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**Stepping Out of the Sun: Watteau and Freedom in the Early Eighteenth
Century**

By

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Art History

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In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, the status of the French aristocratic class awarded them with great privileges that went unknown to the majority of the kingdom. Many aristocrats lived at Versailles, the home of Louis XIV, a luxurious palace that veiled its courtiers in glimmering light and with intricate gardens. But, the beauty at hand did not paint the full picture, as this era was constituted by the rule of Louis XIV. Deemed the Sun King, Louis XIV viewed himself as possessing a God-given right to rule, and believed sternly that this granted him the sole power in the kingdom. This ideology led to several distinct political and social changes that considerably restricted the accessibilities and freedoms of the French people, including those members of the aristocratic class that lived alongside the king at his grand palace, which was staged in many ways to reflect the ideology of an all-powerful Sun King. There was a potent craving for freedom, and the Rococo style arose from this desire in the early eighteenth century as Louis XIV's rule drew near its end, into an artistic type full of soft, idyllic scenes that contrasted with the rigid lifestyle the Sun King's reign had made people accustomed to. Jean-Antoine Watteau was one of the most prominent artists during Rococo's early years, with his creation of the *fête galante* genre, and painter of tranquil subtleties. The political and social landscape transformed with the death of Louis XIV in 1715, where the noble class was already beginning to migrate away from Versailles to their own homes. That year, Watteau painted *La Perspective (View Through the Trees in the Park of Pierre Crozat)* (figure 1), a *fête galante* piece that possesses several qualities that reflects the transformation taking place at this turning point. Not quite at the assuredness the high Rococo would present, where lush imagery and shimmery pastels were dominant, *La Perspective* hints at what is to come, while reflecting the sentiment many felt against the monarch and his confining actions, through its distinctive

setting, depiction of light and shadow, and compositional details, representing the aristocratic desire for freedom from institutional control.

Louis XIV remains one of the most notorious French monarchs in the establishment's long and distinct history. His reign is distinguishably long, nearly three-quarters of a century, leading to an era marked with significant changes. His political ideology and eccentric, paranoid personality make his reign distinct as he held a powerful influence over his own kingdom and the rest of the Western world. The several political and social affairs of his reign make up some of the most notable events of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, as he made many changes to his kingdom that impacted the lives of the kingdom's people, remembered most clearly through the perspective of the aristocratic class, who had closer access to the king and insight into how he thought. Called the Sun King, Louis XIV strongly utilized light and the sun to symbolize the omnipotent power he believed he held, nowhere more obvious than at Versailles, his opulent palace. It was filled with light symbolizing motifs and constructed to keep the king's power at the forefront of one's mind. Louis XIV saw himself as the epitome of power, and it was evident over the course of his reign that he held this perspective.

In his time as king, Louis XIV embodied an ideology rooted in absolutism that declared he as leader of France possessed complete sovereignty from God.¹ The shift toward absolutism as a political ideology came after several centuries of power struggles in the kingdom of France, in which entities such as the Catholic Church, the noble class and the courts wrestled for power.²

¹ Andrew Mansfield, "The Reign of Louis XIV: Absolute Monarchy," in *Ideas of Monarchical Reform: Fénelon, Jacobitism, and the Political Works of the Chevalier Ramsay*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 105.

² Mansfield, "The Reign of Louis XIV: Absolute Monarchy," 106.

As infighting rose in the 16th century, the theory of absolutism was championed as the solution,³ asserting that rather than dividing power further, it would remain with the monarchy where it belonged. Louis XIV maintained this ideology, and further expanded it to ensure that he held total power as sovereign.

He was heavily influenced by the Church and their ideas of sovereignty and rule in how he developed his ideals as ruler. Early dogmas of the Christian Church generally declared that all authority stems from God, later claiming that kings acquired their authority directly from God.⁴ The “Divine Right of Kings” doctrine was employed throughout kingdoms in the West, and further asserted monarchy as a divinely ordained institution, and that kings are only accountable to God.⁵ The Bishop of Meaux, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, provided the most notable defenses of absolutism as an ideology for the monarchy. A figure favored by the royal court, Bossuet supported absolutism in regards to the French monarchy in writings from 1682 and 1709, justifying the centralization of France around Louis XIV as it dispelled rebellion amongst the people and provided a sense of unity for the kingdom, as well as defending Louis XIV’s excessive actions of control through the divine ordination his kingship granted.⁶

With backing from the Church, Louis XIV not only accepted ideas concerning sovereignty established by religion, but furthered them as well, all in a way that granted him more and more power. He accepted as truth the ideas relating to his divine ordination and right, while additionally settling upon the idea that all subordinate entities of his society, such as the Church, the aristocracy, etc., were subject to his will, and that he held absolute authority over the

³ Mansfield, “The Reign of Louis XIV: Absolute Monarchy,” 106.

⁴ Paul W. Fox, “Louis XIV and the Theories of Absolutism and Divine Right,” *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science / Revue Canadienne d’Économique et de Science Politique* 26, no. 1 (1960): 130.

⁵ Fox, “Louis XIV and the Theories of Absolutism and Divine Right,” 132.

⁶ Mansfield, “The Reign of Louis XIV: Absolute Monarchy,” 106.

lives and prosperity of his subjects.⁷ Within this, Louis XIV lessened the role and power of figures like nobles, parlements, and ministers. Since medieval times, nobles had struggled to maintain their autonomy. With their greater wealth and higher status, they were able to possess private armies, land, and had privileges, both economic and legal, that deemed them as threatening.⁸ Louis XIV further circumvented the supporting roles traditionally maintained by nobility in certain apparatuses of the state.⁹ He replaced several roles that had been held by the noblesse d'épée, a distinct noble group, with his own appointed ministers, that were selected specifically to be less intelligent and nonthreatening, while minimizing the power they held.¹⁰ Across the state, Louis XIV decisively undermined any authority of the parlements as well,¹¹ keeping with the pattern of himself maintaining the majority of power.

One of the most politically significant changes made during Louis XIV's reign, and one that epitomized his desire for total control, was the elimination of the role of Prime Minister, done after the death of Prime Minister Mazarin, when the Sun King decreed that there would no longer be such a figure, as they usurped the role of the king.¹² This action aligns with his ideology of absolutism, with the power placed solely in his own hands.

