

# Open Windows 4

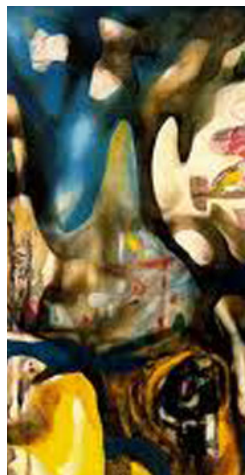
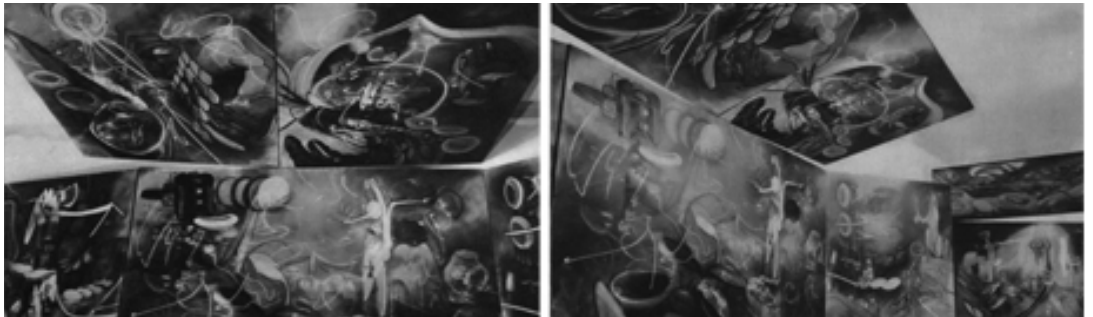
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May 2012

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## Open Windows 4

To commemorate the centenary of Matta's birth, in 2011 the Museum presented a special installation of the 5 canvases that constitute the cycle *L'Honni aveuglant* (*The dazzling Outcast*), with the aim of offering the first recreation of the way it was shown in Paris in 1966. As a continuation of that project, this fourth issue of *Open Windows* includes two texts that analyse Matta's highly innovative and revolutionary concept of space. This issue also includes an article on the *Commedia dell'Arte* in the work of the French Rococo painter Watteau.

# The Story behind the Research: Matta and the Open Cube

Marta Ruiz del Árbol

Fig. 1  
Installation of *L'Honni aveuglant*  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 1992-2009, Madrid



Discovering the stories concealed within works of art is one of the principal tasks of a museum curator. When was the work made? Under what circumstances? What did people think about it at the time? What did the artist think about it? What happened to the work after it was finished? In addition to the information provided by the materials used in a work's creation, the marks left by the artist and the patina of time, research into other sources allows the curator, for example, to reconstruct the creative process and subsequent physical history of the work. Letters, texts by the artist, documents and contemporary photographs together create a map that offers the possibility of entering into a specific work of art in the most complete manner possible. On occasions these accounts lead on to a research project that casts a completely new light on the work in question. This has been the case with the new installation of the cycle by Matta entitled *L'Honni aveuglant (The dazzling Outcast)*, which was on display at the Museum between September and October 2011.

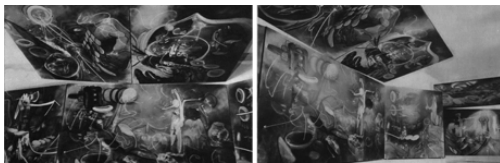


Fig. 2 and 3  
Installation of *L'Honni aveuglant*  
Iolas Gallery, June-July 1966, Paris

## Photographs from 1966

According to Simone Frigerio who visited the first public presentation in 1966 of *L'Honni aveuglant*: "The latest exhibition by Matta at the Gallery Iolas [in Paris] has been designed to occupy a space through completely covering the ceiling, walls and floor with a group of paintings"<sup>1</sup>, while Geneviève Bonnefoi who also submerged himself in Matta's pictorial universe noted that "it is a space that one enters into as if into a steam bath that is as heavenly as it is infernal"<sup>2</sup>. Such accounts and the principal texts on this cycle<sup>3</sup> refer to the unique and striking installation of these works, now in the Museo Thyssen, shortly after they were created. Lack of visual documentation, however, had made it impossible to reconstruct that installation until now (fig. 1).

The discovery of an article with photographs of the installation of Matta's cycle at the Gallery Iolas in Paris in 1966<sup>4</sup> (figs. 2 and 3) has now made it possible, more than forty years later, to reconstruct the way in which Matta showed *L'Honni aveuglant* on its first presentation to the public (fig. 4). In addition to confirming what critics of the day had described and enabling us to present it in the way that Matta conceived of it, this discovery has opened up new directions for a more profound knowledge of the series and of the artist's concept of the "open cube".



Fig. 4  
New installation of *L'Honni aveuglant*  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2011, Madrid

[\[+ info\]](#)



Fig. 5  
Matta  
*Le cube ouvert*, 1949  
Private collection, Paris

### Towards the Open Cube

The concept of the “open cube” appeared in Matta’s work around 1947 as the result of an intensive process of investigation that drew on his origins as an architect, his links with Surrealism and his interest in the representation of a new concept of space related to non-Euclidean geometry<sup>5</sup>. From an early date Matta, who was known from the time of his arrival in Paris in 1933 for his “discovery of previously unexplored regions of space in the world of art”<sup>6</sup>, aimed to achieve a simultaneous expression of exterior and interior reality. The idea of the “open cube” arose precisely from his desire to create a new artistic concept that combined the multiple dimensions to which human beings are exposed. In addition, we need to remember the serious existential crisis that Matta suffered at this point, brought about by his knowledge of the terrible crimes committed during World War II. It manifested itself in a new intention: that of appealing directly to the viewer and of making him or her the true protagonist of the work.

