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Chardin: The Essence of Things



Jean Baptiste Siméon Chardin (1699–1779): *The Silver Tureen*. Oil on canvas, 30" × 42 1/2" (76.2 cm × 107.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1959. 59.9.

Take a young man of modest means with artistic taste, sitting in the family dining-room at that commonplace, dreary moment before the table has been completely cleared. His imagination full of the glory of museums, cathedrals, the sea, the mountains, he looks with distaste and boredom, with a sensation approaching disgust, a feeling not far from depression, at one last knife, lying next to an underdone, unsavory cutlet on a half-removed tablecloth that drags on the floor. A ray of sunshine, alighting on the sideboard, resting gaily on a glass of water still nearly full after having quenched someone's thirst, accentuates as cruelly as an ironic laugh the everyday banality of this unaesthetic sight. At the other end of the room, the young man sees his mother already settled down to her work, slowly unwinding, with her customary calm, a skein of red wool. And behind her, perched on a cupboard, next to a porcelain platter reserved for "company," a compact, fat cat seems like the petty evil genius of this scene of domestic mediocrity.

The young man looks away. His eyes fall on the brilliant, highly polished silver platters, and down below them, on the flaming andirons. Even more irritated by the order than by the disorder of the room and the table, he envies those men of wealth and taste who move only among beautiful objects, in rooms where everything, from the tongs to the doorknob, is a work of art. He curses these ugly surroundings, ashamed of having spent a quarter of an hour experiencing not so much a sense of shame as disgust and a sort of fascination. He gets up, and if he cannot take a train to Holland or to Italy, goes to the Louvre to look for the visions

of palaces à la Veronese, princes à la van Dyck, harbors à la Claude Lorraine which, in the evening, will serve only to aggravate the dullness of the young man's return to the daily scene in its familiar surroundings.

If I knew this young man I should not try to prevent his going to the Louvre; rather I should accompany him. But leading him through the La Caze gallery and through the gallery of eighteenth-century French painting or through the Rubens or some other French gallery, I would have him stop in front of the Chardins. And once he was dazzled by this rich painting of what he calls mediocrity, this zestful painting of a life that he finds tasteless, this great art depicting a subject that he considers mean, I would say to him: "This makes you happy, doesn't it? Yet what more have you seen here than a well-to-do middle-class woman pointing out to her daughter the mistakes she has made in her tapestry work (*La Mère laborieuse*); a woman carrying bread (*La Pourvoyeuse*); the interior of a kitchen where a live cat is trampling on some oysters while a dead fish hangs on the wall, and an already half-cleared sideboard on which some knives are scattered on the cloth (*Fruits et animaux*); and even less impressive, some kitchen or dining-room dishes, not only pretty ones like Dresden chocolate-pots (*Ustensiles variés*), but a shiny lid, all shapes and kinds of pots; sights that repel you like a dead fish sprawled on a table (*La Raie*) and sights that disgust you like half-emptied glasses and too many glasses left full (*Fruits et animaux*)?"

If all of this now seems to you beautiful to look at, it is because Chardin found it beautiful to paint. And he found it beautiful to paint because he found it beautiful to look at. The pleasure you get from his painting of a room in which women are sewing, of a pantry, a kitchen, a sideboard is the pleasure he felt and caught in passing, isolated in time, deepened, immortalized, when he looked at a sideboard, a kitchen, a pantry, a room in which women are sewing. . . . Had you not already been unconsciously experiencing the pleasure that comes from looking at a humble scene or a still-life you would not have felt it in your heart when Chardin, in his imperative and brilliant language, conjured it up. Your consciousness was too inert to descend to his depth. Your awareness had to wait until Chardin entered into the scene to raise it to his level of pleasure. Then you recognized it and, for the first time, appreciated it. If, when looking at Chardin, you can say to yourself, "This is intimate, this is comfortable, this is as living as a kitchen," then, when you are walking around a kitchen, you will say to yourself, "This is special, this is great, this is as beautiful as a Chardin." Chardin may have been merely a man who enjoyed his dining-room, among the fruits and glasses, but he was also a man with a sharper awareness, whose pleasure was so intense that it overflowed into smooth strokes, eternal colors. You, too, will be a Chardin, not so great, perhaps, but great to the