Not only did the Sun King enact sweeping political changes, but social changes as well. Louis XIV saw himself as the moral keeper of his kingdom, and had a strong desire to maintain a sense of virtue within his subjects. Ironically, early in his adult life, and during the early part of his reign, Louis XIV consistently partook in actions considered "immoral," such as adultery. Yet

⁷ Fox, "Louis XIV and the Theories of Absolutism and Divine Right," 138.

⁸ Mansfield, "The Reign of Louis XIV: Absolute Monarchy," 107.

⁹ Mansfield, "The Reign of Louis XIV: Absolute Monarchy," 110.

¹⁰ Mansfield, "The Reign of Louis XIV: Absolute Monarchy," 117.

¹¹ Mansfield, "The Reign of Louis XIV: Absolute Monarchy," 110.

¹² Mansfield, "The Reign of Louis XIV: Absolute Monarchy," 106.

upon his marriage to Madame de Maintenon, a seeming rebirth of the moral ideas set in place by his mother in his childhood, and more robust religious intervention, the Sun King adopted more virtuous ideals. As a result, he began implementing more vigorous restrictions in the 1680s to lessen immoral acts across the kingdom.¹³ These changes were mainly aimed at Paris, where he sought to eliminate all acts of debauchery, such as blasphemy, prostitution, gambling, etc. The most effective strategy the king enacted was the appointing of Lieutenant of Police, an office first held by Nicholas-Gabriel La Reynie, who quickly proved his place by leading an assault on the Courdes Miracles, considered a distinctly criminal area of Paris, and was widely considered an upstanding figure.¹⁴ La Reynie utilized spies and investigators to gauge the moral landscape of the city and act accordingly, and was instructed to keep tabs on cabarets, seen by the king as “lairs fronting for sin.”¹⁵

Louis XIV decreed additional acts that limited expression, namely fashion and theater. He forbade the public wearing of masks and masked balls from taking place at court.¹⁶ The theater had long been a locale in which improper behavior was typical, in both the themes and actions of the actors, as well as the behavior of audiences. Louis XIV had no problem taking drastic actions to maintain “propriety” in the theater setting, once commending La Reynie for jailing a man who whistled at the theater.¹⁷ The troupe with which the Sun King had the greatest issue was the Italian Comedians, who exaggeratedly performed pieces with gestures and expressions that could be universally understood by French audiences, and were therefore very

¹³ Philip F. Riley, “Louis XIV: Watchdog of Parisian Morality,” *The Historian* 36, no. 1 (1973): 19.

¹⁴ Riley, “Louis XIV: Watchdog of Parisian Morality,” 23.

¹⁵ Riley, “Louis XIV: Watchdog of Parisian Morality,” 25.

¹⁶ Riley, “Louis XIV: Watchdog of Parisian Morality,” 24.

¹⁷ Riley, “Louis XIV: Watchdog of Parisian Morality,” 25.

popular.¹⁸ The productions were frequently cited as licentious and indecent, due in part to the several double entendres and the “spicy” language used, and there were several royal efforts made to inhibit such performances, including instructing police to closely observe the subject matter and language of the theater, and intervene if needed.¹⁹ Efforts ramped up to censor the theater through the late 17th century, with all words with double meaning being banned from performances in 1688, and crescendoed when the Italian’s Theater was forced to shut down in 1697, and the troupe expelled from France,²⁰ upon their announcement that they would perform a drama based on *La Fausse Prude*, a satirical book featuring Madame de Maintenon.²¹ The censorship that Louis XIV and his police force aimed at the theater was amongst the stingiest, and his general interest in controlling the actions of the public made him and his police unpopular figures.

It is important to note that all of the social and political changes made by Louis XIV were wholly justified in his mind, and he embodied the idea of “raison d’état”,²² believing that his authority and ideas were in the best interest of the state. They reflect his absolutist political ideology, and aid in illustrating how the kingdom functioned under the Sun King.

The political ideology of Louis XIV seeped into the aesthetics of this reign, most clearly at Versailles. As home to the monarchy, palaces have long been understood to be representative of imperial strength, and Versailles is no different. The palace of Versailles stands as a powerful symbol of the power of the French monarchy, and Louis XIV utilized this symbol to the fullest

¹⁸ Riley, “Louis XIV: Watchdog of Parisian Morality,” 26.

¹⁹ Riley, “Louis XIV: Watchdog of Parisian Morality,” 27.

²⁰ Frederick Brown, “Reflections on Versailles,” *The Hudson Review* 30, no. 3 (1977): 335.

²¹ Riley, “Louis XIV: Watchdog of Parisian Morality,” 27.

²² Fox, “Louis XIV and the Theories of Absolutism and Divine Right,” 139.

extent. Versailles evolved from a humble hunting lodge into an opulent, grand palace, due much in part to the renovations overseen by Louis XIV. The king was very much inspired by the Renaissance and how it seemed to capture an idea of imperial splendor, particularly of Rome, and implored his team of architects and designers to revive that same aesthetic at Versailles.²³

After inheriting the property as a young child, it became a haven for Louis XIV during The Fronde, a rebellion by members of high nobility against royal authority from 1648 to 1652, which forced Louis XIV and his regent mother to flee Paris.²⁴ After the Fronde came to an end, Louis XIV was faced with the challenge of reestablishing the monarchy as a pristine institution, and he found that the royal grounds of Versailles was a prime location to do so.²⁵ His court was settled at Versailles in 1682, deciding to remain there rather than Paris, due to his own personal disdain for the city, and Versailles' locational advantages of greater safety after the Fronde.²⁶

Louis XIV oversaw several renovations to the palace during the course of his reign. He used its architectural design and decoration, and Versailles' importance as a royal setting, to emphasize himself as sovereign and highlight his belief of himself as possessing a God-given light.

It is within the context of Versailles that Louis XIV made dramatic efforts to reflect his symbolism as "the Sun King." By 1662, he had adopted the sun as his personal emblem,²⁷ and it soon became synonymous with the monarchy. Light itself became a way in which the king aimed to present his omnipresent power over the kingdom. To make Louis XIV's affection toward the sun and its symbolic role as his personal ideological emblem even more obvious, Versailles was

²³ Andrew A. Pyrcz, "Versailles: The Ultimate 'French Revs' Excursion," *Agora (Melbourne, Vic.)* 54, no. 3 (2019): 16.