Through canvases with floating structures that represent all-enveloping energies (fig. 5) Matta aimed to make the viewer aware of the enormous range of possible viewpoints that could be adopted in relation to any situation: he combined what is physical and external to us with the psychological and internal in order to offer the viewer a more profound knowledge of his or her surroundings. Matta expressed his increasingly urgent desire to reach out to the person viewing his work and to arouse that person’s dormant conscience through his painting.

### The Open Cube as Total Work of Art

In the early 1960s and having depicted his “open cubes” on the surface of the canvas, Matta’s investigations extended beyond the canvas in order to create a three-dimensional structure consisting of a type of painting that totally enveloped the viewer. Each of the planes in his earlier works became an independent canvas that was then assembled as part of a cycle. The viewer thus ceased to be a merely external observer in order to submerge himself/herself into a new reality, becoming not just part of the work but its very epicentre. Matta’s intention with this new artistic concept was that instead of the viewer possessing the work, it should be the work that possessed the viewer: “Thus, trapped in an unbearable situation because of this painting, he also is obliged to carry out a poetic act of creation in order to make it his own: besieged by the real, he feels defeated and thus reflects”<sup>7</sup>.

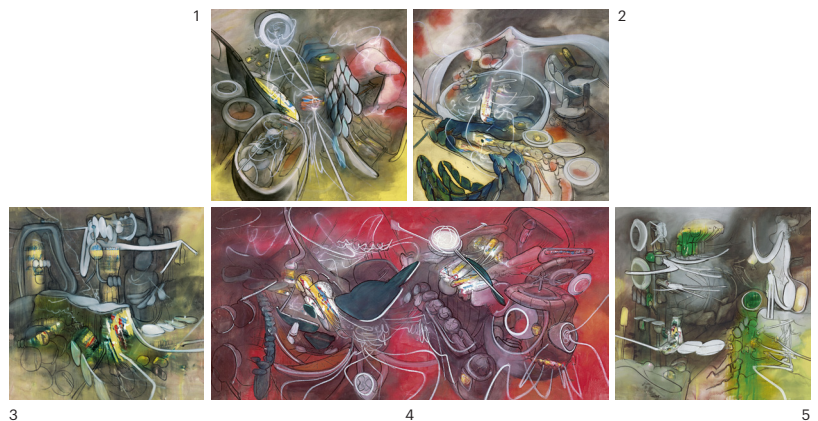
With works such as *Être Atout* of 1960 (fig. 6) Matta laid the way for achieving his aim of creating a total work of art. Some years later, in 1965, the Kunstmuseum in Lucerne published the theoretical text



Fig. 6  
Matta  
*Être Atout* (polyptych), 1960  
Ramuntcho Matta Collection

Fig. 7  
Matta

- 1 *Où loge la folie A* (Where Madness Dwells A) [\[+ info\]](#)
  - 2 *Où loge la folie B* (Where Madness Dwells B) [\[+ info\]](#)
  - 3 *L'Honni aveuglant* (The dazzling outcast) [\[+ info\]](#)
  - 4 *Les Grandes expectatives* (Great Expectations) [\[+ info\]](#)
  - 5 *Le Où à marée haute* (The Where at Flood Tide) [\[+ info\]](#)
- Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid



of the artist on the “open cube” in conjunction with an exhibition of that name<sup>8</sup>. In “Cosa é la cosa mentale” Matta offered a summary of his project to create a cube that would show interior and exterior reality in an indissoluble fusion and would replace the physical space by a realm of the senses<sup>9</sup>. Despite the fact that he had already created other cubes that existed in real space, in the text he said that up to that point his open cubes had been “a spatial projection of my subconscious”. Nonetheless, the artist’s aim was to create a work that represented the fullest possible development of the individual, “a system of analogies, a poetic system” in his own words<sup>10</sup>.

### L’Honni aveuglant

The “open cube” that Matta designed in 1965 reflected all the different realms of human life. Earth, the cosmos, the future, the past, hostile and allied forces were to be represented on each of the cube’s six sides<sup>11</sup>. By completely enveloping themselves in it, viewers would feel themselves surrounded by everything that determined their existence, thus becoming fully developed individuals. The *L’Honni aveuglant* cycle in the Museo Thyssen represents the complete expression of that ideal. This is confirmed by Matta’s highly detailed description in which he lists each of the sides of the cube then provides the titles of the works now in the Museum’s Permanent Collection (fig. 7):

“[...] thus, for example, the bottom part of the cube would be an analogy of the earth (Where Madness dwells). [...] The wall of the top of the cube could be the morphology of the entire physical cosmos (the BACKGROUND) [...]. The canvas opposite you could be the morphology of the reencounter, the “GREAT EXPECTATIONS” of the future, of the unexpected, or of surprise. The canvas behind





Fig. 8  
Invitation to the exhibition  
*L'Honni aveuglant*, lolas  
Gallery, June-July 1966, Paris

you could be memory, our history, our culture, “THE MEMORY SWITCH”. The wall on the right, “THE WHERE AT FLOOD TIDE”, could be the forces that are hostile to you, and the wall on the left, all the allied forces, “THE DAZZLING OUTCAST”. As such, if you were in the perceptual centre of this space, you would simultaneously have an image of what could happen to you, of your allies and enemies, of the power of culture [...], and at the same time an awareness of the physical world in which you find yourselves”<sup>12</sup>.

