

Dance in Baroque Art: Some Pitfalls of Interpretation

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It is something of a commonplace to observe that dance is essentially an ephemeral art. The only clues we have to dance before the age of the camera and moving pictures are some written descriptions, some notations and depictions in art – paintings, prints, porcelain etc. But how reliable are these depictions of dance? Do images of dance from the 18th century show us what the dancing was really like then, or do many of them have hidden agendas? Surely some may reasonably be assumed to be fairly realistic and accurate depictions, perhaps according with evidence from other non-pictorial sources, like instructional texts. Other images, on the other hand, are clearly allegorical, or symbolic of something other than dance, or they are caricatures, or they have political agendas, or they are mixed with a large dollop of fantasy. These images of dance must be ‘interpreted’, and to do this we must be aware of both their contexts and the purpose for their creation. There are many pitfalls for the unwary in reading visual images of dance.



Figure 1 : Terpsichore herself (on the right). Print in the British Library

Easily Interpretable Depictions of dance on Stage

Figure 1 illustrates three images of stage dancers in the late 17th/ early 18th century. How reliable are they? Fortunately, paintings and engravings of dancers are not the only kinds of visual images to give us clues about dance from this period.



Figure 2: The first page of Pecour's dance: *Entrée de deux femme...au feste venitienne*, c. 1713

Figure 2 represents an engraving of a dance in the elaborate notation system devised by Louis XIV's dancing master, Beauchamps, illustrating the steps and patterns of the dance. Although these notations do not show the arm

movements, there are instructional texts from the period that do tell us how to move the arms, and these descriptions are very much in accord with the images of the dancers in Figure 1: they are all holding their arms in beautiful rounded oppositions, and the middle image clearly shows the shoulder-shading described in some instructional texts.

Dance Instruction Books

The most accurate representations of dance are likely to be in dance instruction books; surely they have few hidden agendas, they merely want to teach readers how to dance. Here is an engraving from an English instruction book.



Figure 3 Kellom Tomlinson. *The Art of Dancing*, London 1735

And now for some pitfalls.

Allegorical

One serious pitfall for the unwary dance historian is the depiction of dancers as allegorical figures. Prévost was a famous French dancer at the beginning of the 18th century. The painting of her shown in Figure 4 can be found in a book on Lancret published by the J. Paul Getty Museum where it is said to represent the danced *divertissements* to be seen at the Paris Opera¹. The Paris Opera would be turning in its grave at the thought of this painting being seen as representing their *divertissements*. Prévost would *never* have performed on the stage

dressed like this. She is represented here as the allegorical figure of a *bachante*, perhaps because she appeared alluring on the stage.



Figure 4 Jean Raoux. *Mademoiselle Prévost as a Bacchante*, c. 1723

Like the costume, the dancing pose may give us few clues as to *how* she would have been dancing; it is most probably a pose representing *dance in general*. This is a technique used for conveying the fact that the person in the picture is actually dancing, as opposed to just standing there, as a singer or actor might do. A raised leg – raised either in front or behind – or the movement of clothes, often portrayed ‘dance’ in general.

The two images in Figure 5 come from a German book on the history of dance² used as a textbook for ballet dancers studying for a



Figure 5 *Tänzerinnen*. Figures from the Porcelain factory in Vincennes.

diploma in teaching dance. The caption under the picture reads:

“The two great dancers of the Rokoko, Marie Sallé and Anne Marie de Camargo, fought for costume reform, away from the hooped petticoats that restricted movement. Their ideal was the cut Greek tunic”. Later in the book the author says that we have Sallé to thank for the first great costume reform³, when she appeared on stage in a Greek tunic. The caption continues: “These two graceful figures in biscuit porcelain could represent Sallé or Camargo.”

Neither Sallé nor Camargo would ever have been seen dancing on a public stage in clothes like these. A news clipping describes the uproar that Sallé caused when she dared to appear on a London stage simply without her panniers (hooped petticoat), and wearing her hair down – and the London Playhouse was much more permissive than the Paris Opera.

Watteau, Lancret & and the *Fête Galante* style

A significant proportion of paintings of dance that remain from the early 18th century are those by Watteau and Lancret. These paintings may present a puzzle for dance historians.