²⁴ Pyrcz, "Versailles: The Ultimate 'French Revs' Excursion," 15.

²⁵ Pyrcz, "Versailles: The Ultimate 'French Revs' Excursion," 15.

²⁶ Pyrcz, "Versailles: The Ultimate 'French Revs' Excursion," 15.

²⁷ Pyrcz, "Versailles: The Ultimate 'French Revs' Excursion," 17.

decoratively filled with motifs referencing the sun. One of the most prominent was designs featuring Apollo, the classical Greek and Roman mythical god of the Sun. The gardens were flooded with statues representing Apollo and other figures associated with the god, such as his mother Latona,²⁸ filling the grounds with references to the sun, and thus to the king himself. Many sculptures and works of art inside also depicted Apollo, as well as the king's sun emblem, a head with sun rays emanating from it.²⁹ This symbolism emphatically reminded all who entered the palace of the powerful grasp of Louis XIV and the searing power he held as king with a light that shone high above all.

Several components of Versailles utilized light itself as a symbol for the king. This is most notably done in the Hall of Mirrors, one of the most famous parts of the entire palatial complex, as well as one of the most luxurious. Nearly seventy-five meters in length, the hall is covered in mirrors, and receives light through windows that face the Palace Gardens, and also is decorated extensively with sculpture and painting.³⁰ Its reflection and gathering of light clearly symbolizes the king and his emblem of the sun, presenting a glimmering light that is inescapable due to the clever utilizations of mirrors and windows, along with gold accents from the sculpture and decor, that allow light to flood the area.

The Hall of Mirrors, and Versailles at large, features many pieces by Charles Le Brun, the official painter of Louis XIV, particularly on the ceiling, that depict several key moments of his reign, such as battles and political achievements, that were read to be indicative of his strength as sovereign and leader of the kingdom.³¹ Le Brun, whose artistic style was heavily

²⁸ Brown, "Reflections on Versailles," 346.

²⁹ Tony Spawforth, *Versailles: A Biography of a Palace* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2010), 28.

³⁰ Pyrcz, "Versailles: The Ultimate 'French Revs' Excursion," 17.

³¹ Pyrcz, "Versailles: The Ultimate 'French Revs' Excursion," 17.

influenced by French Baroque icon Nicolas Poussin,³² painted in a way that reflected classical sensibilities in its linearity and stateliness. An exemplary piece of this style and its function within the Hall of Mirrors is *Louis XIV Gives Orders To Attack Four Strongholds in Holland* (figure 2) done by Le Brun around 1678.³³ Depicting a victorious military exploit, Louis XIV is shown standing boldly at center, directing the figures around him, with several mythical and allegorical figures seemingly floating above. The figures are classically dressed, evoking a sense of ancient stateliness, and the composition appears balanced and steady around the king's form. Works such as this were featured primarily in the Hall of Mirrors, adding to the propagandistic nature to the room to show off the accomplishments of the king, and their classically influenced baroque style done by Le Brun work in a way that associated Louis XIV with the strength of empires past and the glory of their rulers. Louis XIV was the very embodiment the baroque style in its sense of majesty,³⁴ and the Hall of Mirrors, as a part of Versailles as a whole, reflected in its splendor the image that Louis XIV wanted for his kingdom.³⁵

The Gardens of Versailles were also meticulously designed in a way that was meant to encapsulate Louis XIV's absolute power. Designer André Le Nôtre constructed the gardens so that they would be perfectly symmetrical, with pathways and greenery creating rigid patterns, and gardeners strictly maintained the greenery so that it was precisely cut into its desired manufactured shape, never overgrown or allowed to take its organic form.³⁶ The gardens possessed a strong sense of geometry, with the greenery cut into sharp lines and angles, that

³² John Fleming and Hugh Honour, *A World History of Art* (United Kingdom: Laurence King, 2009), 604.

³³ Antoine Amarger and Christine Albanet, *The Hall of Mirrors: History & Restoration* (Manchester: Hudson Hills, 2007), 228.

³⁴ Rémy G. Saisselin, "The Rococo as a Dream of Happiness," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 19, no. 2 (1960): 146.

³⁵ Spawforth, *Versailles: A Biography of a Palace*, 30.

³⁶ Brown, "Reflections on Versailles," 346.

dominated the landscape, suggesting to onlookers that the king could even control nature to his standards. The gardens also featured fountains that were technologically advanced that added to the opulence of the landscape, several decorated with sculpture for even more aesthetic beauty.³⁷ The meticulous grounds design is another example of how the Sun King utilized Versailles as a canvas for his ideology, to present himself as an ordered ruler that possesses a sovereignty to maintain the kingdom however he sees fit.

Under Louis XIV, nothing was left to coincidence in the designs of Versailles. Beyond the gardens themselves, the entire orientation of the palace is structured around a central axis from which everything emanated. For example, the palace itself and the gardens are structured around an axis which governs their symmetry, running vertically through the entire complex.³⁸ The axis is aimed centrally at the apartment and bedchamber of Louis XIV,³⁹ keeping the whole palace and surrounding grounds in line with the king himself. Running east to west is the *Allée Royale*, the main pathway intersecting across the grounds of Versailles.⁴⁰ The orientations and axes throughout the landscapes and constructions were done purposefully, to make tangible the idea that Versailles, and thus Louis XIV, was the central point around which the kingdom revolved. The sun and its path was an essential quality to how the grounds of Versailles were oriented, likening the palace and therefore the rule of Louis XIV to “the daily passage of the life-giving sun” that had been established to symbolize the Sun King himself.

³⁷ Pyrcz, “Versailles: The Ultimate ‘French Revs’ Excursion,” 18.

³⁸ Louis Marin and Anna Lehman, “Classical, Baroque: Versailles, or the Architecture of the Prince,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 80 (1991): 179.

³⁹ Marin and Lehman, “Classical, Baroque: Versailles, of the Architecture of the Prince,” 179.

⁴⁰ Benoît Bolduc, “Fêtes on Paper: Graphic Representations of Louis XIV’s Festivals at Versailles,” *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 76, no. 1-2 (2015): 213.