The invitation to the exhibition held in 1966 at the lolas Gallery where the cycle was exhibited (fig. 8) once again confirms the above-mentioned hypothesis as it presents the canvases in the manner of a cutout cube<sup>13</sup>. Each painting, reproduced on the invitation on a small scale, was located in its corresponding place in the cube. The five canvases in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza made up four sides and represented the future, earth, friends and enemies. As Matta’s text reproduced above indicates, there were two more, *The Background* (fig. 9) and *The Memory Switch* (fig. 10), which represented the past and the sky, respectively.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that even the invitation referred to six sides of the cube, photographs of the installation show that the cube was ultimately not closed in and that it consisted of four sides that opened to allow the spectator inside. It was probably the physical impossibility of translating Matta’s ideal into real space that resulted in this modification. On the other hand, it may have been intentional. This was what Bonnefoi believed, who entitled her article “From Cube to Space” and stated that “the installation [...] *L'Honni aveuglant* does not produce the impression of a cube [...] but rather of an open space that can be infinitely extended”<sup>14</sup>.

### Matta as the Dazzling Outcast

*L'Honni aveuglant* was thus a key work in Matta’s career. Firstly, as the artist’s own writings reveal, it constituted a milestone in his lengthy process of research into space and dimensions, both physical and psychological. Not only did he translate his concept of the “open cube” into real space, with the limitations that this implied, but with this cycle he expressed his highest aspirations as an artist. In the cycle of works now in the Museo Thyssen, Matta offered a compendium of everything that he wished to convey to his contemporaries in his attempt to raise them to a higher level of knowledge of reality. In addition, the work can be seen as a statement about himself and his role as an artist in society.

Matta considered himself to be a “dazzling outcast” and thus identified with the title of his work. *L'Honni aveuglant* also involves a reflection on his role as an artist in society, the function of whom was



Fig. 9  
Matta  
*Le Fond*, 1966  
Private collection

Fig. 10  
Matta  
*Interrupteur de la mémoire*, 1966  
Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University  
Collection. Donated by Dr and Mrs Armand  
J. Castellani, 1986

to disturb people's consciences. This was an uncomfortable role for his friends and associates who, in Matta's opinion, both rejected and admired him. *L'Honni aveuglant* is Matta's most personal cycle in which he reflects on reality and dream, the physical and the mental, the world and its relationship with the artist. Matta appeals to us in his desire to liberate our thinking and free it of prejudices and moral and aesthetic limitations. He "seemingly makes life more difficult as he wishes to disturb; but he does so in order to make it clearer and more lucid. More beautiful"<sup>15</sup>.

## Notes

- 1 Frigerio, Simone: "Matta. "Le Honni Aveuglant". In *Aujourd'hui, Art et Architecture*, no. 54, September 1966, p. 99.
- 2 Bonnefoi, Geneviève: "Matta du cube à l'espace". In *XXe siècle*, n° 27, 1966, p. 137.
- 3 See Alarcó, Paloma: *Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza. Pintura Moderna*. Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2009, pp. 452-453, ill. and Álvarez Lopera, José: *Maestros Modernos del Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza*. Madrid, Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, 1992. n. 665, pp. 552, 604, ill.
- 4 See Bonnefoi 1966 op.cit.
- 5 On Matta and theories of modern physics, see Sawin, Martica: "Matta en Nueva York: Una luz que iluminó el panorama artístico americano". In *Matta, 1911-2011* [exhib. cat., Valencia, IVAM - Bilbao, Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao]. Madrid, Sociedad Estatal de Acción Cultural, 2011, pp. 41-43 y Henderson, Linda D.: *The fourth dimension and non-Euclidean geometry in art*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 348.
- 6 Marcel Duchamp in the catalogue of the collection of the Société Anonyme, 1945. Cited in Sawin p. 42.
- 7 Matta: "El proscrito que deslumbra (1965)". In *Matta* [exhib. cat., Madrid, Palacio de Cristal]. Madrid, Ministerio de Cultura, 1983, p. 41.
- 8 *Matta (le cube ouvert)* was on display at the Kunstmuseum de Lucerna from 8 August to 26 September 1965.
- 9 Matta: "Cosa é la cosa mentale". In *Matta* [exhib. cat.]. Lucerna, Kunstmuseum Luzern, 1965, unpaginated.
- 10 Matta 1965, unpaginated.
- 11 Matta 1965, unpaginated.
- 12 Text by Matta reproduced in "Cronologie et documents". In *Matta* [exhib. cat.]. Paris, Centre Pompidou, 1985, pp. 292-293.
- 13 Paris 1985, p. 293.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.

# Matta: when the invisible reveals itself

Ignacio Olavarria

Roberto Sebastián Antonio Matta Echaurren forged chains of words in order to feel free and captured reality with the aim of demolishing the walls of pictorial representation. Urged on by his rebellious and unconventional nature, Matta went beyond the limits of spatial representation on the two-dimensional plane.

Matta de-codified perceptible reality and presented it to the viewer in the form of his canvases. He offered himself as an interpreter to all those who wished to perceive through the gaze what could only be felt. In his voyage of interpretation he reached the limits of an interior world previously unexplored by pictorial language.

The work of this “southern realist”, as Matta defined himself, remains surprisingly relevant today. His theoretical conception of the future and of continual change is fully applicable to the world today in which nothing is fixed or stable.

