

from Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and Jason Gaiger, eds.,
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12 Denis Diderot (1713–1784) from the ‘Salon of 1763’

At the invitation of Melchior Grimm (see IIC10), Diderot reviewed the biennial Salons for the *Correspondence littéraire* between 1759 and 1771. At the time of the 1773 Salon he was en route to St Petersburg with Grimm. He contributed a brief review for the year 1775 and a final one at Grimm's behest in 1781 (see IVA11). Taken together, Diderot's 'Salons' constitute a remarkable contribution to the modern development of art criticism. They are

distinguished by the variety of his approaches, by the vividness of his descriptions, and by the forthrightness of his judgements. The high point of his development as a reviewer of contemporary art is reached with the Salons of 1763, 1765 and 1767, each of which is longer than the last. It should be borne in mind that these were far from being public productions. By the end of the 1750s, the printing of independent Salon reviews was being officially discouraged. The *Correspondence littéraire* circulated in manuscript, its sale was prohibited in Paris, and while its readership may have been highly select, its subscription list barely reached double figures. On the other hand, it was free from censorship. Diderot was thus able to express opinions that would have been prohibited in a printed text. His 'Salons' were not in fact issued in printed form until the appearance of Jacques-André Naigeon's *Oeuvres de Denis Diderot publiées sur les manuscrits de l'auteur*, in fifteen volumes, Paris, 1798. Our excerpts from the 'Salon of 1763' are taken from *Diderot oeuvres IV: Esthétique-Théâtre*, ed. Laurent Versini, Paris: Robert Laffont, 1996, pp. 246–7, 264–5 and 275–8. Boucher's art represented all that Diderot disapproved of in the rococo art of the *ancien régime*. The work of Chardin and of Greuze, on the other hand, prompted him to some of his most effective passages of advocacy. It is noticeable that he adapts the manner of his writing to the work under consideration. In the case of Chardin he concentrates upon the quality of colour and the substantial properties of the paint, while Greuze's work stimulates him to acts of imaginative engagement with its represented subject. The excerpts have been translated for this edition by Kate Tunstall. (See also III C7, 13, 14 and IVA11.)

Boucher

Pastoral Scene

Imagine in the background a vase on a pedestal crowned with a bunch of heavily drooping branches; beneath it, a shepherd asleep in the lap of his shepherdess. Arrange around them a shepherd's crook, a little hat full of roses, a dog, some sheep, a bit of countryside and countless other objects piled on top of each other. Paint the lot in the brightest colours, and there you have Boucher's *Pastoral Scene*.

What a misuse of talent! How much time gone to waste! You could have had twice the effect for half the effort. With so many details all equally carefully painted, the eye doesn't know where to look. No air. No rest. And yet the shepherdess does have the right face for her station. And this bit of countryside surrounding the vase does have a delicacy, a freshness, a surprising charm. But what does this vase and its pedestal mean? What's the meaning of those heavy branches on top of it? When one writes, does one have to write everything? And when one paints, does one have to paint everything? For pity's sake, leave something to my imagination. But if you say that to a man who has been corrupted by praise and who is convinced of his own talent, he'll just nod his head in disdain; you'll say your piece and we'll move on. *Jussum se suaque solum amare* [Condemned to love nothing but himself and his own works]. It's a shame nonetheless.

When he first came back from Italy, this man did some very beautiful pieces. His sense of colour was strong and true. His compositional skill was sound but full of warmth, his style was generous and great. I know some of his early pieces which today he refers to as daubs and would happily buy back to burn.

He has old portfolios full of admirable pieces which he scorns and new ones stuffed full of sheep and shepherds *à la* Fontenelle which he is ecstatic about.

This man is the ruination of all young apprentice painters. Barely able to handle a brush and hold a palette, they torture themselves stringing together infantile garlands, painting chubby crimson bottoms, and hurl themselves headlong into all kinds of follies which cannot be redeemed by originality, fire, tenderness nor by any magic in their models. For they lack all of these.

Chardin

Here's the real painter, here's the real colourist.

There are many small pictures by Chardin at the Salon, almost all of them depicting fruit with the accoutrements for a meal. This is nature itself. The objects stand out from the canvas and they are so real that my eyes are fooled by them.

The one you can see as you go up the stairs [*The Jar of Olives*, Louvre, Paris] is particularly worthy of note. The artist has placed on a table a vase of old porcelain china, two biscuits, a jar full of olives, a basket of fruit, two glasses half full of wine, a bitter orange and a pie.

In order to look at other people's pictures, I feel as though I need different eyes; but to look at Chardin's, I need only keep the ones nature gave me and use them properly.

If I had painting in mind as a career for my child, I'd buy this one. 'Copy that for me,' I'd say, 'copy it for me again.' Yet nature itself may be no more difficult to copy.

That porcelain vase really is made of porcelain; those olives really are seen through the water they are floating in; you could simply take those biscuits and eat them; break open that bitter orange and squeeze it; pick up that glass of wine and drink it; peel that fruit; and cut a piece of that pie.