As if the glory and splendor of the king was not already high on display, Louis XIV held several ritzy fêtes throughout his reign at Versailles. The parties, events in which the aristocratic class was heavily involved, as spectators and attendants, were excessively planned and extravagant affairs. These fêtes, with their setting at Versailles, were propagandistic in nature, to showcase Versailles as an “enchanted domain” and to parade Louis XIV as a glorious, competent ruler.⁴¹

Depictions of these events, accompanied with prose descriptions of the fêtes, were made as commemorative momentos to capture the refinement on display, functioning not to be accurate representations of the events, but instead to communicate a certain vision desired by authority of how such events were to be perceived and remembered.⁴² The frontispiece from the commemorative book, “*Les Plaisirs de l’Isle enchantée, ou les festes, et divertissements du Roy, à Versailles...1664*,” attributed to Israël Silvestre, displays the fountain of Apollo as a backdrop for a procession taking place along the Allée Royale, the east-west axis of Versailles’ grounds, at the fête of 1664, as well as the King’s sun emblem framed at center.⁴³ This frontispiece, as well as the rest of the commemorative pieces depicting moments of Louis XIV’s Versailles festivals in and of themselves reflect a sense of grandeur. They are imposing in size and made on expensive, high quality paper, and compositionally appear very clean with intricate designs.⁴⁴ These parties held by Louis XIV at Versailles were meticulously planned and featured several extravagant activities such as processions, equestrian competitions, dinners, performances, and firework displays,⁴⁵ and this diligent planning is reflected through the structured, legible

⁴¹ Bolduc, “Fêtes on Paper: Graphic Representations of Louis XIV’s Festivals at Versailles,” 212.

⁴² Bolduc, “Fêtes on Paper: Graphic Representations of Louis XIV’s Festivals at Versailles,” 222.

⁴³ Bolduc, “Fêtes on Paper: Graphic Representations of Louis XIV’s Festivals at Versailles,” 213.

⁴⁴ Bolduc, “Fêtes on Paper: Graphic Representations of Louis XIV’s Festivals at Versailles,” 211.

⁴⁵ Bolduc, “Fêtes on Paper: Graphic Representations of Louis XIV’s Festivals at Versailles,” 214.

compositions portraying these events. There is a systematic sense to the moments of the festivals being captured, with clean, symmetric details. The rigidity evokes a sense of the attendants and events having a staged effect, there being a performative aspect as the fêtes worked to show off the king as holding utter power and pure sovereignty. Despite all the grandeur and order the imagery of these fêtes aims to reflect, several written accounts reveal that the fêtes at Versailles were not the stately events that these depictions portrayed them to be. They were recounted by attendants to be crowded and messy events, where there were several altercations between partygoers⁴⁶ and nobles were forced to sleep in their coaches,⁴⁷ as there were no arrangements in place to provide for the high number of guests. One account by the court ambassador of Savoy, describes a mob of people and intense quarrels that took place between soldiers against courtiers trying to enter certain areas at the 1668 Versailles fête,⁴⁸ causing disorder throughout the court and amongst the guests. The contradictions between how these fêtes were displayed, as orderly events, and how they actually were, more chaotic, illustrates how Louis XIV was persistent in building up an image of grandeur for himself and his reign, that everything he did was an impressive exploit that commanded respect and exhibited his power.

It is clear that Louis XIV went to drastic lengths to present himself as supreme and maintain a kingdom that remained exactly how he saw fit. No one would have been more subject to such lengths than the noble class, as many of its members lived at Versailles alongside the Sun King as members of his court.⁴⁹ Despite the privilege that many would consider a life at

⁴⁶ Bolduc, "Fêtes on Paper: Graphic Representations of Louis XIV's Festivals at Versailles," 220.

⁴⁷ Spawforth, *Versailles: A Biography of a Palace*, 6.

⁴⁸ Bolduc, "Fêtes on Paper: Graphic Representations of Louis XIV's Festivals at Versailles," 221.

⁴⁹ Pyrcz, "Versailles: The Ultimate 'French Revs' Excursion," 18.

Versailles, having an access to the grandeur of the palace and being within close proximity to the king, many nobles were craving to break away from court life that became dull and increasingly rigid as Louis XIV's reign trudged on. The aristocrats were limited in what they could do and where they could be at any given moment. Noblemen were forbidden from partaking in the trade market,⁵⁰ limiting their financial flexibility that would enable them to act more liberally.

Additionally, the court members were expected to partake in several mandatory activities, such as daily Mass, required strolls, and attendance before the king at dinners and other times during the day,⁵¹ including daily ceremonies in the king's bedchamber.⁵² Additionally, the Sun King utilized chamberlains embedded throughout Versailles that worked to keep Louis XIV in the loop on the rumblings happening within the court.⁵³ The aristocrats were constantly under close observation by the Sun King, and he became increasingly paranoid over the course of his reign of any rebellion brewing within the court. Louis XIV's intentions to keep the noble class under close watch was not only due to his desire to show off and reflect his power, but also stemmed from his memories of the Fronde, which had brought him to Versailles in his youth and illustrated the lingering possibility of noble rebellion that he was severely against.⁵⁴

The restrictions and interventions in place at Versailles stiffened the atmosphere of the court, filling courtiers with a general disdain for court life. Memoirist Louis de Rouvroy, the duc de Saint-Simon, provided the most extensive insight into what court life at Versailles was like in his writings, and the court's perspective. He possessed firsthand information about events taking place and the actions and behaviors of Louis XIV, as Saint-Simon himself was a courtier living

⁵⁰ Brown, "Reflections on Versailles," 343.

⁵¹ Brown, "Reflections on Versailles," 343.

⁵² Spawforth, *Versailles: A Biography of a Palace*, 19.

⁵³ Brown, "Reflections on Versailles," 342.

