One of the most influential works that Rococo culture has bequeathed upon us was Antoine Watteau’s *Disembarking on Cythera* (1717). Almost a century and a half after its initial exhibition not only did it inspire this poem by Charles Coran, but it also became a work emblematic of the age that for centuries defined Rococo ideals of love, life and nature. This was the first and ultimate *fête galante*, a symbol of courtly pleasures and the quintessence of the concept of *Romantic love* that curious construction of sentiment, often perceived as Rococo's most treasured legacy. The main protagonists of this painting are both the sentiments expressed and the nature that echoes them. Thus, Watteau’s work came to personify something even more important - an enduring belief in the lure of the pastoral. The notions of love and romance promoted in 18th century culture were inseparable from the image of the garden discernable in the canvases of François Boucher, Watteau, and Jean-Honoré Fragonard and in its verdant counterparts.

If one element were to be considered essential for an understanding of the Rococo aesthetic, it would be the sense of scale. In less than half a century this had changed irreversibly - the scale of spaces, canvases, objects and sentiments.

Where the Baroque offered magnificence and sumptuousness, the Rococo presented delicacy and refined luxury. The majestic gestures of Baroque paintings were exchanged for a lightness of touch and being, visible in mood and ambience as well as in brushstrokes. Light and lightness came to define both space and time, and inevitably the sense of self.

Lightness influenced all spheres of life - from the domain of political power, to the realm of feeling. Instead of the overwhelming sentiments of Baroque religious or historical art, more private sentiments became the focus of the Rococo in both the visual arts and literature. It was an age that revered the everyday, not as a moral example as in Dutch 17th century painting, but as a rediscovered delight in life itself. Rococo art conveyed the splendour of the mundane. Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardoin's *Kitchen Maid* (1738) possessed a dignity previously reserved only for classical or religious heroes, and Fragonard’s depictions of the court ballet held the same importance as grand history painting. During this period, the monumental was replaced with the minute, the secluded and the intimate. In the field of
applied arts, this gave rise to delicate and decorative objects that adorned, rather than defined, their spaces. For these very reasons, Voltaire criticized the art of his time, calling it the age of *pettitesses*. Although the concept of the Rococo differed greatly throughout Europe in the 18th century, for the purpose of this essay, the focus is primarily on France where this change in sensibility was at its most apparent.

Concepts of space and time changed respectively. The grand theatre of the world that had been, for more than a century, performed at Versailles, was now moved to the much more private stage of aristocratic city palaces, to the more intimate space of a *hôtel*. From the complex Baroque sense of temporal plurality that encompassed a fear of transience, an obsession with motion and a deep belief in the perfection of Arcadian realms, the Rococo age aptly retained only the most insubstantial of them all - the dream of Arcadia.

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Fragile Merveille

This dream was an old one, as ancient as civilization itself; a dream that the eternal could be grasped. It was not only a vision of nature beyond the confines of reality, but an image of our perfected selves that made this dream so alluring. Derived from the classical Greek notion of an evergreen, eternal land where Pan reigned, Arcadia received its literary outline in Virgil’s *Eclogues*, becoming the *pastoral*; a symbol of the ultimate unity between man and nature. Its significance outlasted classical antiquity, as the pastoral, like an allegorical mirror, reflected the ideals that each subsequent age desired.

Like many concepts of the classical world, the pastoral had its revival and further elaboration in the age of the Renaissance, and at that time lovers were introduced as privileged inhabitants of this sublime land. Both the literary and pictorial images of the pastoral were developed almost simultaneously - in the verses of Petrarch, Boccaccio, Sannazaro and their visual counterparts. On the canvases of Giorgione, and later Titian, the first visual records of the pastoral were taking shape. They possessed all the elements that would prove an endless inspiration in the centuries to come - *nature as the empire of senses, the divine lovers and the feeling of unattainable perfection*.

It was to the credit of the Baroque that the landscapes of the pastoral developed in a genre of their own. The abundant everlasting nature enveloped in golden afternoon light, in the paintings of Nicolas Poussin, Claude Lorrain or Gaspard Dughet for example, served as a reminder of a primeval world of the Golden Age. In such a place, beyond space and time, only deities resided. Like any utopian world it was beyond the grasp of mere mortals. Only
the equally ethereal shepherds, often clad in classical attire, were admitted. They were as timeless as the land around them.

The pastoral of the Rococo era was molded upon these traditions, but like the age itself, it assumed a profound transformation. The new era of lightness and fragility, the period that glorified the pleasures of life itself, had to create a pastoral ideal of its own - a more attainable one.