Towards the end of his life Matta explained the reasons that led him to paint: “I paint in order not to forget the beating of my heart, the movement of the waves, the galaxies”<sup>1</sup>. This phrase contains the three key concepts in his work. His heart beats marked the rhythm of his progression towards the representation of his thoughts and emotions, while the movement of the waves reflected his meditations on material and energy, which are continuously transformed like the curves of the waves. This theory of energy is manifested in his pictorial output. Lastly, Matta referred to the galaxies as he was the painter of the telescope and the microscope, the painter of forces invisible to the eye, the painter of the human mind, the atom and the cosmos.

The new installation of works from the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza’s Permanent Collection consists of five large canvases that create an immense polyptych, offering a good example of the open cube system deployed by Matta. This system can be seen as the culmination of his quest for a spatial concept that evolved over the course of his career.

Matta’s concept of space took firm hold in the year 1928. At that period the young artist was studying architecture in Santiago de Chile while also attending drawing classes. He was taught by Hernán Gazmuri, a Cubist painter of whom Matta said: “He was the only person who taught me something relatively good about drawing”<sup>2</sup>. This early relationship brought Matta closer to the issue of representing multiple viewpoints of an object on the canvas. In addition, his training as an architect facilitated the subsequent development of his spatial theory as a whole.

Matta’s rebellious nature led him to leave Chile and move to Europe in order to study with Le Corbusier, however this episode does not seem to have allowed the young artist to progress as he might have wished:



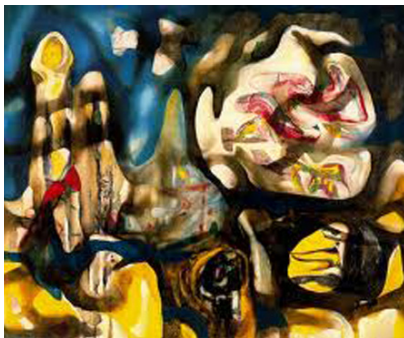


Fig. 1  
Matta  
*Psychological Morphology*, 1939  
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia,  
Madrid

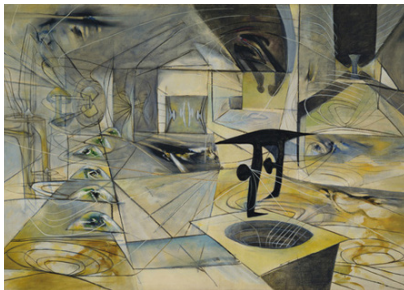


Fig. 2  
Matta  
*The Onyx of Electra*, 1944  
Museum of Modern Art, Nueva York

“In 1933 I arrived in Paris and sought out Le Corbusier who was at the height of his fame; I thought that it would be impossible to work for him but it was in fact easy as no one paid him anything. He wore huge glasses like magnifying glasses and treated me like a messenger boy. I think he was an unhappy man”<sup>3</sup>.

In the light of this situation, Matta’s artistic preoccupations sought refuge in Surrealism and he produced his first oil paintings in the summer of 1938, working alongside Onslow Ford and Esteban Francés. In this series, entitled *Inscape*, he formulated the concept of “psychological morphologies”. André Breton described these works as “absolute automatism, abstract Surrealism” while Matta considered them “The graph of transformations due to the absorption and emission of energy on the part of the object, from its initial appearance to its final form in the geodesic psychological medium”<sup>4</sup>.

In these “psychological morphologies” Onslow Ford and Matta were not representing reality in its external manifestation but rather its inner appearance: the forces that generate it, constantly modify it and complete it. The aim was to discover different states of consciousness and transform them into visual elements through forms and colours.

The following year, in the summer of 1939, Matta, working alongside a small group of friends, consolidated his “psychological morphologies” and began to use a technique that he would continue to deploy throughout his career. Starting with a canvas with a black ground he applied successive layers of watery paint, allowing the colours to mix together at random (see fig. 1).

Some time later, in one of his conversations with Eduardo Carrasco, Matta made the following statement on his pictorial activity at that period: “I do not paint, I see a cosmos in the patches of paint. I start from the patches [...] This is because my works are not painted... they are images”<sup>5</sup>. The idea of revealing the image already present in the patches of paint recalls the figures trapped in blocks of uncarved marble that Michelangelo wished to liberate and imbue with life.

The transparency of the paint layers brings to mind Marcel Duchamp, a key figure in Matta’s career and one who would exercise a major influence on him from 1942 onwards. While Duchamp terminated his particular quest for transparency with *The Large Glass*, Matta began his in 1943 with his “large transparents”.

In *The Large Glass* Duchamp established a series of symbolic relationships referring to the arousal of desire. The innate transparency of the glass used for this work allowed him to create an interplay in which the sexual impulses and instincts arising between the bachelors and the bride are revealed in such a way that nothing and no one can conceal them.



Fig. 3  
Marcel Duchamp  
*The Large Glass*, 1915-1923  
The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia



Fig. 4  
Matta  
*Evolution d'une cible*, 1956  
Private collection, Berlin

Fig. 5  
Matta  
*The Unthinkable*, 1957  
Thomas Monahan Collection

The additional difficulty facing Matta twenty years later was that of converting the canvas into a transparent support so that the entire interior universe should be revealed without anyone being able to conceal it (see fig. 2).

This mission was entrusted to “le vitreur”, who, in Matta’s words:

“Is a curious character who turns everything into glass and into transparency. At that period I referred to characters whom I termed ‘large transparents’, I wanted everything to be transparent so that one could see through and so that nothing could be concealed.”<sup>6</sup>.

