

**FROM THE FÊTE MONARCHIQUE TO THE FÊTE GALANTE:
SOCIETY AND SPECTACLE IN WATTEAU'S *LES PLAISIRS DU BAL***

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The grandes fêtes of Louis XIV were conceived as a means of dazzling his courtiers, of setting them into an enchanted, mysterious space seemingly created by the king's wizardry and control over the natural and supernatural worlds. This space was also a magnificent stage on which Louis played the lead, and the courtiers secondary roles. The theatrically inspired magic and mystery of these fêtes were captured in a series of engravings by Jean Le Pautre, one of the king's foremost engravers and decorative artists. Because of their wide distribution these would surely have been known to the artist, who often modeled his paintings on older works, yet they have been overlooked as a source for Antoine Watteau's fêtes galantes. Incorporating many of their theatrical conventions, he conspicuously adjusted them to celebrate, instead of Louis XIV and his court, an emerging post-absolutist society.¹ This essay will explore Watteau's *Les Plaisirs du bal* (fig. 1, c. 1716 – 17) as a visual commentary on Le Pautre's engraving of a court ball given as part of **Louis's grande fête of 1668** (fig. 2). Both depict the ball—itsself a perfect blend of theater and social intercourse—as the icon of a utopian, theatricalized society. As I will show, however, Watteau's ball may be interpreted as a conscious transformation of the rigid dignity of Le Pautre's bal réglé into a symbolic tribute to a

¹ Jay Caplan, *In the King's Wake: Post-Absolutist Culture in France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Caplan uses the term "post-absolutist" to refer to French art and society of the period following the death of Louis XIV, which saw the cultural decline of absolutism long before its political demise in the French Revolution

less regulated way of life as Paris replaced Versailles as the center of commercial art and entertainment.

This research emerges from recent interpretations of Watteau's paintings as a political critique of Louis XIV and Bourbon absolutism.² The painter hailed from Valenciennes, a Flemish town ruthlessly subjugated and governed by Louis XIV as a garrison for his northern wars. He began his Paris career at the Opéra, probably as a set painter, at just the time a series of stage works at that theater encoded a lively satire on Louis XIV. As I have shown elsewhere, these works, mainly opéra-ballets by André Campra and his contemporaries, reworked a series of similarly titled court ballets, transforming their praise of the king into a metacelebration of public entertainment and its Parisian audiences as a new society of pleasures.³ Watteau based certain paintings, such as *Le Pèlerinage à Cythère*, on the plots of these opéra-ballets.⁴ In paintings such as *Les Plaisirs du bal*, however, he instead took as his source iconic images of court life such as Le Pautre's ballroom scene. Created in the year or so immediately following Louis XIV's death, *Les Plaisirs du bal* transfers the theatricality characteristic of court life and art to the depiction of a society conspicuously marked by the absence of the king.

Les Plaisirs du bal: Fête galante

Like many of his fêtes galantes, Watteau's *Les Plaisirs du bal* (fig. 1) depicts couples enjoying the pleasures of leisure, conversation, and love in a garden setting. As the title

² Julie Anne Plax, *Watteau and the Cultural Politics of Eighteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; paperback ed., 2011); Georgia Cowart, *The Triumph of Pleasure: Louis XIV and the Politics of Spectacle* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008).

³ *Triumph of Pleasure*, chapters 5 – 6.

⁴ Cowart, "Antoine Watteau and the Subversive Utopia of the Opéra-Ballet," *The Art Bulletin* 83/3 (2001): 461 – 78.

indicates, the subject is a ball, featuring a dancing couple, groups of onlookers on either side, and an orchestra. The event takes place under a palatial arcade with distinctive banded columns. This kind of architectural setting may be found in several of Watteau's *fêtes galantes*. Unique to this painting, however, are the large number of figures, the presence of food and drink in the form of a buffet, and the unusual nature of the fountain and garden beyond.

