

The Puzzle of Chardin

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COLLISION

Chardin disconcerts.¹ It is one thing to see his still lifes on a museum wall and appreciate their subtle and quiet dignity, but it is quite another to view his work “in situ” as it were, surrounded by the interiors they would have graced in the eighteenth century. Yet it is here in the splendid Musée Nissim de Camondo in Paris that the puzzle of Chardin becomes most acute.

The wealthy banker and collector Comte Möise de Camondo had a mansion built in 1911, modeled after the Petit Trianon at Versailles, which he completely furnished in eighteenth-century style; he had amassed an enormous collection of paneling, furnishings, textiles, and objets d’art of the period and sought to live among them as though he were an elite member of the court of Louis XV. (He did concede to his architect’s urging, however, to include such twentieth-century comforts as electricity, heating, and running water.) In 1924, he bequeathed the mansion to the city to become a museum, declaring in his bequest that its interior arrangement should remain as unaltered as possible: this is what we can view today.

Tapestries by Aubusson; *chaises à la reine* by Foliot; cabinets by Reisner, a favorite of Marie Antoinette; a roll-top desk by Oeben, who had made Louis XV’s desk at Versailles; chinoiserie; gilt; a room devoted to Sèvres porcelain; walls covered with Peking silk against which hang the paintings of Boucher, Fragonard, and Watteau – in short, a visitor is immediately immersed in the best of French Rococo style. Yet we suddenly stop short: what on earth is a tiny oil of a domestic cooking pot and two onions doing in the midst of all *this*?²

Certainly still life painting was a recognized genre in the eighteenth century, and depictions of the everyday graced many walls. But as Saisselin has claimed, still lifes commonly acted as a “species of indirect portrait” of their owners – that small and privileged aristocratic set who could afford to collect art.³ Norman Bryson noted that “still life cannot escape the phenomenon of class: the table is an exact barometer of status and wealth.”⁴ If we consider works by Vallayer-Coster or Spaendonck, two approximate contemporaries of Chardin’s in France, we find depictions of (over)abundance: porcelain, crystal, and silver; tables laden with feasts of imported luxury foods such as lobsters, oysters, olives, figs, and pineapples; and trays of delicate pastries and wines. Moreover, the food is displayed to tantalize: the figs cut open to reveal their sweet interiors, the grapes dewy with moisture, the wine ready to drink. With palettes as bright as the history paintings of Fragonard, one could well imagine such works among the gilt and silk of an eighteenth-century salon, reflecting the lives and tastes of its occupants.

Not so with Chardin. For most of his career he painted still lifes, and most of his still lifes depict domestic pots, bowls, and kitchen implements; in fact, the same pots and bowls reappear in work after work, accompanied at times by onions, at others by eggs or a loaf of bread. These humble objects stand in stark contrast to the compositions of his peers and in no way reflect the decadent lives of the bourgeoisie. Their muted browns and grays and their

minimalist arrangements seem to refute the riot of abundance with which they are surrounded. Chardin's singularity of vision – his paintings of the “everyday” which must have struck his bourgeois audience as unfamiliar and even alien – is thus all the more mysterious for its very simplicity and humility. Yet he was no renegade: accepted into the Royal Academy in 1728 as a painter of animals and fruits, Chardin held the lowest position in the hierarchy of genres that championed history painting above all.⁵ Yet he was granted a pension by Louis XV in 1752 and a studio and living quarters in the Louvre by 1757. He also came to serve as treasurer of the Academy itself. For all his peculiarity, he was a respected artist in his own time. What then are we to make of these puzzling works?

Let us look more closely at one of them: *Nature morte au chaudron cuivre*.⁶ The painting is intimate – 17 x 20.5 cm – and centrally depicts the cooking pot on its side, fronted by a bowl and those two onions. To the left stands a mortar and pestle, and to the right a knife rests at an oblique angle, its handle extending beyond the stone shelf on which the objects lie. There is little sense of depth and none of location, but there is light. What we can immediately reject in our efforts at interpretation is the idea that this work is somehow a political statement about the inequality endemic in aristocratic society – Chardin would not have been championed by the king if it were.

