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Watteau's 'Les Comédiens Italiens' Once More

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One of Antoine Watteau's most celebrated paintings is surely *Les Comédiens Italiens* (Fig. 1), painted around 1720 and now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Studies of this composition have been devoted mostly to identifying the characters of the comedy troupe that is depicted, and also to discussing associations relating to the events or activities of the Italian Comedy in Paris and London during Watteau's lifetime.¹ In 1952, however, Dora Panofsky published a series of observations of a more complex character, associating the figure of Pierrot with Watteau himself and suggesting that the painting may be based partly on the traditional iconography of the *Ecce Homo*.² The present study attempts to refine further these observations on the basis of new evidence, and to relate the symbolism of this painting to the artist's personal situation on the eve of his death.

In *Les Comédiens Italiens*, the cast of characters represents a notably wide range of ages and physical types. Beginning with the two children at the lower left, the ascending movement continues with Il Matto holding his stick jester, Mezzetino with his guitar, and Isabella and Leandro in amorous conversation; Harlequin and Scapin enclose the group of figures on the left. In the centre stands Pierrot. To stage left (our right), the line of figures continues with the Prima Donna, Zanni and Zagne, followed by Buffetto and the Doctor, and is closed by a footman holding the curtain at the extreme right.³ All of the chief characters of the Italian Comedy are represented, and this led Dora Panofsky to believe that the emphasis of the painting was not on any particular performance but was rather a 'parade' of the various traditional figures.⁴ Watteau's painting is nonetheless marked by a strikingly symmetrical composition that is most un-

usual in the artist's work, and this writer believes that such insistence on symmetry is directly related to meaning.

Indeed, *Les Comédiens Italiens* consists of two evenly balanced components, with Pierrot forming the central, dominant, and vertical accent in a virtually elliptical composition, which is echoed by the semi-circular pediment above and countered by the curvature of the niche setting (Fig. 2). The lower left and upper right corners have red as their dominant colour, and may by their motifs either reveal or conceal a possible source of inspiration for the entire figure grouping. The orientation of compositional 'reading' is from left to right, conforming to what has been called the normal manner of scanning large pictures.⁵ The

¹ It has been suggested that *Les Comédiens Italiens* may relate to the closure of the Opéra-Comique in 1719 after a long period of rivalry with the Comédie-Française. See H. Adhémar, *Watteau: Sa Vie. Son Œuvre* (Paris, 1950), 99-103; also A.P. de Mirimonde, 'Les sujets musicaux chez Antoine Watteau,' *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, LVIII (1961), 272-76.

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² D. Panofsky, 'Gilles or Pierrot? Iconographic Notes on Watteau,' *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, XXXIX (1952), 319-40.

³ For descriptions of individual characters of the Italian Comedy, see L. Riccoboni, *Histoire du Théâtre Italien* (Paris, 1728); K. Lea, *Italian Popular Comedy* (Oxford, 1934); V. Pandolfi, *La Commedia dell'Arte* (Florence, 1957-60); G. Oreglia, *The Commedia dell'Arte* (New York, 1968); A. Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin: A Critical Study of the Commedia dell'Arte* (Cambridge, 1963); and A. Nicoll, *Masks, Mimes and Miracles: Studies in the Popular Theatre* (New York, 1931).

⁴ Panofsky, 'Gilles,' 335.

⁵ Regarding the orientation of reading pictures, see H. Wöfflin, 'Über das Rechts und Links im Bilde,' *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte* (Basle, 1941); W. Ludwig, *Das Rechts-Links Problem im Tierreich und beim Menschen* (Berlin, 1932); A. Blau, *The Master Hand* (New York, 1946); M. Gaffron, 'Right and Left in Pictures,' *The Art Quarterly*, XIII (1950), 312 ff.



