Scholarly Attitudes towards Jean-Antoine Watteau's Use of Pre-polymerized Oil (*huile-grasse*)

Fractures ripple out from the boatman's head. The faces of the lovers are scarred and splintered. The background vanishes in a sea of cracks. This may sound like the description of a contemporary artwork, but it is, in fact, some of what the viewer sees if they come close to French Rococo painter Jean-Antoine Watteau's (1684-1721) *The Pilgrimage to Cythera* (1717) [fig 1]. The cause of these cracks is the pre-polymerized oil known as *huile-grasse*. This substance was employed to dry the layers of seventeenth and eighteenth-century paintings, with the side-effect of splintering their surfaces if it was used in excess. For example, we see the effects of the excessive use of this material in *The Pilgrimage to Cythera* whose manifold splinters contrasts with the more regular cracks in Peter Paul Rubens *The Feast of Venus* (1628-1629), indicative of less use of *huile-grasse* [fig 2].[1] This noticeable difference in the attention to pictorial surface suggests that Watteau possessed a contrasting attitude toward the permanence of his artworks than the painters that came before him, which has been noticed by scholars.[2] This observation reveals conservation perspectives and practices that will be explored in this paper, but also suggests a need for a better understanding of Watteau's paintings more broadly. One may ask: is The *Pilgrimage to Cythera* an inherently fragile object that will always need conservation care? Or is it a work merely marked by the effects of its particular history? In other words, do cracks have age value?

I will argue that the academic attitudes toward the *huile-grasse*-induced surface cracks in Watteau's paintings reveal the influence of value judgments on restorative practices. According to Barbara Appelbaum, "there are many different kinds of value, and a custodian may value an object in more than one way."[3] Accordingly, I will focus on values of economics, intentionality and materiality for this study of Watteau's use of *huile-grasse*. To do this, I will first establish the

[1]Catheline Périer-D'Ieteren, "La Technique d'Exécution de Rubens et Watteau. Filiation et Rupture," in *Watteau Technique Picturale et Problèmes de Restauration*, ed. Ségolène Bergeon et al. (Ministry of the French Community of Belgium, 1986), 41.
[2]Périer-D'Ieteren, 33.
[3]Barbara Appelbaum, *Conservation Treatment Methodology* (Elsevier, 2007), 87.

perspectives about Watteau's application of *huile-grasse*, then identify the issues around economics, intentionality, and materiality in relation to conservation values with respect to this binding agent. Finally, I will propose Barbara Appelbaum's age value as an alternative to these biases.

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Certain perspectives on Watteau's *huile-grasse* explain his use of it within economic terms. For example, Oliver Wunsch examines the changing pressures of the market, in which art was increasingly seen as an efficiently-produced commodity. According to Wunsch, Watteau's use of *huile-grasse* responded to the market forces in the artist's century, which valued transience over the material legacy of artworks. In particular, Watteau followed the sentiment that "the capacity of painting to communicate with the future was often less important than it provided in the present moment," leading to decisions that compromised the health of his artworks.[4] This can be seen in the surface of *Pilgrimage to Cythera* whose *huile-grasse*-induced splinters and cracks are produced by Watteau's hasty technique, in turn a response to the market. Likewise, Wunsch suggests that Watteau departed from traditions valuing the legacy and freshness of pictures by instead regarding them as commodities to satisfy current tastes. Wunsch's characterization of Watteau as a kind of rebel likely derives from Michael Levey's perspectives on Watteau, where the artist had little interest in the kinds of historical commissions that were a facet of a typical public career.[5] Without these bolsters, seemingly all that was left for the artist like Watteau to do was paint for the market, following tastes and trends when they arose in the public consciousness.

Continuing with Wunsch, Watteau's indifference towards the degradation of his artworks "demands to be understood as an effect of his environment, as a set of attitudes and behaviors shaped by the new commercial realities that determined artistic fates."[6] Wunsch justifies Watteau's

[4]Oliver Wunsch, "Watteau, through the Cracks," *Art Bulletin* 100, no. 2 (2018): 40.
[5]Michael Levey, *From Rococo to Revolution: Major Trends in Eighteenth-Century Painting* (Praeger, 1966), 55-56.
[6]Wunsch, 56.

use of *huile-grasse* as a factor of the society around him that privileged the continued dissemination of images through engravings, suggesting that society valued Watteau's crumbling commodities enough to give them another chance on the art market. Moreover, Wunsch quotes the engraver Pierre Crozat in arguing that engravings can be globally circulated and survive even beyond the lifespan of a fragile artwork.[7] However, Wunsch characterizes this market as a place amplifying centuries-long tension between a painter's "desire for posterity's recognition against their impulse to take technical risks," such as the employment of *huile-grasse* in painting.[8] *Huile-grasse* could be blended into oil paints to quicken their drying process; however, this technique resulted in different pigments drying at different rates, which created fast-forming cracks that cut deeply into the surface of the image. The fractures rippling from the boatman's head and the splinters scarring the lovers' faces in *Pilgrimage to Cythera* all attest to Watteau's employment of *huile-grasse* [figs. 3 and 4]. Wunsch maintains that Watteau's use of this material is indicative of his need for haste within a market that demanded the most pictures in the least amount of time.