The painting is striking, not for what it does say but for what it does *not*. As Frédéric Ogée has noted, Chardin's subjects have no “allegorical or metaphorical charge”; this work does not point beyond itself to suggest an “indirect portrait” of its audience or a mimetic representation of the bourgeois world or even an ethico-religious lesson of some kind, such as we can see with Baugin's paintings of wine and wafers.⁷ As Ogée observes, the categories of the hierarchy at the Academy were dependent upon the “quantity and quality of discourse which the works could generate”: the more “verbalization” they could produce, the more valued they were. Chardin's paintings instead created an “enormous embarrassment” because they eluded any clear discursive grasp.⁸ As Bryson has said, Chardin somehow “expels the values human presence imposes on the world” and “breaks the scale of human importance.”⁹ The pot is upended; the onions are whole and unready to be eaten; the setting is unknown. In the work there is an overwhelming stillness: no obvious human activity has preceded this moment, and none is obviously forthcoming. Instead we have implements that are quietly waiting for human intervention¹⁰ or as Carolyn Korsmeyer puts it, “what is left when human beings exit the scene: things.”¹¹ A pot, a knife, and two onions. Diderot called Chardin's works “mute compositions,”¹² and Condillac noted that with them we enter a “psychic area which does not allow itself to be spoken.”¹³ There is for Ogée “no entry for discourse” in this work because Chardin emphatically denies that there is anything to say.¹⁴ And this is disconcerting, for what can be spoken about a work that denies speech? What interpretation is possible when the very ideas of metaphor and allegory are rejected?


One possibility is simply beauty. The pot, the onions are divorced from their quotidian functions; they stand outside of the activities of everyday life. We are being tasked to *look*, not to speak, when we confront them. Thus, are they purely formal compositions whose lines and colors are meant to be admired? I would reject this suggestion as too simplistic. Not because Chardin's work is not beautiful; it surely is. But if he sought to "transport" his audience to "a world of aesthetic exaltation" as the formalist Clive Bell has put it, he would have failed through his choice of subject matter alone.¹⁵ These items so carefully rendered must have been crude and beneath admiration for the eighteenth-century viewer. Further, if Chardin were merely experimenting with color and form, any number of objects would have been at his disposal. Instead, he returned to the same ones again and again as though charging us to look – to just look.

At what? At *these* things. And why? Because, I would suggest, Chardin was attempting to present to us the unrepresentable. Kant knew well enough that there are limits to what we can know; beyond those limits are what he called "rational ideas" – of God, freedom, or justice – about which we can only speculate. If we try to establish the truth of these ideas, "we are asking for something impossible" because they cannot be conceptually determined in any adequate way.¹⁶ But there is art. And for Kant, its proper subject matter is "aesthetic ideas": in painting, these are visual representations which "cannot be completely compassed and made intelligible by language."¹⁷ Aesthetic ideas are the manifest counterparts to our intellectual speculations; through visual means, artworks "strive after something which lies beyond the bounds of experience," arousing in our imagination "more thought than can be expressed in a concept determined by words."¹⁸ It is only through art that we can approach the inconceivable, that we can attempt to canvas what forever lies beyond our means.

Art does not, however, present aesthetic ideas in general but a particular one. In his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant mentions hell, eternity, creation, death, envy, love, and fame as examples of rational ideas made manifest in various works, but surprisingly he does not mention the *sina qua non* of all the rational ideas in his entire architectonic: the thing in itself.¹⁹ This, the supersensible, is the "basis of the possibility of all these objects of experience, but which we can never extend or elevate into a cognition"; it is the idea of objects as they exist outside of our experience of them.²⁰ The thing in itself – or mind-independent reality – is for Kant something which must be entirely unknown to us. It lies outside of the spatio-temporal forms of our experiences; we cannot even determine if there is a causal connection between the supersensible and our experiences of perceptual phenomena in the world around us. The supersensible is as mysterious for Kant as God. If art in general is an attempt to capture the inconceivable, there is no reason why this particular rational idea could not also be its subject matter. What is more interesting is that we have long failed to see that Chardin achieves precisely this in his work.

