



COURTESY OF THE MINT MUSEUM (CHARLOTTE, NC)

MUSEUM BOOK CLUB GUIDE

Antoine's Alphabet

JED PERL

Antoine's Alphabet: Watteau and His World—“Perl creates an astonishing experience by gathering his reflections on this ‘master of silken surfaces and elusive emotions’ in the form of an alphabet—a fairy tale for adults—giving us a new way to think about art. This brilliant collage of a book is a hunt for the treasure of Watteau’s life and vision that encompasses the glamour and intrigue of eighteenth-century Paris, the riotous history of Harlequin and Pierrot, and the work of such modern giants as Cézanne, Picasso, and Samuel Beckett.” Page numbers refer to 2009, Vintage paperback edition.

1. What if anything did you know about Antoine Watteau and/or the Rococo period of art before reading the book? Was your opinion favorable? If not, why? Did you learn anything new after reading the book?
2. Discuss Perl’s writing/organizational style for *Antoine’s Alphabet: Watteau and His World*. If you enjoyed the way the book was organized, explain why? If not, why?
3. On page 13 Perl states, “He (Watteau) is the master of the in-between situations, less interested in life as a stage than in the preparations for going onstage or how actors feel after they’ve made their exits.” What does Perl mean by this? How is this statement reflected in Watteau’s work?
4. What, if anything, did you know about the Commedia dell’arte characters before reading the book? What makes these characters popular among artists?
5. On page 47, Perl discusses scholars’ opposite views of Watteau’s work; some scholars believing his work is upbeat, playful, and optimistic while others believe it to be shadowy, melancholy, and troubled. What do you think?
6. Discuss this statement found on page 91. “The artist can never fully control his creation. The work of art eludes the creator’s grasp, takes on (one hopes!) a life of its own. If work of art is going to live, it must eventually turn its back on the artist, it must go its own way.”
7. Concerning Watteau’s stance on Ornament (Chapter “O” page 131). Does anyone else see the irony as it relates to his work?
8. Did Perl’s incorporating of more contemporary figures and their relationship to or feelings about Watteau help give you a more holistic picture of Watteau or did it muddy the waters? Specifically discuss Samuel Beckett’s views of Watteau (pages 115-18).
9. Is this statement found on page 57, “Economy in the arts is something closer to a maximizing of power, the most done with the least ...” a statement you would have associated with Watteau’s work before reading the book? If yes, please elaborate.
10. What was your favorite “letter” or chapter? Or section of a chapter? Why?