Figure 6 Nicolas Lancret. *Quadrille before an Arbor*, c. 1730-35 Charlottenburg, Berlin

Figure 6 depicts a *moulinet*, a right-hand star, being danced, but by whom? and where? Are these courtiers in special picnic outfits doing a country dance at a *fête champêtre* in the

woods? We know they did have *fêtes champêtres* at this time. Or does the painting represent a scene from a play, a ballet or an opera, or maybe a fairground performance? Both Watteau and Lancret had close connections to the theatre. If so, does this indicate that country dances or *cotillons* were performed on the Paris stages?



Figure 7 Nicolas Lancret. *Autumn*, before 1730 The Homeland Foundation, Inc., New York



Figure 8 Antoine Watteau. *Fêtes vénitiennes*. National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh c. 1718

Figures 7 and 8, two very similar scenes by different painters, present a couple dancing; could they be performing a minuet? There are commedia figures here - Harlequin, Pierrot & Pantalone – are they courtiers dressed as commedia figures? Or are they comic actors

performing for the courtiers while they are picnicking? Or again, are they portraying stage scenes? *Fêtes vénitiennes* was the title of a popular ballet by Campra first performed at the Paris Opera in 1710, does this represent a scene from this ballet?



Figure 9 Antoine Watteau. *Les Bergers* – The Shepherds Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin, c. 1719

Figure 9 shows shepherds and shepherdesses; this was a very common theme on the stage. Figure 10 depicts a ball scene; what is this ball?



Figure 10 Antoine Watteau. *Les Plaisirs du bal*, Dulwich College Picture Gallery, London, c. 1715/17

In the early 18th century, in all the arts, an element of light-heartedness was coming in - of frivolity, and *galanterie* - and a rejection of the formality of the old order. The *fête galante* style of painting initiated by Watteau

and further developed by Lancret was a manifestation of this new aesthetic. If these painters wished to portray dance, then it would be likely to be part of some kind of *fête galante* setting. This does not necessarily imply that at any particular *fête galante* event - either real or the stage variety - there would have been a lot of dancing; and further that even if there were dancing, these *fêtes galantes* paintings may not represent what actually took place there.

Painting a scene or landscape to look realistic was not a particular virtue in this period. What painters wanted to present was the *ideal* of nature; this ideal could be largely a fantasy of the imagination. The dancing portrayed in these *fêtes galantes* paintings may have been used simply as a metaphor for sensual pleasures, and in many paintings, as a representation of love between two people - who is not in love with their partner when dancing the minuet?

There are many commedia characters in Watteau's paintings. It has been suggested that he frequently painted these characters simply because he inherited many commedia costumes when he acquired his studio, and he liked to dress his models in them. But Watteau may also have been making a political statement, subverting the values of the *ancien régime* of Louis XIV. In her book *The Triumph of Pleasure*⁴, Georgia Cowart convincingly argues that the festive arts deployed an intricate network of subversive satire to undermine the rhetoric of sovereign authority.

We can't leave these *fête galante* paintings of dance without viewing what is perhaps the most famous one of all in England, since it lives in the Wallace Collection in London. Camargo was one of the most popular French dancers of the period; she was famous for her *entrechats quatres*, and for shortening her petticoats so that people could see her nifty footwork. Since Lancret's painting of Camargo is of a real dancer, is it a more realistic portrayal of the style of dance at the time? Does it represent a dance pose that might have been seen on the stage? She could be half-way through a *pas de gaillarde*, or just finished a sideways *contretemps*. It is

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possible, however, that it is a pose representing *dance in general*, as mentioned earlier for the painting of Prevost, where she is depicted standing with a leg raised at the back. Two outstretched arms may be a similar device in the 18th century.



Figure 11 Lancret. *Camargo Dancing*, 1728. The Wallace Collection in London.

Marie Sallé, the famous rival of Camargo, is painted in a similar *fête champêtre* setting, and with the same arm positions. These outstretched arms are portrayed everywhere, and not just in the *fête galante* paintings. Of course this pose may have been seen on the stage, possibly as a starting position for a dance, but in paintings of the period it probably represents an image of *dance in general* rather than any particular dance movement of the period.