In addition, there are certain similarities between Duchamp’s *The Large Glass* and the “cube” on which Matta was already working at that point. Both oblige the spectator to become part of the work; in the case of the former this is achieved through the spectator’s gaze that passes through the work and in the way he or she is reflected in it, thus becoming part of it. In the latter, the spectator is drawn into the work and becomes immersed in it. In both cases the viewer becomes part of what is represented. In *The Large Glass* it is the spectator that transmits the energy that moves the machine of desire. In Matta’s cubes the viewer is transported to the true real world that he or she cannot perceive through sight.

Duchamp’s influence was crucial for Matta’s formulation of the concept of the reciprocal interaction between the viewer and the work and by the late 1940s he had established the theoretical basis of the “cube”. Over the coming years he would put his theory to the test in his canvases, which became an experimental laboratory that would take concrete shape in the 1960s (see figs. 4 and 5).

From 1946 Matta’s social and political commitment became more pronounced and was expressed in his work as a result of his return to Europe that year when he saw at first hand the horrors resulting from World War II. Over the course of the next two decades the subject matter of Matta’s work reflected his ideas on the historical events of his time. Concentration camps, injustice, Salvador Allende’s Socialist Chile, the Vietnam War and Pinochet’s coup d’état are among the themes to be found in his compositions.

Matta’s social and political commitment did not, however, prevent him from completing “the cube”, one of his most original and characteristic projects that he had been working on over the previous years. Between 1960 and 1966 he produced large format works with the aim of creating a closed cube that would replace the individual paintings and would allow for the participation of the viewer in the work through his or her immersion in it. Technical difficulties regarding its installation prevented him from fully terminating this ambitious project and he was ultimately obliged to leave the cube open to reveal its six interior sides.

In this unique configuration of multi-dimensional space that involves time and movement in addition to the traditional dimensions, Matta was able to represent a complete interior world that expressed his own thoughts and emotions as well as relationships between subject and object. This type of connection would expand the relationship between his paintings and the viewer with the aim that the viewer not only saw the work but also felt himself/herself to be seen by it and to be part of it.

His works involve both planetary space and microscopic space, in which objects and people are fundamentally represented from within and not through their exterior appearance. For Matta, visual perception was not sufficient to reveal the essence of reality in its most authentic form. Limited perception codifies its exterior appearance without discovering its genesis, its formation and its relationship with what surrounds it, in a continuous and ongoing process of evolution. Matta's aim was to reveal the intrinsic essence of each of the elements that makes up perceptible reality.

This intention extended to the world of the sensations, emotions, states of mind and ideas that each of the motifs in his work convey, whether the subject is nature, people, inanimate objects or historical events.

In the last years of his life Matta's unconventional approach led him to move into the field of digital creation. He considered that computers opened up a new direction for artistic experimentation and one that allowed for the ongoing incorporation of distortions of colour, movement, interaction and spatial representation. In the year 2000 Matta stated: "The task of the *computer* is that of an accelerator of form. Its drawings are the future of the original"<sup>7</sup>.

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**Notes**

- 1 Matta: "Un estallido interior". In *Revista común presencia entrevistas*: <http://comunpresenciaentrevistas.blogspot.com/2006/11/roberto-matta-entrevista-en-roma-html>
- 2 Carrasco, Eduardo: *Matta. Conversaciones*. Santiago de Chile, Interamericana, 1987, p. 75.
- 3 Matta: "Un estallido interior", op. cit.
- 4 *Matta* [exhib. cat.]. Barcelona, Fundación Caixa Catalunya-Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 1999, p. 31.
- 5 See Carrasco 1987, op.cit. p. 145
- 6 Carrasco 1987, p. 204.
- 7 Matta-Ferrari, Germana: *Matta. El año de los tres 000*. Lugano, Sistan Edition, 2000.

# Watteau's Vision of the *Commedia dell'Arte*

María Eugenia Alonso



Fig. 1  
Attributed to Claude Gillot  
*Pierrot dancing, seen from the front*  
Musée du Louvre, Département  
des arts Graphiques, Paris

Around 1702 Watteau (1684-1721) arrived in Paris from his native city of Valenciennes. In the capital circumstances favoured his rise to become the greatest painter of the French Rococo and one of the most original artists of the 18th century.

Watteau's first contacts with the world of the theatre and music date from the early years of his training in Paris, where he is documented around 1705 as a pupil of the painter, printmaker and set designer Claude Gillot (1673-1722). Few paintings by Gillot survive but there are numerous drawings and prints by him in museums around the world, including the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Musée du Louvre has a large group of works on paper by Gillot on theatrical themes, particularly the *Commedia dell'Arte* (fig. 1), a subject that would soon influence his pupil and which Watteau would subsequently develop with great skill to the point of surpassing his master.

Watteau continued his training with Claude Audran (1658-1734), a French painter who specialised in the decoration of interiors and ornament design. In 1704 Audran was appointed concierge to the Luxembourg Palace, which meant that Watteau could visit the collection housed in the palace and in particular study the works by Rubens including his celebrated scenes on the life of Marie de Médicis (now Musée du Louvre). Rubens's work and his knowledge of the Venetian Renaissance painters notably influenced Watteau's technique and exquisite palette in which warm, brilliant tones prevailed. The time that Watteau spent in Audran's studio laid the foundations for his mature style, which was influenced by the type of interior design with arabesque motifs that prevailed at this period and which in turn influenced contemporary painting.