The buffet is highlighted by its centrality and its frame of two lifelike caryatids supporting urns and a recessed arch (fig. 3). Between them stand another gold and silver urn and platters festooned with garlands. A massive serving dish below holds what appears to be fruit, perhaps oranges,⁵ which two young waiters are beginning to serve with beverages. A prominent shell motif may be seen in the patterns of the serving dishes on the buffet (fig. 4) and in a large stone sculpture of a shell, framing a bust in the pediment above the buffet (fig. 5). This motif contributes to a system of water imagery culminating in the fountain, whose upward thrusting jet spills into a basin extending across the entire garden seen through the archway (fig. 6). The dancing couple is framed by a large flattened arch, by the recessed arch of the buffet to the right, and by a similar recessed arch (only partially visible) to the left. The sun, low on the horizon in the background, casts its luminous rays onto the rippling surface of the pool. The quality of the light inspired Constable to describe the scene as having been “painted in honey; so mellow, so tender, so soft and so delicious”⁶ [ED: Please keep quote in English – with French translation in parens or note]

⁵ These appear with greater clarity in the copy made by Pater, now in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

⁶ Pierre Rosenberg, “Les Plaisirs du bal,” in Margaret Morgan Grasselli and Rosenberg, *Watteau, 1684 – 1721* (Washington, D. C.: National Gallery of Art, 1984), p. 368.

A few of the figures are dressed in familiar theatrical costumes. These include, in the left background, characters of the Comédie-Italienne—Pierrot, with his white suit and ruff, and to his right Arlequin, with his black mask, triangle-shaped patches, and characteristic torqued gesture (fig. 7). A Fool in his customary livery with cap and bells, holding and perhaps playing a guitar, sits with his back to the viewer in the foreground (fig. 8). Other figures, such as the bearded gentleman below the musicians, in front of the columns of the buffet, wear a type of early seventeenth-century, lace-collared costume in the style of Rubens or Van Dyck (fig. 9). Most of the other participants wear the quasi-“Spanish” costume used in the contemporary comic theater, also a popular mode of dress for costume balls and for fanciful portraiture. For women this featured a white ruff above a low décolleté, for men an old-fashioned ruff and shoulder cape over knee breeches (fig. 10). The central *danseuse* wears a feminine version of Mezzetin’s costume, with pink, white, and green stripes, along with his shoulder cape and a pinkish-burgundy toque. Both of the central dancers are modeled on Watteau’s *Bal champêtre* (fig. 11), in which the male dancer is holding castanets. In *The Pleasures of the Ball* the castanets have been omitted though the arm position remains the same. Such an arm position, even empty-handed, suggests a Spanish dance such as the folias (known in France as “les folies d’Espagne”). (See fig. 12.)⁷

As Jacqueline Touma has suggested, *The Pleasures of the Ball* represents an example of Watteau’s propensity for incorporating elements of stagecraft, creating an ambiguity as to whether he is depicting a theatrical scene, the illusion that scene is supposed to represent, or some synthesis of the two. For example, the wide arch of

⁷ I am grateful to Ana Yepes (pictured), director and choreographer for the Ensemble Donaires, and Catherine Turocy, director of the New York Baroque Dance Company, for this information.

Watteau's painting evokes the back door, or "royal" door, of a type of seventeenth-century stage design known as the façade stage. Developed from the triumphal arch of royal processions, the royal door had fallen from favor by Watteau's time, but it is used here, as in other paintings of Watteau, to suggest a distant vanishing point beyond the limits of the stage. Touma compares Watteau's garden view behind the arch, with its sketchy, impressionistic treatment (fig. 6), to the painted canvases often placed behind the royal door in theatrical productions.⁸

Jérôme de La Gorce has linked the painting to an actual stage design at the Paris Opéra—unidentified, but probably the work of chief stage designer Jean Bérain (fig. 13). The design belongs to a larger series of sets exhibiting similarities to the Palais de Luxembourg. According to La Gorce, the earliest of these may have been self-referential, since the opera house was originally located next door to the Luxembourg palace, known for its banded columns. In Watteau's time the Opéra was housed at the Palais-Royal, and this architectural style had begun to enjoy a revival – perhaps, as La Gorce suggests, as the result of Bérain's propensity for its use.⁹

This design bears some specific similarities to the architecture of Watteau's painting. These include the banded columns and the porticos protruding into the stage space from either side, which are echoed in the painting by the portico in the right background (though from a different angle, as if from within the structure suggested by the stage set). The set design also includes a large shell in the pediment of the central doorway and features prominent shell imagery in the receptacles of its fountains, into

⁸ Touma, 93.