Figure 12 Nicolas Lancret, *Mlle. Sallé*, c.1732. Berlin, Rheinsburg Palace

Posner, the well-known Watteau authority, describes the dancer portrayed in Figure 13 with the same outstretched arms as “executing a majestic pirouette;”⁵ is he reading more into this painting than he should?



Figure 13 Antoine Watteau, *L'Indifférent*, c. 1717 The Louvre, Paris

Figure 14 presents another version of Lancret’s *Camargo* painting. She has now acquired a partner, and they both have the same arm positions. Does this reveal something about the relationship of dance partners on the French stage? Or is this positioning designed to represent the portrayal of love in general, revealing little of the interaction of a ‘real’ dancing couple on stage?



Figure 14 Lancret, *La Camargo dancing*, 1729/30 The National Gallery of Art in Washington.

Caricatures

Country Dances in the Ballroom

English Country Dancing was a very popular form of dancing in the ballroom; Figure 15 is a painting by Hogarth representing jolly country dancing. It is probably moderately 'accurate', but of course, it being Hogarth, there is usually some element of caricature present.



Figure 15 William Hogarth, *The Country Dance*, c. 1745 Tate Gallery, London

What about the dancing in Figure 16? At least it is not quite as unrealistic as Cruickshank's from the beginning of the 19th century as seen in Figure 17.



Figure 16 A Scotch Reel

The hairdos would be undone after about a month!

Of course much information can be gleaned from these caricature depictions of dance, but caution must be observed.



Figure 17 Isaac Robert Cruickshank, *Inconvenient Partners in Waltzing*, c. 1817. The British Museum

Caricatures of Dancing Masters

Dancing Masters were a common target for caricaturists. They taught not only dance, but also deportment. There is of course a certain irony in the fact that dancing masters of low



Figure 18 *The Levee*, from *The Rake's Progress*, William Hogarth, 1733. Sir John Soane's Museum, London



Figure 19 John Collet, *Crown Gentlemen Taught to Dance*



Figure 20 Gaetan Vestris, teaching a goose department! *Six Guineas entrance and a Guinea a Lesson*. 1781. Harvard University Engraving by Paul Sandby

status were employed to instruct the aristocracy how to reveal the 'innate' deportment that reveals their status in life; hence the many caricatures of dancing masters. They were also suspect because they were associated with the French. The French were despised, but everyone wanted to be associated with French culture. There is also the perennial association of dancing with low morals; think of Samuel Pepys's worries about leaving his wife alone with the dancing master.



Figure 21

Caricatures of stage dancers



Figure 22 William Hogarth, *The Charmers of the Age*. 1742 Barbara Campanini (La Barbarina) & P. Desnoyer. Clement Crisp Collection, London

This engraving was made in 1782. It was taken from the now lost original.

Stage dancers were also a target for the caricaturists, especially women who shortened their skirts and could jump high. Barbara Campanini was a young Venetian dancer who took the Paris Opera by storm, supposedly doing *entrechats dix* across the stage (a rather unlikely story!) Many people, clearly including Hogarth (judging from this caricature), deplored the cult of virtuosity at the expense of a more expressive, less virtuoso style of dance. And of course others



Figure 23 Antoine Pesne, *La Barbarina*, before 1747. Potsdam, Charlottenburg, © Bridgeman Art Library

were shocked by how much of the female dancers' legs were visible when they did fast pirouettes; the dancers in the theatre were all instructed to wear knickers.

La Barbarina is portrayed in Figure 23 in a garden setting; the leopard-skin overskirt may indicate the role of a *bacchante*. This may be a more realistic depiction of the length of her skirts on stage than Figure 22.



Figure 24 Ballet at the King's Theatre, 1796

At first glance, the image of dancing on the stage illustrated in Figure 24 appears reasonably authentic; presumably a fairly accurate drawing of the theatre, the backdrop, and the audience; but what of the dancing?



Figure 25

Figure 25 is a close-up of the dancers in Figure 24. There appears to be a kind of freedom in the dancing here when compared with dance from earlier in the century, which may seem fitting for the close of the 18th century; but all their limbs seem floppy, droopy; their poses are loose and weak. Does this represent a new form of dance? Although

ballet at this time did not have the extreme extension of 20th century ballet, evidence from other sources and pictures indicate it was not as it is in this picture. Who painted this? Thomas Rowlandson, well-known caricaturist of the late 18th century. It would seem, however, that Rowlandson had some help in his designs for the dancers.



