

THE MINUET - Adrien Moreau (1843-1906)

Having exhibited medieval scenes at the 1875 and 1876 Salons Moreau chose in 1878 to illustrate another of his favourite era: the 17th century. Such subjects enabled him to combine history and genre.



A merry company has assembled outside the massive gate of the castle. Family and friends are watching some ladies and gentlemen dancing the minuet, accompanied by musicians.

The minuet is the most famous of ancient French dances. In every language its name is evocative of dainty *marquis* in powdered wigs and *marquises* as delicate as Sèvres porcelain figures, a symbol of a carefree, light-hearted world that came to an end with the French Revolution. But the minuet cannot be reduced to such simplistic vision. It probably originated in the robust 'branle à mener' of the peasants from the Poitou region. Its name could be derived from the French 'menu' [small, minute] but could also be a mispronunciation of 'mener' [to lead]

In the 1660s Lully introduced the minuet to the Court and included many of them in his ballets to humour his patron, Louis XIV, who had a passion for dance. In the 18th century the minuet invaded other types of music, not simply ballet: it was part of the instrumental suite, inserted between the saraband and the gigue, and became the third movement of that novelty, the symphony. The 'tempo di minuetto' survived until the Romantics replaced it with fiery scherzi.

In choosing the 17th century as a setting for his minuet Moreau probably wished to go back to its origin as a peasants' dance. Of course the party of gentlemen and ladies is not a gang of rustics, but they are not courtiers either, mere provincial gentry. They are dancing outside, for the sheer pleasure of entertainment and their good-humour pervades the scene. As usual Moreau has a message for us, about 'good old times' and idealized past. Yet it seems to me that in his wish to rewind the time machine, he has gone a bit too far. He dressed his figures in clothes that would be appropriate for the reign of Louis XIII, at least as he and his contemporaries figured them.



Jean Ernest Meissonier (1815-1891): Self-portrait in Louis XIII Costume

Lauronce's fan leaf does away with the castle and a good number of figures as well. Only two couples of dancers remain, and two onlookers. The musicians have gone.



As I knew the fan by Lauronce before the painting by Moreau, I thought it was another of these 'galant walk in the park' scenes. Ever since the study of 'La Vicaria' by Fortuny [#3] I have noticed that Lauronce's adaptations are not always relevant: there, a wedding ceremony without a vicar, here, a minuet without music.