⁹ Jérôme de La Gorce. "Quelques rapports," 141.

which dolphins mounted by cupids spout water (fig. 14). La Gorce speculates that, because of the association of water imagery with Venus, the design could have accompanied the Opéra's production of Campra's *Vénus, fête galante* in 1698. It could have also accompanied the operatic revival of *L'Eglogue de Versailles*, a one-act divertissement of song and dance celebrating the Grotte de Thétis, a small grotto-themed palace, adjacent to the northern side of the main château. First produced at Versailles in 1668 and reprised as part of the Versailles fête of 1674, the work represents a paean to the grotto as metonym for the pleasures Louis XIV offered his court. The *Eglogue* was reprised at the Opéra in 1700 under the title *La Grotte de Versailles*. The stage set, while not a replica of the Versailles Grotte, does incorporate several images associated with it, namely, Cupids riding dolphins as found on its façade, a series of arches framing fountain sculptures as found in its interior, and especially the shell motif that echoed the shell work of the Grotte.¹⁰

The Versailles Fête of 1668: Fête monarchique

Watteau's painting does not quote Le Pautre's ball scene directly, but like many of his other paintings it updates the imagery of this engraving for a new audience. The court ball (fig. 2) depicted by Le Pautre was one component of the Versailles fête of July 1668, celebrating the peace of Aix-La-Chapelle between France and Spain. The second of three grandes fêtes produced by Louis XIV at Versailles in 1664, 1668, and 1674, it was the most concentrated of the three, spanning the course of one night and concluding at dawn. The events included a collation, the performance of Lully's *Les Fêtes de l'Amour et de*

¹⁰ On water imagery in the musical theater, see Cowart, "Sirènes et Muses: De l'éloge à la satire dans la fête théâtrale, 1654 - 1703." *XVIIe siècle* (January, 2013).

Bacchus, a banquet, a ball, and finally a viewing of the illuminated château and fireworks over the Grand Canal. These events were set in different parts of the gardens of Versailles, highlighting the recent expansion of its recent landscaping, fountains, and architectural features.¹¹

A detailed account of the fête was prepared by André Félibien, Louis's court historian.¹² In 1679 Félibien's description was reissued by Ballard in an imposing folio edition that included a series of five engravings by Le Pautre. Depicting each of the five events of the fête, these were probably created at some point well after an occasion the artist had not actually witnessed. Regardless of their historical accuracy, however, they contributed to a propaganda of Versailles at a time when Louis had begun to transfer the seat of government to his palace there, a process that would become official in 1682. Providing its viewers a vicarious experience of court life at the height of its artistic luxury, Le Pautre's engravings were disseminated not only as plates in the folio edition, but also in sheets available for separate sale.¹³

The ball took place in a temporary pavilion, a *salle de bal* designed for the occasion by the architect Louis Le Vau near the site where the Fountain of Ceres now stands. The scene engraved by Le Pautre coincides with the protocol for court balls. Differing from the staged court ballet, with its costumes and elaborate stage sets, as well as the costume ball, a less formal affair in which the participants appeared in masquerade, the formal court ball (the *bal paré*) typically featured an opening group dance followed by the successive performances of noble couples dressed in court attire. Only a fraction of

¹¹ Barbara Coeyman, "Social Dance in the 1668 Feste de Versailles: Architecture and Performance Context," *Early Music* 26 (May, 1998), 264 – 85.

¹² *Relation de la feste de Versailles du 18e juillet 1668* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1669).