With these conditions in mind, Wunsch asks the reader "how could art maintain its exalted status when it was increasingly governed by the same physical and temporal forces that shaped the production and reception of other commodities?".[9] In other words, what good is the painterly brilliance of an oil-on-canvas master like Watteau in a market that did not privilege a smooth, delicate finish? For example, there is seemingly nowhere on the surface of *The Pilgrimage to Cythera* that is not affected by some manner of crack, blemish or divot, ranging from intersecting scratches crisscrossing the hill under the branch to finer rivulets scarring the trees above the shrine to Venus [figs. 5 and 6]. In addition, Wunsch's quote above likens a painting like *The Pilgrimage to Cythera* to any other commodity in the art market – no different than a Gobelins tapestry or Sèvres

[7]Wunsch, "Watteau," 53.
[8]Oliver Wunsch, *A Delicate Matter: Art, Fragility and Consumption in Eighteenth-Century France* (De Gruyter, 2024), 6.
[9]Wunsch, *A Delicate Matter,* 8.

porcelain – which suggests that notions of fine art might not have held as much sway over eighteenth-century France. This comparison between the fine and decorative arts may be surprising for some, but it should help capture the stakes of the cultural shift that was unfolding as Watteau lived and worked. This is not to say that these values were completely useless in eighteenth-century France; however, Wunsch seems to want to limit notions of art value to the French Royal Academy. Furthermore, the scholar notes that Watteau was not alone in his application of *huile-grasse;* Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Pater and other painters of Watteau's generation used it as well.

At the same time, Wunsch explains that there were some market forces beyond the control of painters: "superfluous consumption, precisely since it was not a specifically French phenomenon, threatened to degrade and erase the defining feature of the nation."[10] This can be seen in Watteau's other artworks like *The Shop-Sign of Gersaint* (1720-1721) painted for a private client, buying into the rampant consumerism of its century in both subject and context. In addition, the "defining feature of the nation" that Wunsch refers to seems to be the permanence of the art object which had long been the norm in the French public conscience. In general, Wunsch argues that the speed with which Watteau produced his art challenged these beliefs by offering a different, transient mode of painting. Returning to *The Pilgrimage to Cythera,* the scholar suggests that manifold splinters and cracks are, therefore, the consequence of Watteau working quickly, in a way that raises questions about Watteau's intentionality. In other words, did Watteau *intend* that his paintings crack and crumble? What kind of artist would do such a thing? Or is there something more at play here? I will turn towards the arguments proposed by Etienne Jollet and M. Kirby Talley Jr. to better understand these questions of intent and to evaluate the worth of returning to the "original" artwork.

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[10]Wunsch, *A Delicate Matter,* 10.

Having analyzed the economic value scholars place on our artist's employment of *huile-grasse* in relation to his contemporary market, I will now delve into how questions of intentionality affect conservation attitudes toward *The Pilgrimage to Cythera.* More specifically, the proponents of returning this painting to its original state essentially wish to peel back the layers of time, expressed in splinters and cracks, to discover the "true" face of the artwork as it appeared in 1717. The assumed goal would be to better understand Watteau's intent at the moment of the creation of *The Pilgrimage to Cythera*. According to Jollet, we need to ensure that our conception of the appearance of a Watteau painting today is consistent with that intended by the artist, in order to participate in a more nuanced historical discussion. Indeed, the very first sentence of Jollet's article declares, "knowing the artwork: this ideal is common to art historians and practitioners of the technical analysis of objects," yet this leaves us with more questions than answers.[11] One may ask what exactly is this "knowing?" Is it historical? Is it philosophical? Is it technical or scientific? Following Jollet's logic, the fields of art history and conservation would be much easier if we could objectively discern the purpose behind a Boucher or a Watteau, as there would be no more need for further debate. For example, if we *knew* with certainty that *The Pilgrimage to Cythera* was a meditation on love as Vernon Hyde Minor has suggested, there would be no one holding us accountable if we were wrong.[12] This knowing with certainty acts as, therefore, a dangerous thing, because it conjures up statements with little recourse to standard academic discourse.

