

## Student Lightning Talk: *Lovers in a Landscape*



*Lovers in a Landscape* ('The Turtle Doves'), Nicolas Lancret, about 1736, oil on canvas, 75.3 x 97.5 cm. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

## Transcript

Hi, I'm Susanna Davis, and I have just completed my degree in History and History of Art at the University of Birmingham. In this podcast I will consider the first painting ever bought for the Barber Institute, purchased in 1937. Entitled *Lovers in a Landscape* (or, 'The Turtle Doves'), it was painted in oils around 1736 by Nicolas Lancret, a French artist working predominately in Paris in the early eighteenth century. Measuring about 75 by 98 cm, it is usually found in the Barber's Beige Gallery, which features eighteenth-century European art. The founder of the Barber Institute, Lady Barber, stipulated the gallery should include works of art 'of that quality required by the National Gallery and the Wallace Collection'. The Wallace is dominated by French eighteenth-century paintings similar to *Lovers in the Landscape* and may have been influential in the Barber's decision to purchase Lancret's fine and characteristic scene.

Lancret's painting was made during the reign of Louis XV [1715-74], which roughly coincides with what was later dubbed the Rococo period, after the style that dominated European art during the mid-eighteenth century. The term Rococo derives from the French word *rocaille*, which refers to an ornamental style of French decoration made up of elaborate shell-like formations often used in the decoration of artificial grottos and fountains. But the Rococo was not just limited to artificial grottos it extended to painting, furniture, architecture, and interior decoration. It can be identified by its ornamental nature, pastel colours, and playful extravagance. Although, the term Rococo is an imperfect one and is a bit of a generalisation, I am using it to encapsulate a particularly frivolous period of artistic production during the eighteenth century.

Lancret was a leading follower of Antoine Watteau, himself an innovative and hugely influential painter in France in the early eighteenth century. Watteau invented the artistic subject of the 'fête galante', an amorous gathering of elegantly dressed figures in the outdoors. In paintings like *Lovers in a Landscape*, Lancret created his own distinctive versions of such subjects. While Watteau focused on mood and the impermanence of human happiness, Lancret was more concerned with telling a story.

In the Barber painting, we see a young couple on a grassy bank cocooned by the trees and flowers surrounding them. The man directs the woman's attention to a pair of turtle doves nestling in a tree in the top left-hand corner of the painting. The billing turtle doves in this painting symbolise faithful love, which is echoed by the human couple below. It isn't a scene of seduction, but an image of true love reciprocated. This is emphasised by the soft pastel hues which create a romantic and gentle setting in which the lovers are situated. The warm pink of the sky is reflected in the stream running past the bank. The stream appears to be remarkably peaceful, set against rolling green hills, there is no sign of discord to disrupt the gentle aura of the image.

Lancret's delicate modulation of the main colours give us a sense of light and atmosphere, there is no strong contrast of tone: the gentle blues and greens are complemented by the soft pinks, peaches, and yellows. He has used a feathery brush work, typical of the Rococo period, to depict the foliage which occupies a significant proportion of the scene. The posture of the couple themselves indicate their intimacy, as like the turtle doves they lean towards each other. They are clothed in an elaborate confection of soft tones; their extravagant silks conjure up ideas of luxury and indulgence. The froth of lace at the man's cuffs and dainty collection of bows arranged on the woman's sleeve almost imitate the delicate flowers to the right of the couple, thereby further immersing them within the scene.

The painting appears like a stage set. This is an idyllic dream rather than a real place – the stream is still and flat, and there is no sense of movement. While *Lovers in a Landscape* might appear to be a fairly over-the-top image, smothered with roses and pastel hues, this is moderate compared with some of the more elaborate Rococo images, which can be swamped with cherubs and frills of every kind.

In France, the taste for Rococo art began to decline after the 1750s, about twenty years after *Lovers in a Landscape* was created. In the early 1760s philosophers such as Voltaire began to criticise the style's superficiality. The excesses of the Rococo were replaced with a desire for

rigour and a return to antiquity. And so, by 1785 the frivolous Rococo style had been replaced by a taste for the more severe Neoclassical, typified in painting by the work of Jacques-Louis David.

This shift in artistic taste can be read through another lens – the changing political landscape of France. Several interlinking factors contributed to this including: the emergence of the radical philosophies of the Enlightenment; economic uncertainty; huge debt as a result of French involvement in the American War of Independence; and great political instability. These factors culminated in the French Revolution of 1789.

Artistic movements are not clear-cut and do not begin and finish in a precise manner, there is usually a period of gradual change, and in discussing the movements of the Rococo and Neoclassical there is a danger of over-simplification. However, in recognising the aesthetic shift from the indulgent Rococo to the austere Neoclassical, we can see the political changes in French society being played out in the artistic sphere. As the wealth, excess and privilege of the French aristocracy was rejected, so was the artistic style that encapsulated the extravagances of the *ancien régime*.

In the 1730s, when *Lovers in a Landscape* was painted, the political situation in France was remarkably peaceful. In the painting, there is no indication of the turmoil ahead. However, the inequality of the French social structure was increasingly questioned throughout this period. The ideas of the Enlightenment undermined the authority of Crown and Church and paved the way for the political revolutions of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While this painting was created over fifty years before the French Revolution, it hints at some of the indulgence of the *ancien régime* and the carefree excess that so disgusted those that rose up and overthrew it.

This may not seem a particularly remarkable painting: it isn't massively striking or dramatic, but it has always made me stop. I love that it's the first painting the gallery ever purchased. I also find it fascinating that within forty years of *Lovers in a Landscape* being painted, avant garde art in France looked so different. If the Rococo era represented grace, leisure,

and indulgence, the Neoclassical celebrated antiquity, precision and order. This movement later evolved to include the propagandist aims of the French Revolution – could anything be more different from Lancret's gentle depiction of this amorous couple?