Figure 26 James Gillray, *MODERN GRACE, or the Operatical Finale to the Ballet of Alonzo e caro*, 1796. Harvard University

This picture was drawn by James Gillray, another well-known caricaturist of the day. Its title, *Modern Grace*, serves to emphasise the joke; they are hardly the epitome of grace!

Caricatures of pantomime dancers

Serious drama in the English Playhouse at this time was often followed by a pantomime.

Pantomimes were full of singing, dancing, comedy and special effects, and they were usually much more popular than the play. Box office take quadrupled on evenings when a pantomime followed the play. Not surprisingly, there was a lot of opposition to pantomimes from the playwrights, who were appalled by the fact that audiences preferred what Colley Cibber referred to as "monstrous Medlies" to their worthy dramas. This led to many scathing accounts of pantomimes, and of course caricatures.

Many pantomimes were staged by John Rich; he himself was the most famous Harlequin of the period. He is portrayed in Figure 27 as Mercury at the top of the cupola, and as the dog pissing at the front. Despite David



Figure 27 Francis Nivelon & Madame Laguerre
Frontispiece of *Harlequin Horace* (1773) by James Miller, a satirical poem that attacked pantomimes. This scene is a composite of several scenes from the pantomime *Perseus & Andromeda*.

Garrick's description of John Rich as being adept at converting himself "into a wild Beast, a Bird, or a Serpent with a long Tail, and what not," neither of these drawings of him capture a 'realistic' image of our Harlequin.

Figure 28 may represent a more realistic portrayal of John Rich.



Figure 28 John Rich as Harlequin in an early British pantomime, c. 1720. Victoria & Albert Museum.

Political Caricatures

There are many images of dance in political caricatures, but here it is neither dance nor dancing that is being satirised, rather the depiction of dance is being used as a vehicle for satirising politics and politicians. With its connotations of lasciviousness, foolishness etc., dance serves as an easy metaphor for such things. It has been used to portray the uncontrolled passions of mobs, people being led by the nose, power relations etc.

We might eagerly examine the minuet in Figure 29 for clues to hand-holds and foot positions for the late 18th century minuet, but a closer inspection reveals that it is Lord North dancing with Mr Fox, representing and satirising their coalition government, so caution must be observed .



Figure 29 Coalition Minuet, Anon. 1783 British Museum, London

Around 1781, a dance called the Devonshire minuet was composed by Gaetano Vestris and performed by him at the London Opera House; the music survives, but not the dance instructions. It was dedicated to Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, Vestris' patron. Might Figure 30 depict a representation of this performance? Its high opposition arms might at first glance indicate a stage dance, but in reality it is a picture satirising the Duchess who, when campaigning for the Whig party in 1784, was said to be exchanging votes for kisses. On the apron of the butcher with whom she is dancing is written: 'All upright Members forever'.



Figure 30 William Paulet Carey *The Devonshire Minuet, Danced to Ancient British Music through Westminster, During the Present Election.* 1784
British Museum, London

In like vein Figure 31 satirises the revolutionary sympathies of Fox, showing him as a dandy dancing with a peasant woman. It does not represent the happy mixing of social classes in a jolly dance, in true Enlightenment spirit.



Figure 31 Newton *Opening the Ambassador's Ball in Paris.* 1794.
British Museum, London

Porcelain

Character dances were very popular on the stage in the 18th century, and many of these were performed by commedia characters, especially Harlequin, Columbine and Pantalone. Many of these were depicted in porcelain; do these figures provide information about dancing or dance costumes of the period?



Figure 32 Harlequin Dancing. c. 1754

Figure 32 shows a figure of Harlequin Dancing, looking remarkably similar to the 1722 engraving by Wolrab on which it was based.



Figure 33 Harlequine, engraving by Wolrab, 1722

The left side of Figure 34 shows a detail from a porcelain milk jug c. 1770, fairly accurately portraying the Watteau painting of dancers on the right side on which it was based. Much of the porcelain of the period appears to portray paintings and engravings of dance, rather than reality, giving few new clues about the dancing of the period. However, might the colours of the porcelain figures tell us anything about the costumes worn?