Jollet places himself within the artistic intent camp and the search for an original Watteau: "It is then a question of verifying whether the effects identified in the work as we know it today [...] were those defined from the beginning."[13] More specifically, this author would have us interrogate which cracks could be considered authentic to the 1717 version of *The Pilgrimage to Cythera,* to be

[11]Étienne Jollet, "L'Analyse technique et poétique de l'œuvre: le cas des fêtes galantes de Watteau," *Technè* 30-31 (2009): 229.
[12]Vernon Hyde Minor, *Baroque & Rococo: Art & Culture* (Laurence King Publishing, 1999), 34-35.
[13]Jollet, 229.

differentiated from those fractures that accumulated over time. Then, conservators would merely need to patch up those inauthentic cracks to return to the pure, 1717 version of *The Pilgrimage of Cythera.* However, the sheer number of fractures, blemishes, and divots ingrained in the surface of Watteau's reception piece makes such a restoration cost an immense amount of time. Jollet also notes that technical examinations should be employed in order to determine whether certain effects, like the cracking of the surface of *The Pilgrimage of Cythera,* "[are] entirely or partly due to the numerous alterations which have subsequently affected the works in question, or if we can consider that this corresponds to an original state."[14] In other words, Jollet seems to believe that intervention acts as a necessary part of Watteau conservation studies to make the artwork look new, leaving little room for the artwork to display signs of aging. Indeed, this wholehearted notion that maybe the true Watteau can be found by removing another layer of varnish is the ultimate limitation of Jollet's argument, because it proposes a search jeopardizing the artwork for future viewers. The truth is that conservation causes damage as artworks cannot heal, so any intervention on an artwork needs to be thoroughly justified. Jollet's argument sometimes veers into the territory of genius by putting a premium on the artists' creative abilities over the ethical concerns of the scientific field.[15] These myths are especially problematic for conservation since they reduce our focus to the achievements of a single individual, over the broader, more nuanced dynamics in the world around them.

However, according to Talley Jr., we should always keep in mind the historical intent behind a Watteau painting when we restore it, so that our own values do not outweigh those of its creator. In particular, Talley Jr. articulates that intent is hard to prove.[16] For example, a modern viewer would have a hard time discerning the intent of *The Pilgrimage to Cythera,* which could have been made with a variety of goals in mind, from being a reception piece displaying Watteau's painterly

[14]Jollet, 234.
[15]Jollet, 240.
[16]M. Kirby Talley Jr., 'Introduction to Part II' in *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage,* ed. Nicholas Price, M. Kirby Talley Jr., and Alessandra Melucco (Getty Conservation Institute, 1996), 162.

virtuosity to the French Academy, as Michael Levey has argued, to an evocation of the subversive utopia of Cythera, as Georgia Baetjer has explained.[17] Likewise, Talley Jr. describes how "artists also have more specific, technical intentions, such as the optical effect of the surface [...], surface finish [...], placement or location of a work, lighting, frames, and the like" with the first category certainly applying to Watteau's employment of the caustic *huile-grasse*.[18] Looking again at *The Pilgrimage to Cythera,* the viewer can reconsider the fractures rippling from the boatman's head and the splinters that scar the faces of the lovers not as damage to be fixed by conservation intervention, but rather indicative of what the painter himself wanted for his finished picture. The "surface effects" that Talley mentions appear in Watteau primarily as splinters which ripple across the pictorial surface of *The Pilgrimage to Cythera.* However, the plethora of claims we could make around the 'finished picture' are hard to stake without knowing more about the temperament of Watteau and what the artist's intentions were when he painted *The Pilgrimage to Cythera*.

This exploration will involve a critical engagement with much of our imagination about Watteau to make sure we don't fall prey to the allure of the centuries-old mythos of Watteau's crumbling pictures and slovenly technique that traditionally justify his conservation.[19] The traditional story goes that Watteau's paintings were in a fragile state from the very beginning, and that it was up to conservators to "save" these works. What's more certain in Talley Jr. is his assessment of what collectors' value: a painting that showcases "optimum condition with the presumable intent to impress, to preserve their investment, and to purchase a little bit of immortality."[20] This introduces a limitation to the artist's intent where collectors only care about original brushstrokes, composition, and surface effects, and not any second or third opinion about

[17]Levey, 60; Georgia Cowart,"Watteau's *Pilgrimage to Cythera* and the Subversive Utopia of the Opera-Ballet," *Art Bulletin* 83, no. 3 (2001): 477-478.
[18]Talley Jr., 163.
[19]Wunsch, "Watteau," 37-38; Elisabeth Martin and Claudia Sindaco-Domas, "La technique picturale des peintres des fêtes galantes dans le contexte du XVIIIe siècle,' *Technè* 30-31 (2009): 34.
[20]Talley Jr., 170.

them. For example, we can imagine a collector valuing the entire rippling surface of *The Pilgrimage to Cythera* because it speaks to Watteau's use of *huile-grasse*, which is what makes him different from painters with a more polished surface. Indeed, this discussion of materials will be my primary focus in the next section of this paper, where I analyze the ideas of Elisabeth Martin and Claudia Sindaco-Domas, as well as Natalie Volle.

