

Emerald's Jardin, Ordinary Creature Within Crystal Jar: Formal Analysis of Mezzetin by Jean-Antoine Watteau

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Abstract. In the early 18th century, artists in Paris leaned towards the topic of entertainment and public theatre. Jean-Antoine Watteau created Mezzetin; arranged a mysterious space to elaborate and dramatize Mezzetin's life through figural scale, meticulous selection of colors, and painterly details. The artist depicted the melancholic image within the paradigms of the Rococo style. The current study investigated several elements of the painting that delivers this atmosphere. This study will focus on the grey tone of green background color, mysterious woman's identity, irregular protagonist position within ordered composition, and contradictory character setting, which are considered elements that molded Mezzetin as a behind-the-scene of entertaining character.

Keywords: Overgrown Garden, Unbalanced Composition, Identity of the Protagonist.

1. Introduction

In the early 18th century, Jean-Antoine Watteau arrived in Paris, the second-largest city with a boom in population and cultural and artistic development. Public theater became a fashionable place for any citizen in Paris to visit, no matter the bourgeoisie or working class, as long as the ticket was purchased. The Comédie Italienne was the most popular form in Paris. Characters of the comedy are given designated personalities and roles to display. This new form of entertainment hugely influenced the development of art. The art theme slowly moved from mythology and heroic history to pleasure within ordinary upper-class life [1]. Watteau is along with this trend; he is an early Rococo painter, hugely inspired by Venetian painting, Rubens, and theater performance. Watteau's painting is renowned for its stage-like setting, soft palette, and naturalistic body movement. His painting inspired Rococo artists later on such as François Boucher and Jean-Honoré Fragonard. Several theater characters appeared in Watteau's painting, such as Pierrot, Harlequin, and Mezzetin. Many art historians linked and projected Watteau's melancholy depiction of the clown character due to his short-lived life, constantly bothered by disease. He sentimentalized the clown character with contrasting components of a laughing happy character but with inert weakness and sadness [2-4].

Mezzetin was painted around 1718-1720, named after Mezzetin, a comedy figure from the Italian commedia dell'arte who usually wore a striped costume and used exaggerated facial or body expressions to present comedy effects [5]. At first sight of Mezzetin, the viewer might be drawn to the delicate feeling the protagonist Mezzetin conveyed and the secretive woman in the back, then sink into a space full of greenness, like inside a dark emerald crystal, leaks of light transmitted through some polished facets. Jean-Antoine Watteau created this mysterious space to elaborate and dramatize Mezzetin's life through figural scale, meticulous selection of colors, and painterly details. The artist depicts a melancholic image within the paradigms of the Rococo style.



Figure 1. Jean-Antoine Watteau, Mezzetin, ca. 1718-1720, Oil on Canvas, 55.2 cm × 43.2 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, U.S.

The current study is diving into Mezzetin, checking out various details, and trying to figure out how components of Mezzetin delivered the melancholy in a natural but dramatic way. There is a previous study of Why So Sad? Watteau's Pierrots by Judy Sund on Watteau's character Pierrot. Similar traits could be found in Mezzetin. In Watteau, Reverie, and Selfhood, Aaron Wile discussed how Watteau creates a dreamlike and reverie atmosphere in his painting. In Mezzetin's background, the study could be found among extensive studies on the depressed atmosphere within Watteau's paintings. The current study focused on a single painting, Mezzetin, and how this painting creates the atmosphere in an intimidating way. This paper will go through several critical elements, including background color, composition, and character depicted to create this atmosphere under the author's intention.

2. The Components

2.1. Overgrown garden

Looking at Mezzetin, the viewer can easily be impressed by the extensive use of green in the background, portraying an overgrown garden covered thoroughly by leaves and trees. Few branches of leaves reached out to the foreground, making the composition looks natural. Gardens are repeatedly depicted as overgrown and arcadian during the Rococo period, followed by the aesthetic of that time, which represented a sign of abundance [6]. The same illustration could be seen in *Swing* by Fragonard or *The Scale of Love* by Watteau.