¹³ Coeyman, 269.

the attendees—those possessing the requisite advantages of youth, beauty, and proficiency at dancing—were invited to perform. Each couple in turn performed a dance or dance sequence under the exacting gaze of the king and the court. The quality of a dancer’s performance could have a strong influence on his or her status at court; the duc de Saint-Simon tells of a courtier disgraced because of a misstep.¹⁴ In Le Pautre’s engraving, adhering to traditional courtly iconography, Louis XIV and the queen are depicted (along with Louis’s brother and sister-in-law) in the central foreground (fig. 15); this iconographical convention may also be seen in Le Pautre’s engraving of Lully’s *Les Fêtes de l’Amour et de Bacchus*, also performed as part of the 1668 fête; see fig. 16). Court productions staged the king as much as anything else, and though only his back is seen here, his central presence commands the viewer’s attention. Other couples, probably those also slated to perform, surround the dancers, while the remaining courtiers observe from the galleries above.¹⁵

Le Pautre’s engraving and other, more technical drawings of this temporary pavilion reinforce Félibien’s emphasis on its spectacular fountains. Directly facing the king, a jet of water rises high into the air (according to Félibien’s description, to an extraordinary height of 30 feet). The engraving also shows water spewing from sculptures of aquatic creatures and grotesque masks set into niches and pedestals supporting lifelike statues of women playing musical instruments (fig. 17). These statues, set at the angles of the ballroom’s octagonal floor, appeared to provide music for the dance in the seeming absence of musicians, who were hidden from view. This effect is

¹⁴ *Mémoires complets et authentique du Duc de Saint-Simon*, vol. 1 (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1853), 58 – 59.

¹⁵ Coeyman, 271. On the ball at Louis XIV’s court, see Rebecca Harris-Warrick, “Ballroom Dancing at the Court of Louis XIV,” *Early Music* 15 (1986): 41 – 49.

exaggerated in the print, in which the statues are equal in their liveliness to the participants of the ball.

Touma maintains that Watteau's characteristic ambiguity between the reality of the stage and the illusion it was supposed to represent—a quality largely lacking in the paintings of his predecessors and contemporaries—can be traced to the world of the theatrical print. Her analysis of works in that genre, along with Guy Spielmann's investigation of theatrical frontispieces, show how these conflate theatrical reality and illusion to varying degrees. They may use features such as floorboards or obvious painted backdrops as part of a literal depiction of the stage, or absorb them into a more pictorial, "ideal" representation.¹⁶ Theatrical in their own right, Le Pautre's illustrations of the Versailles fêtes exhibit the same blend of stage reality and pictorial illusion found in theatrical prints and frontispieces. The engraving of the Versailles ball, for example, depicts a stage-like ballroom floor, where a couple performs for an audience seated in the round. The *salle du bal* is presented as a symmetrical façade stage facing the king. The central arch of the ballroom reveals an impressionistic view of the *allée* beyond, resembling a backdrop positioned behind the opening. The seating of Louis XIV and the queen directly in front of the arch bears out the meaning of the term "royal door," to which the presence immediately overhead of the official devise—a face surrounded by the sun's rays, supported by the official carriers of the Bourbon arms—lends added weight. Le Pautre's blending of historical reality and illusion is reflected in the lifelike quality of the statues, collapsing the barrier between Louis XIV's stagecraft and the

¹⁶ Touma, "From the Playhouse to the Stage: Visual Sources for Watteau's Theatrical Universe," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 40 (2011): 83 – 101; Guy Spielmann, "Text, Image, Fiction, Performance: A Case Study of Theatre Iconography from French Fairground Drama," in *Word and Image in the Long Eighteenth Century: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*, ed. Renata Schellenberg and Christina Ionescu (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008), 292 – 322.

illusion it was meant to convey. Such statuary lifelikeness is a common feature in Le Pautre's illustrations of the Versailles fêtes and deserves further study as an important source for Watteau's own ubiquitous lifelike statuary.¹⁷

