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THE FRICK COLLECTION

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RECENTLY DISCOVERED WATTEAU MASTERPIECE ON LOAN TO THE FRICK COLLECTION



Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684–1721), *La Surprise: A Couple Embracing While a Figure Dressed as Mezzetin Tunes a Guitar*, 1718–19, oil on panel, 14 ½ x 11 ½ inches; private collection; photo: Michael Bodycomb

Antoine Watteau’s magnificent picture *La Surprise* has long been deemed a masterpiece of eighteenth-century French painting by scholars and connoisseurs. The panel was originally in the collection of Nicolas Hénin (1691–1724), Councilor to the King and a close friend of the artist, for whom it may have been painted. The work then entered several prestigious Parisian collections before ending up in England and disappearing from public view. Unpublished, unexhibited, and presumed lost for nearly two hundred years, *La Surprise* was discovered in an English private collection in 2007.

The current owner’s generosity has made it possible for this important example from Watteau’s oeuvre to be admired by visitors to The Frick Collection, where the picture will be on loan for two years beginning in November of 2011. It is installed in the North

Hall, near works by other French artists, among them Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Claude Monet. The Frick’s only Watteau, *The Portal at Valenciennes*—a work from the artist’s early maturity—also hangs in this gallery. During the residence of *La Surprise* at the Frick, a series of educational programs, including public lectures and gallery talks, will be offered to deepen public appreciation of the painting. Comments Deputy Director and Chief Curator Colin B. Bailey, “The Frick Collection’s reputation for presenting outstanding single loans and its extensive collection of eighteenth-century French paintings

and decorative arts makes it the ideal venue for the display of this extraordinary work. We're so pleased to have the opportunity to welcome it to the Frick for a substantial period of time."

La Surprise, 1718–19, is an exquisite example of the *fête galante*, a genre created by Watteau (1684–1721), who depicted elegant figures engaging in flirtations and other pleasurable activities amid bucolic surroundings. The artist's pulsating colors and deft strokes of paint can be fully appreciated owing to the panel's superb condition. Below a setting sun, a man sits tuning a guitar in a lush garden. He is Mezzetin, a character from the Italian commedia dell'arte, and his costume of rose red punctuated with slashes of lemon yellow and pale blue embellishments indicates the theatrical source. Next to the serenading actor, a man in silver and white thespian costume sweeps a girl in peasant attire from her feet in an ardent embrace. The kissing couple is seemingly oblivious to both their neighbor and the curious black-and-white dog who witnesses the spectacle. Such overt theatrical allusions would have been immediately recognizable to Watteau's audience and reveal his interest in contemporary opera and drama. Watteau also sought inspiration from Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), with whom he shared a Flemish heritage. The entwined couple in *La Surprise* derives from Rubens's painting *The Kermesse* (Musée du Louvre, Paris). Watteau copied the pair in a red chalk drawing, preserved in the Musée des arts décoratifs, Paris, later adjusting their postures slightly to suit his painted composition. The panel's canine participant also derives from a work by Rubens, having been excerpted from *The Marriage by Proxy* episode in the Flemish master's *Life of Marie de' Medici* cycle (Musée du Louvre).

Despite its lengthy absence from public view, the much-admired composition was well known to eighteenth-century connoisseurs and collectors. An engraving made after it by Benoît II Audran in 1731 appeared in the *Recueil Jullienne*, a two-volume compilation of Watteau's paintings published by Jean de Jullienne, the artist's friend and occasional dealer. Further, an early copy of the picture was purchased by the Prince Regent in 1819 and is today in the royal collection at Buckingham Palace. The work's significance in the artist's oeuvre was acknowledged by his contemporaries. Pierre-Jean Mariette, the leading connoisseur and art historian of the European enlightenment, praised *La Surprise* in 1746 as "one of Watteau's best paintings." Similarly, in 1792 the prominent art dealer J. P. B. Le Brun pronounced it "among the most beautifully colored and most beautifully crafted works by the Master." Modern scholars have concurred with such assessments, and visitors to the Frick will now have an opportunity to see why this work garnered such admiration during the eighteenth century.

ABOUT THE FRICK COLLECTION AND FRICK ART REFERENCE LIBRARY

Henry Clay Frick (1849–1919), the coke and steel industrialist, philanthropist, and art collector, left his New York residence and his remarkable collection of Western paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts to the public “for the purpose of establishing and maintaining a gallery of art, [and] of encouraging and developing the study of fine arts and of advancing the general knowledge of kindred subjects.” Designed and built for Mr. Frick in 1913 and 1914 by Thomas Hastings of Carrère and Hastings, the mansion provides a grand domestic setting reminiscent of the noble houses of Europe for the masterworks from the Renaissance through the nineteenth century that it contains. Of special note are paintings by Bellini, Constable, Corot, Fragonard, Gainsborough, Goya, El Greco, Holbein, Ingres, Manet, Monet, Rembrandt, Renoir, Titian, Turner, Velázquez, Vermeer, Whistler, and other masters. Mr. Frick’s superb examples of French eighteenth-century furniture, Italian Renaissance bronzes, and Limoges enamels bring a special ambiance to the galleries, while the interior and exterior gardens and the amenities created since the founder’s time in the 1930s and 1970s contribute to the serenity of the visitor’s experience. Renowned for its exhibitions and for its highly regarded concert series and lectures, The Frick Collection also operates the Frick Art Reference Library, founded by Henry Clay Frick’s daughter, Helen Clay Frick, located in an adjoining building at 10 East 71st Street. Both a research library and a photo archive, the Frick Art Reference Library is one of the world’s great repositories of documents for the study of Western art. It has served the international art world for more than seventy-five years.

BASIC INFORMATION

General Information Phone: 212.288.0700

Web site: www.frick.org

E-mail: info@frick.org

Where: 1 East 70th Street, near Fifth Avenue.

Hours: open six days a week: 10am to 6pm on Tuesdays through Saturdays; 11am to 5pm on Sundays. Closed Mondays, New Year’s Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. Limited hours (11am to 5pm) on Lincoln’s Birthday, Election Day, and Veterans Day.

Admission: \$18; senior citizens \$15; students \$10; “pay as you wish” on Sundays from 11am to 1pm

PLEASE NOTE TO YOUR READERS: Children under ten are not admitted to the Collection.

Subway: #6 local (on Lexington Avenue) to 68th Street station; **Bus:** M1, M2, M3, and M4 southbound on Fifth Avenue to 72nd Street and northbound on Madison Avenue to 70th Street

Tour Information: included in the price of admission is an Acoustiguide Audio Tour of the permanent collection. The tour is offered in six languages: English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish.

Museum Shop: the shop is open the same days as the Museum, closing fifteen minutes before the institution.

Group Visits: Please call 212. 288.0700 for details and to make reservations.

Public Programs: A calendar of events is published regularly and is available upon request.

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