

THE 18TH-CENTURY FRENCH
ARTIST CREATED A
BEGUILING OEUVRE OF
PORTRAITS, STILL LIVES AND
GENRE SCENES
BY PHYLLIS TUCHMAN
Smithsonian, June 2000

THE QUIET MASTERY OF *JEAN-SIMEON CHARDIN*



In 1766, Catherine the Great commissioned a painting for the lecture hall of the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg from the French master Jean-Simeon Chardin. But when the canvas, *The Attributes of the Arts and Their Rewards*, arrived in Russia, the empress was so dazzled by the inventive composition that she decided to keep it for herself. The artful still life features a paint-daubed palette complete with knife and brushes, a plaster cast of a statue of Mercury, books, coins, a ewer, a portfolio of drawings and a black ribbon with the cross of the Order of St. Michael, all arranged in a rhythmic composition of form and color.

By the late 1710s, the mighty Catherine, a renowned Francophile, owned five exceptional pictures by Chardin. She had a remarkable eye: all of them were included in the seminal retrospective of the artist's work that opened in 1979. Seen also in Cleveland and Boston, it was the first comprehensive Chardin exhibition mounted by museums in the 200 years since the artist's death.

The Russian sovereign's taste and discrimination are again apparent in the splendid Chardin exhibition opening at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York on June 27, after crowd-pleasing runs in Paris, Dusseldorf and London. This time, paintings from Catherine's collection, as well as the Minneapolis Institute of Arts' variant (opposite) of her *Attributes*, will be on view along with some 60 other works representing a career that spanned five decades. Unlike other established artists of his time, Chardin, in the days before photographic reproductions, often painted multiple versions of his successful panels and canvases. These works have always been among the most discussed of his career. Writing about one of the later versions of *Attributes*, no less than the incomparable Denis Diderot-the mastermind behind the

Encyclopedie and an art adviser to Catherine the Great- declared in 1769: “While looking at ‘Attributes of the Arts,’ the eye is soothed and remains satisfied and at peace. When one has looked at this piece for a long time, other pieces appear cold, two-dimensional, commonplace and crude. Chardin is Paris in between nature and art; he.... is an old sorcerer from whom age has not yet stolen his magic wand.” In the scores of still lifes and genre scenes to be displayed at the Metropolitan, viewers can see evidence of the virtuosity that elicited Diderot’s enthusiastic response. Chardin’s works convey his warmth, charm and reserve. He portrayed children with the tenderness of a doting grandparent (though he never became one himself) and caressed color onto the contours of fruits as if he were a Dean or Deluca. Unlike his contemporaries, he ignored frivolity and intrigue, depicting instead the simplicity of everyday life. In his works, common objects and scenes are rendered with dignity and seriousness, and the humdrum becomes beguiling. For Philippe de Montebello, the Metropolitan’s director, Chardin is “a pure painter whose subject is almost subordinate to the joy of painting.”

The minimalist compositions of Chardin’s small-sized pictures—some measure less than 7 by 9 inches—belie their complexity. As novelist/culture czar Andre Malraux said in 1951, “Chardin is not simply a little master of the eighteenth century who is more refined than his rivals. ...His quiet mastery overthrew the baroque still life of Holland and made mere decorators of his contemporaries.”

How Chardin did what he did remains a mystery. He never revealed his technique. It was said that he worked on one canvas or panel at a time, and that each painting could take him several months to complete; that he layered his colors, applying his paint in rapid brushstrokes, often using his thumb; and that he used models and preferred to paint what he knew. About the version of *Attributes* in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Samuel Sachs II, that museum’s former director, commented, “This is a still life on a scale reserved for portraiture. It is a portrait of everything important to the artist who painted it.” This sensibility is a leitmotiv in Chardin’s art.

The original version of *The Attributes of the Arts and Their Rewards*, with its plaster cast of sculptor Jean-Baptiste Pigalle’s celebrated Mercury, was painted for Catherine the Great in 1766. The version above, now in Minneapolis, was likely painted for Pigalle.

Jean-Simeon Chardin, a stay-at-home, was born in Paris on the Left Bank in the rue de Seine on November 2, 1699. His world never grew much larger. Besides being baptized at the nearby church of Saint-Sulpice, he would twice be married there. The house in the rue du Four where he next lived with his parents and, later, with his first wife, is also in the sixth arrondissement, as was the home he shared with his second wife, around the corner in the rue Princesse. Except for a brief time spent in Fontainebleau in 1731 to help restore some 16th century wall paintings, Chardin seems never to have left Paris. He died there in 1779 at the age of 80.

Among his colleagues and contemporaries, Chardin was an exception. Both Francois Boucher and Jean-Honore Fragonard, like other winners of the Prix de Rome, traveled to Italy. Antoine Watteau visited London, and the peripatetic Voltaire lived in Prussia, England and Switzerland.



