
Chardin, Jean-Siméon [Jean-Baptiste-Siméon]

(b Paris, Nov 2, 1699; d Paris, Dec 6, 1779).

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T015989>

Published online: 2003

French painter. He rose from a relatively humble background to become one of the most admired painters of mid-18th-century France and to hold the influential position of Treasurer of the Académie Royale. His austere still-lives and bourgeois domestic genre scenes were highly praised by Diderot in his Salon reviews, and, though his reputation went into decline after his death, Chardin was by the middle of the 19th century once again among the most highly esteemed of French painters. His works and technique continued to find particular favour with artists and connoisseurs. Although he is often referred to as Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, there is no documentary evidence to confirm this additional name.

1. Training and early still-lives, to early 1730s.

Chardin was born into a prosperous artisan family, and his betrothal in 1723 united him with a legal and administrative family. About 1718 he joined the studio of the history painter Pierre-Jacques Cazes, who taught him the mechanics of painting and encouraged him to draw from life at the Académie Royale. One hesitant life study in the manner of Cazes survives (Stockholm, Nmus.), but this kind of academic drawing seems to have held no real interest for Chardin. He also studied briefly (c. 1720–21) with the history painter Noël-Nicolas Coypel. There is little in the work of either of Chardin's teachers, beyond a feeling for decorative design and colour, to suggest the later development of Chardin's art. But it is noteworthy that Chardin's friend and biographer Charles-Nicolas Cochin (ii) recorded an incident when Coypel set Chardin to paint from nature a musket in one of Coypel's portraits. It was perhaps this experience that set Chardin on his course as an observational rather than a conceptual painter.

Chardin's first genre scenes date from c. 1720–21, when a surgeon asked him to paint a large signboard (untraced) for his premises, the design of which is recorded in a 19th-century etching after the preparatory oil sketch (destr. 1871). The horizontal format and the disposition of the figures are reminiscent of Watteau's celebrated *L'Enseigne de Gersaint* (Berlin, Schloss Charlottenburg), painted around this time. The subject-matter shows Chardin's commitment to the contemporary urban scene, as does his *Billiard Party* (Paris, Carnavalet). The handling of both space and figures in these works is rudimentary compared with Watteau's works, but they show that Chardin was capable of acute observation of contemporary life.

Both Cochin and Pierre-Jean Mariette (Chardin's other, more critical and classically minded, contemporary biographer) described one of his first experiences of painting a still-life of game in the early 1720s. For Cochin it was a confirmation of Chardin's calling as an assiduous student of nature. The difficulties the painter encountered, in a task regarded by academic theorists as one of the most menial activities of an artist, taught him the impossibility of exact imitation. Thereafter he worked to discover painterly means to create a selective equivalent of reality.

It is difficult to establish a chronology for Chardin's earliest still-lives, since the first surviving dated example is from 1728. The *Still-life with a Copper Cauldron* (ex-Kaiser-Friedrich Mus., Berlin; destr.) of c. 1725 must have been among the first. Chardin evidently selected the objects—kitchen utensils, eggs, apples and spring onions, arranged simply along a stone shelf—for their different volumes and textures, and he adapted his brushwork to represent these differences. The originality of his subject-matter possibly reflected his wish to differentiate himself from his prominent and successful rivals in the art of still-life, François Desportes and Jean-Baptiste Oudry, who were already specialists in depicting dead game and trophies of the chase. However, Chardin initially may have selected everyday utensils and food because their simply defined forms and textures were relatively easy to organize and depict for a painter to whom little came easily.



Jean Siméon Chardin: *The Silver Tureen*, oil on canvas, 30 x 42 1/2 in. (76.2 x 108 cm), 1728 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1959, Accession ID: 59.9); photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/110000320>

From the mid-1720s to the late 1730s Chardin painted variations on the theme of utensils and food, and the quantity of these works indicates that he found a ready market (see fig.). In the earlier examples, such as *Still-life with Bottle and Cucumbers* (New York, Frick), objects are arranged loosely on rough-cut stone shelves that slope slightly down to the left, and the brushwork can be quite free. The air of informality of these works gives them an affinity with the contemporary picturesque genre in decorative painting.

The designs of the 1730s have greater stability: shelves are horizontal, more objects are introduced and in greater variety, or, when there are few objects, they are made more monumental in relation to the overall picture space. The greatest examples of these more complex designs are the pendants *Fast-day Meal* and *Meat-day Meal* (both 1731; Paris, Louvre), the former displaying various utensils to

accompany herrings, eggs and spring onions, the latter with meat and offal. In these works Chardin juxtaposed colours, shapes and textures: the bulging, convex forms of a jug, teapot, bottle or brazier are shown with the hollow space of a copper pot turned on its side; the silvery sheen of a fish is shown with glazed pottery; the matt surface of eggs is shown with the shine of copper; and the contrasting reds of meat, kidney and copper are shown with a mottled green-glazed jug. For all the apparent simplicity of his subject-matter, the variations are numerous. Chardin delighted in the objects themselves and patiently adjusted their arrangement and lighting. Of the simpler designs, the most magisterial are the two versions of *Copper Pot, Pepper Mill, Eggs and Casserole* (Detroit, MI, Inst. A.; Paris, Louvre) and, perhaps a pendant, *Copper Pot, Pestle, Mortar, Bowl and Onions* (Paris, Mus. Cognacq-Jay).

