

National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

Jean-Antoine Watteau

Ceres (Summer)

1684 - 1721

55 3/4 x 45 9/16 inches

Oil on canvas

1961.9.50

Placed in a gilded-wooden frame hanging on an eggshell white wall.



It is a momentous moment in a bug's life to find itself alive and well in a space so obviously created for humans. Nevertheless, with no humans around, this fortune-favored little caterpillar could not be more overwhelmed. For he was crawling across the most unusual and unfamiliar of surfaces.

Tentatively, the caterpillar began to cover the exterior sides of the mysterious object, as he found it was the only familiar texture beneath his feet: wood. He crawled for hours along the extensive, smooth surface of the wood. From what he understood, the wood served as a frame for a different surface within. It was rectangular, and ornately carved. Its sides receded inward about two inches in depth, allowing him to crawl within the space. The corners of this frame, he noted, provided excellent hiding spots, as they undulated and curved into what looked like carved leaves and vines. These rounded the corners and provided niches for him to wiggle into. The frame, however, was unfortunately gilded in a yellow-gold hue, horrible for camouflage. Grateful, he found a few spots that strategically maintained the light brown color of the wood. These spots were often found on the decorative aspects of the frame, such as the corners and edges. The underside of the frame was not as ornately carved and had simply been gilded.

After familiarizing himself with the frame, the caterpillar knew he needed to acquire more knowledge of his surroundings. Crawling from the bottom left corner, he placed a brave foot onto the oval-shaped surface housed within the wood, and was immediately relieved when he realized what it was: oil paint, dried atop a canvas. The paint itself shone under the light with a glossy finish, hardly raised at all against the surface. The paint felt completely smooth, and presented tones of light and dark grays blended roughly in circular strokes.

As he crawled, he noticed within the blurred gray tones that there lay a sharp, pristine black figure highlighted with white paint. He gathered that the paint rendered the larger body of a

crayfish. The crayfish's matte black head, claw, and lower half of its tail were all slightly blurred beneath the gray paint that surrounded it, while its wide body remained unobstructed. As he traversed the area to the left of the lobster, he recognized that the gray tones, which darkened close to the border and lightened as he moved up the painting, rendered clouds. The caterpillar figured this to be a very odd place for a crayfish, and made it his mission to piece together the whole of the image despite its enormity; thus, he continued on.

Crawling upwards to the left, he noticed the gray paint began to grow darker along the border, while also dissipating closer within the painting. He moved further in to investigate, and discovered the gray was replaced by a deep auburn color, finely painted in hundreds of thin strokes. These strokes varied in hue, lightening into a saffron color the further up he crawled. He moved across them until landing on an almond-shaped form that held a wide brown oval within. The two corners that the oval did not touch were off white. This, he recognized, created an eye. Excited, he moved further to the right and landed on a form that clearly marked the second eye, though it had been painted slightly darker, and raised higher in comparison to the left. He moved lower, and found a patch of sparse white paint surrounding a solid brown nose. The nose was wide and thin, and below it, to its right, the caterpillar found a long, red-brown tongue protruding from a slightly agape mouth. He quickly recognized the creature created in the paint: it was a lion. Crawling further down he found the rest of the body and paw of the beast. The ear of the lion poked through the mane in a semi-circular brush stroke of light auburn that turned darker toward its center. The strands of long auburn paint made up its mane, and the application of hair shortened and blended to create its body and face.

He discovered around the top of the lion's mane many long, golden strands painted horizontally, these lightly detailed the stems of wheat. The kernels of the wheat were dotted atop

a slate blue that washed over the background. Seeing this blue he recognized that it formed the sky, and each figure had been placed within it against large clouds. The paw of the beast rested upon such a mass of paint that rendered a cloud, near to the lobster.

Crawling along the paw of the lion, the caterpillar startled: the paint had been abruptly halted by a different color palette, and a dissimilar application of paint! This paint was not sparse like the fur, but rather entirely uniform, moving from a subdued white, to a dark gray, to a light pink, seamlessly. The caterpillar found that this form of painting did not render something living, as the tonal variations imitated the drapes and folds of fabric. He found that the wide brushstrokes of gray and pink created the depth of the folds, while those in white created the tops of them. A lighter pink colored the spaces between these as well. He also became acutely aware of a very fine craquelure that presented itself most significantly in the painted mass of folds. Slightly below the center, the direction of the brushstrokes making up the folds implied two distinct forms beneath the fabric. He concurred that the soft angle created by the transition of left-leaning, horizontal brushstrokes to more vertical ones created a pair of seated legs. He determined that this painted fabric made up the dress of a human woman.

The caterpillar found his proof in the pink and beige paint that rendered a human foot towards the lower center of the painting. Surrounded by a dark shadow, the foot emerged in a frontal position, with the ankle and leg leaning towards the left. It rested upon a near-white mass of paint making up the top of the aforementioned cloud. He moved to the right of the painting to find the figure's other foot, but instead found more pink, white, and gray paint-made-fabric that extended all the way down to the border of the painting. The figure's left leg was fully immersed under the fabric, while the right had been slightly raised.

Despite his fear of humans, he crawled up to the heart of the painting to continue piecing the figure together. There he found that the folds of the drapery were painted in thinner strokes of gray, against a sharp white. This application of paint separated itself from the wide folds illusioned in the fabric below. The thin gray strokes leaned to the right in accordance with the figure's body, and bunched in a loose horizontal manner around its arms, creating sleeves. He concurred that this whole section completed the top of the dress. Intrigued, he continued upwards.

The chest of the figure had been executed in the same cream-beige palette that rendered her right foot. The stroke of a brush was near impossible to see on the surface of her skin. Fine craquelure presented itself once again around the lower left of the woman's chest, and made its way to some of her shoulder and neck. A large brush stroke of light pink reached from the figure's right shoulder to the crevice of her left arm, creating a sash.