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While Jollet and Talley Jr. help us see the limitations of intentionality when considering *The Pilgrimage to Cythera,* other scholars reveal an overvaluing of materiality and technique when examining this painting. For our purposes, technique is defined as the way in which a given artist expresses their intent through a material, or the substance, object, or media that they use to create their artworks. For example, Watteau's use of *huile-grasse* to splinter *The Pilgrimage to Cythera*'s pictorial surface would be considered as a specific technique enacted within the medium of oil on canvas painting. According to Martin and Sindaco-Domas, Watteau's employment of *huile-grasse* was to the detriment of the health of his paintings, as "it makes a paint that is always sticky and cracks when it comes to drying."[21] This comment on the materials of Watteau's painting, taken from the French painter Jean-Baptiste Oudry, focuses on the dry cracking of *huile-grasse* as a negative. This kind of cracking is seen everywhere from the boatman's head to the delicate branches in *The Pilgrimage to Cythera,* revealing that *huile-grasse* was used in these sections of the painting, consistent with the scholar's quote. By that same logic, there is little cracking where there is little use of *huile-grasse*, such as in the blue sky in the top left corner of the painting [fig 7]. Cracking, therefore, is a telltale indicator that *huile-grasse* has been used in a composition, following Martin and Sindaco-Domas argument. Ultimately, their comment is similar to Wunsch's reflections on the effects of *huile-grasse* on a drying canvas, adopting a pessimistic tone towards Watteau.[22]

[21]Martin and Sindaco-Domas, 29.
[22]Wunsch, "Watteau," 37-38.

A problem with Martin and Sindaco-Domas' previous quote is that it introduces a point of subjective judgment into a more objective scientific article. In particular, the rest of their paper is concerned with such matters as microscopic imaging and the dimensions of canvases, so such a change in tone is especially perplexing.[23] Moreover, other scholars would oppose this overlapping of the subjective and the scientific; Talley Jr. claims that we need to "proceed with the utmost caution" when aesthetic judgments are in play "and to check, whenever possible, one's conceptions and conclusions against original intent."[24] Simply put, Martin and Sindaco-Domas let their aesthetic judgment of Watteau's materials interfere with their exacting study of eighteenth-century French fêtes galantes. The scholars illustrate how Watteau and his contemporaries "left few traces of their working method accessible to the eye or to scientific investigations," which itself contains another bias.[25] The reader could rephrase this comment as *more* traces of Watteau and his contemporaries' work would be *more* accessible to modern scientists. On the one hand, if we view science as a purely objective discipline, there should be little room for conservation scientists to allow their subjective observations to intervene in its procedures. On the other hand, if we understand science to be the product of many individual efforts to advance a discipline, individual perspectives become acceptable as a sign of dynamism and diversity within contemporary conservation. Accordingly, our understanding of *The Pilgrimage to Cythera* is possible within this second framework of science, where answers can prompt further exploration into the nuances of history.

While Martin and Sindaco-Dolmas provided an opportunity to interrogate the role that conservation science plays in our understanding of Watteau's technique, Natalie Volle's scholarship highlights the historical context behind Watteau restoration. According to Volle, Watteau's use of *huile-grasse* resulted in the need for early intervention on these paintings, even within the

[23]Martin and Sindaco-Domas, 25-26.
[24]Talley Jr., 175.
[25]Martin and Sindaco-Domas, 31.

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Volle indicates that the damage implicated by Watteau's technique is well established in the historical record, with a painter being paid 36 francs to restore *The Pilgrimage of Cythera's* pictorial layer in 1795. These restoration efforts suggest that his work continued to be a commodity in the art market. In particular, Volle admits that the conservation of Watteau's artworks within fifty years of the artist's death can be partially explained by how he "was not very careful in his technique."[26] Volle, much like Martin and Sindaco-Domas, introduces a personal perspective into her article, and one that is aimed at the artist. What does it mean for an artist to be not careful in their technique? Is this an assessment of the artist's methods as they were perceived in its century or more of an issue with how we conceptualize them today? Volle is only one of the many sources arguing that artists in Watteau's century knew of the destructive effects of *huile-grasse* on oil-on-canvas painting, which makes us ask what motivated Watteau to use such a medium.[27] The cracks and fissures in Watteau's painting are simply too widespread, too seemingly intentional to be the result of random chance. For example, the primary subject of the picture are groups of lovers on the isle of Love, and we observe that their faces are scarred by splinters. Volle also includes a quote by Germain Bazin from 1950, in which he notes that "we do not have the right to lighten [the Louvre *Pilgrimage*] because the varnish has been exhausted by too many successive regenerations."[28] Bazin's insistence on the varnish being *exhausted* and the regenerations being *too many* reinforces the technical aspect of some conservation perspectives. Thus, Volle falls in line with this conservation tradition without considering other potential values to inform her efforts.

