

In the Park – A Tempting Interpretation of a Painting by Delort

As part of extensive research¹ aimed at developing a catalogue raisonné of the works of Charles Delort, an intriguing hypothesis has been developed for one of his paintings, which we propose to share in this article.

Charles Delort (1841-1895)

Charles Delort is one of the painters from Marlotte who left his mark on the town: a street bears his name, his studio is still used for artistic activities, and his grave is in the municipal cemetery. Trained by Gleyre and Gérôme at the École des Beaux-Arts, he distinguished himself primarily in genre scenes and historical compositions. A regular at the inns of Marlotte from 1860 onward, he was one of the founders of the village's artistic group of painters after 1870. In 1886, he acquired the future Nicotière and established his studio there.²

In the Park... A genre scene by Charles Delort

In 1875, Delort painted a large canvas (89.5 cm x 129.6 cm) depicting a festive gathering in a park. This oil on canvas entered the Goupil Gallery in May 1876 under the title *Luncheon After the Wedding* and was subsequently exhibited at the Salon of May 1876 under the original title *In the Park After Luncheon, Souvenir of the Wedding of Mademoiselle L... at Fontainebleau*. Much later, the work was the subject of several international sales: in New York in 1944, 1981 and 1999, then in London in 2004 and 2023, as *Les Noces, Fontainebleau*.



Les Noces, Fontainebleau – Bonham London auction - Sep 27, 2023

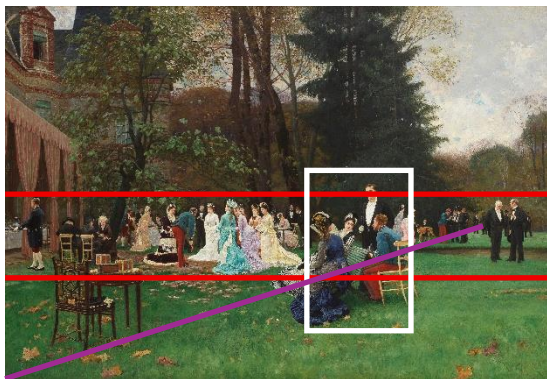
¹ A passionate art lover, Henri Deix discovered at a family gathering that his daughter, Florence, had married a direct descendant of Charles Delort. No biography or catalogue of his works was available, even though his reference dictionary of world painters (Bénézit) devoted half a page to Charles Delort. The artist's legacy was fading. Henri Deix then embarked on a diligent search for the painter's works, period documents, and collected family recollections about him. He decided to compile a catalogue raisonné as "a duty of remembrance," particularly for his grandchildren. Henri Deix's son-in-law granted access to the draft of this catalogue, which, unfortunately, Henri Deix was unable to complete. Most of this article is a direct transcription of Mr. Deix's writings.

² *Si les maisons racontaient ... Dans l'intimité de la communauté artistique de Bourron-Marlotte* by M-C. Roesch-Lalance, 3rd edition, 2023

The catalogue of one of those auctions offers the following analysis of the painting: *Delort employs the same meticulous attention to detail in his depiction of contemporary Belle Epoque life that he had in his period genre subjects set in seventeenth and eighteenth century. Moreover, its large-scale format, unusual in Delort's oeuvre, underscores the significance the artist gave to the work...*

... "The Wedding, Fontainebleau" can be interpreted as a text replete with vignettes that would have been readily understood by Delort's audience for their portrayal of the complicated social dynamics of the "nouveau beau monde": scenes of flirtations, serious political discourse, rituals of etiquette, and intimate tête-à-têtes.

Composition of the painting



The approximately forty figures in the painting are arranged in a distinctive way. They are contained within a ribbon that runs across the canvas from left to right (between the two red lines). The only exception is the group of two couples who stand out prominently in the foreground (outlined in white).

The depth of field, so dear to Charles Delort, is emphasized by the succession of increasingly distant planes. First, on the left, a foreground of furniture is conspicuously set apart from the heart of the ceremony; then the group of four celebrities, also detached towards the front; and finally, a series of small groups positioned further and further away, reaching the far end of the meadow, at the edge of the tree line (purple line).



The central group deserves some particular attention. A seated couple, the soldier on a chair, the young woman on a bench, exchange a knowing glance. The other couple is of much greater interest. The elegant woman, seated on the other side of the bench, has her back to the viewer, even though she is clearly the primary subject of the painting. Her elegance is refined, her hair vibrant, her posture superb. The importance of this figure is such that

Charles Delort made a very detailed study of her in the splendid watercolor reproduced here. The elegant woman's head is turned towards a standing man who is exchanging a meaningful look with her.



Study for *The wedding, Fontainebleau...* by C. Delort (watercolor, private collection)

Self-portrait and a hidden presentation of his future wife?

The man in question, who also occupies a prominent place in the painting, could very well be Charles Delort himself, a self-portrait in all his majesty (only his face rises above the ribbon that surrounds all the figures). If this is the case, one conclusion is inescapable: the elegant woman seen from behind on the bench can only be Julie Brincard. This hypothesis is strengthened by considering chronology. This painting was completed before May 1876. Given its size and complexity, it was therefore prepared and developed during 1875, the likely year of Charles and Julie's engagement, who would marry in 1876.³ Therefore, the following interpretation of the painting is proposed: Charles Delort staged his own marriage in advance, as if he wanted the two events to be simultaneous (the wedding and the unveiling of the painting). As the idea of this work preceded the event, he did not allow himself to represent his fiancée from the front. With the modesty and malice that characterize him, he placed Julie in the very center of the canvas, but with her back turned, like a riddle, a wink for the initiated, a snub to etiquette, a carefully concealed insolence, but with the key to the enigma nonetheless: himself!

³ Charles Edouard Delort and Julie Elisabeth Brincard were married on October 19, 1876 in Paris. Among the witnesses were the painter Léon Gérôme and the art dealer and publisher Adolphe Goupil.