Watteau's *Pleasures of the Ball* alludes to the 1668 ball in several ways. A couple dances on a ballroom floor, surrounded by a large number of onlookers. Both the male and female dancers are wearing gloves, a costume element unusual for Watteau but a part of court dress that was *de rigueur* at court balls. Watteau has crowded 65 figures onto this small canvas, approximately equivalent to the 70 figures on the dance floor of the engraving (in addition to approximately 20 in the visible tribunes). Unlike the engraving, Watteau's painting highlights the musicians, mostly sitting on gradated seats reminiscent of the tribunes. Statues figure in both works, with Watteau's caryatids evoking the lifelike statues of the print, a conflation of realistic stage design and lifelike illusion. In both, the ballroom floor is composed of similar square tiles, whose lines direct the eye to a fountain spewing a high jet of water spilling into a pool. Both fountains sit at the center of an impressive royal arch.

Watteau's water imagery continues in the arch above the buffet, in the bust set into a large shell. The shell points to the identification of the bust as a river god, whose attributes are flowers and fruits, which may be faintly discerned in the wreath (fig. 5¹⁸). The gold-and-silver serving dishes on the buffet link the scene to the banquet of the fête, which featured similar dishes on a buffet set beneath an arch (fig. 18). The bust also

¹⁷ On the living statue in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century spectacle, see Devin Michael Paul Burke, "Music, Magic, and Mechanics: The Living Statue in Ancien-Régime Spectacle" (Ph.D. dissertation, Case Western Reserve University [Cleveland], 2015).

¹⁸ Rosenberg, 368, refers to this as a laurel wreath. The high magnification afforded by digital technology seems to indicate the fruits and flowers serving as attributes of river gods; in any case, the shell links the bust to some sort of water imagery.

corresponds to two statues of river gods created especially for the fête and highlighted in the fireworks display (the subject of the final engraving). Finally, the spectacular display of fruit, blending with the golden colors of the buffet, recalls Félibien's description of "great plates of oranges" served for refreshment during the performance of Molière's comedy on another evening of the 1668 fête. Watteau's painting, then, may be linked primarily to elements of the 1668 ball, as conveyed by Le Pautre, and to details of the other events of the fête, including the banquet, comedy, and fireworks display.

The water imagery in Watteau's fountain and basin into which it spills, the large decorative shells of the buffet and pediment, and the bust of a river god may be linked more generally to the prominence of water and water imagery in the gardens of Versailles. Its fountains, numbering around 1400 by the end of Louis XIV's reign, employed the latest hydraulic technology. Through these fountains ran a complex theme of water iconography, including river gods and water nymphs. The fountains of Versailles provided Louis XIV with restful pleasure after his labors. All three of the *grandes fêtes* highlighted the Versailles fountains and water iconography as the double symbol of pleasurable respite and technological control over the elements. As many accounts attest, the fountains and water systems of Versailles created the effect on the courtiers of being transported to magical grottos and underwater realms inhabited by river gods, tritons, naiads and neriades. This imagery climaxed in the Grotte de Thétis, where fountain sculptures made of inlaid shells depicted water creatures, and an outstretched river god, made of shells, appeared above the main arch of the central foyer. This kind of water imagery may also be seen in the fountains of the *salle de bal* depicted by Le Pautre, and in Watteau's ball.

The King's Absence

As mentioned above, two engravings of Louis XIV's *grandes fêtes* (figs. 15 and 16) feature the king and queen, prominently positioned on a dais with a privileged view of the entertainment below. In another, Le Pautre's banquet scene from the fête of 1668 (fig. 19), the king may be seen gesturing toward the table of refreshments and a fountain sculpture of Parnassus with the nine Muses, a symbol of the arts in his service. In *The Pleasures of the Ball*, Watteau underscores the absence of the sovereign and his family by leaving a conspicuously empty space where they would have been seated (fig. 20). The effect is to transfer the sightline of the king and his family to that of the viewer of the painting. This perspective would place the viewer looking down on the dancers from a point higher than stage level though not as high as an opera box or balcony, more precisely at the level of the king's dais. It also places the viewer in front of the royal arch, with an optimal sightline through the arch to the fountain and beyond. The audience of Watteau's painting may then be seen as overtaking or inheriting the place of the king.