Conservators today cannot proceed to restore *The Pilgrimage to Cythera* without potentially ruining its pictorial surface for future generations. The question of where we look for authenticity also comes into play, as Volle argues that a history of over-restoration caused a loss of the "true"

[26]Nathalie Volle, "Les restaurations des tableaux de Watteau: une histoire à écrire," *Technè* 30- 31 (2009): 98.
[27]Volle, 94-95; Ségolène Bergeon, *Watteau Technique Picturale et Problèmes de Restauration* (Ministry of the French Community of Belgium, 1986), 33.
[28]Volle, 101.

Watteau painting. The ultimate premise of Volle's article is that such a history needs to be written since it can be commented upon by us in the present, in order not to repeat the mistakes of the past.[29] *The Pilgrimage to Cythera* with all its *huile-grasse*-induced cracks demands a different approach which values the effects of time upon an artwork. What we need now is a consideration of age value, mediated by Salvator Muños-Viñas, Barbara Appelbaum and Spike Bucklow.

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Whereas all of the previous conservation perspectives and values I have analyzed — economics, intentionality, and materiality — have been primarily concerned with how to restore *The Pilgrimage to Cythera* to its original state, its "optimal condition" to quote Talley Jr., I would now like to offer a counter-perspective that allows us to view *huile-grasse* cracks as positive by focusing on age value.[30] The major issue with the established scholarship is that it views the rippling surface of Watteau's works as a problem to fix, to restore the surface to the authentic state of the painting. However, according to Salvator Muños-Viñas, "conservation is often done because we do not like the authentic state of some objects," suggesting that we always seek to change the artworks in front of us because it does not fit with our contemporary values.[31] For example, conservators confronted with the manifold cracks rippling across *The Pilgrimage to Cythera* might attempt to concoct some kind of antidote to *huile-grasse* as opposed to accepting this kind of scarring as an inherent factor to the painter's technique. By contrast, Muños-Viñas would argue that this scarring authenticates the Watteau painting, which differs from the previous narratives of fixing Watteau's fragile paintings to achieve a higher degree of authenticity. This scholar explains that our search for authenticity needs to be handled with care, because it "depends on whether the history of an object is in agreement with our expectations about it."[32] For example, if we buy into the Watteau narrative that *The*

[29]Volle, 105.
[30]Talley Jr., 175.
[31]Salvator Muños-Viñas, *On The Ethics of Cultural Heritage Conservation* (Archetype Books, 2020), 22.
[32]Muños-Viñas, 30.

Pilgrimage to Cythera is a delicate and crumbling picture populated by spectral figures, then we will impose that reading on the picture when we come face to face with it. At the same time, if we believe in the age value of *The Pilgrimage to Cythera,* we would imagine its cracks and splinters as signs that we are dealing with an object with a rich and varied history.

So, what then, is this age value? According to Barbara Appelbaum, "an object has age value when it is old, when it looks old, and we like that it looks old."[33] There is no denying that *The Pilgrimage to Cythera* is old — more than 300 years old to be exact — painted in the Rococo style that is no longer dominant in our world. The picture's assortment of splinters, scars and cracks make it look 300 years old, where a more polished surface would make it look younger and fresher. However, Appelbaum raises the question of whether we like that it is old, and the response to this question could be yes. The author herself admits that "most people want old things to look old and new things to look new" in a statement that seems as valid for Chinese bronzes as it does for *The Pilgrimage to Cythera.*[34] We expect to find signs of aging on such an artwork, which satisfies our need to see the effects of history within a single object. At the same time, Appelbaum asserts that age value alone is not enough to generate cultural value, and that "old things with cultural value have artistic quality, rarity, or some other value in addition to having survived to old age."[35] In this light, *The Pilgrimage to Cythera* has artistic value as an object that we recognize as belonging to the world of fine arts, despite the cracks and splinters that ripple across its pictorial surface.

But what if the modern viewer wanted to accept the cracks as part of the essence of Watteau without worrying about matters of artness? This is where the writings of Spike Bucklow prove especially useful, since they provide a more neutral, scientific perspective on Watteau's craquelures. According to Bucklow, our everyday languages are maladapted to describe this kind of complex

[33]Appelbaum, 104.
[34]Appelbaum, 104.
[35]Appelbaum, 105.

visual phenomenon as “at what point, for example, does a ‘prong’ or ‘barb’ become a ‘branch” or even where do we determine where a crack or network of cracks begins and ends.”[36] It should be noted that Bucklow would find fault with Wunsch's overbearing use of a common language of “splinters” and “cracks” to describe the fragility of *The Pilgrimage to Cythera.* (I admit that my own paper, too, may not satisfy this scholar, because I have also relied on common language to make Watteau's cracks more accessible to the reader). However, where Bucklow excels is his capacity to more or less objectively describe cracks without leveling the same judgment against Watteau's use of *huile-grasse,* as was apparent in Martin and Sindaco-Domas’ writings. More specifically, Bucklow illustrates how eighteenth-century French painterly cracks are “more random, curved, large, and usually interconnected.”[37] For example, the cracks extending from the boatman's head and the splinters in the branches above the shrine to Venus satisfy this description, and, what's more, it is one that makes no *ad hominem* comments against Watteau as an individual using *huile-grasse*. In addition, Bucklow condemns any effort of further explaining this with regards to technique or history or aesthetics even, because the amount of sampling needed to make such observations would be unethical.[38] Bucklow, then, offers an example of a scholar who accepts the age value of Watteau's cracks without wishing to justify them with reference to the world around them. The cracks are neither *positive* nor *negative* for Bucklow. It is equally refreshing to read an author wishing to stop a damaging conservation intervention, unlike Jollet and other scholars.