⁵⁴ Mansfield, "The Reign of Louis XIV: Absolute Monarchy," 106.

at the palace.⁵⁵ He did not withhold any criticism for the king and how he conducted his reign, including the way in which members of the court were treated and in his political choices. Saint-Simon scathingly describes Versailles as a “gilded cage” trapping the noble class,⁵⁶ and attacks the king, calling Louis XIV “vainglorious” and blaming the king for the ineffectual running of France.⁵⁷ Saint-Simon captured the sentiments that many courtiers felt with the waning of the king’s reign, remembering Louis XIV as “the vainest man ever.”⁵⁸

These restrictions and interventions unsurprisingly drove many aristocrats away from Versailles and the tight grasp of the king, with many eventually breaking away to apartments or townhomes in Paris,⁵⁹ where they found a novel sense of freedom from the rigidity in place at the palace. As time went on, Louis XIV grew disdainful for any courtiers displaying any sort of resistant attitude. When certain nobles began to prefer living in their own townhomes rather than at the palace, Louis XIV would say “I do not know them” at their mention.⁶⁰ Amidst all of the constraints put in place by Louis XIV, and his volatile reactions to their rumblings, there began to be a new craving within the noble class for freedom and happiness. It is within this desire, along with the Sun King’s reign coming to an end, that the Rococo style found its footing.

There was a yearning for a lifestyle, and an art, and was less constraining and more tender; themes that would become relevant in the Rococo style, which found its beginnings at this very political turning point. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, and especially once Louis XIV died in 1715, the desire for a more tranquil, simple life allowed them to indulge in

⁵⁵ Mansfield, “The Reign of Louis XIV: Absolute Monarchy,” 117.

⁵⁶ Spawforth, *Versailles: A Biography of a Palace*, 64.

⁵⁷ Mansfield, “The Reign of Louis XIV: Absolute Monarchy,” 117.

⁵⁸ Spawforth, *Versailles: A Biography of a Palace*, 25.

⁵⁹ Brown, “Reflections on Versailles,” 341.

⁶⁰ Brown, “Reflections on Versailles,” 341.

their own moments of pleasure after a long and boring stint at Versailles.⁶¹ In essence, the Rococo presents an artistic style that reacts to and contradicts with the previous French Baroque, more stately style. Rococo reflects an anti-classical temperament, as that had regal, monarchical associations.⁶² Instead, Rococo presented a novel idea of “the pursuit of freedom and pleasure,” an idea that the nobility was ready for due to the austerity they’d succumb to at Court,⁶³ and did so stylistically through asymmetric, airier, compositions. For the aristocrats, there was a shift away from what was sublime, beginning with a renunciation of Versailles and the exodus from the palace to more intimate homes, such as hôtels and apartments.⁶⁴ The theme of intimacy pervades in the Rococo style, where there remains a sense of elegance while still being more subdued, and not so performative.⁶⁵ The moments are fleeting, not staged, as those living at the turning point of the death of Louis XIV dreamt of genuine sociability and obtaining a happiness they could achieve themselves.⁶⁶ The aristocracy strongly yearned for free expression,⁶⁷ and the Rococo style fit this desire.

As the itch for change grew amongst the French nobility, so did artist Jean-Antoine Watteau’s artistic prowess. Watteau is viewed now as one of the key artists of the Rococo style, and is especially distinguished by his creation of the *fête galante* scene as a genre, scenes depicting outdoor entertainment without any preconceived subject matter influencing its

⁶¹ Saisselin, “The Rococo as a Dream of Happiness,” 147.

⁶² Irénée Scalbert, “The Rococo Revolution,” *AA Files*, no. 39 (1999): 12.

⁶³ Scalbert, “The Rococo Revolution,” 13.

⁶⁴ Saisselin, “The Rococo as a Dream of Happiness,” 147.

⁶⁵ Aaron Wile, “Watteau, Reverie, and Selfhood,” *The Art Bulletin* 96, no. 3 (2014): 330.

⁶⁶ Saisselin, “The Rococo as a Dream of Happiness,” 146.

⁶⁷ Victoria Charles and Carl H. Klaus, *Rococo* (New York: Parkstone International, 2012), 19.

content.⁶⁸ His journey from son of a tinsmith to a popular artist reflects a weakened art establishment that had been strongly royally influenced prior to and for much of the Sun King's reign, where humble artists could more easily rise through the ranks and bend an institution made rigid. Watteau was an artist that did not maintain the academic traditions set before him, indicating again the shift away from imperial command that had infiltrated society at large.

Watteau was born in the city of Valenciennes in 1684, where his father was a tinsmith who had hoped his son would succeed him in his work. But Watteau found interest in the arts early in his life, and his father allowed these interests to be explored by allowing his son to study with painter Jacques-Albert Geurín at the age of fourteen.⁶⁹ Geurín later brought Watteau with him to Paris, where Watteau was exposed to the French art world at a greater intensity, and soon Watteau worked as an assistant, first to painter Claude Gillot, then to Claude Audran III.⁷⁰ After many years of assistantship, Watteau tried for a pension to study in Rome, but placed second, causing him to leave the workshop of Audran III, returning to his hometown for a short time before returning to Paris.⁷¹

On his second attempt, Watteau was accepted into the Académie Royale in 1712, and this success required him to create a reception piece, the subjects of which were customarily assigned by the Académie Director. Records indicate that Watteau initially did have a subject assigned to his reception piece, only for his assignment to be recounted, giving Watteau the freedom to determine the subject matter of his reception piece for the Académie.⁷² This unprecedented act,

⁶⁸ Michael Levey, "The Importance of Watteau," in *Rococo to Revolution: Major Trends in Eighteenth-Century Painting*, (New York City: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 56.

⁶⁹ Casa Editorial Hispano-Americana, *Los Grandes Pintores: Watteau* (Buenos Aires: Casa Editorial Hispano-Americana, 1914), 17.

⁷⁰ Casa Editorial Hispano-Americana, *Los Grandes Pintores: Watteau*, 22.

⁷¹ Casa Editorial Hispano-Americana, *Los Grandes Pintores: Watteau*, 34.

⁷² Levey, "The Importance of Watteau," 58.

made at no inclination of Watteau himself, who still had no great commissions or awards to his name, represents the weakening of the Académie establishment, as the organization and structure that had been set in place for decades was struck for no explicit reason.⁷³ Louis XIV's institutions were beginning to bend amidst all of his heavy constraints and with his seventy-two year reign drawing closer to an end. Rococo as an art style generally made no attempts to establish itself through the formal institutions in place like the Académie,⁷⁴ and with his novelty and inadvertent triumph over the Académie's rules for reception piece subjects, Watteau, and the Rococo style at large, represented a refreshment to the arts that the noble class was craving.

