

European Art Historian's Analysis of Vernis Martin Art work on Steinway A made in Hamburg in 1900 restored in 2016 by Sonny's Luxury Art Case Pianos

Description:

Steinway rosewood Grand Piano, made in Germany 1900. The case decorated later with **Vernis Martin** style scenes painted on the piano and keyboard tops, depicting pastoral scenes of love and romance following the manner of fashionable painters of the mid-18th century, and with gold painted scrolling tendrils and colored flowers and garlands on the case and legs.

Vernis Martin was an 18th century technique named for the Martin brothers of Paris, who were instrumental in development and refinement of lacquer in imitation of Asian lacquer. *Vernis* is the French for varnish. Their tightly guarded chemical compositions generated new colors—blues and yellows, in addition to Asian reds and blacks. By the mid-18th century, the period of Louis XV, elaborate scenic paintings in lacquer were to be seen on furniture and objects, inspired by the work of then vogueish French painters such as the hedonistic Boucher and Fragonard and landscapes by Claude-Joseph Vernet. Various materials and objects (such as furniture, wood panels, and boxes) were lacquered, but it was the ornamental elements adorning coaches—highly sought after by European royalty—that brought acclaim to *Vernis Martin* and which made this expensive style of decoration the epitome of luxury and refinement.

The trend was temporary, and the Martin varnish style disappeared with the French Revolution. While the lacquer technique remained in use in some workshops, its esthetic appeal waned. However, from the mid-19th c. on, a renewed interest in French high-style furniture of the Louis XV period brought *Vernis Martin* decoration on furniture once again back into fashion....a taste that lasted until about 1920.

Most often this type of painting was executed by artisan / decorative painters of varying levels of skill and went unsigned. Occasionally, known artists were commissioned to execute such paintings on furniture and they were encouraged to sign their work. That doesn't seem to be the case for the painting on this piano which was probably painted by a local artisan to match the 18th century style furnishings of a particular room.

Examples of 18th century paintings that inspired decorative painters producing *Vernis Martin* embellished furniture.



Fragonard



Boucher



Vernet

Mid- 18th century examples of *Vernis Martin* work



Sedan chair c.1750

Bombe chest c. 1750

Late 19th / early 20th century example of furniture with *Vernis Martin* decoration



Louis XV style *Vernis Martin* cabinet, c. 1900

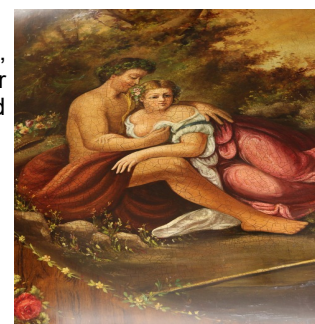
Identification of subjects of painted vignettes on this piano :
Piano top:



Lovers, after the fact

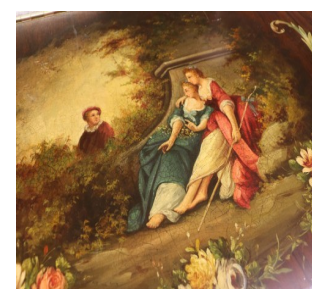
Probably refers to passionate love affair of Venus and Mars, here resting after the fact, but soon to be caught in flagrante by Venus' husband Vulcan. This had been a popular subject in European painting since the renaissance, a chance to show both a man and woman naked, or nearly so. They could also be any number of couples known from classical mythology who's liaisons were passionate and naughty.

I can't read the note laying across the long stick (shepherd's crook?) but that is meant to be a revealing clue.



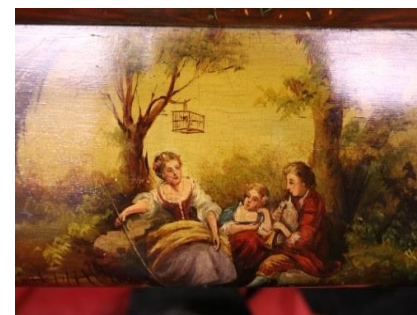
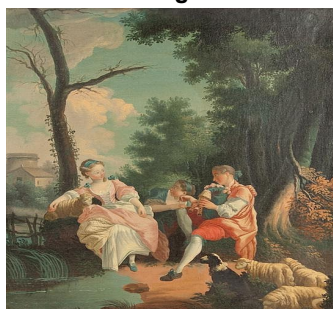
Two shepherdesses resting against a wall, admired by passing young man

Barefoot shepherdesses in too elaborate clothing – very much a Marie-Antoinette romantic pastoral fantasy. One of the women holds a shepherd's crook. Is it love at first sight? Will he or won't he storm the separating wall?



Pastoral scene, young shepherd and shepherdesses resting
Keyboard lid:

Artist unknown, 18th c painting with similar subject and configuration. Probably copied from the work of a well known painter.



About the 1900 delivery of this piano, reputedly to an unknown Prince in La Tour-de-Peilz, Switzerland

La Tour-de-Peilz is a small village on the northern shore of Lake Geneva between Vevey and Montreux. In the late 19th / early 20th century it was a favorite swanky holiday spot for European royalty...especially Germans. After World War I, two of the deposed Prussian princes, sons of Kaiser Wilhem, sought refuge here and stayed for the remainder of their lives.