

DIDEROT PASSES COMMENT ON GREUZE

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[Reading by Colas Duflo and Fabrice Moulin.](#)

1765 exhibition.

"Finally, I saw it, a painting by my friend Greuze, but it was not without some difficulty. His work continues to attract a crowd. A father has just paid his daughter's dowry. The subject is moving and I feel overcome with pleasant emotion just looking at it. The composition is very beautiful. That's surely how it must have been.

There are twelve figures. Each has its place and does what they should. They come one after the other, undulating and pyramid-like. I laugh at these circumstances. However, when they meet by chance on a canvas, without the painter having thought of introducing them, without sacrificing any of them, they please me. On the right is a lawyer sat in front of a little table, his back turned to the spectator. On the table, the marriage contract and other papers. Between the legs of the lawyer, the youngest child. Then by continuing to follow the composition from right to left, the eldest daughter stands, leaning against the back of her father's armchair. The father is sat in the armchair. In front of him, his son-in-law stands and holds, in his left hand, the purse containing the dowry. The bride-to-be, also standing, delicately holds her fiancé's arm, the other is being held by her mother who is sat next to her. Between the mother and the betrothed, a younger sister, standing and hanging onto the intended, with an arm thrown over her shoulders.

Behind this group, a young child stands on tip toes to see what's going on. To the side of the mother, in the foreground, a young girl is sat with some pieces of bread cut up in her pinafore. To the far left in the background and far from the scene, two servants stand and observe. On the right, a pantry full of conserves makes up the background. In the middle, an old arquebus hangs on its hook. Then, there's a wooden staircase leading to the floor above. In the foreground, in the empty space left by the figures, near the mother's feet, a chicken guides its chicks to where the little girl is throwing bread. There's a bowl of water and, on the edge of the bowl, a chick, beak in the air, to allow the gulp of water he just drank to go down. That's the general set-up.

Let's come to the details. The lawyer is dressed in black, colourful stockings and trousers, a coat and band, a hat on his head. He seems to be a bit wily and contentious, well suited to someone of his profession. He has a kind face. He listens to what the father has to say to his son-in-law. The father is the only one who talks. The rest of them listen and remain silent. The child between the lawyer's legs acts exactly like what any young boy would in that situation. Without showing any interest to what's happening, he looks at the scribbled papers and traces his fingers over them. We can see feelings of pain and jealousy in the eldest daughter, who's leaning against the back of the father's armchair, since she has been [sidelinedside-lined](#) by her younger sister. She has her head in one of her hands and looks at the engaged couple with curiosity, anger and wrath.

The father is an old man of 60, grey hair, with a handkerchief wrapped around his neck. He's a gentleman. The arms stretched out towards his son-in-law, he speaks with an open heart. He seems to say: "Jeannette is sweet and wise. She will make you happy, mind you do the same" or something on the importance of marriage duties. What he says is surely moving and honest. One of his hands we can see is tanned and brown, the other one white, that's down to nature's elements. The fiancé is an agreeable fellow. He has a tanned face, but we can see he has white skin. He stands a little towards his stepfather. He pays attention to the discourse. He seems to be earnest and wonderfully dressed without overselling his rank.

I'll move onto the other characters. The painter has given the bride-to-be a charming, decent and reserved face. She is dressed beautifully. The white pinafore says she could not do better. There is a little bit of luxury in her embellishments, but it is an engagement day so that is true of everyone. The

charming girl does not stand straight, rather there is a delicate and soft bend in her body and in all her joints which fill her with grace and truth. She is pretty, in fact rather very pretty. We see nothing of her chest. But I bet there's nothing there to hold it up and that it supports itself. Had she had shown more to her fiancé, she would not have been decent enough. Had she had shown more to her mother or father, she would have misrepresented herself. She has an arm folded over that of her future husband and her fingertips fall softly to touch his hand. That's the only sign of tenderness she gives him, and perhaps that's without being aware of it herself. It's a subtle addition from the painter.

The mother is a good country woman who's close on 60 years old, but still has her health. She is also smartly dressed. With one hand, she holds her daughter's upper arm, with the other, she holds the arm just above the wrist. She is sitting. She looks at her daughter from the bottom up. She feels some pain in leaving her daughter but the match is a good one. Jean is a brave boy, honest and hard-working. She does not doubt that her daughter won't be happy with him. Joy and tenderness are mixed in the mother's physiognomy. As for the younger sister who's standing next to the bride-to-be, embracing her and resting her head on her breast, she is an interesting character. She is really angry to be separated from her sister; she's crying. But this does not put a downer on the composition. On the contrary, it is rather touching.

There is taste and good taste in having put together this picture. The two children, one of which is sat next to the mother amuses herself by throwing bread to the chicken and her young family, while the other stands on tip toe and cranes the neck to see, are charming, but especially the latter. The two servants standing at the back of the room, casually turned towards each other, seem to talk of behaviours and faces: "when will our time come?" And the chicken who's leading her chicks towards the centre of the room, has five or six babies, like the mother, at who's feet she's looking for bread, has six to seven children. The small girl who throws the bread and feeds them, I have to admit all this is charming propriety, from the scene taking place to the setting and characters. What a poetic stroke of genius.

It is the father who draws most attention. Then the husband or the fiancé, followed by the betrothed, the mother, the younger or older sister, depending, of course, on whomever looks at the painting. Next, the lawyer, the other children, the servants and the background, proof certainly of a good disposition."