

CHARDIN SEEN BY DIDEROT

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Reading by Colas Duflo and Fabrice Moulin.

Salon of 1765.

"This one is a painter. This one is a colourist. There are several small paintings by Chardin at the Salon. They almost all depict fruits and meal utensils. It's nature itself. The objects seem to be out of the canvas and so real as to fool the eyes. The one you can see by the stairs deserves the all our attention. The artist placed on a table a vase of old china porcelain, two biscuits, a jar filled with olives, a basket of fruit, two glasses half full of wine, a bitter orange and a pâté.

To look at the paintings of others, it seems to me that I need to get my eyes to see something else. To look at those of Chardin, I have only to keep the eyes that nature gave me and that serve me well. If I wanted my child to become a painter, this is the painting I would buy: "Copy it for me, I would say to him, copy it again", perhaps nature is not more difficult to copy.

This porcelain vase actually is porcelain. These olives really are separated from the eye by the water in which they swim; it is only necessary to pick up these biscuits to eat them, to cut this orange open and to squeeze it; to pick up this glass of wine and drink it, to take these fruits and peel them, to take this pâté and put the knife in. He is this one who hears colours' harmony and their reflections. Oh Chardin, it's not white, red and black that you grind on your palette, it's the substance of objects itself, it's air and light that you take with the tip of your brush and that you tie to the canvas.

After my child would have copied and copied this piece again, he would busy himself on *The Ray* by the same painter. The object itself is disgusting. But it's the flesh of the fish itself. It's the skin; it's the blood. The very appearance of the thing would not affect otherwise. Monsieur Pierre, look closely at this piece when you go to the Academy, and learn, if you can, the secret of saving with talent some of natures' repugnance.

We do not understand anything about this magic. It is thick layers of colours applied over each other and whose effect transpires from below. Other times, it looks like it's a vapour that has been blown on the canvas. Elsewhere, light foam that was thrown there. Rubens, Bergen, Greuze, Louthembourg would explain it to you way better than me.

They would all make the effect felt on your mind. Come closer, everything blurs, flattens and disappears. Move away, everything is recreated and happens again. I was told that Greuze, coming up to the Salon and seeing the piece of Chardin which I have just described, looked at it and moved on with a deep sigh. This praise is shorter and better than mine."

Salon of 1769.

"All see nature but Chardin sees it well and exhausts himself trying to render it as he sees it. His piece *The Attributes of the Arts* is proof of this. How perspective is portrayed, how the objects reflect on each other, how the masses are decided. We do not know where prestige is because it is everywhere, we look for dark and for clear and there must be some, but they do not strike in any place, objects separate without priming.

Take this artist's smallest painting, a peach, a grape, a pear, a nut, a cup, a saucer, a rabbit, a partridge and you will see the great and profound colourist. Looking at *The Attributes of the Arts*, the eye remains satisfied and tranquil. When we have looked at this piece for a long time, others seem cold, cut, flat, raw and out of tune.

Chardin is between nature and art. He relegates other imitations to third position. There is nothing in him that shows the palette. It is a harmony beyond which we do not dream of wanting. It snakes imperceptibly in its composition, all under each part of the extent of his canvas. It is, as theologians say of the mind, sensible in all and secret in each individual point."

Salon of 1767.

"It is said of him that he has "a technique" of his own and that he uses his thumb as much as his brush. I do not know if it is true. What is certain is that I never knew anyone who saw him at work. In any case, his compositions indistinctly call to the ignorant and the connoisseur. It is an incredible strength of colours, a general harmony, a sharp and true effect, beautiful masses, a magic in the making that desperate others, a stew whose range is the recipe.

Pull away, come closer. Same illusion, no confusion, no symmetry, no flicker, the eye is always recaptured because there is calm and rest. We stop in front of a Chardin as if instinctively, as a traveller tired by the road will sit almost without noticing it in the place that offers him a seat of greenery, silence, water, shadow and cool."