

ZEUXIS

AN ASSOCIATION OF
STILL LIFE PAINTERS

For the Love of Chardin

ESSAY BY DAVID SUMMERS

ZEUXIS

For the Love of Chardin

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Chardin's Modernity

J. S. Chardin is now considered one of the great painters of the 18th century. Although not trained in the Royal Academy, he was admitted in 1728 as a painter “skilled in animals and fruit”. Chardin was the son of a master carpenter specializing in billiard tables, and it happens that the ancient root of the word “harmony” referred to woodworking before it referred to music. Still life was low in the academic hierarchy crowned by history painting, and Chardin’s reputation dwindled after his death in 1779. How then did this painter of “animals and fruit” come to prevail in the judgment of history? Chardin’s departures from his contemporaries’ expectations were to make him an important forerunner of modern Western painting.

Chardin’s paintings were sometimes compared to those of the Le Nain brothers, best known for their genre paintings of peasants, who worked in Paris in the earlier 17th century. His brushwork was described as bold or broken, to the point of comparison to mosaic. He was praised as a “colorist”, not simply because he used colors freely, but because he found harmonious relations among the colors he used. Chardin’s use of color was noted by Cezanne, van Gogh and especially by Matisse, with fundamental consequences for modern painting.

Chardin’s genre paintings won him a reputation among collectors extending to Europe’s royalty, but the Encyclopedist Denis Diderot wrote that “his compositions appeal both to the uninformed and the connoisseur”. Diderot’s admiration gave Chardin a favored place at the



Figure 1. *Cat Stalking a Partridge and a Hare Left Near a Soup Tureen*, c. 1728, 73.5 x 105 cm., New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Matt Klos
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Ying Li
Nancy McCarthy

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Clara Shen
Gwen Strahle
David Summers
Sheldon Tapley

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Figure 2. *The Game of Knucklebones*, c. 1739, 81.5 x 64.5 cm., Baltimore Museum of Art, Mary Frick Jacobs Collection

beginning of modern art-critical writing. Diderot praised the “truth” of Chardin’s painting, and his “magical” transformation of pigments into the presence of things themselves.

Still life painting is an old art, with many uses and meanings from ancient *xenia* to the present. For Diderot imitation had its own fascination. He imagined that a child learning to paint would copy Chardin’s beautiful *Jar of Olives*, then copy it again, but then copy the *Ray Fish*, Chardin’s *tour de force* presentation painting to the Academy. The eviscerated ray, with its deathly gill-face, menaced by a cat, is, Diderot says, “disgusting, but it is truly the fish’s very flesh, skin, and blood; it affects us as though we saw the thing itself.” Diderot echoes Aristotle’s *Poetics*. We are repelled by the sight of corpses, but we are delighted by skillful imitation of them in painting because we are the most imitative of animals. We delight in skills of imitation, even that of the ugly and—for Chardin—the ordinary and nondescript. The child will learn that “truth” is ambivalent, and that imitation has its own power. It should be noted that the minutes of the Academy called the *Ray Fish* a *cuisine*, a kitchen. Perhaps we are the prowling cat.

The principles of the new empiricism of John Locke and Isaac Newton had to be used, adapted to innumerable circumstances. As a painter, Chardin might be expected to have been interested in the questions of sensation and perception treated in Academy lectures he attended. As for gravity, do we draw and paint a ray fish differently when we understand that its plumb fall is determined precisely by the center of the Earth’s own mass? The geometry of vision begins to be empathic. Aren’t we like those weighty forms? How do

we set up our apples and silver goblets when we see them, not “in perspective”, but in Newton’s “absolute space”, the isometric space, not of individual “point of view,” but of objects themselves.

Locke wrote that time has its foundations in the succession of our “ideas” in consciousness. Actual times are “durations” which we distinguish from the abstracted idea of pure succession; an “instant” is a “part of duration” in which “we perceive no succession” This is a new definition of time corresponding to the space of the modern world, and Chardin began to imagine the corresponding modern sensibility.