This is the man who really understands the harmony of colour and reflections. O Chardin, it's not white, red or black pigment that you grind on your palette but rather the very substance of objects; it's real air and light that you take onto the tip of your brush and transfer onto the canvas.

Once my child had copied that piece and then copied it again, I'd set her to work on *The Dead Skate* [*The Rayfish*, Paris, Louvre] by the same master. The object is revolting; but this is the real meat of the fish. Its skin, its blood; the sight of the real thing would affect you in just the same way. Mr Pierre, take a good look at this picture when you go to the Academy and if you can, learn the secret of using artistic talent to redeem the revolting aspect of certain subjects.

It's magic, one can't understand how it's done: thick layers of colour, applied one on top of the other, each one filtering through from underneath to create the effect. At times, it looks as though the canvas has misted over from someone breathing on it; at others, as though a thin film of water has landed on it. Rubens, Berghem, Greuze and Louthembourg could explain this technique better than I; they would all describe the effect as you see it. Close up, everything blurs, goes flat and disappears. From a distance, everything comes back to life and reappears.

They say that when Greuze came to the Salon and saw the Chardin I've just described, he looked at it and gave a deep sigh. This brief praise is more valuable than mine.

Who will reward Chardin's paintings when this rare man is gone? You should also know that the artist is a man of sound judgement and can talk wonderfully about his art.

Ah! my friend, spit on Apelles' curtain and Zeuxis' grapes. An impatient artist is easily fooled and animals are bad judges of painting. Haven't we seen the birds in the King's Garden go crashing into the most unconvincing of *trompe-l'œils*? But it's you and me that Chardin will fool, any time he likes.

Greuze

That Greuze really is my kind of man. Putting to one side for a moment his small compositions which will give me some nice things to say to him, I'm going straight to his painting of *Filial Piety*, a better title for which would be *On the Rewards of a Good Education*.

To begin with, I like the genre. It's moral painting. What? Hasn't the painter's brush been given over to sin and vice often enough and for far too long? Shouldn't we be pleased to see it at last competing with dramatic verse to move us, teach us, improve us and invite us to be virtuous? Keep it up, Greuze, my friend! Put moral lessons in your paintings, and keep on doing it like this. When your time comes to leave this world, there won't be a single composition you won't be pleased to look back on. If only you had heard that young girl exclaim in a lively, charming way as she was looking at the face of your *Paralytic*: 'Ah, my God, how moved I am by him; if I look at him any longer though, I think I'll cry.' And if only that young girl were mine. I would have known her to be mine by that outburst. When I saw that pathetic, eloquent, old man, I too felt my soul moved to pity and I was ready to shed tears.

Filial Piety

This painting is 4 feet 6 inches wide and 3 feet high

The main figure, occupying centre stage, and who captures our attention, is a paralysed old man, stretched out in his armchair, his head on a pillow and his feet on a stool. He is fully dressed. His feeble legs are wrapped in a blanket. He is surrounded by his children and grandchildren, most of them anxious to attend to him. His lovely face has such a touching character; he seems so moved by the help he is being given; he has such difficulty speaking, his voice is so weak, his eyes so tender, his complexion so pale, that you would have to be devoid of all feeling not to be moved by him.

To his right, one of his daughters is raising his head on his pillow.

In front of him, on the same side, his son-in-law has come to give him some food. The son-in-law is listening to what his father-in-law says, and looks very moved.

To the left, on the other side of him, a young boy is bringing him something to drink. You should see the distress in his whole body. His grief is not only to be seen in his face, it's in his legs, in every inch of his body.

A small boy's head is visible from behind the old man's armchair. He is coming closer to him; he would also very much like to listen to his grandpa, to see him and help him; the children are dutiful. You can see his little fingers on the top of the armchair.

Another older boy is at his feet, arranging the blanket.

In front of him, a very young boy has slipped in between the son-in-law and his father-in-law and is presenting him with a goldfinch. Look at the way he is holding the bird! Look at the way he is offering it to him! He thinks it'll cure his grandpa.

Further away, to the right of the old man, is his married daughter. She is listening with joy to what her father is saying to her husband. She is sitting on a stool; she is leaning her head on her hand. She has the Holy Scripture on her lap. She has stopped reading it to the old man.

Next to the daughter is her mother and the paralytic's wife. She too is seated, on a wicker chair. She is darning a shirt. I am sure she is hard of hearing. She has stopped her work, and is leaning forward to listen.

On the same side, at the far edge of the painting, a servant has abandoned her work and is also listening.

Everything relates back to the main figure, both what everyone is doing now in the present moment and what everyone was doing in the previous moment.

Even the background reveals the way the old man is being cared for. There is a large sheet hanging to dry on a rope. This sheet is well thought out both in relation to the subject of the painting and for the artistic effect it produces. You would be right in thinking that the painter has not omitted to give it ample space.