Watteau's relationship with the world of the theatre and masks is not entirely clear. There is no biographical information to suggest that he was directly engaged in music or the performing arts, nor even that he was knowledgeable about music or played an instrument. According to Georgia J. Cowart,<sup>1</sup> Watteau may have met professional musicians in the house of his friend and patron Pierre Crozat<sup>2</sup> and very probably in the circle of friends associated with his great patron Jean de Jullienne (1686-1766)<sup>3</sup> (fig. 2).

The Comédie Italienne had established itself permanently in Paris around the mid-17th century. Its characters continued to be the original ones invented and performed in Italy, almost all of them male and most of them servants who generally devoted their time to intrigues or, at best, to assisting young couples or lovers to meet in secret, unknown to their parents or tutors. The Comédie Italienne used increasingly sophisticated and complex sets and its performances were further enhanced with *divertissements*.<sup>4</sup> Around 1697, however, Louis XIV had it banned, annoyed by the continual criticisms and mockery of the role



Fig. 2  
Nicolas-Henri Tardieu  
*Assis, au près de toi...*, 1731  
Engraving after a lost work by Watteau.

(Self-portrait of Watteau with Jean de Jullienne)  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris





Fig. 3  
Jean Antoine Watteau  
*Pierrot content*, ca. 1712  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid  
[\[+ info\]](#)

of the monarchy by the Italian company. The company did not return to France until Philippe II d'Orléans, regent of the future Louis XV and a great admirer of music and the theatre, promoted its return. The Comédie Italienne thus returned to Paris, once again occupying the theatre in the Hôtel de Bourgogne.<sup>5</sup>

It was during the period of Louis XIV and the Régence (1715-1723) that Watteau established his style and subject matter. It was also at this time that the world of theatre and opera came to have a profound influence on art, soon becoming the favoured subject of numerous painters, together with balls, country fêtes and fêtes galantes. Watteau was accepted into the Académie as a painter specialising in such works.

*Pierrot content* (fig. 3) is an early painting by Watteau and is considered a magnificent example of his work due both to its quality and its subject matter. It is one of Watteau's earliest depictions of an outdoor fête galante.

The four figures in the foreground recall *Commedia dell'Arte* actors but they are simply shown as peacefully seated rather than as performing a play. Watteau locates them in the centre of the composition in a woodland clearing or garden, suggesting that he had a stage set in mind but this is not definitely the case. The subject of the Comédie Italienne is undoubtedly present in this enigmatic image but Watteau has chosen to focus on its essence, stripping it of any theatrical trappings: there is no performance nor any gestures or movements as we find in some of his earlier paintings. Apart from the guitar player, all the figures could be described as contemplative in mood and pose.

The figure of a man or woman playing the guitar (fig. 4) is a recurring one in Watteau's works in which music frequently appears, particularly in the fêtes galantes. In numerous drawings Watteau tried out the different poses that could be adopted when playing the guitar, an instrument that acquired great prestige and popularity at this period, to the point where even the young Louis XIV took classes with the great Italian guitarist Francesco Corbetta.

In *Pierrot content* (fig. 3) the woman holding a guitar wears a small ruff, a tightly fitting jacket and a skirt of the same shade as the elegant little hat that she wears. The position of her hands suggests that she is playing the guitar although she does not look at it. Apart from Pierrot<sup>6</sup> she is the only figure to look directly at the viewer while she is also the focus of attention of the rest of the group. On her other side is Mezzetin<sup>7</sup> who admires her with a rapturous expression. The group terminates on the right with a couple that turns towards the centre of the composition. The scene is completed by two further figures who are almost impossible to see in the present day but who look out among the background foliage and can be identified as another figure of Mezzetin or possibly Scaramouche, and Harlequin.<sup>8</sup>



Fig. 4  
Jean Antoine Watteau  
*Study of a Woman playing the Guitar and holding a Piece of Music*, ca. 1717-1718  
Musée du Louvre, Département des arts Graphiques, Paris. Aimé-Charles Horace His de la Salle Collection, donated in 1878





Fig. 5  
Edmé Jeurat  
*Pierrot content*, 1728  
Engraving after the painting by Watteau  
in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid

Watteau died young, probably aged thirty-seven, but his work remained in the public eye for many years due to the fact that most of his paintings were reproduced in the form of engravings that were commissioned and distributed by his patron Jean de Jullienne.<sup>9</sup> *Pierrot content* (fig. 3) was also the subject of a print made by Edmé Jeurat (1688-1738) in 1728 (fig. 5), seven years after the artist's death, as is mentioned on one of the labels on the reverse of the painting (fig. 6).<sup>10</sup>

Jeurat's print has provided valuable information on the original state of the painting, which has been altered over time. At the lower edge of the print is the phrase "Engraved from the original work painted by Watteau, of the same size". However, the size of the painting as it is now is smaller than the print, suggesting that the canvas in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum was cut down on all sides at an unknown date and that it originally had a more horizontal format. In addition, in the print it is easier to identify the two figures concealed among the vegetation and which are now almost invisible in the painting due to Watteau's imperfect technique that has resulted in the paint darkening, particularly in this area of the canvas.

A careful observation of the painting also reveals various, easily visible changes to the composition that appear as pentimenti on the surface (fig. 7). One relates to the position of the female figure's head, which was originally closer to Pierrot but which Watteau altered by moving it further away so that she leans her chin on her fan in a gesture of disapproval. Another alteration is to be seen in the area around her feet as Watteau originally painted the drapery of her skirt to spread out further across the ground.