So, what do we do with this information? Let us look once more at the surface of *The Pilgrimage to Cythera* but this time applying age value to our analytical perspective. Our example will be the intersecting scratches on the hill under the branch. The traditional perspective would explain this feature of the pictorial surface as the unfortunate result of Watteau’s excessive use of

[36]Spike Bucklow, “The Classification of Craquelure Patterns,” in *The Conservation of Easel Paintings*, eds. Joyce Hill Stoner and Rebecca Rushfield (Routledge: 2012) 285.
[37]Bucklow, 289.
[38]Bucklow, 290.

huile-grasse. Our new perspective based on age value imagines things a little differently. Now these cracks act as indicators of the artwork surviving until today, thus enhancing the appeal of the object. With this new view of the artwork there is little attempt to fix the object, to immediately provide it conservational care simply for being old. Therefore, we can start to appreciate the effect of age on the canvas without worrying about how to correct it to fit with modern sensibilities. It is hard to say if this is what Watteau would have wanted; however, that should not matter as much, as we are not as invested in the intent of the artist as genius. As a result, it is age value that allows us to appreciate *The Pilgrimage of Cythera* in its current state.

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The scholarly engagement with Watteau's employment of *huile-grasse* reinforces traditional practices of trying to fix a crumbling picture for it to better correspond with aesthetic values. The previous perspectives on *huile-grasse* are punctuated by the biases of Western art history and conservation. The problem with this view of Watteau is that it projects the present conception of art onto the past. Meanwhile, an authenticity-based approach to the conservation of Watteau's paintings differs from this scholarship by dealing with the essence of artworks in the present world. There needs to be more research into the specificities of Watteau's color palette, to understand other aspects of this question of *huile-grasse.* There is also some value in deconstructing the received story of Watteau's conservation and the narrative of his picture's vulnerability. In conclusion, Watteau's use of *huile-grasse* has been the subject of much conservation discussion and should be approached in a way that highlights the age value of a particular painting in the present day.

Illustrations



Fig 1: Jean-Antoine Watteau, *The Pilgrimage to Cythera* (1717) oil on canvas: 1.2 ✕ 1.9 m. Louvre, Paris.