extent that you love him, identify yourself with him, become like him, a person for whom metal and stoneware are living and to whom fruit speaks. And when they see how he reveals their secrets to you they will no longer avoid confiding them to you yourself. Still-life will, above all, change into life in action. Like life itself, it will always have something to say to you, some shining marvel, some mystery to reveal. Day-to-day life will delight you if for several days you pay attention to his painting as though it were a lesson: and having understood the life of his painting you will have conquered the beauty of life itself. In rooms where you see nothing but the expression of the banality of others, the reflection of your own boredom, Chardin enters like light, giving to each object its color, evoking from the eternal night that shrouded them all the essence of life, still or animated, with the meaning of its form, so striking to the eye, so obscure to the mind. Like the sleeping princess awakened, everything is restored to life, resumes its color, starts speaking to you, living, enduring. On this sideboard where, from the careless pleats in the half-folded cloth to the knife at the edge of the table, its blade hidden, everything is a reminder of the haste of servants, everything bears witness to the gorging of the guests. The tiered fruit dish, still as glorious and already as stripped as an autumn orchard, is piled high with plump peaches, as rosy as cherubim, inaccessible and smiling like the immortals. A dog, his head raised, cannot quite reach them, and by desiring them in vain renders them all the more desirable. His eye savors them and catches on the downy moisture of the skin, the sweetness of their flavor. As transparent as the day and as tempting as spring water, some glasses, in which a mouthful or two of sweet wine is caught in the throat of the goblets, stand next to some empty glasses, like symbols of burning thirst and thirst quenched. Bent, like a faded corolla, one glass is half tipped over; the felicity of its pose reveals the contour of its base, the delicacy of its stem, the transparency of the glass itself, the nobility of its form. Half cracked, free henceforth of the needs of men whom it will no longer serve, there is in its non-utilitarian grace the nobility of a Venetian vase. As delicate as a mother-of-pearl cup, as fresh as the sea water that they offer us, some oysters are spread on the cloth, as though on the altar of greed, offering their frail, delicious symbols.

Cold water is dripping from a wine cooler, pushed aside by a hasty foot that bumped into it abruptly. A knife that someone had quickly hidden in eager anticipation of pleasure, juts out from under golden slices of lemon seemingly placed there as a gesture of greed, the crowning touch to this display of sensual delight.

Now come as far as the kitchen where the entrance is strictly guarded by the tribe of pots and pans of every size—capable and faithful servants, a hard-working and splendid race. On the table, the busy knives, going straight to the point, are resting

in menacing but harmless idleness. Above you hangs a strange monster, still as fresh as the sea in which it undulated—a skate; the sight of it blends the hunger of the gourmand with the special charm of the calm or tempests of the sea, whose awesome evidence the fish symbolizes, at the same time that it recalls a memory of the zoo combined with something one has tasted in a restaurant. The skate is cut open, and you can admire the beauty of its vast and delicate architecture, tinted with red blood, blue nerves and white muscles, like the nave of a cathedral in polychrome. In front of it, some other fish, in their death surrender, are distorted in a taut and hopeless curve, prostrate, their eyes popping. Then some more oysters and a live cat, superimposing on this aquarium the obscure life of her more agile lines; the gleam in her eye focused on the skate, she steers her velvet paws in careful haste across the oysters, reveals the prudence of her nature, the covetousness of her palate and the boldness of her venture. The eye which, aided by a few colors, tends to combine with the other senses to reconstitute more than a past—a whole future—already smells the freshness of the oysters that will moisten the cat's paws; and one can already hear, at the moment when the precarious pile of fragile shells will give way under the weight of the cat, the little cry of their cracking and the thunder of their fall.