Every figure in the picture shows precisely the right degree of interest for their age and character. The number of figures assembled in quite a small space is very large; but there is no confusion, for this master excels above all else at creating order in his scene. The skin colours are true. The fabrics are very carefully done. There is no awkwardness in any of the movements. Everyone is involved in what they are doing. The youngest children are happy because they are not yet old enough to have feelings. Compassion is clearest on the faces of the older figures. The son-in-law seems to be the most deeply moved because the sick man is speaking and looking at him. The married daughter seems to be listening with pleasure rather than with pain. Sympathy is, if not absent, then invisible in the old mother; and all this is true to life. *Iam proximus ardet Ucalegon.*¹ Very soon now, her only consolation will be that same tenderness being displayed by her children. And anyway, age hardens the heart and toughens the soul.

Some say the paralytic is leaning too far back and that it is impossible for him to eat in such a position. He is not eating, he is speaking and someone is ready to lift his head for him.

Some say it should be his daughter giving him the food and his son-in-law lifting his head and pillow, since the first task requires skill and the second strength. This observation is not as well-founded as it first appears. The painter wanted his paralytic to receive particular help from the person he had the least right to expect it from.

This justifies the choice he has made for his daughter; this is the real source of the emotion shown in his face, his eyes and in the words he is saying to him. To place this figure somewhere else would have been to change the subject of the picture. To put the daughter in the place of the son-in-law would have been to undermine the whole composition; it would have meant four women's heads next to each other and the series of all those heads would have been unbearable.

They also say that the degree of consideration shown by the figures is unnatural; that some should indeed be involved with the old man, but that the rest should be getting on with their own tasks; that the scene would thereby have been simpler and truer, and that that is how it was, they are sure of it. – Those people *faciant ut nimis intelligendo nihil intelligent*.² The moment they are asking for is a general moment, without interest; the one the painter has chosen is particular. By chance it happened that day that it was the son-in-law who was bringing him his food, and the old man was moved and showed his gratitude in such a lively and profound manner that it made the rest of the family abandon their activities and fix their attention on him.

They also say that the old man is dying, that his face is that of a man breathing his last – Doctor Gatti says that those critics have never seen a sick man and that this one has a good three years left in him.

They say that the daughter who is looking up from her book lacks expression or that she has the wrong expression – I agree in part.

They say that the arms of this otherwise charming figure are stiff, scrawny, badly painted and lacking in detail. – Well, that's certainly true.

That the pillow is brand new and that it would be more natural if it had been used before. – Perhaps.

That this artist is devoid of creativity; and that all the heads in the scene are the same as those in his painting of *The Betrothal* and that the heads in *The Betrothal* are the same ones as the ones in his *Peasant Reading to his Children*. – Fine, but supposing the painter wanted it this way? Supposing he has traced the history of the same family?

That . . . damn those critics and me with them! This painting is beautiful, very beautiful, and woe betide anyone who is able to look at it for a single moment and remain unmoved! The old man's character is unique; the child who is bringing him a drink is also unique. The old lady, unique. Wherever you look, you are enchanted. The background, the blankets, the clothes are all perfectly finished; and furthermore, this man draws like a god. His use of colour is beautiful and strong, though it is not quite up to Chardin's. I'll say it again, this painting is beautiful, or I don't know what is. Moreover, it pulls in crowds of spectators; you can't get close to it. You are transported by it, and when you see it again, you realize you were right to be transported by it.

It would be very surprising if this artist did not excel. He has intelligence and sensibility. He is enthusiastic about his art; he is forever producing studies. He spares no expense and goes out of his way to get the models he needs. If he sees a striking face, he would happily go down on his knees in front of its wearer to persuade it to come into his studio. He is always observing people, in streets, in churches, in markets, in theatres, in promenades, in public assemblies. If he is thinking about a subject, he is obsessed by it, it follows him everywhere. It infiltrates his

own personality. He adopts that of his painting: he is brusque, gentle, guileful, acerbic, flirtatious, sad, gay, cold, serious or insane, depending on the subject he is preparing.

Besides the genius of his art, which you cannot deny him, you can see that he is intelligent by his choice and arrangement of secondary figures. In the painting of the *Peasant Reading the Holy Scripture to his Children*, he had placed on the floor in one corner a small child, amusing himself by pulling faces at a dog. In his *The Betrothal*, he had introduced a mother hen with her brood. In the former, next to the boy bringing a drink to his sick father, he had placed a big dog, a bitch, suckling her puppies while standing still with her nose in the air; not to mention the sheet stretched out on a rope which forms the backdrop to this painting.

He used to be criticized for painting in rather grey tones, but he has stopped making this mistake. Whatever people say, Greuze is the painter for me.

¹ Virgil, *Aeneid*, II, v. 311-12: 'The house of Ucalegon is already ablaze nearby.' Said when misfortune is at hand, here with reference to the mother's death following on from the father's.

² Terence, *Andria*, Prologue, v. 17 (slightly misquoted): 'They see to it that by understanding too much, they understand nothing.'