FIGURE 1. Antoine Watteau, *Les Comédiens Italiens*, ca. 1720. 64 × 76 cm. Washington, National Gallery of Art (Photo: National Gallery of Art).

group of children and Il Matto are located on the lowest 'step' of the picture, and seem mutually to reinforce what, in my opinion, is the underlying meaning of the painting: that Watteau's assembly of figures in *Les Comédiens Italiens* was founded on

the emblematic tradition of the symbolic *Steps of Life*.⁶ The popularity of this image from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century can be attested to by a number of works by artists as diverse as Goya and Courbet, in whose hands a conventional symbol was transformed through ingenious manipulation into a complex play of imagery.⁷

The traditional portrayal of the *Steps of Life* (Fig. 3)⁸ shows the various ages of human existence. Each is represented by a figure on the step of a bridge, under which a *Last Judgment* usually appears. Invariably beginning with Childhood on the left, the procession moves first upwards with Youth and Maturity, then descends to Old Age and Death on the right. *Vanitas* motifs are often incorporated in the foreground, par-

6 Concerning the tradition of the *Steps of Life*, see R. van Marle, *Iconographie de l'art profane au Moyen-Age et à la Renaissance* (New York, 1971), 156 ff; also S. Chew, *The Pilgrimage of Life* (New Haven and London, 1962), 147-53; M. de Meyer, *Volksprenten in de Nederlanden 1400-1900* (Amsterdam, 1970), 114.

7 Both Goya's tapestry cartoon, *La Boda*, and Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* were based on the emblematic image of the *Steps of Life*. For a discussion of Courbet's *Burial*, see M. Schapiro, 'Courbet and Popular Imagery: An Essay on Realism and Naïveté,' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, iv (1940-41), 167.