Figure 2. Jean Honore Fragonard, Swing, ca. 1767, Oil on Canvas, 81 cm × 64.2 cm, Wallace Collection, London, United Kingdom

Overall green hues are composed of different shades of green or green combined with analogous colors; the shadow part is mixed with blue, bright part is mixed with yellow. In the background, light is scattered and dark. The darkest green surrounded Mezzetin to outstood the protagonist. Saturation among the whole canvas is low except for the paints on the protagonist. In Figure 3, seven locations on canvas have been checked for color wheel and saturation; locations 3-7 are falling at the lower left of the saturation square. This light to dark green palette mixed with a grey tone creates a melancholic, depressing atmosphere.



Figure 3. (Color Saturation) Jean-Antoine Watteau, Mezzetin, ca. 1718-1720, Oil on Canvas, 55.2 cm × 43.2 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, U.S.

On the contrary, Swing has overall light green color, which delivers a sense of delightfulness through brightness and contrast. Fragonard is another famous Rococo artist who developed his career in Rococo's climax. Thus, method used is slightly different from Watteau's method at the beginning of the Rococo period. In Figure 4, locations 2 and 5 depict the shadow area, which is darker than Mezzetin's. There is even complete black depicted in the upper right corner. Compared with Mezzetin, there is more color mixed with yellow and higher brightness. The abundance sign is also pointed in the full coverage of trees; even tree branches are surrounded by climbing vines. Some red or orange

flowers are painted on the ground. Adding up together makes the canvas pass a sense of bright sunshine within the wood.

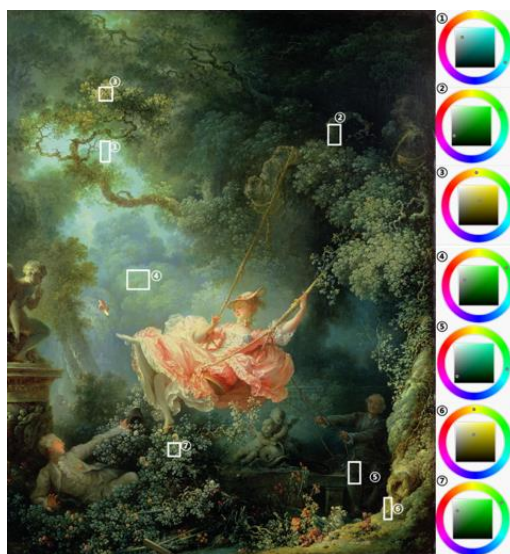


Figure 4. (Color Saturation) Jean Honore Fragonard, *Swing*, ca. 1767, Oil on Canvas, 81 cm × 64.2 cm, Wallace Collection, London, United Kingdom

Mezzetin's color range fits the color range of qualifying as a great piece of emerald crystal in Gemology, the yellowish-green to blueish green with evenly distributed color, without huge contrast difference. Compared with *Swing*, Mezzetin's forest and color delivered a sense of mystery and greyness. Presenting the viewer with the finest color in gemstone, this color leads to a cryptic atmosphere that catches the viewer's attention and invites them to dig more.

2.2. Unbalanced composition

Watteau's designated route for the viewer could be noticed via his painting composition. The viewer will first see the protagonist, Mezzetin, then eyesight got directed to the mysterious woman in the back. The female figure is covered in green and blends in with the background garden. The viewer's eyesight will be directed to her head through the protagonist's leg bone. In Figure 5, a diagonal line could be seen set by Watteau between Mezzetin's leg bone and the female figure's head. The tree branches reached out to the foreground and formed two parallel lines with the diagonal line, creating a harmonious composition in the foreground.



Figure 5. (Assisting Composition Line) Jean-Antoine Watteau, *Mezzetin*, ca. 1718-1720, Oil on Canvas, 55.2 cm × 43.2 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, U.S.

In the background, a few tree trunks and buildings formed long parallel vertical lines which extend until the end of the canvas, creating a sense of distance and imagination of space above the canvas. The female figure is as well parallel to the vertical lines. She is in the middle left of the canvas, and the only short vertical composition among the background, which is a part of the reason that she could be easily seen. Besides the shadow surrounding Mezzetin, he is highlighted through the composition. His body is leaning towards the right side of the canvas and forming the only incohesive contour within the balanced composition. This uniformity strengthens the protagonist's visibility and leads to his expressive facial expression and gesture.



