

The Birds' Christening Party

While searching the past sales of a famous British auction house for Lauronce fans, I found this description :

"Birds dressed as a Breton christening party".

The fan referred to in the sale is obviously similar to this one:



Indeed it shows birds and the theme is a christening party but no Bretons are involved here.

In the center of the leaf the proud parents are dressed in their best finery : Dad in tail-coat , bow tie and top-hat , Mum all delicate lace, plumed hat and a parasol to protect her rosy complexion. Far from being regional costumes these are typical late 19th century bourgeois clothes.



The father is throwing *dragées* (candied almonds) to a group of youngsters who are eagerly gulping them down. This is a symbolic payment for the entry of the new-born baby into the community of the parish children (Note 1). Traditionally almonds, hazelnuts or aniseed were used, these nut-fruit representing abundance. In the 19th century more elaborate confectionery replaced the rustic fruit, hiding the emblematic value of the almonds under a coat of icing sugar.

The symbolic payment to enter the community could also be made with coins. If the children did not get enough money or sweets, or thought they did not, they could shout abuse and call down curses upon the family and the baby. Some of the outbreaks of bad language were so offensive that most 19th century studies didn't dare print them. (Note 2)

On the right of the fan leaf the new-born, all in white (*in albis*, as required by religious practice) is emerging from a half-cracked shell and is barely visible among the flounces of fine muslin and lace that are a must on his/her first public outing. In some French regions it was customary to wrap the baby in the mother's bridal veil.



The baby is in the arms of a 'person' sporting a high lace bonnet, the detail that led to the confusion about a 'Breton party'. But to all French people this bonnet is instantly recognized as traditional head-gear from Normandy.



And the person is of course the '*nourrice Normande*', the Norman wet-nurse. As no lady would think of breast-feeding her baby, wet-nurses were in charge of suckling infants from well-to-do families. In this position country women from Normandy were the most sought after. Normandy with its green pastures, prosperous herds of cattle and renowned dairy productions must have seemed a logical place to find persons whose task was to provide nourishment.

The Norman wet-nurse appears frequently in 19th century illustrations.



Grandville (Note 3): "Come,Nurse"



F.Kaemmerer: Un Baptême au Directoire

She is also present on three other Lauronce fans illustrating christening parties but featuring people instead of birds. Two of these scenes are supposedly set in the Middle-Ages and the nurse's typical bonnet is not so recognizable: the artist portrays a nondescript style of head dress meant to look 'medieval'.



(Collection F.Hovinga-van Eijsden)

But on the fourth fan, a mock-rococo scene, we find again the typical high Norman head- dress. Indeed the nurse 's outfit is much similar to the one depicted in F.Kaemmerer 's painting entitled 'Un Baptême au Directoire'. (Note 4)



These fans are a testimony to the wet-nurse's foremost place in 19th century bourgeois families, to the point of taking central stage next to the father, as on the fan illustrated above. Note that the mother is not present in this scene. Indeed in ancient times the mother could not attend her child's baptism as she was considered 'impure' after giving birth and could not enter a church until the ceremony of 'relevailles' (ritual purification) was performed. By the end of the 19th century this custom was on the

wane but had not totally disappeared. 'Relevailles' ceremonies were still performed in Provence, not a specially backward region, in the early 20th century.

CONCLUSION

Fans have widely been referred to as 'mirror images of their times'. Once again we can see how true this assertion is: a Lauronce fan which seems to be featuring pure buffoonery with ridiculous birds has in fact a lot to tell us about its contemporaries and their way of life, which French writer Octave Feuillet more poetically described in his 1876 novel ' *Histoire de Sibylle* '.

“ A crowd in their Sunday best had just poured forth from the church and was abuzz with expectation in the churchyard: they murmured approvingly when a Norman nurse in full regalia appeared a moment later on the porch, the ample folds of her head dress sheltering an infant swaddled in christening finery.”

NOTES

1/ Christening rituals in : Arnold van Gennep, *Manuel de folklore français contemporain*, Picard, 1937

2/ This tradition is reminiscent of the “Trick or Treat” Hallowe'en custom.

3/ J.J.Grandville (1803-1847)

4/ The Directoire period: 1795-1799
Frederick Kaemmerer (1839-1902)