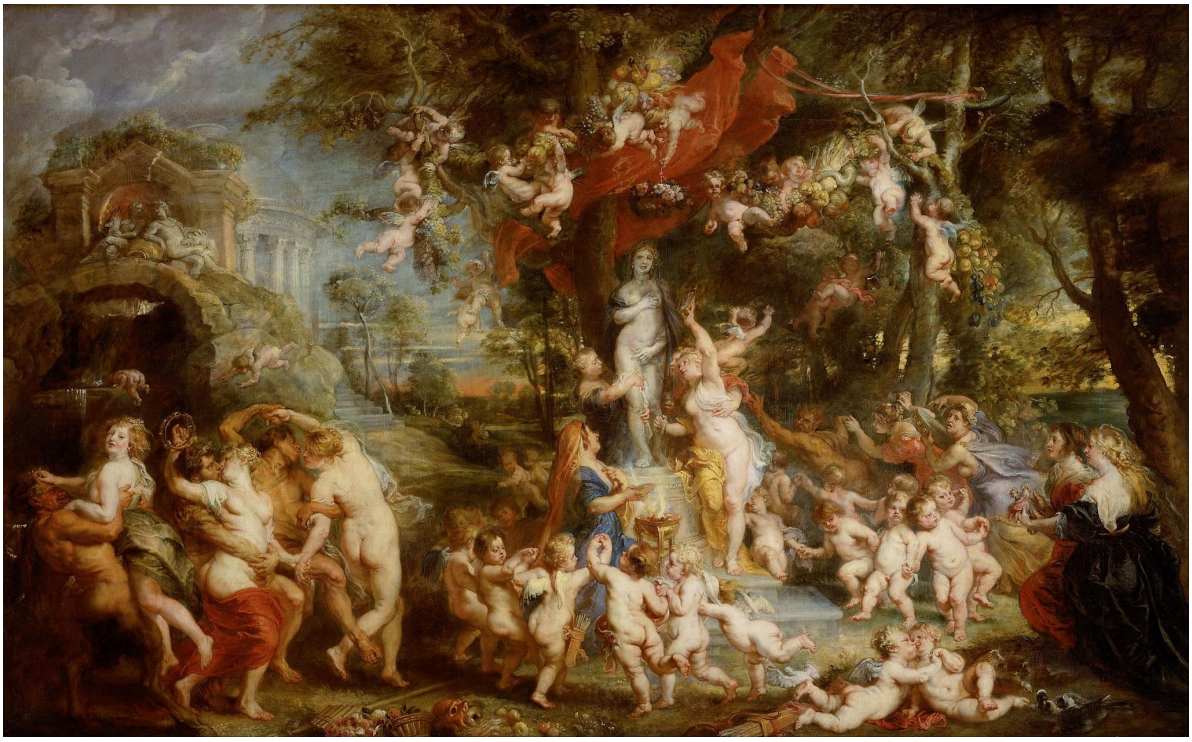


Fig 2: Peter Paul Rubens, *The Feast of Venus* (1636-137) oil on canvas 2,1700 mm ✕ 3,500mm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

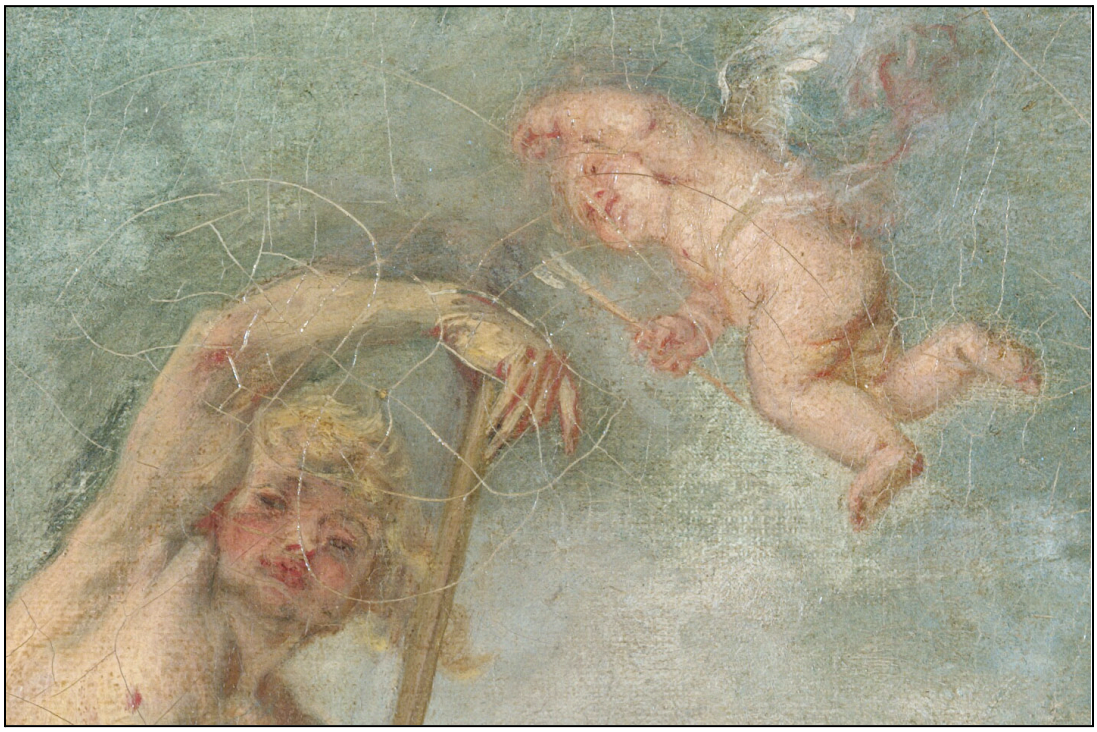


Fig 3: The fractures rippling from the boatman's head, *The Pilgrimage to Cythera.*

