Chardin and the Bourgeois Ideals of his Time 1

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Although Chardin was first ‘rediscovered’ in the first of the 19th century by a small group of collectors, painters and critics, it was not until the Goncourt brothers published their fascinating study of his work that this 18th-century French artist enjoyed a full-scale revival. Since that time his paintings have continued to reap the high esteem they deserve. In their book L'art du 18e siècle the Goncourts praise the technique, color and intimate atmosphere of Chardin’s still lifes, household interiors and portraits. They saw in his works a reflection of the artist as a man, a modest bourgeois seeking inspiration in his own surroundings, which he depicted with becoming simplicity and directness. Chardin answered perfectly to the Goncourt’s theory of l'art pour l'art.

The Goncourt’s view of Chardin has been left basically unchanged by the later writings on the artist, including the excellent studies by Pascal-Gaucheron and Wildenstein. ‘A painter from the beginning, devoting himself almost exclusively to mastering the technique of handling brush and colours, he only wanted to find in painting the means of expressing all that his genius could see around him and wanted to record: the interplay of materials and light, even impressions normally given only by the sense of touch.’

If only for the reason that l'art pour l'art was an approach to art that did not exist in the 18th century, and could not have been the conscious stance of an artist like Chardin, it seems necessary to reconsider this impressionistic view. I hope to do this in the present article. In the first part I will explore the reasons for Chardin’s great success with genre subjects in the 1730s and ’40s and examine the connections between his themes and those of contemporary literature. I will also attempt to define the possible links between the motifs Chardin first introduced into French art and certain new conceptions of society, the education of children and the place of woman. Finally, I will compare Chardin’s ideas on art with accepted 17th- and 18th-century art theory. In the second part the arguments will be bolstered by a discussion of each of Chardin’s genre scenes.

Chardin’s biography forms a chapter in each of the many monographs on the painter. The common source for all descriptions of his life is the
biography written after Chardin's death in 1779 by his friend the engraver Charles-Nicolas Cochin.\textsuperscript{7}

For our purposes it is sufficient to recollect briefly a few of the more important facts. Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin was born in 1699, the son of a carpenter. At the age of 18 he was apprenticed to the rather obscure history painter Pierre-Jacques Cazes. Thereafter he worked as assistant to Noël-Nicolas Coypel and Jean-Baptiste van Loo, concentrating largely on painting 'objets inanimés'. In 1728 he was admitted to the Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture as a 'reçu' on the basis of two still lifes, \textit{Le Buffet} and \textit{La Raie}. In 1743 Chardin became conseiller of the Académie, and from 1755 to 1775 bore the title trésorier.\textsuperscript{8} In 1757 he was placed in the honorific 'logement au galeries du Louvre' generally reserved for history painters.\textsuperscript{9}

Chardin's work as a painter can be divided into three categories. First of all come the still lifes which earned him his early reputation and which he was to continue producing all his life. Then the scenes from daily life, the first of which he painted in the early 1730s and not, as Cochin said, in 1737. (The confusion probably arose because Chardin first exhibited scenes of household life in the Salon of 1737. The reason for this was simply that no Salon had been held for twelve years before that date.) The third category is the portrait. With a few exceptions\textsuperscript{10}, none of Chardin's portraits were painted before 1740. Later in life he devoted himself nearly exclusively to portraiture.

\textit{The Genre Painting}

In the terms of 18th-century art theory, Chardin should have to be classified as a genre painter. This in itself does not say very much. A genre painter was simply someone who practiced 'petit genre', which, in the wholesale division of that system, encompassed everything that was not of the 'grand genre' – history painting.\textsuperscript{11} It was not until the 19th century that the concept was differentiated further. Portrait, landscape and still life each came to occupy a category of its own, and the unqualified designation 'genre' was reserved mainly for scenes of everyday life. The concept is not firmly bordered, and various interpretations of it are still current. The most acceptable definition is probably that formulated by Washburn in 1954: 'a scene of everyday life, wherein human figures, treated as types, are anonymously depicted.' \textsuperscript{12}

As its name implies, the 'petit genre' was considered inferior to the 'grand genre' in French 17th- and 18th- – following Italian 16th- – century art theory.\textsuperscript{13} The essence of painting, in the words of Roger de Piles, was '... une fidelle imitation, à la faveur de laquelle les Peintres peuvent instruire et divertir selon la mesure de leur Génie'.\textsuperscript{14} Genre painting was