In an early still life, (Figure 1) Chardin set a hare and a partridge in a niche on a ledge before an elaborate silver tureen. Light falls from our left. On the floor, a cat, eyes on the partridge, is clearly about to spring, making the stillness of the still life momentary. The orange perched on the lid of the tureen will tumble. This orange is reflected in the lid, beginning a series of reflections. In fact, Chardin frequently depicted moments, explained in terms of the theme of *vanitas*, (Figure 2) A girl has tossed a ball into the air. Is it rising or falling? We cannot say. The ball is forever suspended in the painting, but what will happen in the next moment? How long will a house of cards stand, or a top spin? A youth blows a bubble (Figure 3) which might drop or burst. In so spare a composition, the reflection of the sky and sun on the bubble fix the viewer in the painting’s moment. Another boy blows bubbles from the suds of a washerwoman, who reacts as if an unexpected sound had just attracted her attention.



Figure 3. *Soap Bubbles*, c. 1739, 61 x 63 cm., New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Catherine D. Wentworth Fund, 1949.



Figure 4. *Glass of Water and Coffeepot*, c. 1761, 32.5 x 41 cm.,
Pittsburgh, Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute

After 1750 Chardin devoted himself mostly to still life, refining and expanding the simple formula of the shelf of stone with more or fewer familiar or utilitarian objects, raising their forms, edges, lights, darks and color to the level of something like music (Figure 4). The surface of the glass reflects and radiates the white of the garlic cloves. The same white light fills the water in the glass and crests the simple presence of a graspable earthenware coffee pot. There must also have been a subjective moment when such a painting is finished, when its elements are felt and known to be poised and resolved, completing a uniquely found circuit in the comity of world, light and vision, as fragile as a house of cards.

— David Summers,
William. R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Art, University of Virginia



CLARA SHEN
After Chardin's La Raie, 2022, oil on board, 18 x 18 in.



RICHARD BAKER
Untitled, 2016, oil on wood, 18 x 10 in.



PHILIP R. JACKSON
Homage to Chardin & Uglow, 2001-22, oil on panel, 11 x 9 in.



RACHEL YOUENS
Orbit, 2014, oil on linen, 20 x 32 in.



DANIEL DALLMANN
Chardin's Green Card Table, 2022, oil on linen, 24 x 24 in.



ELIZABETH HIGGINS

For The Love of Chardin (after Chardin's Still Life with Vase of Flowers), 2022, oil on canvas, 32 x 24 in.



DELPHINE HOGARTH

Shaded Breakfast, 2022, oil, pen and pastel crayon on canvas, 29 x 21 in.



TIM KENNEDY
Zinnias in Bennington Cup, 2021, oil on muslin on panel, 12 x 9 in.



YING LI
The Dragon Fruit for Chairman Mao, 2021, oil on linen, 24 x 20 in.



JOSEPH MORZUCH
Paper Bag, 2020, oil on canvas on panel, 17 x 17 in.



EDMOND PRAYBE
Homage, 2022, oil on linen on panel, 20 x 20 in



LUCY BARBER
Sentinel (Tasmanian Leatherwood Honey), 2017, oil on muslin on panel, 12 x 12 in.