Louis XIV died on September 1, 1715, but it was not a mournful event for much of the kingdom. The people of Paris resented him for his excessive restrictions and the court was trapped at Versailles. Therefore, upon the announcement of his death, people joyfully celebrated in the streets.⁷⁵ In the same year, Watteau created the piece "*La Perspective*," a fête galante scene featuring several figures interacting in the gardens of Montmorency.⁷⁶ An oil on canvas piece now at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,⁷⁷ "*La Perspective*" presents a landscape dominated by deep green trees, with aristocratic men and women gathered sitting and talking hidden away in a shadowy grove. The piece represents the political and social changes that came with the death of Louis XIV, as it features several details that contradict what the Sun King's reign had become synonymous with. There is a more private and intimate setting, and a more tenebrous landscape dominated by deep foliage. The figures are caught interacting together, in

⁷³ Levey, "The Importance of Watteau," 58.

⁷⁴ Scalbert, "The Rococo Revolution," 11.

⁷⁵ Casa Editorial Hispano-Americana, *Los Grandes Pintores: Watteau*, 12.

⁷⁶ Wile, "Watteau, Reverie, and Selfhood," 332.

⁷⁷ Cordélia Hattori, "Contemporary Drawings in the Collection of Pierre Crozat," *Master Drawings* 45, no. 1 (2007): 40.

natural motion and expressions that indicate a moment frozen in time, rather than a rigid forced event. This piece, created just as the Rococo style was at its genesis, possesses several qualities that Rococo art is associated with, with soft greenery and air of serenity, as well as in its capturing of moments of pleasure. Still, it is not overt in its brightness and its pastel colors, as high Rococo pieces typically are. Much of the splashes of color outside the landscape come from the clothing of the figures, who wear jewel toned blues, reds, and yellows. *La Perspective* hints visually towards the elements of high Rococo, while still capturing its general thematic sentiments, making it a powerful transitory piece with palpable political reflections.

The piece is unique amongst Watteau's catalog of *fête galante* genre pieces, in that it is set in a distinct location, recognizable by the architecture portrayed in the central background. Where his other *fête galantes* have more vague and or mythical settings, *La Perspective* is placed firmly in the contemporary time, in a place that would have been known to many members of the aristocratic class, as Crozat had established a hub for artistic discourse that rivaled the Académie.⁷⁸ It presents the gardens of Pierre Crozat's mansion in Montmorency, with the towering architecture in the background being the chateau of that property.⁷⁹ Drawings of the elements at Montmorency, including the garden and central pavilion which is seen in the distant background of *La Perspective*, had been done by Watteau,⁸⁰ reflecting that there was intent behind using this setting in the painting, and that he had a familiarity with this location, no doubt due his friendship with Crozat and Crozat being one of Watteau's most noted patrons,⁸¹ after

⁷⁸ Wile, "Watteau, Reverie, and Selfhood," 321.

⁷⁹ Wile, "Watteau, Reverie, and Selfhood," 333.

⁸⁰ Martin P. Eidelberg, "Watteau's Use of Landscape Drawings," *Master Drawings* 5, no. 2 (1967): 173.

⁸¹ Hattori, "Contemporary Drawings in the Collection of Pierre Crozat," 38.

being introduced by Académie member Charles de La Fosse.⁸² Crozat amassed a significant collection of art over the course of his life, made possible through his lucrative career as an investor,⁸³ and he had many connections to the Académie Royale.

Despite his Académie connections, Crozat's hôtel in Richelieu, Paris became an important center for the arts in the early eighteenth century for many aristocratic elites, who at this point had grown tired of Versailles and the courts, as well as several Académie members that visited frequently.⁸⁴ The growth of Crozat's home as a center of the arts, his own salon, indicates the shift of the arts being a government dominated realm, where more private locales like Crozat's hôtel, could compete with the Académie as a setting in which the arts could be discussed and presented. In addition to his hôtel in Paris, Crozat's mansion in Montmorency just outside Paris, the place in which *La Perspective* is set, has its own importance in reflecting a growing distance from the state. The location has a notable history, with marked ties to the monarchy. Crozat bought this home from the heirs of Charles Le Brun, the official court painter of Louis XIV, who had decreed Le Brun "the greatest French artist of all time."⁸⁵ This broken tie to the monarchy is clear, and indicative of a changing of the guard from stately, imperial affiliations to ones more private. Connections to the monarchy and its reputation of control were being dismantled.

Rather than leave the setting ambiguous, as all of his other fête galante pieces' settings are, Watteau makes it explicit to the audience that this is a place contemporary to them, and that has an air of novel freedom for the noble class. The main audience for Watteau's art at this time

⁸² Hattori, "Contemporary Drawings in the Collection of Pierre Crozat," 40.

⁸³ Hattori, "Contemporary Drawings in the Collection of Pierre Crozat," 38.

⁸⁴ Hattori, "Contemporary Drawings in the Collection of Pierre Crozat," 40.

⁸⁵ Fleming and Honour, *A World History of Art*, 604.

were the nobles and amateurs of the arts in Crozat's circle, who had a generally negative view of what the monarchy and its institutes had become under Louis XIV.⁸⁶ He places the pleasure seeking figures in a location that meant freedom away from Versailles and freedom to pursue their own interests beyond the court, a gesture that those associated with the art scene at Crozat's would have recognized and appreciated, as they, in general, had strong anti-institutional attitudes after Louis XIV had created such a confining environment.⁸⁷ Having been made in the year of Louis XIV's death, which had been a celebratory event for many throughout Paris and the kingdom,⁸⁸ the private setting of *La Perspective* holds great significance as the Sun King's rule officially came to an end.

Beyond its specific setting, *La Perspective* features visual qualities that seem to contradict the features that Louis XIV and his reign came to be associated with, such as geometric greenery and bright imposing light. At Versailles, with its symmetric, well maintained gardens, nature was kept within the constraints of the King's desire for clean cut, geometric landscapes, indicating his control even surpassed the laws of nature. But *La Perspective* shows a landscape with greenery and trees that are growing naturally, with foliage jutting and reaching without constraint. The trees lean and curve, creating organic shapes that possess a soft quality. The trees of the landscape hover over the clearing and path, as well as the figures, shielding them within the lush branches. The forest thus has a protective quality, as if it is a fortress guarding the figures as they freely interact, something that courtiers, under strict regiment at Versailles, could not previously do under the Sun King.