Chardin did not become a cabinet-maker like his father. Instead, he studied with two respected history painters, now practically forgotten, Pierre-Jacques Cazes and Noel-Nicolas Coypel. By 1724 the young man was admitted as a master painter to the Academie de Saint-Luc on the basis of two multigure compositions: a signboard for a surgeon, for which several friends posed; and an anecdote-filled scene of a candlelit billiard party, complete with posted police regulations. Chardin clearly knew his cushions from his cues. His father specialized in billiard tables, even making several for the king.

Throughout his life, Chardin painted the familiar. His panels and canvases are filled with everyday objects, many from his own home-kitchen utensils, tables, chairs, carpets, clocks, goblets and covered bowls. Both of his wives sat for his genre scenes, as did friends and acquaintances. Chardin owned the plaster copy of sculptor Jean-Baptist Pigalle's *Mercury* featured in *The Attributes of the Arts and Their Rewards*. And he constantly passed, in the rue de Grenelle, Bouchardon's fountain with its sculptural allegory of Paris, which appears in an earlier painting. Almost all his titles, however, were generic. When, for instance, during his 70s, he rendered pastel portraits of himself and his second wife, he nearly always displayed them simply as "studies of heads." He apparently felt that further information was extraneous to the work of art.

Small in stature, but strong and muscular, Chardin, according to Diderot, was witty and "had spirit and...a great store of good sense." His talent and ambition were already evident in the elaborate still lifes he painted shortly after 1724. These feature dogs and cats eyeing partridges, hares and fish on tables laden with foodstuffs. Two of these works, *The Buffet* and *The Ray*, earned Chardin a citation from the prestigious Academie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture as "a painter skilled in animals and fruits." In 1728 he was received as a member of the Academie at the tender age of 28.



Among the first group of paintings Chardin displayed at the Salon du Louvre when it resumed in 1737 was *Girl with Shuttlecock*, which was created that same year. In this work, Chardin portrays his young subject with remarkable delicacy and sympathy.

The Ray, on display for the first time outside Paris, features copper-ware, ceramics, a corked bottle, a tenuously placed knife, opened oysters, a raw carp, a rumpled cloth and an animated cat. Hanging on a stone wall and dominating the scene is the ghostlike eponymous image of the fish. Overly cluttered by today's standards, the picture has been copied by countless modern artists. Paul Cezanne sketched its right side during the late 1880s. Henri Matisse's full-sized homage dates from 1896. "Yes, I often go to the Louvre," Matisse said in 1913, during Cubism's height. "I mainly study the work of Chardin there. I go...to study his technique." After Chardin was rediscovered in the mid-19th century, a number of major painters early in their careers, including Manet, Monet and Vuillard, appear to have drawn inspiration from his motifs and methods.

In the late 1720s, Chardin courageously began paring down the compositions that had brought him attention. Instead of continuing to paint the sort of ornate, sumptuous still lifes popularized by the Dutch masters, he created works that are as subdued and spare as those of the early Spanish still life artist Juan Sanchez C6tan. Upon stone shelves,

Chardin placed just a few pieces of fruit and a bottle or goblet. Even the pictures with rabbits, other game and sporting gear—bags, powder flasks, guns—changed. They are not hunting pictures, just as Jean Renoir’s classic film *Rules of the Game* is hardly the story of a hunting party. Both artist and director focus on relationships--and on startlingly accurate depictions. As Sachs, now director of New York’s Frick Collection, said not long ago, “Chardin’s imagery is meant to be touched by the eye. It’s not just about the skill of the artist. Fur feels like fur.” Under natural illumination, such as the skylights of the Kunstmuseum in Dusseldorf, one could see how the artist applied his pigments as if he were modeling a sculpture from clay or wax.

By 1730, Chardin was receiving important commissions, including five pictures for Count Conrad-Alexandre de Rothenbourg, the French Ambassador to the Court of Spain. Two of these, *Musical Instruments and Parrot* and *Musical Instruments and Basket of Fruit*, will be in the Metropolitan show. Prefiguring Catherine the Great’s Attributes by three decades, the pair reveal Chardin’s knack for composing shapes, textures and colors into visual rhythms.



In his early genre masterpiece, *The Washerwoman* (1733), Chardin artfully rendered the peace and silence of this domestic scene. His figures—their gestures static—seem to inhabit their own separate worlds, creating a sense of discreet intimacy.

Success enabled the 31-year-old Chardin in 1731 to marry 22-year-old Marguerite Saintard, his fiancée of eight years. Within a year, they had a son, Jean-Pierre, a future painter who would win acclaim as a history painter, study in Rome and ultimately drown in a canal in Venice, an apparent suicide. A daughter, Marguerite-Agnes, was born in 1733, but died just a few years later.