The space replacing the royal dais in Le Pautre's print is marked off in Watteau's painting by the fool with his guitar on the left and by a small spaniel on the right. As mentioned above, the arm position of the male dancer suggests a Spanish dance such as the folias ("les folies d'Espagne"). This dance, associated with castanets, tambourines, and/or guitars, acquired its name because it was so fast and noisy that the dancers seemed out of their minds.¹⁹ The proximity of the fool with his guitar supports the possibility that

¹⁹ Giuseppe Gerbino and Alexander Silbiger, "Folia," Oxford Music Online. http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/09929?q=folia&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit. Accessed 5.28.2016.

the dancer is performing such a dance. It might also point to the presence of parody or satire, for which the fool traditionally served as a symbol.

The spaniel is a direct quotation from one of the paintings in Rubens's Marie de Médicis cycle, *Proxy Wedding of Marie de' Medici with Henry IV* (fig. 21). Henri IV had become the first Bourbon king of France in 1594. His marriage to Marie in 1599 produced a line of heirs that included Louis XIV and his descendants. Watteau's dog may be seen as a symbol of the royal succession and his ball as a representation of the entertainments of an alternative, utopian society. The two spaniels and the greyhound of *The Pleasures of the Ball* (fig. 20: OMIT) were all considered to be noble breeds. One of these appears at the feet of a young servant. This boy is taken directly from Veronese's *Christ and the Centurion* (in reverse, probably from an engraving), in which he is seen as an armor bearer, holding the helmet of the centurion; here, instead of armor, he holds refreshments (fig. 22). Another reversal is seen in the turbaned African boy looking down from the roof of the portico at the right (fig. 23). Black child servants were often employed in wealthy homes, and often figured as an exotic touch in paintings of the period. Placed high above the ball, this figure is divorced from his usual role of servitude. The composite meaning here, then, could be that the society represented by *The Pleasures of the Ball*—whether following in the line of succession to the Bourbon dynasty or disrupting it— was to be a libertine and peaceful one, trading in the arms of war, religious imagery, and social hierarchy for the pleasures of music, comedy, dance, and wine.

The Pleasures of the Ball could be interpreted as a private *fête galante*, but it also might refer to the institution of the Opéra ball (*bal de l'Opéra* or *bal public*). Opéra balls

had been inaugurated in January of 1716, just after Louis XIV's death and, indeed, at precisely the time Watteau's painting is thought to have been created (1716 – 17). Highly anticipated and widely discussed, these balls, like those at court, took place after the evening's entertainment, but the Opéra balls welcomed anyone who could afford the price of a ticket. The dances, including the minuet for couples and the contredanse for groups, were similar to those used for the bals parés, but they held a different social motivation. While the bal paré sought to uphold social distinction by means of rigorous hierarchies and regulations, the Opéra ball fostered social leveling through its policy of inclusion and the practice of masking.²⁰

The Opéra balls, by all accounts electrifying in their effect on participants, contrasted dramatically with the stultifying atmosphere of the court in the King's late years. The immense ballroom floor was created by raising the floor of the parterre to the level of the stage at one end and the loges at the other. Probably sometime between 1727 and mid-century, following a renovation of the hall and the division of the orchestra into two groups performing at either end of the ballroom floor, the Opéra ball began to accommodate more than one dancing couple simultaneously. Instead of a dancing couple, the center of the ballroom floor was given over to socializing, relegating the dancers to the two ends of the hall. During Watteau's lifetime, however, the older system of individual couples dancing to the music of a single orchestra prevailed. The refreshments shown in the painting also conform to the wines and fruits typically served at Opéra balls, and to accounts from the earliest period onward attesting to their rich decorations and brilliant illumination.

²⁰ This and much of the following information on the Opéra ball is taken from Richard Semmons, *The Bals publics at the Paris Opera in the Eighteenth Century* (NY: Pendragon Press, 2004).