8 The word 'Trap,' appearing on top of Fig. 3, in addition to meaning steps and stairs, also connotes degrees or stages.

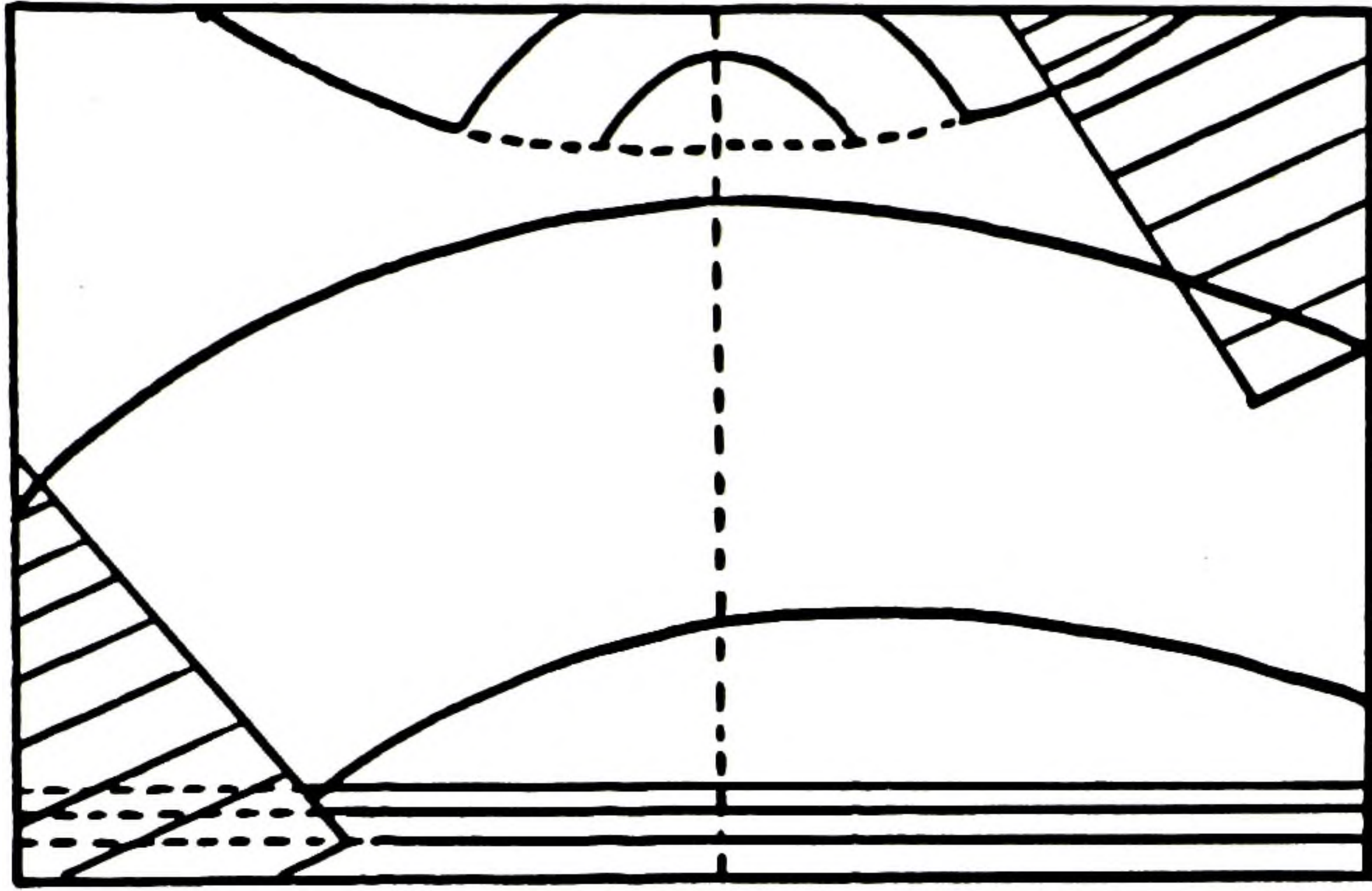


FIGURE 2. Compositional Structure of Watteau's *Les Comédiens Italiens* (Drawing: author).

ticularly in seventeenth-century prints from the Netherlands.⁹

As a native of Valenciennes, a city which belonged to the Spanish Netherlands until 1684, Watteau could very likely have been exposed to popular images of this type prior to his coming to Paris in 1702. In addition, such prints were also well known in Paris, and Watteau could have seen them there. Watteau's awareness of the traditional representations of the *Ages of Man* diffused through engravings is further reflected in the series of the *Four Seasons* that he painted during his early years in Paris.¹⁰

Another painting, *l'Occupation selon l'âge* (Fig. 4) was made only a few years before *Les Comédiens*

Italiens, and clearly indicates that Watteau's source of inspiration came essentially from emblematic depictions. Here are found four figures in an interior. While they seem to be engaged in domestic activities, it is apparent upon closer examination that the four female figures represent three generations: the grandmother, her daughter, and her two grandchildren. Even their 'domestic' activities of sewing and spinning are symbolical in that they are related to the activity of the Fates, whose main concern is the determination of the thread of human life. The birdcage, the still lifes on the table, and the animals in the painting are also objects suggestive of human transience.¹¹ Thus one may conclude that Watteau was familiar with the emblematic tradition and had on some occasions incorporated symbolical or allegorical elements in his works.

⁹ Meyer, *Volksprenten*, 114.

¹⁰ There is a long tradition of associating the *Four Seasons* with the *Four Ages of Man* (see Chew, *Pilgrimage*, 154-60). The best known series of the *Four Seasons* by Watteau include the *Jullienne Seasons*, the *Cosse Seasons*, and the *Crozat Seasons*. See E. Camesca, *The Complete Paintings of Watteau* (New York, 1968) 93-96.

¹¹ The birdcage, still lifes, and animals are common symbols in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in representing the *Ages of Man* and his destiny. For the Dutch tradition in such representations, see E. de Jongh, 'Erotica in vogelperspectief,' *Simiolus*, III (1968-69), 22-72. An example is found, for instance, in William Hogarth's *Portrait of the Graham Children* of 1742; see R. Paulson, *Hogarth: His Life, Art and Times* (New Haven and London, 1971), I, 458-59.



FIGURE 3. J.C. Visscher, *Steps of Life*, 17th century (Photo: author).



FIGURE 4. A. Watteau, *L'Occupation selon l'âge*, ca. 1718. Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland (Photo: National Gallery of Ireland).