In the canvas in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum (fig. 3) the centre of the composition is occupied by Pierrot. In most of the depictions of this figure by Watteau he is shown as seated, positioned frontally and in a markedly static pose. Only rarely is he depicted standing, as in the celebrated painting in the Musée du Louvre (fig.8) entitled *Pierrot*, formerly known as *Gilles* in which his figure acquires the monumentality of a life-size portrait.

The painting in the Thyssen collection has been compared to other works by Watteau of the same period that also focus on the subject of jealousy and, in a broader sense, on the psychology of love. The closest in approach and composition to the present work is *Les Jaloux*, a lost work that was also painted in 1712 and which is known from a copy in the National Gallery of Melbourne and from a print by Gérard Jean-Baptiste Scotin (1671-1716) (fig. 9).

A comparison of the two works reveals a series of coincidences and differences that have provoked debate among experts as to which is the earlier of the two. The compositions are extremely similar but the number of figures in them is different. In *Pierrot content* (fig. 3) Watteau depicted a group of five principal figures while in *Les Jaloux*

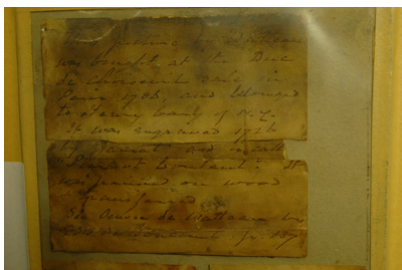


Fig.6  
*Pierrot content*  
Photograph of a detail of the label on the reverse  
of the painting



Fig. 7  
Jean Antoine Watteau  
*Pierrot content* (detail),  
ca. 1712  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza,  
Madrid



Fig. 8  
Jean Antoine Watteau  
*Pierrot*, previously known  
as *Gilles*, ca. 1718-1719.  
Paris, Musée du Louvre



Fig. 9  
Gérard Jean-Baptiste Scotin  
*Les Jaloux (Invidiosi)*, 1726-1729  
Engraving after a lost painting by Watteau  
Trustees of the British Museum, London



Fig. 10  
P.Q. Chedel  
*Harlequin Jaloux*  
Engraving after a lost  
painting by Watteau



Fig. 11  
Jean Antoine Watteau  
*The Foursome (La Partie quarrée)*, ca. 1713  
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Museum  
Purchase, Mildred Anna Williams Collection

(fig. 9) the young man seated on the ground on the right has been replaced by a tambourine. The position of the group and poses of the figures are almost identical in the two works with the exception of the young woman on the right, whose disdain for Pierrot, expressed by the movement of her head, becomes a gesture of closeness towards him in *Les Jaloux*. Watteau depicts her smiling at him with an indulgent expression as she gently leans her hand on his shoulder. In both paintings Watteau has included a statue behind the figures, visible among the trees and depicting either Pan or a satyr, symbol of lust and comedy according to Donald Posner.<sup>11</sup> The garden in *Pierrot content* is embellished on the right with a pedestal topped by a ball while in *Les Jaloux* this element takes the form of an enigmatic sphinx that watches the scene, seemingly aware of the figures' secret desires.

The second work in this group is *Harlequin Jaloux* (fig. 10), also now lost and only known through prints of the composition. The scene, which seems to be set in a forest clearing rather than in a carefully tended garden, only includes three principal figures. Pierrot is seated on the ground, holding the guitar that rests on his legs. He shows no sign of being inclined to play it and looks out directly at the viewer. He is accompanied by a couple seated on the right in which the woman is the dominant figure while the man, possibly Mezzetin to judge from his dress, looks at her with an enraptured expression. Harlequin peers out from among the bushes behind them, jealously observing the scene.

*La Partie quarrée* (fig. 11) is a slightly later work. Watteau depicts his four principal characters, once again in a forest clearing or a garden. On this occasion Pierrot is shown standing and is seen from behind, observed by the two women sitting in front of him. His guitar hangs from his back on a red cord. The dress worn by the woman on the left is almost identical to that of the woman guitar player in *Pierrot content* in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, while the other woman holds a Venetian mask. It is known that this canvas was cut down in size in the same way as *Pierrot content*.<sup>12</sup> The background vegetation is not as abundant here, allowing Watteau to create two openings onto patches of intense blue sky that visually lighten the composition. In contrast to the other three scenes, this one is not presided over by a statue of Pan, while the sphinx in *Les Jaloux* (fig. 9) has been replaced by a Cupid on a dolphin, symbol of the impatience of love.<sup>13</sup>

Various preparatory drawings have survived for the figures to be seen in *Pierrot content* (fig. 3). Particularly notable is one in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen (fig. 12) that depicts the rigidly frontal figure of Pierrot exactly as it appears in the final canvas. For the figure of Mezzetin in the painting Watteau probably combined two drawings, one in the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin of the head (fig. 14), which has been attributed to Nicolas Lancret (1690-1743) on occasions,





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14



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Fig. 12  
Pierrot  
Rouen, Musée des Beaux-Arts

Fig. 13  
Pierrot content (detail)

Fig. 14  
Jean Antoine Watteau  
Two Studies of an Actor;  
Sketch of a Woman holding a Fan  
Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin

Fig. 15  
Pierrot content (detail)

Fig. 16  
Jean Antoine Watteau  
Three Studies of Men,  
one with a Violin  
Private collection, New York



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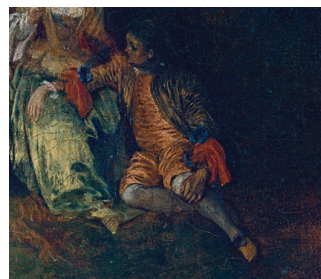


