and Lancret. According to La Caze's wishes 275 paintings were exhibited in the Louvre, the rest enriching other French museums. A special gallery was devoted to this exhibition, with Emperor Napoleon III and Empress Eugénie making the inaugural visit on March, 15th 1870.



Exhibition of the La Caze Collection at the Louvre in 1870

The *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* devoted two articles to the La Caze Exhibition, in May and July 1870. Other magazines must have echoed this artistic and social event. As a shrewd businessman, always on the look-out for novelty and new trends (he had to be, if he wanted to sell fans, the acme of fashion accessories) Lauronce must have seized on this 'Watteau-mania', as he had in 1866 with Géricault's painting *The Derby at Epsom*. [See Study #15]

L'Indifférent all by himself on a fan leaf would have looked forlorn. So he used part of another painting as a prop. A perfect case of artistic irreverence, I'm afraid: I can hear loud cries from purists condemning such liberty. At least he chose for his 'pasticcio' two paintings from the same artist: we have been spared the sight of a chimera half-Watteau, half-Boucher or Fragonard, or who knows what else ...