In *Les Comédiens Italiens*, not only does the general configuration resemble the frieze-like arrangement of the *Steps of Life*, but the steps in the foreground are also surely more than mere indications of the stage. They allusively prefigure the symbolic *Steps of Life*, while the curtain behind the Doctor and the footman at the upper right may well be a symbol of Death itself.¹² Between these, Il Matto, Harlequin, the musician, and the young lovers, all engaged in music and amorous activities, could well represent Youth.¹³ Farther to the right, the Prima Donna, servants, and Buf-

fetto seem more serious in their attitudes, no longer even in *tête-à-tête* encounters. As such, they are suitable for Middle Age. In contrast, in an earlier painting by Watteau of similar subject matter, *l'Amour au Théâtre Italien* (Fig. 5), the characters are not visibly arranged according to age, and children are entirely removed from consideration.¹⁴ The Doctor conforms to the age normally ascribed to this character – about forty or forty-five¹⁵ – so it seems evident that no allusion to the *Steps of Life* was intended. As further possible corroboration, the assembly of figures stands on the same foreground, with only a slight recession at centre, whereas the composition of *Les Comédiens Italiens* first protrudes from and then recedes into the stage. The conflation of the *Steps of Life* emblem with a stage performance is certainly an ingenious one, with human life displayed in its entirety on the one hand, and stage performance amounting to a miniaturization of life on the other – either of which is predicated upon its transitory nature.

As previously mentioned, *Vanitas* objects – books, scientific instruments, money, wine goblets, hourglasses, watches, precious objects, butterflies, musical instruments, and full-blown roses – are often seen in Netherlandish representations of this subject.¹⁶ In *Les Comédiens Italiens*, Mezzetino's guitar represents both Spring and Love while symbolizing the vanity appropriate to Youth.¹⁷ As for the roses, they adorn the jester-

¹² For the use of the curtain as a symbol of death, see J. Spence, *Observations, Anecdotes, and Characters of Books and Men Collected from Conversation* (Oxford, 1966), 1, 263.

¹³ According to Ripa, a young man playing a stringed instrument is the representation of the sanguine temperament. This temperament is also related to Venus, the goddess of love, spring, air, and children. See C. Ripa, *Della Più Che Novissima Iconologia* (Padua, 1630), 1, 122 ff.

¹⁴ It is worth noting that in the four preparatory drawings for *Les Comédiens Italiens*, none shows a deliberate arrangement of the figures according to those on the *Steps of Life*. See J. Mathey, *Antoine Watteau: Catalogue complet de son œuvre dessiné* (Paris, 1957), cat. nos. 873, 875, 876, and 877.

¹⁵ Nicoll, *Harlequin*, 56.

¹⁶ J.B. Knipping, *De Iconografie van de Contra-reformatie in de Nederlanden* (Hilversum, 1939) 1, 113-24; also I. Bergström, *Dutch Still-Life Painting in the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1956), 154-90; H. Rudolph, 'Vanitas, die Bedeutung Mittelalterlicher und humanistischer Bildinhalte in der niederländischen Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts,' *Festschrift Wilhelm Pinder zum 60. Geburtstag* (Leipzig, 1938), 405-33; and M.L. Wurfbain, *Ijdelheid der ijdelheden Hollandse Vanitas-vorstellungen uit de zeventiende eeuw* (Leiden, 1970).

¹⁷ See A.P. de Mirimonde, 'La musique dans les allégories de

FIGURE 5. A. Watteau, *L'Amour au Théâtre Italien*, ca. 1716. Berlin-Dahlem, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie (Photo: Jörg P. Anders).



head held by Il Matto and are pulled apart by the children, a *memento mori*. This action may also be interpreted as a symbol of Fate: 'Il m'aime, un peu, beaucoup, à la folie.'

The bouquet of roses lying in front of Pierrot seems more elaborate than simply a *memento mori* in that roses, the traditional flowers of love, are also associated with the prime Christian virtue Caritas, which Christ embodies in the New Testament.¹⁸ Such a double role sheds light on the image of Pierrot himself and on his relationship with an important figure of the *Steps of Life*, whose most urgent message is to remind one that the Last Judgment will come any day. Normally, the central figure dominating the steps is Christ himself, seated above or below the steps, who will reward the good and punish the evil. If Watteau intended Pierrot to play the role of Christ, his symbolic role would be ironically reinforced by the introduction into the painting of the *Ecce Homo* iconography in a way anticipated by Dora Panofsky and intimately connected with the *Steps of Life* itself (Fig. 6).¹⁹

Watteau's Pierrot is notably clumsy and rigid in comparison with other figures of the 'assembly,' but he is also isolated, occupying the rectangular space indicated by the opening in the architecture behind him. Not only do his shimmering white costume and bouquet of roses single him out, but his cap is calculated to form a halo-like appearance, and light seems to be radiating from the

figure itself as with the resurrected Christ.²⁰ This is a suitable association in that this is precisely the role of Christ in the *Steps of Life* – the Second Coming. Pierrot's initial humiliation would ultimately lead, like Christ's, to elevation and triumph through his suffering. In presenting Pierrot in mock-heroic fashion, Watteau could bring the peculiar character of Pierrot closer to his audience, introducing an ironic comment about the identity of the true judge, as in the *Ecce*

'l'amour,' *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, LXVIII (1966), 265 ff; LXIX (1967), 319 ff.