⁸⁶ Charles and Klaus, *Rococo*, 19.

⁸⁷ Wile, "Watteau, Reverie, and Selfhood," 332.

⁸⁸ Casa Editorial Hispano-Americana, *Los Grandes Pintores: Watteau*, 12.

The depiction of light is notable, considering light was such a dominant motif under Louis XIV at Versailles, where there were constant reminders of the sun and light and the palace itself was constructed to evoke the passing of the sun. *La Perspective* instead focuses its scene in the shadows, without a glaring sense of light governing over the episode. It appears to be daytime, with a section of light blue sky hovering above and between the clearing, but rather than enjoying themselves in the sun, the figures are content to be hidden within a forest glade, with trees that shield them from the sun's glare. The shadowy darkness made by the dense trees is prominent across the picture plane with the figures engaged within the dark haziness of this landscape, some of them almost merging into it themselves as their forms blend into the shadows. A deep green color dominates the canvas, enveloping much of the scene and its figures in its darkness. In the aftermath of a period where light and symbolism of light was ubiquitous with Louis XIV, Watteau's choice to instead shroud the piece in a darker setting is notable. These figures have found content in the shadows, where they are interacting with ease with one another with freedom to engage how they'd like: sitting, walking, etc. Rather than basking in the light, as many other Rococo fête galante pieces show, these figures are content to hide away in the shadows, symbolizing the noble class' shift away from the glare of the Sun King and his constrictive reign. Where Louis XIV utilized bright light, Watteau settled the scene in the darkness. The natural growth of the forest, and with such, its shadowy cover contradicts the rigid, bright environment that was the norm at Versailles that courtiers were accustomed to. The creation of this piece in the year of the king's death makes this idea even stronger, that the figures, and by extension the audience and the noble class, can find a new sense of freedom and pleasure away from the imposing sunlight that symbolized Louis XIV for so many years.

The genre of *La Perspective* can also be interpreted politically and socially when contrasted to depictions of fêtes under Louis XIV. This fête galante, in its subject matter of an outdoor gathering, is similar in subject to the commemorative pieces for Louis XIV's several fêtes at Versailles over the course of his reign. But the differences are astounding, despite this thematic similarity. Images of Louis XIV's Versailles fêtes are more stark and imposing in size. Where depictions of Louis XIV's fêtes appear staged and give off a severe and more rigid sense, where every event was meticulously planned, this fête galante piece, as well as Watteau's other works within this category, seems intently focused on the intimacy of the moment. The figures are depicted as being caught in a fleeting moment rather than reading staged and propagandistic. The men and women are caught in delicate motions, facing one another and the landscape rather than interacting with the viewer that would suggest a staged scene. One figure in particular captures the pleasure seeking intent that encapsulates the Rococo style. The third figure from left is a man, who is seated playing the guitar. This activity clearly reflects a relaxed, pleasurable mood, and further, it recalls the realm of theater that had been minimized in Paris under Louis XIV. The figure recalls that of Mezzetin, stock comic character in the Italian Comedy, which had been profoundly popular before its extinction from Paris at the hands of the king. The figure's reclined pose, with his head tilted back, and playing of the guitar, reflects an air of nonchalance, and the figure certainly resembles that of a figure in a later Watteau piece that explicitly illustrates Mezzetin (*Le Mezzetin*, 1718-20) (figure 5) in pose and action.⁸⁹ By recalling a figure and an art form that had been minimized by Louis XIV in the years prior, despite its popularity, the restrictive actions of the king are brought to mind, yet the figure plays on, capturing the sentiment that was pervasive at this time amongst the noble class: that they would find the sense

⁸⁹ Levey, "The Importance of Watteau," 78.

of freedom and tranquility that had been restricted from them now that the Sun King had died, and the regency era would allow them greater independence.

What on the surface is a tranquil scene, when gazed upon through a political lens, *La Perspective* becomes a piece that hints toward the shifting sentiments pertinent at that political turning point. By creating this piece in the same year that Louis XIV died, Watteau seems to acknowledge the current events, and the transition at hand from restriction to greater freedom. The very idea that these people are gathered in a locale beyond the Sun King's reach, at a private place with broken ties to the monarchy, indicates a new sense of freedom that the aristocratic class was not accustomed to having been courtiers at Versailles for several years. Louis XIV embodied absolutism, and made it clear through social and political affairs that he solely saw himself as holding power. This stifling ideology was utilized imposingly throughout the kingdom and in several visual symbols that made it clear to everyone that the Sun King was the sovereign and that he possessed a God-given right to control. After decades of strict routine and pompous festivals at Versailles, the nobles were ready for a fresh start and wanted an environment and lifestyle in which they could pursue their own pleasures. Watteau, with his fresh persona and artistic capabilities, captured the sentiment in *La Perspective* that the aristocrats held, that it was time to step out of the glaring light of the Sun King, and into a sense of intimate tranquility and grab hold of the freedom they had been restricted from for years.

Figure 1: *La Perspective (View Through the Trees in the Park of Pierre Crozat)*, Jean-Antoine Watteau, 1715, oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

