

THE LOST SUPPER - Adrien de Boucherville (? – 1912)



In a richly furnished rococo room a table has been set for supper. The maid bringing a dish of chicken and veg has just slipped on the floor. Madame looks appalled, half-rising from her seat to get a better view of the mess whereas Monsieur seems to be having great fun and finding the incident most exhilarating.

Adrien de Boucherville is a little-known French painter – his birthdate is not certain: 1827 or 1845 according to various sources. He painted genre scenes in 18th century or contemporary surroundings. The one reproduced here is dated 1874 and though it may seem insipid at first glance, verging on bad taste, a closer look reveals some interesting features.

The artist chose to depict the scene at the very moment when the maid has just lost her balance. Her pose is physically impossible, without any stability. The chicken is already on the floor but the other ingredients of the dish are suspended in mid-air on the edge of the tray or a few inches off the ground. The comparison with a cinematographic frozen frame comes to mind, as in the previous study, 'The Derby at Epsom' [#15]. Of course Géricault's painting has more breath than this vapid gallant scene but both are a testimony to the quest of 19th century painters striving to get a realistic depiction of movement. Did Boucherville know chronophotography, the new photographic technique that allowed to visualize the different phases of a specific movement? I doubt he did, for the way he paints it the servant's fall looks awkward. Géricault's horses, elongated, distorted by speed were much more convincing. In fact Boucherville paints a static scene within a static scene and never achieves a feeling of movement. It has not occurred to him that movement could only originate not from the pose of the model but from the way he painted it: that goal would only be reached by laying aside this type of stiff, academic touch and letting the brush run freely on the canvas.



On the fan by Lauronce an odd element immediately catches the eye: a wicker basket with bottles of wine has been added to the left. As the background has been replaced with foliage, the scene suddenly turns from family supper to genial outdoor revelling. The lithographer having been heavy-handed with red ink, the gentleman's cheeks are flushed with too much drinking. The lady, now fully standing, is no longer distressed at her maid's predicament but is staring at us with a knowing smile on her lips as if she were the only sober person in the scene.

That's why the title "Ivresse" had seemed a good choice when I bought the fan. Now that I know the painting I am not so sure about the inebriety of these respectable people.

In fact the title remains a mystery. The painting was sold by an English auction house, which failed to mention the original French name: I wonder if the auctioneer made a pun on 'Lost/Last Supper' unawares, or if he was trying to render the irony of the original.

Further research may bring an answer to this question, as well as to many others: for instance, is Lauronce responsible for the changes described above, or did he copy an altered version? What did

the engraving of the painting look like ? Was it a popular Lauronce subject ? Mine seems to be the only surviving copy.