Figure 6. Jean-Antoine Watteau, Pierrot, ca. 1718-1719, Oil on Canvas, 185 cm × 217 cm, Louvre Museum, Paris, France



Figure 7. (Assisting Composition Line) Jean-Antoine Watteau, Pierrot, ca. 1718-1719, Oil on Canvas, 185 cm × 217 cm, Louvre Museum, Paris, France

Compared with Watteau's other artwork, a trait could be found that he tends to stand out protagonist through some tricks under his single protagonist composition. In Figure 7, Pierrot is composed oppositely with Mezzetin, except for Pierrot is standing strangely still, everything else in the composition is sloped or bent. Pierrot is the only figure occupying the whole canvas, looking straight at the viewer without any facial expression. This is also composed of visual inconsistency within the canvas to increase the protagonist's visibility in a different approach.

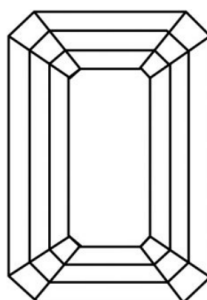


Figure 8. Emerald-cut

The nonuniformity within the balanced composition of Mezzetin leads to relating to cuts of an emerald. The emerald cut is created for emerald crystal around the 1500s due to its delicate nature of high in hardness, or resistance to scratch, but low in toughness, or resistance to chipping and breaking. The emerald cut is created to prevent this gemstone from breaking during the cutting process but is renowned for its elegance and simpleness. The composition in Mezzetin is very similar to the emerald cuts shown in Figure 8. The perpendicular composition and few parallel diagonal lines are very similar to a lower-left corner of an emerald. The only nonuniformity that would appear in cut emerald gemstones is its natural inclusion. Emerald contains various kinds of inclusion, which would be referred to as emerald's jardin in gemology. Mezzetin, as the only incohesive figure in the painting, is just like a natural crystal inclusion trapped within an emerald crystal.

2.3. Identity of the protagonist

Mezzetin is wearing a white, pink, and green striped satin costume with a white lace collar and a pair of yellow shoes that contrast with the pink beret, cape, and rose-like decoration. He is the most colorful figure on this canvas. The overall palette is soft, with low saturation. Mezzetin is playing guitar, an instrument usually symbolizing courtship, on a bench next to an ancient building [7]. He has downturned eyes and lips, gazing wide-eyed at something upwards, with an expression like he is idolizing something. His mouth is open, combined with the instrument, an assumption could be made that he is singing to someone. Many specialists have stated that color and eye-rolling facial expressions are under the influence of Rubens.

His left hand is extremely crooked, angular, and pressing the guitar heavily; his right hand is lightly flipping the strings – A sense of motion is created through the contrast between lightness and heaviness. Taking a closer look at his left hand, a sense of nervousness has been portrayed by comparing it to the background of a soft, pink globe. The multi-folds and light reflection addressed by thin pinkish-white paint, slice by slice, carefully addressed, has shown the softness and silkiness of the fabric. Under the exact hue of red, the depiction of the hand's joints is highly saturated and extremely expressive. The tension created between left hand and right-hand left hand and fabric, and the strength difference of hands and other body components make this painting unimaginably lively.

Combining the color use, his facial expression, posture, and gesture, Mezzetin delivers a sense of strain and pathetic. Judy Sund had discussed Watteau's other clown character Pierrot, which some similarities could be found with Mezzetin, that through exhibiting "some idiosyncratic features that bespeak his human actuality" and "breaches the boundary between the fictive world (of the play and the painting) and the 'real' world (of their audience)" [7]. As a comedy figure, he does not express cheerfulness in his facial expression, creating a contrast to the stereotypical image of Mezzetin. When not on a stage, actors get to express feelings just like ordinary people. Mezzetin got the chance off stage to take off all the disguise and express his original feeling, even if the feeling might be nonresponsive. The protagonist's melancholy expression leads to the viewer's curiosity about the story behind.