For the first time, the realm of perfection became accessible, descending from the distant heights of classical mythology into a more mundane sphere. From remote and imaginary pastures, the pastoral world became the space of the garden - controllable, attainable and domesticated. Similar processes transformed the nature of feelings to which the pastoral was related. Instead of the elevated love of Ovidian *Metamorphoses*, Rococo pastoral offered a scope of feelings that one could, and ought, to possess. The most profound change concerned the new protagonists of these pastorals. They were no longer aloof classical deities, or ethereal nymphs, remote from the ordinary beholder. These new heroes belonged to the contemporary world. Fashionably attired in the latest 18th century garments, carefully dressed and coiffed, these shepherds and shepherdesses, enacted with utmost grace scenes where love and lightness of being were dominant sentiments.

One of the most poignant examples of this Rococo vision of love and nature fused in the image of the pastoral is undoubtedly *An Autumn Pastoral* by François Boucher (1749) (now in the Wallace Collection in London). Although it possesses the main elements that the pastoral genre required, its world is no longer the secret and sacred garden depicted by Giorgione, Titian or Dughet. In the midst of lush green trees and shrubs stands a dilapidated fountain, almost overgrown with moss and lichen. Together with the inevitable flock of sheep, it forms a perfect setting for an amorous couple of shepherds reclining in the deep green shade of a fountain. The young shepherd clad in ruffled silk, gazes longingly on his beloved in his lap, feeding her gracefully with glistening grapes. This entire scene, similar to the pastorals of the previous age, *is* also an idealized construct, only it embodies an entirely different set of feelings. These sophisticated bucolic protagonists are as far removed from the ethereal gods and goddesses of the Renaissance as is their love from the sentiments previously depicted. Their love is not a transcendental absolute, but the elegant game of amorous affection so prized by the 18th century aristocracy. Love and its depiction are transformed here into a veritable fragile merveille: a fragile marvel of being and existing.

The sensual world of love and the sensuality of nature completely pervaded aristocratic life in the Rococo age. Instead of merely admiring or longing for a distant pastoral
abode, the aristocracy of this time desired to appropriate it, and accommodate it in the gallant world of their courtly lives. In their very sentiments they strove to imitate, enact and maybe even re-live the pastoral. Even some of the residences of French aristocracy strove towards this Arcadian ideal, and bore such names as *Hermitage, Solitude, Monrepos* 

For the first time in the history of the pastoral ideal, the sensual worlds of love and nature surpassed the bucolic dream and began to shape reality itself.

This merging of real with imaginary worlds, of realms desired and attained, represents the very essence of the painting with which this essay began — Watteau’s *Disembarking on Cythera*. This is not a pastoral in its substance, but an ingenious invention of the artist who fittingly named it a *fête galante*. It represents the amorous pilgrimage of lovers to the island of Cythera; a quest for the promised land of love where all romantic reveries would be content. Constructed as an allegory of love and courtship, this painting depicts a number of refined couples in a bucolic setting reminiscent both of Renaissance and Baroque great Arcadian landscapes. Every gesture is a carefully studied element of courtship and, with their stylish dress and courtly manners, it works as a perfect mirror of aristocracy. It is indeed a pastoral mirror, one that could return to them, through love, an improved image of themselves. But this is not the only connotation embodied in Watteau’s work, it conceals another far more melancholy meaning — the shade in the garden.

There is a sense of deep sorrow and longing in the very core of its iridescence, more fitting for an image of departure. In the shape of its landscape, in the commotion of its figures, even in the rustling of leaves and rippling of water, one can distinguish opposing senses of finitude and insubstantiality. Thus, for decades, this painting has remained a riddle for scholars, who still cannot agree, whether it is an image of arrival at, or parting from the island of love’s delight.

Despite its ceaseless desire for happiness, the age of Rococo knew, all too well, that love, like all dreams, is ephemeral. Lightness of touch and being, so pivotal for the sensibility of an age, carries within itself a feeling of utmost fragility. This melancholy pastoral did not remain only on the canvases of Rococo painters; it also invaded nature itself. Even in the most glorious gardens of both England and France, devoted to the very embodiment of pastoral pleasure, there is an inescapable feeling of impermanence. Shadowy, crumbling towers, pseudo-classical ruins and moss covered gothic arches populated the gardens of the 18th century. Their presence was not conditioned only by a desire for the picturesque, but by the need to represent the true nature of the pastoral; one that included a
faint feeling of demise. A sense of profound melancholy seeps through these seemingly perfect vistas, reminding the beholder that even frivolity casts a deep shadow.

**Selected further reading:**


Mary Sheriff (ed.), *Antoine Watteau: Perspectives on the Artist and the Culture of His Time*, Newark, 2010.