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Fig. 17  
Pierrot content (detail)



18



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Fig. 18  
Jean Antoine Watteau  
Three Studies of Men  
Lost drawing (first at Brême,  
Kunsthalle Kupferstichkabinett)

Fig. 19  
Pierrot content (detail)

Fig. 20  
Jean Antoine Watteau  
Studies of standing Men  
and a seated Woman  
Collection Mrs. Elliot Hodgkin, London



20



21

Fig. 21  
Pierrot content (detail)



Fig. 22  
Lucian Freud  
*Portrait of Baron H.H. Thyssen-Bornemisza*, 1981-1982  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid  
[\[+ info\]](#)



Fig. 23  
Lucian Freud  
*Large Interior W11 (after Watteau)*,  
1981-1983  
Private collection

and another of the body (fig. 16). Watteau took the man on the right from his drawing *Three Studies of Men* (fig. 18) and used it for the figure on the right of the painting. The young woman with the fan in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum painting appears in the drawing *Two standing Men and a seated Woman* (fig. 21). When transferring this figure to his painting Watteau altered the line of the head and the position of the right arm.

Watteau's only documented pupil was Jean-Baptiste Pater (1695-1736), who completed his master's commissions after his death and who also entered the Académie as a painter of *fêtes galantes*. Watteau's style was celebrated during his lifetime and he consequently had numerous followers, as a result of which the oeuvres of almost all the 18th-century French painters, particularly Lancret, Fragonard and Boucher, reveal the influence of this great artist, who is considered the first Rococo painter.

The canvas of *Pierrot content* (fig. 3) was acquired by Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza from Newhouse Galleries in New York in 1977. In 1972 the painting had been stolen from a warehouse just before it was due to be sent by plane to New York and was not recovered until 1976 by the FBI.<sup>14</sup> The Baron's admiration for Watteau's painting was shared by the British painter Lucian Freud (1922-2011) who included a detail of it in the portrait that the Baron commissioned from him (fig. 22).<sup>15</sup>

Freud was fascinated by *Pierrot content*, both with regard to its composition and for its psychological study of the characters from the *Commedia dell'Arte* painted by Watteau. This interest led him to make a pastel copy of the central part of Watteau's canvas and inspired his own painting entitled *Large Interior W11 (after Watteau)* (fig. 23).

## Notes



Fig. 24  
Jean Antoine Watteau  
*Mezzetin*, ca. 1718-1720  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
New York

- 1 See Cowart, Georgia J. "The Musical Theatre in Watteau's Paris" in *Watteau, Music, and Theater* [exhib. cat. 2009]. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009.
- 2 Pierre Crozat (1665-1740) was a wealthy French financier who assembled one of the most important art collections of his time, including paintings, drawings and works of art. Crozat was one of Watteau's patrons and commissioned from him the series on *The Four Seasons* for the decoration of one of the public rooms in his Paris hôtel.
- 3 Jean de Jullienne (1686-1766) was one of the most important French collectors of the 18th century and a leading art dealer. His activities as a publisher, particularly of the work of Watteau, brought him enormous renown in his own day.
- 4 *Divertissements*: a French term that refers to a group of dances, songs including Italian arias or French chansons, acrobatic or magic acts or short theatrical numbers that could be related or unrelated to the principal *Commedia dell'Arte* work being performed.
- 5 The theatre opened around 1548. It was built over the ruins of the palace of the dukes of Burgundy. It became the leading public theatre in Europe and the first of the permanent theatres that would later contribute significantly to Parisian cultural life.
- 6 Pierrot: A French derivation of the *Commedia dell'Arte* character known as *Pedrolino*. He is generally depicted wearing a cream or white suit with a collar and a wide-brimmed hat. Depictions of this character normally present him in a static pose and with a dreamy or doltish expression and a slightly lost look (see fig. 8).
- 7 Mezzetin (fig. 24): wearing his traditional costume of pantaloons, cape and cap in pink, blue-green and white striped cloth, this *Commedia dell'Arte* character is a humble servant like Harlequin. Also attracted to intrigues, he is, however, more cultivated than the others and extremely fond of music. He is thus generally shown as dancing or playing an instrument.
- 8 Harlequin: *Arlecchino* in Italian, this character from the *Commedia dell'Arte* plays the role of servant. On occasions he is presented as the suitor of Columbine and thus the rival of Pierrot. Harlequin wears a suit with a diamond pattern, initially made from scraps to indicate his humble social status but later from richer and more sophisticated fabrics. Harlequin has a great sense of humour and enlivens the stage with his acrobatic tricks.
- 9 The close relationship between the artist and collector was studied in the exhibition *Esprit et Vérité: Watteau and his Circle*, Wallace Collection, London, 12 March to 5 June 2011, which included paintings by Watteau alongside other works from Jullienne's collection.
- 10 On the reverse of the painting is a hand-written label in English that refers to Edmond de Goncourt and reads: "It was engraved in 1726 by Jaurat and is called 'Pierrot Content'" (see fig. 6).
- 11 See Posner, Donald: *Antoine Watteau*. London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, p. 56.
- 12 See *Watteau, Music, and Theater* (exhib. cat. 2009). New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009, p. 26.
- 13 See Posner, Donald: *Antoine Watteau*. London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, p. 57.
- 14 According to a letter from Marco Grassi in the documentary archive of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Dept. of Old Master Paintings.
- 15 See Alarcó, Paloma: *Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Maestros Modernos*. Madrid, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, 2009, pp. 476-477.