This artwork was initially owned by the artist's patron and friend Jean de Julienne, then went to the collection of Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia, after Julienne's death. This artwork is given to the artist's friend as a gift and is held for an extended period. As Watteau's strongest patron, Julienne has sold thirty-two Watteau's paintings in his collection during his lifetime; Mezzetin was one of eight

paintings that remained in his collection for his whole life and was sold during the estate sale. During the year of creation, Julienne was pursuing his future wife, Marie-Louise de Brecey, his future wife. Speculation could be made that this is an allegory painting as a gift metaphor for his friend pursuing his love [8]. Commissioning artwork during the 18th century is still the most common way for the artist to make a living. Commission artwork usually shows off skills and adds up components requested by people who place commissions. Mezzetin is different. This painting is a friend's gift, reflecting his friend's experience. Watteau once wrote to Julienne in a letter regarding another painting given to Julienne as a gift: "I cannot hide the fact that the painting pleases me and I expect some corresponding satisfaction on your part" [9]. In no need of skill-showing or compiling components, Mezzetin is a relaxed painting that exhibits a detailed, dramatic, and stage-like scene, demonstrating the artist's preference and interests in theater and distinguished skillsets. It is a small-scale painting that does not aim to exhibit to a vast number of viewers but provides some intimate feeling for his friends, inviting the viewer to take a close look at those detailly depicted brushstrokes and the protagonist's posture.

2.4. Mystery woman

Her depiction is ambiguous: a few dark green brushstrokes outlined her simple dress and hairstyle with a low bun, which did not fit the Rococo period's fashion with a high wig and chic dress. She looks like a figure from a historical painting and not a natural person from the Rococo period. An assumption could be made that this is an imaginary person, which increases the mysterious atmosphere of this painting.

She is fully depicted in green, which is not human-like, leading the viewer to think about what kinds of texture or material will reflect or absorb the surrounding's color. White marble could do that. This woman might be a white marble statue. Many art historians speculate this woman to be Venus, goddess of love. [9] In Grasselli's Watteau 1684-1721, the author claimed this statue hints at the metaphor of the main subject of this painting as unrequited love. The guitarist seeks to charm someone with his music, someone who is not within the canvas, and the statue is facing backward to the male figure, which states that the one he is longing for is not responsive to his feeling [8].

Even most art historians hold the opinion that this is a Venus statue. Considering that this is a gift describing the intimate feeling of his friend, another speculation could be made that this is not Venus. Firstly, Venus facing back the protagonist is hardly considered a good wish for his friend to chase his love. Venus facing back is usually referring as nonresponsive and failed love. Secondly, in various of Watteau's depictions of Venus, such as *Fête Galante* with a statue of Venus, *Embarkation to Kythera*, *Cupid Disarmed*, and *Portrait of Julienne and Watteau in Garden Playing Violincello*, two traits could be found, which are high bun and nakedness [10]. This woman's status contains neither feature. The current study will boldly assume that this is not a Venus statue. It could perhaps be another Roman goddess, which is praising some great qualities of the artist's friend even if love is not responsive.

3. Conclusions

This paper aims to discuss how critical components of Mezzetin create the melancholic atmosphere. The melancholic atmosphere painted with a grey tone of green background color, mysterious woman's identity, irregular protagonist position within ordered composition, and contradictory character setting these elements molded Mezzetin into an entertaining behind-the-scenes character. This painting depicted a grieved lover thinking of someone who does not love back and a nobody under the aristocratic Rococo paradigm. The current study is named *Emerald's Jardin - Ordinary Creature Within Crystal Jar*. Emerald is a green hexagonal beryl crystal, renowned for its expensive price and dark blueish-green color. The similar palettes, the same kinds of elegant, restrained, and delicate feeling delivered, the similarities between the cuts and composition could all relate to Mezzetin as an ordinary creature within a green crystal jar. Focusing on a single painting

could provide a route to go through most of the paintings by the same author and have a closer sense of how slight changes in painting components influenced the whole painting's sense delivered.

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