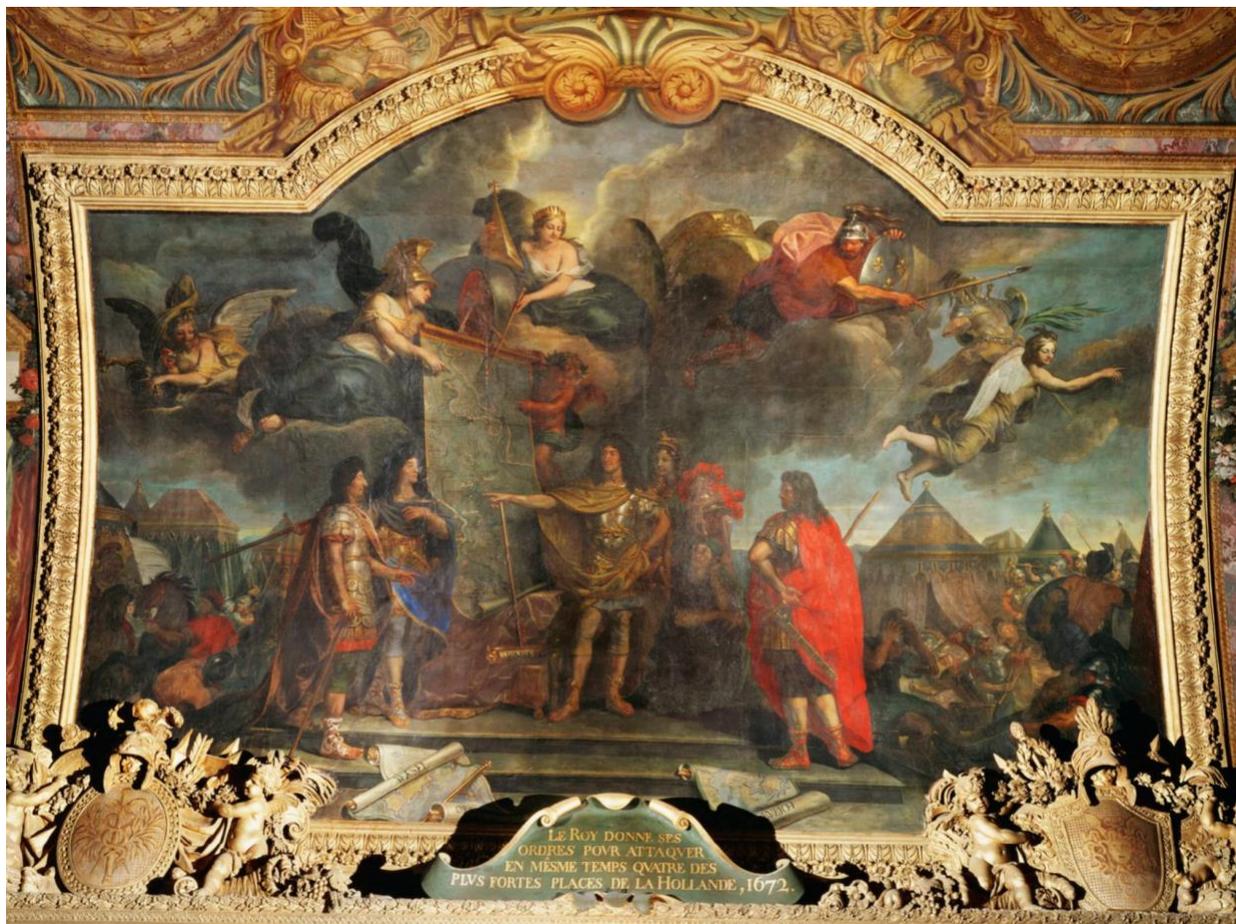


Figure 2: *Louis XIV Gives Orders To Attack Four Strongholds in Holland*, Charles Le Brun, 1678, Versailles, France.



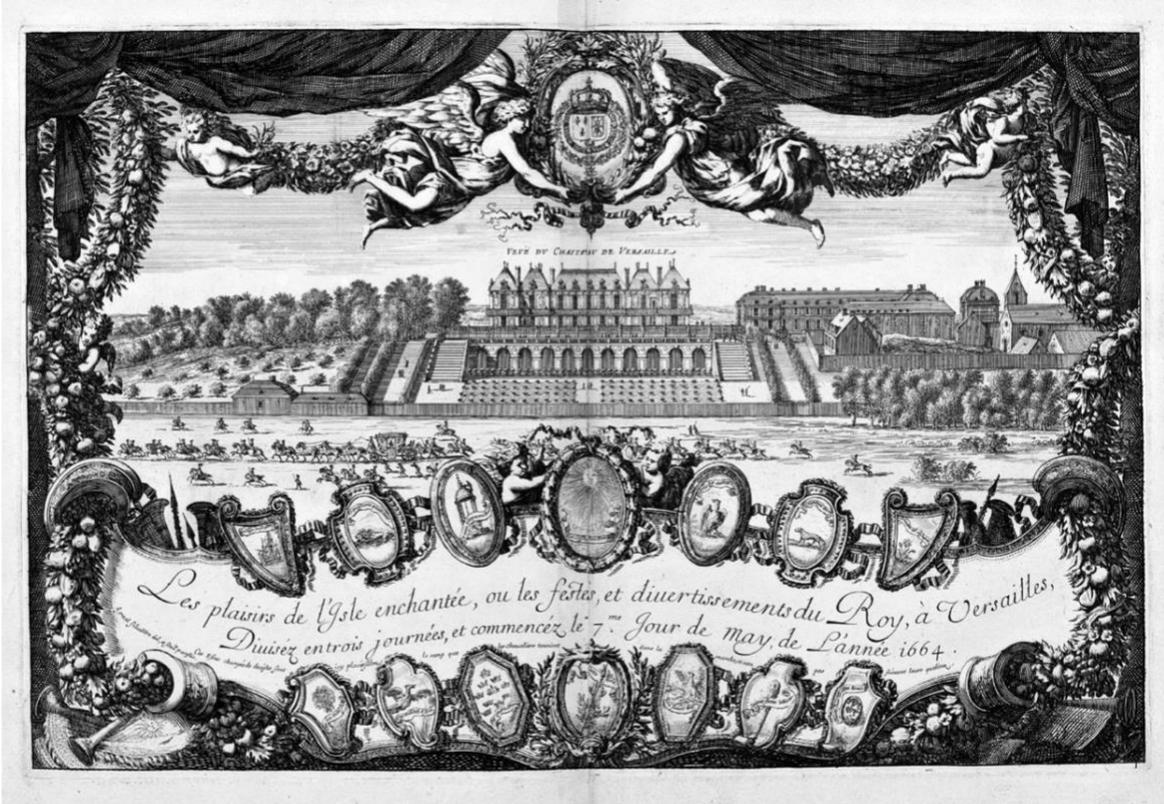


Figure 3: Frontispiece of “*Les Plaisirs de l’Isle enchantée, ou les festes, et divertissements du Roy à Versailles...1664*”, Israël Silvestre, 1664, Princeton University Library.



Figure 4: Engraving of Drawing by Watteau (*Maison de M. Le Brun*), engraving by Comte de Caylus, National Library of France, Paris.



Figure 5: *Le Mezzetin*, Jean-Antoine Watteau, 1718-20, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

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