The caterpillar crawled up to discover her face. It was ovular, and painted at a slight three quarter view. This, he noticed, allowed her only to have her right ear painted, as the left was hidden by the turn of her head. Her cheeks held a rose color, similar to that which accented the tips of her fingers and toes. Her eyebrows were rounded and thin, only lightly applied to the canvas, as if barely there. Beneath them the caterpillar discovered two, rounded forms creating her eyes. The sockets curved in a circular manner with strokes of gray and beige, but the eyes themselves were almond-shaped. Her irises, too, had been painted gray with dark, black pupils. Her nose was thin and pointed, and her nostrils were pink. Her lips, he found as he crawled lower, were the very same pink, and appeared pursed through their small width.

He persevered upwards, to the figure's hair. It appeared blotted as well as brushed onto the canvas. Still though, it did not rise from the smooth surface. Pale yellow in color, it darkened

only around her ear and ended at the top of her neck on her right side. It did, however, follow the length of her neck and shoulder on her left side. The top of her head had been crowned in dashes of light and dark blue, and blots of vermillion that made the impression of flowers. Extending above these flowers, golden stems of wheat protruded from the crown; the grains were simple, light touches of paint.

Before making his way to the very top of the painting, the caterpillar was determined to discover the rest of the woman's figure. Moving down her right side, he followed the expanse of her arm and down to her hand. The bend in her elbow hid within the sleeve of her dress, yet her forearm was visible. It rested atop the folds of the dress illusioned in pink and gray. To his surprise he found the hand relaxed near to the lion's right eye. The thumb itself was not painted, as it hid behind the dress, but her other four fingers were shown curving slightly left. The tips of them were shadowed, but the hand itself remained unobstructed, resting near her gown. He then moved to the right of the painting to find her left arm. It bent slightly forward, and in her hand he found a tool. The tool was a dark, solid gray that curved into a precise crescent. The gray was highlighted with white paint, creating a metallic look. The handle, while mostly shown covered by the woman's fingers, had a brown base. He determined that this tool was painted to look like a sickle. Startled, he found that around this sickle, two new human forms emerged in the paint.

The one nearest to the sickle had pale yellow hair applied similar to that of the lion's mane, only shorter and distinctly parted to the left. Its face was painted to have plump, round cheeks and a slight nose and mouth. Only a soft brown color was used to paint the figures thin, downcast eyes and eyebrows. The lips, however, were pink. The head of the figure faced away from the central woman. Its body twisted to the right of the painting, while its left arm and hand were painted atop multiple long strokes of straight, light gold paint. The caterpillar found that

these created the stems to a bundle of wheat. Placed against the gray of a cloud, The tops of the wheat were lightly brushed onto the canvas. The left hand of the figure appeared only barely, with three fingers poking behind the wheat. Its body had been painted to its chest, and from there was hidden mostly by its right arm.

The second figure the caterpillar found was directly below, and slightly to the right of the first. Her face was in full profile and turned to the left, facing the central woman. Her eyebrows were created through quick dashes of brown paint. She had blond hair similar to the other figures, but the brushwork that composed it was looser, and produced small curls in the hair. The figure had her left breast exposed, while the other was covered behind white paint making up her sleeve. Under her left arm was a bundle of wheat that cascaded downwards toward the bottom right of the border. Her right hand rested against the dress of the central figure, with only three of its fingers painted as the others receded behind the dress. Her left arm, as well as her torso, disappeared behind the wheat, and had been covered in a haze of gray paint.

Finally crawling to the very top, the caterpillar returned to the border of the painting. He stood in a mass of blue paint that darkened slightly as it reached the edge. It was here he found the majority of the sky that all of the figures within the composition had been placed in. On the left side, the clouds were painted more pink than any of the others, and extended from the central woman's right shoulder to the very edge of the border. On the right, they were a light gray, and touched both the figure's left shoulder and the border.

Overall, he determined that the full composition, from an outside point of view, was as follows: A woman reclining atop clouds in the sky, holding a sickle and leaning against a lion to her right. She wore a long, flowing dress. Below the lion, a lobster laid within the clouds. On the right side of the painting, below the woman, were two figures holding wheat, one female, the

other young and androgynous. Three bunches of wheat appeared: two in the care of the lower figures, and another above the mane of the lion. This was the picture created in the paint he crawled upon.

Proud of himself for completing his journey, the caterpillar finally rested in a comfortable niche he found carved in the corner of the frame.

Review/self-reflection: Overall I feel I did a sufficient job; perhaps I went a little too in-depth, but I wanted to ensure that every detail was captured descriptively (leave no stone undescribed!). I feel like I could have structured the caterpillar's path around the painting better, but I wanted to separate my description for each figure into its own paragraph. To do this I had to avoid explaining things such as the hand atop the lion's mane until later in the essay. Figuring out when and where to mention certain aspects of the work was a challenge I continued to encounter. I also continuously struggled to disengage with the work's formal visual qualities, and focus solely on its physical nature and the illusion created through paint. Shrinking it through the eyes of a caterpillar really allowed me to hone in on the surface aspects and the application of paint, this I am proud of. Though it did make it very long, which, despite having no given word count, does worry me. The sky/clouds and drapery were certainly the hardest of all the elements to describe in terms of physicality, so I do hope I did them justice. I paid attention to the amount of 'to-be' verbs I was including, and did what I could to make them as minimal as possible to make the writing more engaging. I would love to improve on the organization of my descriptive analysis next time, but still I think I didn't do poorly. I am confident in my descriptions and only hope I did not tread into visual analysis territory! Thanks for reading:)

