

WATTEAU, VERLAINE, DEBUSSY: A STUDY IN ARTISTIC REACTIONS

How the "Fêtes Galantes" of the Eighteenth Century Painter Have Been Translated Into the Poetry of Verlaine and the Music of Debussy

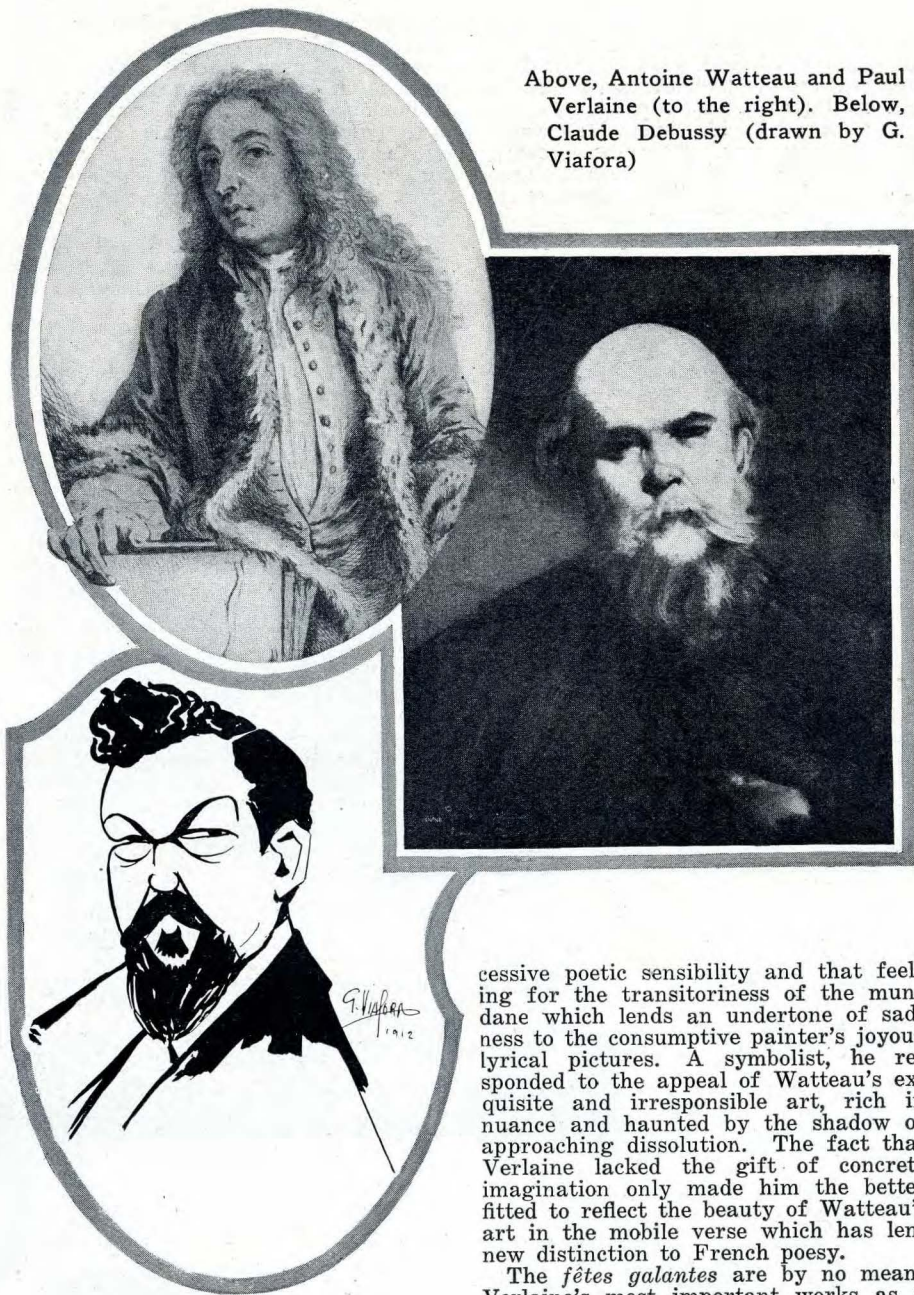
By FREDERICK H. MARTENS

"THE gayest scenes of pastoral elegance, in a land out of time, a No-Man's Land of blue skies, beautiful women, gallant men and lovely landscapes." Such is Huneker's description of the *fêtes galantes* of Watteau,* the canvases in which that painter idealizes the spirit of eighteenth century France, with a delicacy of feeling and an insight not to be found in the works of his followers Lancret, Boucher and Fragonard. The very mention of Watteau's name still "evokes in men's minds a memory of the melancholy that was his, arrayed in garments of azure and rose," and recalls his dreams of gallant innocence, which cloak in beauty the moral degeneracy of his time.

Like Boucher and Fragonard, Watteau was a society painter, the brilliant gatherings of the lords and ladies who frequented the famous gardens of the Luxembourg, to which he had access as the assistant to the custodian, the fashionable artist, Audran, supplying him with models. Yet while Boucher and Fragonard were content to portray the mere sensuous elegance and voluptuous grace of the society of their epoch, Watteau has limned its very soul in his paintings. The school whose founder and first exemplar he was, marked, it is true, a reaction in favor of naturalism against the pompous insincerity and decadent classicism of the age of Louis XIV, yet this naturalism was masked with convention. Watteau's entrancing landscapes, with their clear meadows and shaded woodland dells, are piquantly peopled by the society folk of the Regency, dressed in the latest fashions, though the sharp contrast between nature and art only lends the greater charm to his work. In his masterpiece, "L'Embarquement pour Cythère," the fluttering cupids, accessories of Greek mythology, that hover over this idyllic setting forth of gallants and ladies in court costume to the island of love, are the children of some *rococo* Venus, with *talons rouges* and powdered hair. They may have played in the gardens of St. Germain, never on the slopes of the Idalian mount. And clear sky and lucent water, tender color and graceful movement emphasize the happy *insouciance* of this epicurean society, whose light laughter was ere long to be drowned in the roll of revolutionary drums on the Place de Grève.