For the following two decades, Chardin painted genre scenes that conveyed the nature of life “upstairs, downstairs” as few others have. The artist’s wife, it is believed, posed for one of the earliest such genre pictures, *Woman Sealing a Letter*, which was exhibited in the 179 Salon du Louvre and was the first of many to be reproduced as an engraving by other artists. Chardin subsequently supplemented his income with “royalties” from such reproductions. But while charming, these prints, executed in black and white, highlight by its very absence the artist’s gift for color. Wrote Diderot, “This magic defies understanding. It is thick layers of color applied one on top of the other. ...At other times, you could say it is vapour that has been breathed onto the canvas.”

No one is certain why Chardin stopped painting still lifes and started producing genre scenes, or why he later returned to still lifes. One explanation, at least for the former, centers on an apocryphal story involving the portrait painter Joseph Aved. Allegedly, a woman who had asked Aved to portray her wanted to pay less than he thought he deserved. Even though he was not busy, he rejected her offer. Chardin urged his friend to change his mind because the fee was good for a relative unknown, as they both were at the time. “Yes,” Aved cheekily replied, “if a portrait were as easy to do as a sausage”--an allusion, of course, to Chardin’s still lifes. Supposedly to disprove this notion, Chardin began to paint family and friends, including Aved (p. 6). Yet he did not title the picture for which his colleague posed *Portrait of Aved*. Caught

deep in thought, the figure was exhibited alternately during Chardin's lifetime as a chemist, a philosopher and an alchemist.



One of the artist's more elaborate still lifes, *Partridge, Bowl of Plums and Basket of Pears* is reminiscent of works by the Dutch masters. Distinguished by its rich color, skillful use space and subtle highlights, the painting dates from Chardin's pre-1730 period.

In other pictures, scullery maids, cooks and washerwomen return from market, draw water, peel turnips. One servant tries to get whites whiter. Children, rather than pursuing their studies, take games from drawers, blow bubbles, build houses of cards and spin tops. These little adults are scene stealers. An enchanting young girl, whose features seem to bear a resemblance to those of Chardin's first wife, holds a badminton racquet in one hand and a shuttlecock in the other. As the son of one of Chardin's friends turns a top in another picture, we watch him watching. Notes Montebello, "Part of the poetry in Chardin is the silence of his pictures. He captures and holds the moment for eternity."

In 1735, shortly after the artist depicted his wife stirring a cup of steaming tea, a symbol of the transitory, she died at the age of 26.

Chardin, who by all accounts was devoted to her, was bereft. It was

not until 1744 that he wed Francoise Marguerite Pouget, a wealthy, childless widow of 37. The marriage thrust Chardin solidly into the middle class. The couple had one child, a daughter, who died in infancy.

By this time Chardin's collectors included his monarch (Louis XV), the royalty of Prussia and Sweden, and various counts, cardinals, ministers and ambassadors from across Europe. Despite his lofty position, Count Carl Gustav Tessin of Sweden was humbled enough to write: "The pictures by Chardin are something to go on your knees before...."

When Chardin returned to painting still lifes around 1750, he simplified them further. He used fewer elements, and his compositions became more austere. Often he would include items of greater value than before, reflecting his own change in lifestyle. In paintings such as *The Cut Melon*, the objects seem closer to the viewer. The overall design has become more abstract, as his forms appear to rise and fall, billow and recede. Curves echo one another and continue to reverberate. When the colors of fruits and flowers are reflected on porcelain and silver surfaces, the painter conveys the tenderness of two people touching. As Diderot exclaimed, "Oh Chardin! It is not white, red or black that you grind on your palette: it is the very substance of your subjects: it is air and light that you dip your brush into and transfer and attach to the canvas."

About his own art, Chardin had little to say. "One uses colors, but one paints with feeling," he was reported to have observed. While he painstakingly rendered what he saw, year in and year out, he well understood that the magic and mystery of art comes from the ineffable.



Chardin's portrait of his close friend the painter Joseph Aved was displayed at the 1737 Salon as *A Chemist in His Laboratory* and later shown under the title *A Philosopher Reading* is imposing volume and use of half-light recall the work of Rembrandt.

In September 1752, Chardin was awarded the first of several royal pensions for his accomplishments. He was also put in charge of the hanging of the Salons after 1755 and served as the treasurer of the Academie Royale, taking that venerable institution from debt to surplus. In 1757, the artist and his wife moved to royal apartments in the Louvre, just across the Seine from his childhood home.

As his eyesight weakened during the 1770s from the fumes of his paint, Chardin could no longer work with oils. Never known as a draftsman, he mastered working with pastel on paper. The best known are his self-portraits. Marcel Proust once likened the artist's appearance in the portrait in which he wears an eyeshade (p. 80) to that of an eccentric, elderly English tourist. With his face close to those of his viewers throughout this series, Chardin--with a twinkle, a nod and a proudly turned lip--eloquently sums up his lifetime in the arts. Growing old, he suggests, you will know joy, sorrow, honor, disappointment, wonder, love and glee.



Phyllis Tuchman has written for *Smithsonian* on artists George Segal and Jackson Pollock.