Figure 34



Figure 35 c.1753



Figure 36 c. 1737

Figure 35 shows the figure of Pantalone wearing his familiar black and red clothes. Many porcelain images however give him a white cloak. Perhaps he did not always wear black or red?

Harlequin's costume traditionally revealed multi-coloured diamonds, and many porcelain figures show this (Figure 37), but others show him completely in white, or half white and half patterned (Figures 38 & 39).

Do the colours of these porcelain figures indicate that there was more variety in the colours of commedia costumes than is traditionally believed to be the case? The



Figure 37 c. 1752



Figure 38 c.1756



Figure 39 c.1743

reality is that porcelain figures cannot be trusted to provide reliable evidence of the colours worn by the commedia characters. The porcelain was made for rich aristocrats to show off their wealth; white was the most expensive colour to produce in porcelain, so the aristocrats wanted figures in white on their mantelpieces, no matter the accuracy of the colouring.

Cross-dressing

Cross-dressing can provide pitfalls for the unwary dance historian. Dance groups recreating baroque dance have been known to have based their ladies' costumes on images like the one portrayed in Figure 40. The costume certainly indicates a female role; however, this ballet took place in 1654. The first time a real woman danced on a public stage in Paris was in 1681. There were private performances at court before this date where women danced, but they would not have been

wearing skirts as short as this. This painting shows a cross-dressed man wearing a costume that would never have been worn at that time by a woman on stage.



Figure 40 *Une Dame de la Cour de Pélée*. Costume for the *Ballet des Noces de Pélée et Thétis*, 1654. Musée Carnavalet, Paris

Masquerades

Masquerade balls were extremely popular throughout most of the 18th century. They were glittering occasions, where everyone had to wear a costume of some kind. People were usually in total disguise, even the King and Queen. Women of the night could dress as duchesses, men dressed as clerics, women could dress as men. One had to behave according to the cut of one's clothes, so a Harlequin had to dance as a professional Harlequin, a cross-dressed woman had to behave, and dance, as a man.



Figure 41 A Masquerade Ball at Ranelagh to celebrate the birthday of the Prince of Wales.

Pictures depicting masquerade balls can present a minefield for the unwary interpreter. Are the commedia characters portrayed in Figure 41 at Ranelagh Gardens professional

dancers from the theatre? Did professional dancers perform at these balls? What is being represented here? Contemporary descriptions of masquerade balls provide the answers. Commedia characters abounded at these balls, but they were not professional commedia players, rather ball-goers masquerading as such.



Figure 42 Masquerade Ball at the Pantheon in Oxford Street London in 1773 (detail)⁶ C.White, artist & engraver.

A cursory glance might indicate the characters in Figure 42 to be caricatures, but at one ball, there was a masquerader “pranc[ing] a minuet on his hobby-horse, with a dancing bear for his partner.”

Works of art provide invaluable sources of information for the interpreter of 18th century dance, but *caveat emptor* – buyer beware - dangerous pitfalls may lie in wait; the devil may be playing the tune!

And here we have an all male masquerade – with the devil playing the tune.



Figure 43 Six men in costumes of a friar, jew, mohammedan, turk and so on, dance in pairs to a devil playing on a horn. British Library Print Collection, 8 December 1771. Etching

End Notes

¹ Mary Tavener Holmes, *Nicolas Lancret: Dance Before as Fountain*. 2006. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, p. 18.

² Rudolf Liechtenhan, *ballett & tanz*. Nymphenburger, Munich 2000, page 59.
“Die Beiden grossen Tänzerinnen des Rokoko, Marie Sallé und Anne Marie de Camargo, kämpften um die Reform des die Bewegung hemmenden Ballettkostüms mit Reifrock. Ihr Ideal sahen sie in der im hellenistischen Stil geschnittenen Tunika. Die beiden zierlichen Figuren aus Biskuitporzellan könnten die Sallé oder die Camargo darstellen”.

³ *ibid.* p. 191.

⁴ Georgia J. Cowart, *The Triumph of Pleasure – Louis XIV & the Politics of Spectacle*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 2008.

⁵ Donald Posner, *Antoine Watteau*. Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London, 1984, p. 169.

⁶ Aileen Ribiero, *The Dress Worn at Masquerades in England, 1730 to 1790, and its Relation to Fancy Dress in Portraiture*. Garland Publishing, 1984