¹⁸ See R. Freyhan, 'Evolution of the Caritas Figure in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries,' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XI (1948), 85.

¹⁹ Dora Panofsky has suggested that Watteau might have used Rembrandt's print, *Ecce Homo* of 1655 (Fig. 6), as a model (Panofsky, 'Gilles,' 339). In Rembrandt's *Ecce Homo*, there is a large statue at the base of the podium. This pensive figure is very likely a symbol of the witnessing of the fulfilment of Christ's Passion. In Watteau's *Les Comédiens Italiens*, a bust of a faun decorates the semi-pediment above Pierrot. The pagan bust is perhaps also a witness – one to the passage of time, serving as a kind of 'triumph of Remembrance over Death.' Regarding an interpretation of statues in Watteau's paintings, see A.P. de Mirimonde, 'Statues et emblèmes dans l'œuvre d'Antoine Watteau,' *Revue du Louvre*, XII (1962), 11-20.

²⁰ The stage setting in *Les Comédiens Italiens* is reminiscent of tomb architecture. In many seventeenth-century Dutch *Vanitas* paintings, similar architectural settings are found; in such instances, they are certainly associated with the idea of death, of ruin, and of decay. For illustrated material, see I. Bergström, 'Vanité et Moralité,' *L'Oeil* (October 1970), 13.

