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MEDIA CONTACT
Amy Hood
Getty Communications
(310) 440-6427
ahood@getty.edu

J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM ANNOUNCES THE ACQUISITION OF JEAN-ANTOINE WATTEAU'S *THE ITALIAN COMEDIANS*

The large oil painting is an important addition to the Getty Museum's 18th century French holdings and will go on view in late spring

LOS ANGELES—The J. Paul Getty Museum announced today the acquisition of *The Italian Comedians* (ca. 1720) by **Jean-Antoine Watteau** (French, 1684–1721). The large oil painting (50 ⁷/₈" x 36 ³/₄"") was painted at the height of Watteau's fame, shortly before his early death at age 36.

"This major, little-known painting is extraordinary. It shows Watteau at the height of his creative genius," said James Cuno, President and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust. "Not only will it enhance our paintings collection, but it complements the Museum's collection of French decorative arts, which is amongst the finest in the world."

The Italian Comedians joins 18th century French paintings already in the Getty Museum's collection by artists such as Nicolas Lancret (1690–1743), Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806), Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699–1779), and Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714–1789), all of which have been acquired in the last decade.

The painting portrays five fairground comedians costumed as characters from the *Comédie Italienne*. Watteau, who would have seen the travelling performers at fairgrounds on the outskirts of Paris, often depicted members of this popular troupe in his *fêtes galantes*,



The Italian Comedians, ca. 1720. Jean-Antoine Watteau (French, 1684–1721). Oil on canvas. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

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small compositions showing conversations or music-making set in a park or landscape. Monumental paintings, in which the performers dominate a larger picture, are extremely rare in Watteau's oeuvre. His compassionate depictions of the character Pierrot, a white-clad clown, are especially renowned, with one of the most notable being the life-size depiction of him that hangs in the Musée du Louvre in Paris.

In this painting, Pierrot and his troupe have just finished a performance and taken their bows. They have stepped off of the makeshift stage and are about to start collecting money. All five of the actors look expectantly at the viewer. The central figure, Pierrot, holds his hat in one hand while his other reaches into a pocket of his baggy white jacket, cueing the audience, and the viewer, that it is time to show their appreciation.

"Watteau was perhaps the greatest French artist of the 18th century," explains Scott Schaefer, senior curator of paintings at the Getty Museum. "This painting typifies the way that Watteau combined acuity and elegance with poetic powers of description, in equal parts sensitive and humorous."

The Italian Comedians has been in private collections since the 18th century and has not been publicly exhibited since 1929. Over the last three centuries, its attribution has fluctuated. Until the late 19th century, the painting was attributed to Watteau. It was then assigned to Watteau's pupil Jean-Baptiste Pater and subsequently to an anonymous painter in the circle of Watteau. Although the attribution has changed over time, the artwork has always been praised for its brilliant composition and emotional power and associated with Watteau's psychologically profound depictions of the Italian Comedians.

"Although not all scholars agree about the attribution, they are all in accord that the canvas is brilliantly conceived, emotionally compelling, beautifully painted, and by an artist at the top of his form," adds Schaefer. "We believe that the only artist able to rise to this level of accomplishment was Antoine Watteau, and that he executed the entire painting."

The Italian Comedians will go on view in late spring.

About Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684–1721)

The son of a roof tiler, Jean-Antoine Watteau showed a penchant for drawing and painting early in life. At eighteen he was apprenticed to a painter in his native town of Valenciennes. Soon after, with little money and few possessions, he made his way to Paris where he made a living by copying the works of Titian and Paolo Veronese. There he entered the studio of Claude Audran III, the most renowned decorator in Paris, and met Claude Gillot,

a decorator of theatrical scenery. The theatrical qualities of Watteau's paintings and drawings—their artificial illumination, costumes, and painted backdrops—reflect Gillot's influence. Watteau's subjects, often including figures from the *commedia dell'arte*, reflect his constant observation of the theater. His stylistic sources can also be found in the works of Peter Paul Rubens and other 17th century Flemish painters, as well as 16th century Venetian art.

At the time of his acceptance into the Académie Royale, Watteau was credited with a new type of painting, the *fête galante*. These small scenes of well-to-do men and women enjoying themselves outdoors allowed him to showcase his talent for conveying the delights and enchantments of nature and led to repeat commissions from such connoisseurs as Pierre Crozat. Watteau, who died at 36 of tuberculosis, was only active for about 15 years, leaving a small body of work with an impressive legacy. For years after his death, his compositions remained widely-known in Europe through the circulation of engravings and drawings.

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