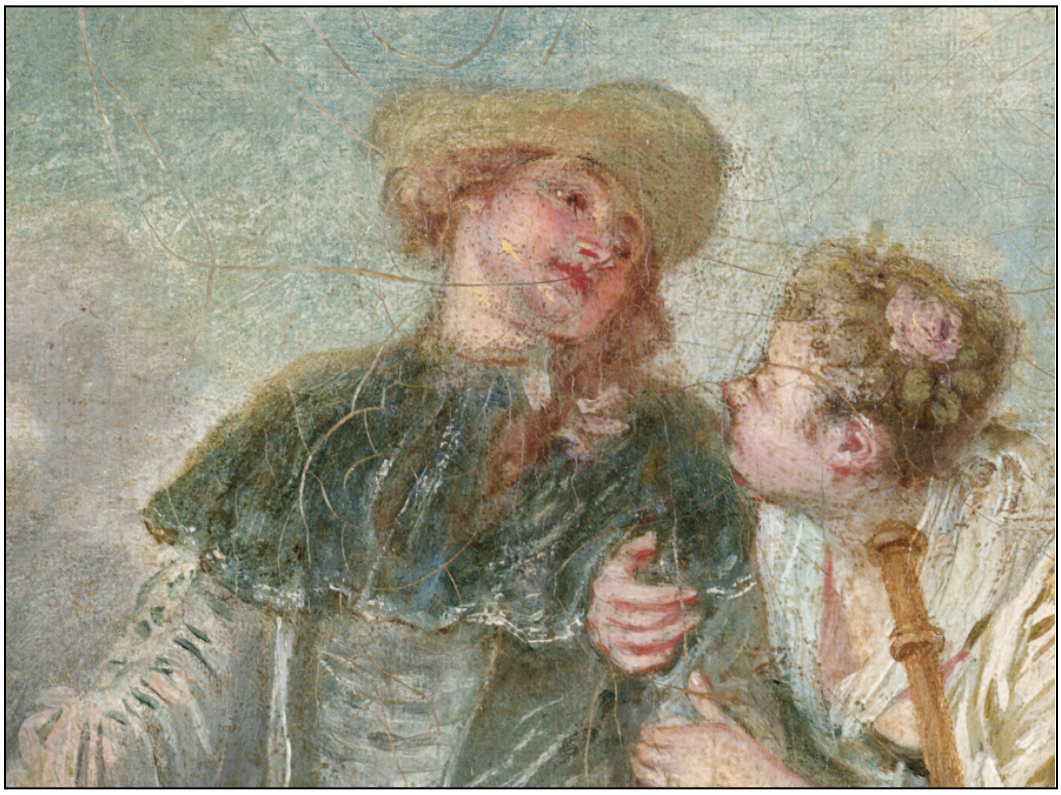


Fig 4: the splinters that scar the faces of the lovers, *The Pilgrimage to Cythera.*



Fig 5: intersecting scratches crisscrossing the hill under the branch, *The Pilgrimage to Cythera.*



Fig 6: finer rivulets scarring the trees above the shrine to Venus, *The Pilgrimage to Cythera.*

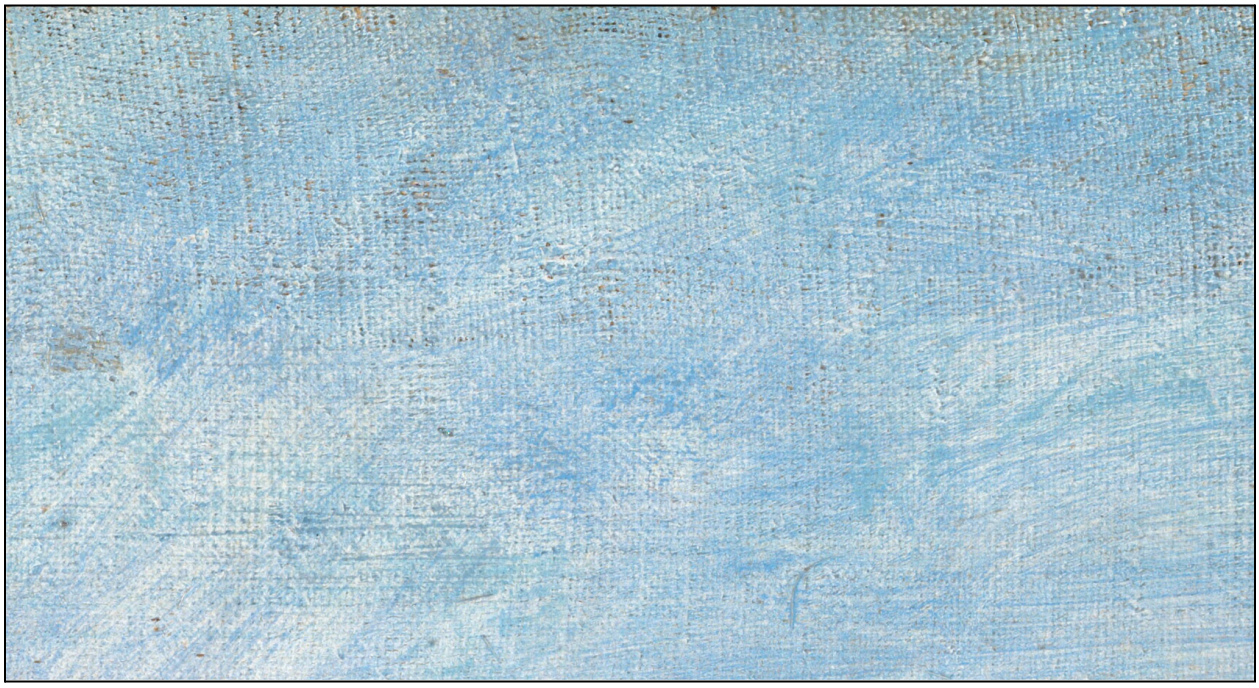


Fig 7: the relative lack of cracks in the sky, *The Pilgrimage to Cythera*

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