

ATTRIBUTED TO
LOUIS-JOSEPH WATTEAU

(Valenciennes 1731 - Lille 1798)

The Bivouac

watercolour, gouache and oxidised white gouache
14.5 x 24.5 cm (5¾ x 9⅝ in)

Provenance: Anonymous sale, Paris Drouot Hotel, on June 4, 1947, Room 9, no. 90.

THIS CHARMING SCENE, ATTRIBUTED TO LOUIS-Joseph Watteau, combines the atmosphere of a *fête-galante* with the martially orientated themes that run throughout Watteau's works. A delicate, essentially monochromatic, background underlines the action at the fore of the work, which immediately captures the viewer's attention.

At the entrance to a low-slung tent, a moustachioed officer is seated, holding a glass in his right hand whilst his left elbow props him up, giving him the air of a man embarking upon some serious relaxation. He seems almost impervious to the palpably joyous couple frolicking nearby: a magnificently attired officer, complete with plumed hat and a splendid blue uniform with brass buttons, affectionately clasps his female companion around her waist. The little dog capers about in clear delight, evidently enjoying the couple's very public intimacy.

Standing placidly by, two horses relish the chance to rest, although the fact

that they are still fully saddled up suggests it will not be for long. The three figures trotting gently forward in the left-hand middle ground further enhances the notion that this foreground grouping is enjoying only a temporary respite and the bivouacs themselves were designed simply as interim encampments during military manoeuvres.

The artful figure arrangement of *The Bivouac* lends a remarkable sense of depth to the work. The main focus of the action is on the right-hand side of the composition which at once attracts the viewer's attention. In compositional terms, whilst this present work is attributed to the artist, a painting of a military scene by Watteau bears astonishing similarities to this exquisite watercolour (fig. 1). The same raised perspective of foreground action can be seen, as well as an almost identical grouping of figures outside a similarly detailed bivouac.

Watteau, also known as Watteau of Lille, was a nephew of the renowned artist Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721) and borrowed much from his ancestor's whimsical rococo style. He trained under Jacques Dumont in Paris as well as at the Académie Royale. In 1755, he settled in Lille and became a teacher at the school of drawing though he was dismissed for introducing the then scandalous innovation of the study of the female nude. Over the course of his career he became a prolific draughtsman. Having returned to his home town, Valenciennes for fifteen years, Watteau succeeded Louis-Jean Guéret to the directorship of the school of drawing in Lille and established an annual salon in 1773, where he himself exhibited.

One of the more colourful aspects of his life played out in 1795 when he was asked to draw up an inventory of all works of art seized from religious foundations and the property of a huge number of aristocrats during the French Revolution. Ultimately, Watteau played a decisive role in the foundation of what would become the Musée Lillois des Beaux-Arts, which opened in 1803.

Watteau is chiefly remembered as a highly skilled genre painter who adapted the style of other family members to produce his own uniquely romantic and informal painting manner. He was a highly prolific artist, described by his contemporaries as *un peintre besogneux* ('a hard-working painter') and between 1773 and 1798, he exhibited around two hundred works in the Lille Salon. He exerted a great influence on his son, Francois Watteau (1758-1823) so much so that it is often exceptionally difficult to tell apart the work of father and son.



Louis-Joseph Watteau, *Scène de Camp*, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Valenciennes (Figure 1)