The behavior of the attendees in *Pleasures of the Ball* may be contrasted to that of the attendees of Le Pautre's engraving in the same ways that behavior at the public Opéra differed from that of courtiers at Louis XIV's entertainments. Recent research has suggested that courtly audiences adhered to a stronger code of decorum than public audiences.²¹ In the late years of Louis's reign, many of his court nobility escaped Versailles as often as possible to indulge in the liberating and exhilarating enjoyment of public entertainment away from his watchful scrutiny. Socializing, eating and drinking, seduction, conversation, and adventures of all kinds characterized the audiences of public theaters in this period, all known as havens of libertinism. At the Opéra ball, of course, this performativity was intensified as audience members invaded the stage itself to participate in the most literal sense.

Opéra balls were notorious for sexual intrigue and at times aggression, a quality that might explain the forwardness of two of the gentlemen on the left side of Watteau's painting. In this regard it should be noted that courtly entertainments had not been devoid of glamor and sexual intrigue. Even in his dismal late years, Louis XIV had continued to fête the courtiers with informal costume balls, though he rarely attended himself. Clearly, Watteau—who may not have known of these costume balls, since, unlike the *grandes fêtes*, they were not recorded for posterity—focused not on the historical realities and complexities, but on the neat if simplistic contrast between the rigid, static, prescribed, and formal aspect of Le Pautre's print and the informality, movement, and fluidity of the Opéra ball as depicted in his own painting. Watteau's ball is also a feast of conversation, in which almost all of the participants who are not participating in the music and dance

²¹ William Weber, "Did People Listen in the Eighteenth Century?" *Early Music* 25/4: 678–691. Georgia Cowart, "Audiences," in *The Oxford Handbook of Opera* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 666 – 684.

are either speaking or listening – another vital sign of freedom of expression, in contrast to the relative silence of the onlookers at court.²²

The Pleasures of the Ball, then, draws on elements of the 1668 fête, especially the court ball as recorded by Le Pautre. But it filters those elements through the lens of a stage set at the Opéra (itself perhaps a recreation of a court entertainment), and through its implicit comparison between the balls at court and at the Opéra. Watteau's connections with the Opéra dated from his earliest years in Paris, and he maintained relationships with Opéra personnel in his later years. His painting originated in the period immediately following the death of Louis XIV in 1715 and the return of the court to Paris. On his accession to the Regency, Philippe d'Orléans had shuttered Versailles and moved the government to the Palais-Royal, also the home of the Paris Opéra. The magnificent grandes fêtes, now over 40 years in the past, were kept alive only in the memory of the oldest courtiers and through published descriptions and engravings. Ironically, the Opéra and the Opéra ball now gave the public access not only to the kind of entertainments originally created for the king and court, but access to that entertainment within the walls of a princely palace, the Palais-Royal. The Opéra balls, then, represented a significant cultural transformation immediately following the death of the Sun King in 1715.

The Regent, who embraced public entertainment and even transacted state business from his box at the Opéra, had no need for exclusive grandes fêtes. Like his fellow nobles, he had chafed under the rigid etiquette of Versailles and frequented the Opéra as a kind of countercourt. After Louis XIV's death he sponsored its bals publics as

²² On conversation in Watteau, see Mary Vidal, *Watteau's Painted Conversations: Art, Literature, and Talk in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century France* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992).

a festive ritual upending the formalities of Louis's Versailles. The transfer of entertainment from the court to Paris, to both its public sphere of spectacle and its private sphere of the *fête galante*, was a process that had transpired gradually over the course of the late seventeenth and earlier eighteenth centuries. Though Louis XV would try to revive the caché of royal spectacle when the court returned to Versailles in the late 1720s, Paris, rather than the court, would henceforth dictate artistic taste.²³ *The Pleasures of the Ball* celebrates this evolution. Like Louis XIV's fêtes, it uses theatrical illusion to dazzle its viewers and to transport them into a utopian space filled with magic and mystery. But whereas the fêtes immortalized by Le Pautre emphasized the dominating presence of the king, Watteau's painting emphasizes his absence, and the pleasures of court life without its strictures.

²³ The court returned to Versailles in 1722, where it remained until the Revolution. Court entertainment after the return, however, generally remained under the influence of Paris, rather than being influenced by Paris as in earlier times.