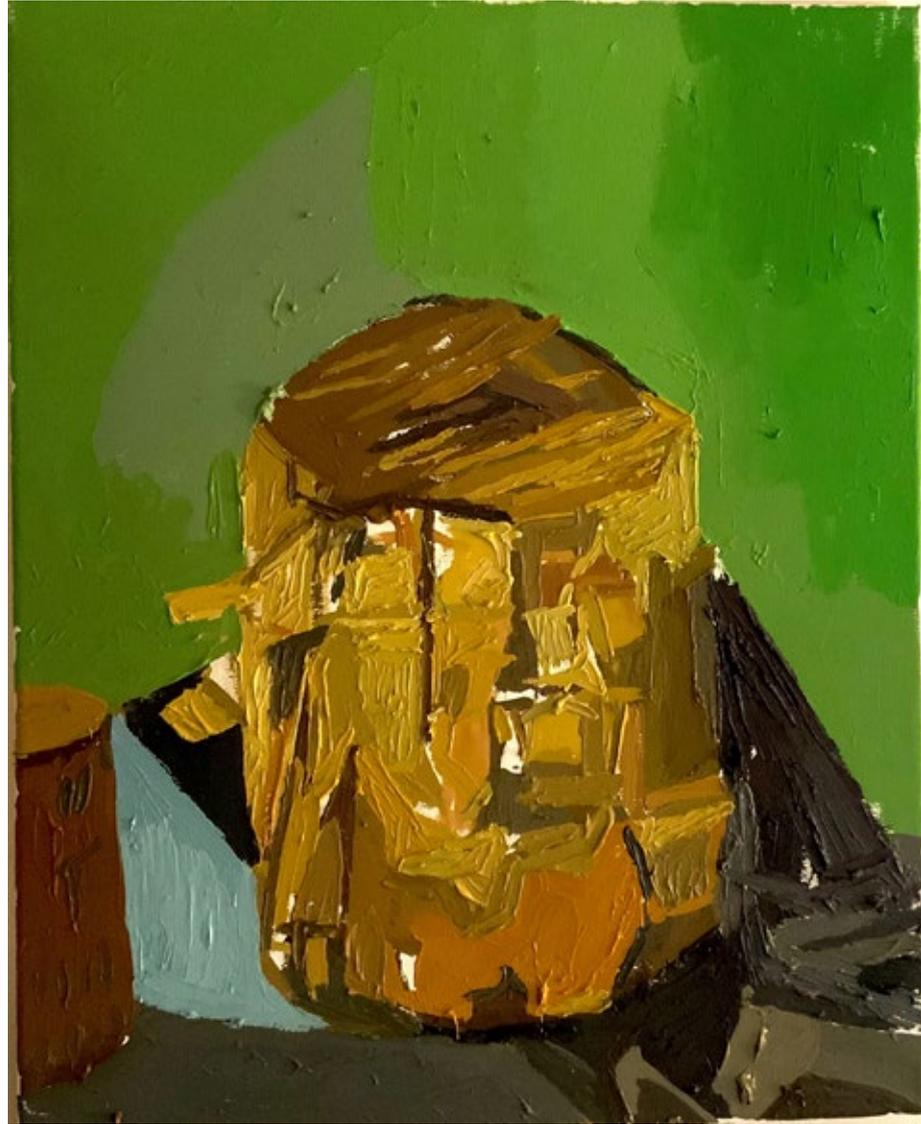
CATHERINE KEHOE
After Chardin, 2022, oil on panel, 6 x 8 in.



KATHLEEN CRAIG
Still Life with Two Cats, 2022, oil on canvas, 18 x 14 in.



DAVID SUMMERS
J. S. Chardin at our House, 2021-22, oil on panel, 24 x 36 in.



CLINTEL STEED
Portrait of Tree Stump #3, 2021, oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in.



MARY PRINCE
Pandora's Box?, 2022, oil on panel, 14 x 18 in.



RICHARD LA PRESTI
Studio, 2021, acrylic on board, 28 ½ x 40 in.



NEIL CALLANDER
Self-Portrait with Eyeshade, 2022, oil on panel, 24 x 18 in.



TEMMA BELL

Homage à Chardin II: Jojo and Una, 2022, oil on linen, 16 x 20 in.



DEBORAH KIRKLIN

Still Life with Tangerines and Jug, 2022, oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in.



GWEN STRAHLE
Untitled, 2022, oil on canvas, 20 x 14 in.



JOHN GOODRICH
Purple Vase, 2019-20, oil on canvasboard, 12 x 16 in.



BARBARA KASSEL
Via Dei Servi, 2015, oil on linen on panel, 10 x 10 in.



NEIL PLOTKIN
Ghost of the Ray (After Chardin's Duck with Seville Orange), 2022, oil on panel, 24 x 18 in.



MATT KLOS
Turkish Jug, 2022, oil on canvas panel, 16 x 12 in.



SCOTT NOEL
The Oath of the Horatii, 2021, oil on linen, 24 x 30 in.



NANCY MCCARTHY
One Robin, 2022, oil on panel, 8 x 8 in.



PHYLLIS FLOYD
Oh Chardin #1, 2022, oil on canvas, 12 x 16 in.



SHELDON TAPLEY
Solitaire, 2013, oil on linen, 36 x 45 in.