Like objects that we are used to, typical faces have their charm. . . . Go and look at the self-portraits Chardin painted when he was seventy. Above an enormous pair of eyeglasses that have slipped down to the end of his nose, way above the two brand new lenses that pinch it, the dimmed eyes with worn pupils are raised with an air of having seen, laughed at and loved a great deal. Tenderly, boastingly, they seem to say, "Yes, I am old! What of it?" Beneath the dim gentleness with which age has lightly covered them, his eyes still have fire. But the lids, as tired as worn-out shutters, are red around the edges. Like the old suit that covers his body, his skin, too, has hardened and gone by. Like the cloth, it has retained, almost brightened, its rosy tone, and in spots is coated with a sort of golden mother-of-pearl. And the wear and tear of the one brings to mind at every moment the wearing away of the other, suggesting the tones of all things approaching their end; from dying embers, rotting leaves and the setting sun, to worn-out clothes and aging men; infinitely frail, rich and sweet. It is astonishing to see how the puckering of the mouth is exactly controlled by the opening of the eye to which the wrinkling of the nose is also subject. The slightest fold of the skin, the slightest relief of a vein is the very faithful and special translation of three factors: character, life, emotion. . . .

In the portrait that we have just been discussing, the carelessness of Chardin's undress, with his head already covered by a night-cap, makes him look like an old

woman. In the other pastel that Chardin has left of himself, his costume attains the comical eccentricity of an old English tourist. From the eyeshade, firmly set on his brow, to the Masulipatam foulard knotted around his neck, the whole thing makes you want to smile without feeling any need of disguising it from this old character who would be so intelligent, so gently docile about taking a joke—above all, so much the artist. For every detail of this extraordinary, careless undress, all ready for the night, seems quite as much an index of taste as a challenge to convention. If this rose Masulipatam is so old, it is because old rose is softer. When you look at these rose and yellow knots that seem to be reflected in the jaundiced and reddened skin, when you recognize in the blue border of the eyeshade the somber luster of the steel spectacles, the astonishment that the surprising attire of the old man at first arouses melts into a soft charm; into the aristocratic pleasure, too, of rediscovering in the apparently disorderly undress of an old bourgeois the noble hierarchy of precious colors, the order of the laws of beauty.

But in looking more deeply at Chardin's face in this pastel, you will hesitate, you will be confused by the uncertainty of the expression, daring neither to smile, to justify yourself nor to weep. . . . Is Chardin looking at us here with the braggadocio of an old man who does not take himself seriously; exaggerating, in order to amuse us or to show that he is not a dupe, his high spirits springing from his good health, his rough humor: "Oh, so you think you young people are the only ones?" Or has our youth, perhaps, wounded his sense of helplessness; is he revolting in a passionate, useless challenge that is painful for us to see? One might almost believe this, for the intensity of the eyes, the quivering of the lips have a sombre expression. . . .

We have learned from Chardin that a pear is as living as a woman, that an ordinary piece of pottery is as beautiful as a precious stone. The painter has proclaimed the divine equality of all things before the spirit that contemplates them, the light that embellishes them. He has brought us out of a false ideal to penetrate deeply into reality, to find therein everywhere a beauty no longer the feeble prisoner of convention or false taste, but free, strong, universal, opening the world to us. And he launches us on a sea of beauty. . . .

I have shown through Chardin what the work of a great painter can be to us because of what it has been to him. Since it is not at all the display of special gifts but the expression of the most intimate things in his life, and the deepest meaning there is in objects, it is to our life that his work appeals; it is our life that it reaches out to touch, gradually leading our perceptions towards objects, close to the heart of things. I should like to add for the benefit of painters who are endlessly reproaching writers for their inability to discuss painting, and for the complacency with

which they attribute to painters intentions they never had: if indeed painters do what I have said, or to be more specific, if Chardin did everything I have said, he did it without intending to. It is even highly probable that he was never conscious of it. Perhaps, indeed, he would be very much surprised to learn that he had depicted so passionately the animation of life that was supposed to be still; had sipped at the pearly cup of the oyster shell, tasted the freshness of sea water, sympathized with the fondness of a cloth for a table, of darkness for light. Thus a gynecologist could astonish a woman who had just given birth, by explaining to her what had happened inside her body, by describing to her the physiological process which she had had the mysterious power to perform without being at all aware of its nature. Creative acts originate, in fact, not from a knowledge of their laws, but from an incomprehensible and obscure power that is not fortified by being explained. A woman does not need a knowledge of medicine to give birth to a child; a man need not understand the psychology of love in order to love.

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Translated from the French by Mina Curtiss