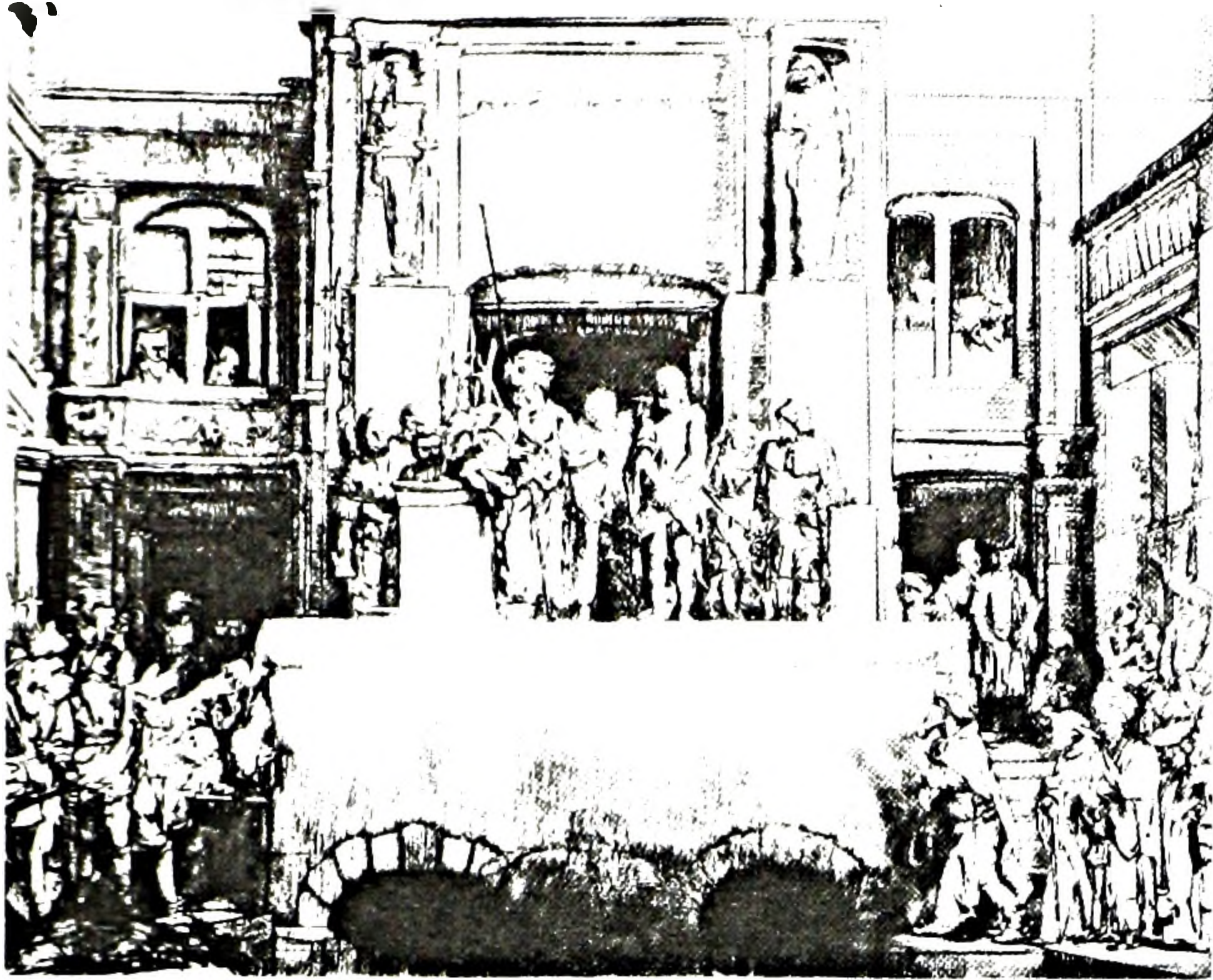


FIGURE 6. Rembrandt, *Ecce Homo*, 1655. London, British Museum (Photo: British Museum).

