

WHERE
WERE
WE

Angie Keefer: WHERE WERE WE

Front cover: This shop sign was imagined over the course of a years-long conversation between Kara Hamilton and Angie Keefer for a weeks-long exhibition at Kunstverein, Amsterdam, which opened on November 29, 2013. With thanks to Kara Hamilton, Christine Roland, Maxine Kopsa and Kunstverein for reasons and permissions.

There is a pleat, or a certain type of gown, known as a Watteau Pleat or a Watteau Gown, though the painter Watteau doesn't seem to have had much to do with its invention. He merely depicted the look repeatedly, famously, and once in petal pink satin on the back of a woman ascending a step. The latter stars in a shop sign commissioned by a man who made his living selling art and baubles to aristocrats, though it's unclear whether artist or client truly expected the painting to advertise anything other than itself. Indeed, the sign depicts aristocrats shopping for art and baubles, but a buyer acquired it from Gersaint, the shop owner, almost immediately; Watteau died shortly thereafter; and now the work is considered his final masterpiece, rather than, say, a watershed in the history of sign making.



Antoine Watteau, *L'Enseigne de Gersaint*, 1720, oil on canvas

Novelties browsed by the clientele in Gersaint's actual shop included ornate mirrors, articles for the vanity table, and paintings of various sizes and subjects. In Watteau's version, frolicking nudes, religious tableaux and regal portraits line the stall, which is open on one side like a doll's house. The lady in the pleated pink sack gown steps up from a cobblestone street to enter the shop as if to cross a proscenium. One foot in the scene, the other still lingering outside, she hesitates to place her right hand in the open palm of the solicitous, curly wiggled man who attends her. Instead, she looks away from him, over her left shoulder, down towards two workers who load a framed mirror and a painting of the old, dead King Louis XIV into a crate. Her silk cape extends from the gaping booth like a wet tongue while, a few feet away, at the opposite edge of the painting, a mongrel dog strains to lick his haunch.

No one in the painting makes eye contact with another. The clerks regard their customers, the customers regard the paintings, the gentleman regards the lady, the lady regards the workers, the workers regard their work, and the dog minds a flea. Distraction is their common drama.

A century and a half after Gersaint's sign changed hands, Stéphane Mallarmé wrote, edited, and designed several issues of a fashion magazine called *La Dernière Mode*. The journal, published in 1874, was categorically indistinguishable from other such publications available at the time, though likely better written. It appears Mallarmé created it in earnest. Perhaps for this reason alone, *La Dernière Mode* was long ignored by scholars, who had difficulty integrating the apparent non-sequitur with the rest of the poet's oeuvre. Under several pen names, each imparted with a different voice and agenda, Mallarmé filled the pages of the magazine almost single-handedly. Marguerite de Ponty, its ostensive editor, wrote a lengthy column on the topic of jewelry for the premier issue. She begins:

Too late to speak of summer fashions and too soon to speak of winter ones (or even autumn ones). Though several great Paris Houses, as we happen to know, are already busy over their end-of-season selection. Today, in fact, not having to hand the elements needed even to begin designing a new toilette, we would like to chat with our readers about the objects which serve to complete a toilette, i.e. jewels. A paradox? No: is there not, in jewels, something permanent, fitting to speak of in a fashion journal still in suspense as to what was fashion in July or will be in September?

From there, she/he continues to muse through several hundred words on the art of jewelry and its proper applications for girls and women of various ages in various circumstances.

Who is interested in bracelets? I saw a splendid one yesterday made of gold and rubies: then several rings of brilliants, or emeralds, or with cameos (these last are coming back into fashion). I leave it to you to choose the clasp for the shawl... Nevertheless nothing can ever rival a fan, with a setting as rich as you please or quite simple, but affirming, above all, ideality. What sort of ideality? That of a painting: an old-master one, of the school of Boucher or Watteau, or even by them ...

DEUXIEME LIVRAISON

DIMANCHE 20 SEPTEMBRE 1874



PARAIT

LE 1^{er} ET LE 3^e DIMANCHE DU MOIS

AVEC LE CONGRÈS

DES GRANDES TAPISERIES, DE TAPISSIERS-DÉCORATEURS, DE MAÎTRES QUEUX DE JARDINIERS, D'AMATEURS DE BIJOUX ET DU SPORT

NOUVELLES & VERS

DE THÉODORE DE BANVILLE, LÉON CLADEL, FRANÇOIS COPPÉE, ALPHONSE DAUDET, LÉON DIERX, ERNEST O'HÉRVILLY, ALBERT MÉNAT, STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ, CATULLE MENDÈS, SULLY PRUDHOMME, YVON VALADÉ, AUGUSTE VILLIERS DE LISLE ADAM, ÉMILE ZOLA, ETC.

MUSIQUE

PAR LES PRINCIPAUX COMPOSITEURS



La Dernière Mode, no. 2, Sunday 20 September 1874

A footnote to this passage from the English translation of “Boucher or Watteau” (published only a decade ago by P.N. Furbank and Alex Cain) notes that Jules and Edmond de Goncourt, contemporaries of Mallarmé’s who disdained his work, “had recently tried to revive an interest in these 18th-century painters.” When Jules died of syphilis in 1870, his brother Edmond began to publish the daily journal they’d kept (and also continued to write it alone). The journals were full of gossip-worthy details about the lives, habits, petty behaviors, and fashions of the artists of the day, including, for example, Baudelaire, Zola, and Flaubert.

Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1856), had she been conceived 20 years hence, would have stashed issues of Mallarmé’s magazine in her mental bunker, amongst other Parisian fashion rags, those “imaginary assuagements for her personal lusts.” Not coincidentally, the same moral ambiguity attaches to *Madame Bovary* as to *La Dernière Mode*. While Mallarmé may have intended to parody the cult of fashion along with other theaters of bourgeois aspiration, and perhaps even in direct response to the frivolities and delusions of the brothers Goncourt, he—like Flaubert—lavished considerable time and care on the endeavor. This critical mass of attention, in itself, constitutes a certain valuation; regardless of the artists’ motives and whatever verdicts they may have privately passed on their subjects’ indulgences, if “*Madame Bovary, c’est moi*,” so, too, *Madame de Ponty* is Mallarmé, and that browsing, pink-robed aristocrat is Watteau.

But what did it mean (if it is true, as poets say, that a dress means something?)

Marguerite de Ponty asks the question in issue 6 and reiterates it in number 8, the final installment of *La Dernière Mode*:

In a publication studying Fashion as an art it is not enough (not by any means!) to cry: “You must wear such-and-such.” One needs to say: “This is why,” and “We told you so!”

An online image search for “watteau” returns pictures of his major works rhythmically interspersed by contemporary bridal gowns modeled against seamless grey or blush backdrops. From the 18th-century Watteau Gown, assorted costumes—a “Cheap Watteau,” a “Luxurious Strapless

Watteau,” and a “Watteau Train One Shoulder Short Dress,” to name only a few—have evolved to outfit modern day wedding role-play. The style gives form to a fantasy of the good, bucolic life: a time before the Revolution (whichever one), when silk-clad haves watched the world through airy gauze on mild summer days while submissive have-nots did their bidding. But unlike Watteau’s sign, a studio shot of a readymade wedding dress conveys no hint of irony—no mangy dog conducts his business in the corner, no narrator interprets the look under a winking *nom de plume*. The model in a Cheap Watteau wedding number is a Bovary refracted and unbound.

Just as the passive, coy half of Watteau’s, Mallarmé’s and Flaubert’s alter-egos is memorialized in countless white garments on innumerable wedding days, the other, greedy, sexually insatiable (and often violent) half has fueled the entertainment industry for at least as long as show business has been big business. The young distributor and theater owner William Fox launched his production in 1914 of *A Fool There Was*, a story adapted from a play based on a painting (!) of a woman in a negligee, who may have been a vampire, as well. In the painting, the woman/vampire sits on the edge of a bed, dominating a ravaged male lover who is either asleep or dead beneath her. In the movie version, a seductive young woman/vampire rather warmly dressed in modern, Poirot-style clothing ruins a successful family man. (More plot detail might make a better synopsis but would obscure the bottom line—that an unattached woman in dark, straight-cut clothes spells trouble.)

Though female vampires had begun titillating cinema audiences some years earlier, *A Fool There Was* created a sensation, turning its lead, an unknown named Theodosia Goodman, into a star overnight. Goodman was either a mediocre actress or a fine one who convincingly played a mediocre one. Early moviegoers knew her as Theda Bara, a fiction cooked up by the public relations people working for Fox Studios when it was still a fledgling company, before receipts from Bara’s films helped Fox swell to a behemoth. Most of those films, with the exception of *A Fool There Was* and a handful of others, are gone now, as are most people old enough to remember seeing them. Box office accounts, reviews and images survive, but they’re ambivalent. After her stunning debut as a bloodthirsty home-wrecker, audiences only really loved Bara when she

again played the Vamp, while critics occasionally respected her when she (very rarely) didn't.



Bara is alternately captivating and plain in photographs, yet she was once considered the most famous woman in the world. That Marilyn Monroe was the Theda Bara of her generation should put things in perspective: the fact that you probably haven't heard of Bara, for one, or that you can't bring to mind an iconic image of her. Under the weighty caulk of garish screen makeup, Bara put sloe-eyes and round hips on a new, cinematic archetype—the femme fatale—but off screen, she disappointed press photographers and gossip columnists in search of a man-eater. She lived with her mother and sister during the rapid rise and peak of her career. For pleasure, she liked to read.

According to confused immigration authorities, Bara's father, a master tailor, hailed from "Poland, Russia." Her Swiss-born mother was a wig-maker. Both eventually became owners of successful businesses in their respective costume trades, acquiring the means to raise children in high middle-class Cincinnati comfort. Theda and her siblings were well-dressed, well-educated, and encouraged by their parents in their leisurely pursuits. After spending some time in college, Bara moved to New York, where she unsuccessfully attempted to forge a stage career. Almost 30 when she finally landed in front of a movie camera, she made a marketing decision to reduce her age as well as her name. All in all, Theda Bara was an unlikely candidate for the office of erotic scarecrow she ultimately attained.

The vamp style was to Theodosia Goodman as the pleated sack gown was to Antoine Watteau. Neither invented the objects they portrayed, but, inadvertently, both popularized forms that grew up and away into icons of their own, which outlasted particular fashion cycles and the artists themselves. “What is the meaning of a dress?” Mallarmé asked. Unlike, “What is the meaning of a flower?” the question can be answered. Most people ponder the matter every time they put on clothes, or make or buy or even see some. But much like, “What is the meaning of a sign?” the question pervades daily social experience such that it disappears from conscious, critical awareness, while a thousand subtle answers register with every scanning glance of a crowd or an image.

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Watteau Train One Shoulder Short Junior Prom Dress