Chardin offers his audience depictions with which they would be unfamiliar and in which they would not normally be interested. Instead of a mirror of themselves, his viewers are presented with mere things, stripped of ornamentation, decoration, the trappings of society, even of human presence. His audience is offered the residue of what is left behind when humans have “exited the scene.” How better to charge them to simply look, to focus on those things themselves than to confound their expectations? To present not shows of abundance but rather objects that are humble, displaced, singular, and mute?

We can see in the writing of art critics and historians attempts to capture the singularity of Chardin’s vision; they come close to the answer to our puzzle but do not make this final connection. Chardin worked outside of language; his canvases do not allow their subject matter to be spoken because there is nothing we can speak *about* when we are confronted with what we cannot *know*. His images for Bryson are “not quite of this world”;²¹ they present for Arnheim a “detached reality”;²² the space of his pictures is for McCoubry “a private place, ultimately serene and inaccessible” that “comes closer to the alien timeless world of the inanimate things presented.”²³ Each of these various attempts at understanding Chardin is correct on its own: if we put them together, however, we arrive at a more complete truth – that Chardin confronts us with what is truly unknowable.

Chardin disconcerts because in a simple pot and two onions, we are faced with the limits of language, the limits of understanding, and the limits of human experience. His work is both puzzling and an “embarrassment” for his contemporaries because, rather than a reflection of the known, it suggests to us a vista that is ultimately unreachable. In this way his work is not only beautiful; it is sublime.²⁴ 

Notes

- 1 I must acknowledge that this opening sentence was directly inspired by that of Charles Taylor's essay "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 152–184.
- 2 In the spirit of the "great deal of license" afforded authors of "Collisions" in this journal, I have combined experiences from my wanderings in Paris for dramatic effect. The Musée Nissim de Camondo is exactly as I have described it, but the Chardin painting that is the centre of this piece actually resides at the Musée Cognacq-Jay across town. Ernest Cognacq and his wife Marie-Louise Jay were entrepreneurs who also bequeathed their (much smaller) collection to the city of Paris to become a museum. But their collection does not present as complete a picture of the eighteenth century as Camondo's does and is housed in a sixteenth century townhouse that has been greatly altered. I felt that the setting of Camondo's mansion was more effective for demonstrating the disconcerting surprise that Chardin's work provokes. I would urge readers to visit both splendid museums if they can.
- 3 R.G. Saisselin, "Still-Life Paintings in a Consumer Society," *Leonardo* 9 (1976): 202.
- 4 Norman Bryson, "Chardin and the Text of Still Life," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989): 245.
- 5 See Helène Prigent and Pierre Rosenberg, *Chardin: la nature silencieuse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 118; and Frédéric Ogée, "Chardin's Time: Reflections on the Tercentenary Exhibition and Twenty Years of Scholarship," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33 (2000): 432.
- 6 This work (1734–5) is alternatively titled *Egrugeoir avec son pilon, un bol, deux oignons, chaudron de cuivre rouge et couteau* in Prigent and Rosenberg, *Chardin*, 123. The titles of still lifes were often little more than a catalogue of their depicted objects.
- 7 Ogée, "Chardin's Time," 445.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 432.
- 9 Bryson, "Text of Still Life," 228.
- 10 My thanks to an anonymous reviewer at *Evental Aesthetics* for this suggested interpretation of Chardin's painting.
- 11 Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 163.
- 12 Quoted in Ogée, "Chardin's Time," 434.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 439.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958), 77.
- 16 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Publishing, 1972), 197.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 157.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 157–158.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Ibid.*, 11.

21 Bryson, "Text of Still Life," 239.

22 Rudolf Arnheim, "Why Chardin: The Adoption of the Tangible," *Salmagundi* 126/7 (2000): 235.

23 John W. McCoubrey, "The Revival of Chardin in French Still-Life Painting 1850–1870," *The Art Bulletin* 46 (1964): 46, 45.

24 I am grateful to the editor and reviewers at *Evental Aesthetics* for their comments and suggestions on this paper.

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