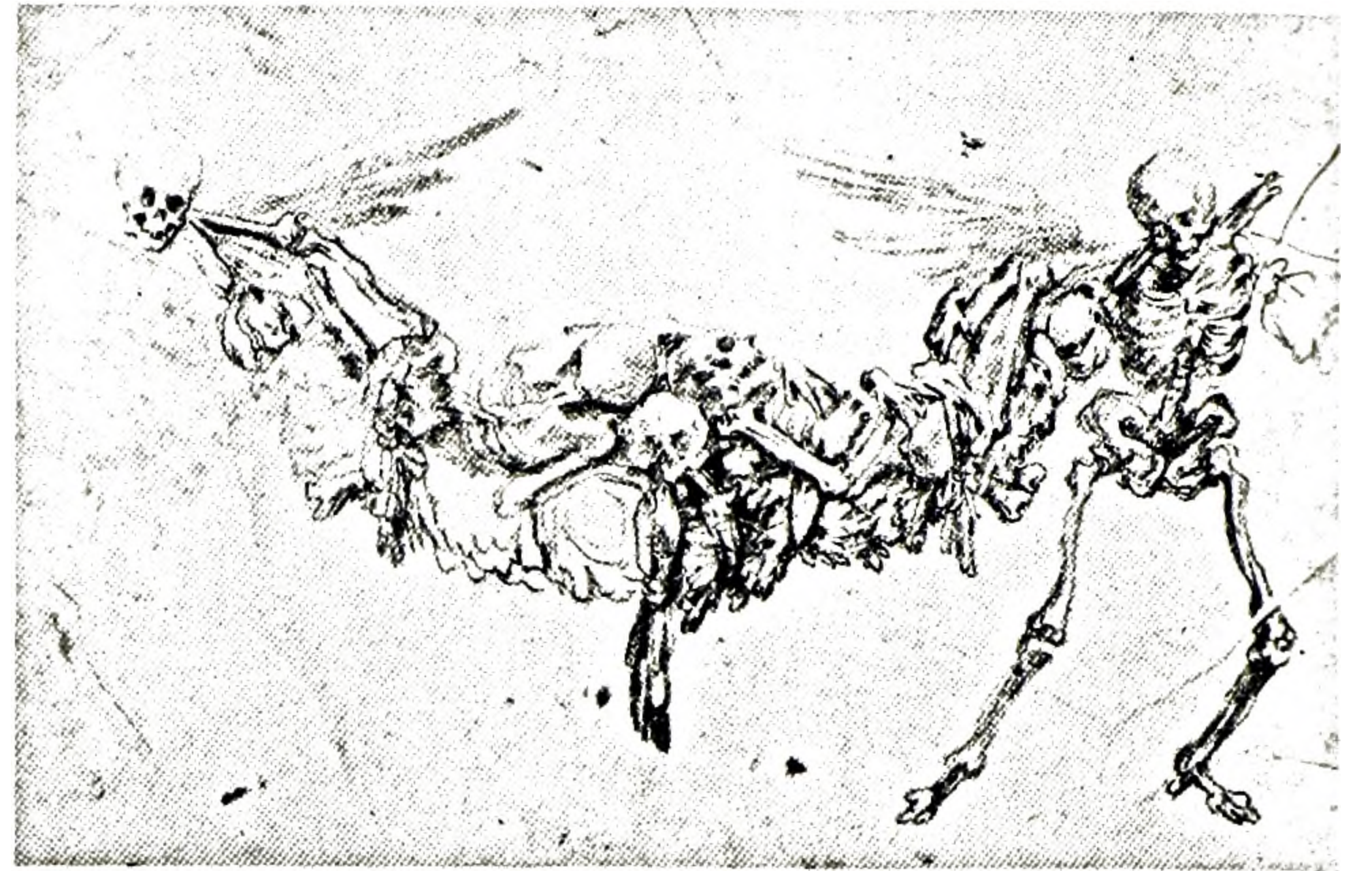


FIGURE 7. A. Watteau, *Skeletal Figures*, ca. 1720. Stockholm, Nationalmuseum (Photo: Nationalmuseum).

Homo compositions. These two iconographies are further linked by the universality of their themes and their tragic implications.

It is naturally tempting to associate the figure of Pierrot with Watteau himself, who is known to have been 'consumptive, solitary and self-tormenting.'²¹ A general melancholic mood or sentiment dominates Watteau's artistic production, with the many *fêtes galantes* serving as allegories of transience in the marking of the passage of time, of an age.²² By the time he painted *Les Comédiens Italiens*, he was consulting Dr. Richard Mead in England and undoubtedly knew the likely outcome of the tuberculosis he

had contracted. His presentiments of an early death may be reflected in a drawing (Fig. 7) in which the macabre ornament seems to show angels of death marching in a funeral procession with a bouquet of skulls and skeletons. This drawing is undoubtedly related to our painting in intrinsic meaning. With *Les Comédiens Italiens*, the symbolic model of the Steps permits a way of grouping many figures in a procession or assembly while providing unity by its implied drama. All of the figures actually participate in a universal event, but are ultimately subordinated to the central, 'elevated' figure of Pierrot, who now assumes the place of Christ himself.

In effect, what Watteau has done is to constitute a new subject by combining no fewer than three traditions – a conventional symbol, a pictorial heritage, and a number of identifiable characters – into a configuration illustrating those central forces which govern human existence. By so doing, he was able to endow a stage depiction which is essentially a genre representation with those philosophical and personal overtones that continue the moral traditions inherent in genre subjects.²³ It is thus possible that Antoine Watteau meant to portray here a curtain call – as much the farewell of the cast as of the artist's own life.²⁴

²¹ Panofsky, 'Gilles,' 334.

²² See E. Panofsky, 'Et in Arcadia Ego: On the Conception of Transience in Poussin and Watteau,' *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer* (Oxford, 1936), 223-54; also M. Levey, 'The Real Theme of Watteau's *Embarkation for Cythera*,' *Burlington Magazine*, CIII (1961), 180-85; and G. LeCoat, 'Le pèlerinage à l'île de Cithère: un sujet "aussi galant qu'allégorique,"' *RACAR*, II: 2 (1975), 9-24.

²³ See J. Adhémar, 'French Sixteenth Century Genre Paintings,' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, VIII (1945), 191-95.

²⁴ Mirimonde has remarked that in *Les Comédiens Italiens*, Watteau 'semble avoir imaginé la dernière vaudeville de la troupe qu'il aimait. Ce tableau serait alors un adieu et un hommage.' (A.P. de Mirimonde, 'Les sujets musicaux chez Antoine Watteau,' 273.)