Watteau, when he first went to Paris in 1702 painted saints and madonnas by the dozen for a picture-factory at the Pont-Notre-Dame, in consideration of three francs a week and a diurnal plate of soup. In 1717 he was admitted to the

*FÊTES GALANTES. 1er recueil. 1. En Sourdine. 2. Fantoche. 3. Clair de Lune. E. Froment, Paris. 2e recueil—1. Les Ingénus. 2. Le Faune. 3. Colloque Sentimentale. A. Durand et Fils, Paris.



Above, Antoine Watteau and Paul Verlaine (to the right). Below, Claude Debussy (drawn by G. Viafora)

Academy as *maître des fêtes galantes*, and only four years later his brief career of restless creative activity was ended by consumption. His work was long held in but slight esteem, though after 1875, largely owing to the brothers de Goncourt, he came into his rightful heritage of appreciation. Yet Watteau's wildest flights of fancy would never have suggested to him that a hundred and fifty years after his death a fellow academician, a poet, would interpret the immobile beauty of his canvases, his *fêtes galantes*, *conversations galantes* and *fêtes champêtres*, in living words. And that a score of years later another poet, a poet in tone, would color with liquid music the word-pictures of his predecessor, and complete the cycle of artistic reactions.

Verlaine's Poetry

Paul Verlaine shared Watteau's "nostalgia of the open road," his ex-

cessive poetic sensibility and that feeling for the transitoriness of the mundane which lends an undertone of sadness to the consumptive painter's joyous lyrical pictures. A symbolist, he responded to the appeal of Watteau's exquisite and irresponsible art, rich in nuance and haunted by the shadow of approaching dissolution. The fact that Verlaine lacked the gift of concrete imagination only made him the better fitted to reflect the beauty of Watteau's art in the mobile verse which has lent new distinction to French poesy.

The *fêtes galantes* are by no means Verlaine's most important works as a poet. Emotionally they pale beside the passionate conviction and original beauty of the religious poems comprised in "Sagesse" (1881) and other individual secular lyrics. And it need hardly be said that Debussy's *fêtes galantes* do not represent the tide-water mark of his genius. But as to Watteau himself, though some of the paintings of his last period (1719-1721) show greater formal development and breadth of delineation, the *fêtes galantes* is the genre in which he reigned supreme. And even if the impressionistic charm of Watteau's canvases suggested no more than a phase of the art of Verlaine and that of Debussy, in each case it has evoked a beauty which differs from their own in kind alone and not in quality. And the sympathetic comprehension of these kindred exponents of Watteau's art, spanning the gulf of years, has given new meaning to his pictures. The songs, "En Sourdine," "Colloque Sentimentale" and "Fantoche" are delightful instances of how delicately Debussy handles Ver-

Few Cycles of Art Development So Complete as This—A Subtle, Psychic Interconnection in the Trinity of Creative Minds

laine's evanescent dream-lyrics, resuscitating the spectres of emotions past and gone.

Such pictures as "L'Amour au Théâtre Italien" (Kaiser-Friedrichs Museum, Berlin) and "Une Mascarade" (Sir Edgar Vincent, London) give us a vivid idea of the *scaramouche* and *pulcinella* of the songs in question. "Les Ingénus" and "Le Faune" express the spirit of Watteau's twilight pictures in a more general manner, and it is hard to identify them with any particular canvases; but the Verlaine-Debussy "Clair de lune" at once evokes Watteau's "Les fêtes vénétiennes" (National Gallery, Edinburgh), and "Les plaisirs du Bal" (Dulwich Gallery, London). Then, too, "The Mandoline," though not included among the numbers in the two books of the *fêtes galantes*, is surely at one with them in spirit, for in its measures:

Serenading beaux are courting
Ladies fair who list, replying
Where soft azure shadows falling,
Merge and turn in glamor'd splendor
Of a rose-gray moonlight falling
While thro' the light breezes, tender,
Tinkles a mandolin's calling.

The English translation, which had to conform to a musical line already fixed, lacks, of course, the perfect suavity of the French, yet anyone who has seen the originals or even copies of "Les Jardins de Saint Cloud" (Prado, Madrid), "L'Assemblée dans un Parc" (Kaiser-Friedrichs Museum in Berlin), "L'île enchantée" (Leon Michael Levy, Paris), "Réunion champêtre" (Royal Gallery, Dresden), and "Bosquet de Bacchus" (in the possession of Lady Wange), will recognize the limpid truth and delicate characterization of the verse, so unlike the stilted pose of the time, into which Verlaine has translated the mute beauty of Watteau's landscapes and figures.

Affinity with Debussy

And Debussy, in his turn, evokes the faint, silver tinkling of the mandolin, "the sighing of the dark branches" and the silken rustle of trailing gowns in his music. There is an obvious affinity between his tonal-schemes in "half-tints of pearl-gray mists, violet twilights and sunshine the hue of pale primroses" and the atmospheric color of Watteau's impressionistic canvases. And the verses of the poet are the point of contact between color and sound. It has been well said that "poetry, eluding argument, holds out her hand to music."

Impressionism, like symbolism, has its climaxes in sensation and feeling. And the charm of Watteau, that protagonist of impressionism in painting, translated into terms of verbal rhythm by the sym-

†"THE MANDOLINE," translated by Frederick H. Martens, from "12 Songs by Claude Debussy," edited and with a preface by Charles Fontaine Manney. Oliver Ditson Company, Boston.

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