Repetitions exist of a number of Chardin's compositions. The *Ray-fish and Basket of Onions* (version, 1731; Raleigh, NC Mus. A.) is recorded in at least six versions. It must have seemed worth taking full commercial advantage of a composition that had proved popular. It is not known whether he employed a copyist or whether designs were pirated. However, Chardin did paint autograph replicas of his own works, sometimes with slight changes, sometimes so close in finish that it is difficult to say which is the prime version.

As well as still-lives with kitchen utensils, Chardin also painted still-lives with game in the 1720s and 1730s (e.g. *Hare and Copper Cauldron*, c. 1726-8; Stockholm, Nmus. and *Hare and Partridge*, c. 1728; Paris, Mus. Chasse & Nat.). In these he perfected his painterly rendering of the fur of rabbits and hares and the feathers of duck and game birds. A masterpiece of this type is *Two Rabbits, Partridge and Game Bag* (1731; Dublin, N.G.), in which soft forms rest on a thick stone ledge and create a symmetrical pyramidal group. The lighting is diffused and the colour a delicate range of greys, beiges and browns.



Jean-Siméon Chardin: Hare and Partridge, oil on canvas, c. 1728 (Paris, Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature); photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

Chardin's small-scale still-lives are brought together in his two large *morceaux de réception* for the Académie, where, unusually, he was approved (*agréé*) and received (*reçu*) on the same day, 25 Sept 1728. *The Buffet* (Paris, Louvre) is a large (h. 1.94 m) still-life of fruits, wine and foodstuffs on a sideboard, recalling the work of Dutch and Flemish 17th-century painters but also, with its sniffing dog and playful parrot, evoking the still-lives with animals by François Desportes and Nicolas de Largillière. Compared with this work, the other *morceau de réception*, the *Ray-fish* (Paris, Louvre), is stark and even shocking, with shadowy chiaroscuro and spare, dragged and scumbled paint, depicting a gutted ray-fish laid on a stone shelf and surrounded by kitchen utensils, oysters, fish and a bristling cat. These large works were probably painted with the Académie in mind. In June 1728 the *Ray-fish* had been exhibited at the Exposition de la Jeunesse, an annual open-air show outside the control of the Académie, held in the Place Dauphine, Paris. This exhibition brought Chardin to public notice (his painting is mentioned in the *Mercure de France*), and shortly afterwards he submitted works to the Académie, encouraged to do so by Largillière. Chardin married in 1731 and in 1730-31 received his first important commissions for decorative still-lives for the Paris house of Konrad von Rothenburg: *Attributes of the Arts* and *Attributes of Exploration* (Paris, Mus. Jacquemart-André).

2. Figure subjects, early 1730s–1751.

With his new standing as an Academician, Chardin turned to figure painting. Still-life painting had commercial limitations, and the Académie considered it the lowest subject in the academic hierarchy of genres. The portrait painter Joseph Aved may also have had some part in encouraging Chardin to turn to figure painting, by gently mocking his humble art. Chardin's figure paintings answered Aved's criticisms while appealing to a larger public than academic history painting. They responded to the contemporary vogue for small cabinet pictures by 17th-century Dutch and Flemish artists such as David Teniers the younger, Willem Kalf and Godfried Schalcken; some of Chardin's own patrons, including Antoine de La Rocque, had important collections of 17th-century paintings. However, Chardin's domestic interiors are always serious-minded and contemplative, never mocking or ribald like those of some of his northern predecessors (see fig.).



Jean-Siméon Chardin: *Back from the Market*, oil on canvas, 470×375 mm, 1739 (Paris, Musée du Louvre); photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

Chardin explored several types of figure painting in the early 1730s: the large *Woman Sealing a Letter* (1733; Berlin, Schloss Charlottenburg) recalls the conversation-pieces of his contemporary Jean-François de Troy, the portrait of his friend Aved as *The Alchemist* (1734; Paris, Louvre) is done in the manner of Rembrandt's ideal figures, and small kitchen interiors with maids and servants seem a natural extension of his still-lives with kitchen utensils. Examples of these are the *Washer-woman* and its pendant, a *Woman Drawing Water from a Cistern* (both 1733; Stockholm, Nmus.). In their dark wash-house and kitchen interiors, the two pensive women go about their tasks, accompanied by secondary figures and surrounded by some of the artefacts Chardin had already used in the still-lives. The careful application of solid, textured paint, the selective chiaroscuro, the monumental forms and the gentle, deliberate movements of the servants confer dignity on their lowly occupations.

Chardin's genre scenes were very popular at the Salon, which was established on a more regular basis from 1737. The very wealthy soon became clients for Chardin's Salon paintings—among these were Queen Louise-Ulrica of Sweden and Prince Joseph-Wenceslas-Lorenz of Liechtenstein—but the public could buy engravings of them at much cheaper prices. Some of Chardin's engravers were among the finest of the age, such as the father of Chardin's biographer, Charles-Nicholas Cochin (i), Bernard Lépicié and Louis Surugue, but it was also possible to buy cheaper, cruder versions and even forgeries in Chardin's manner. Often the engravings had a few verses appended, making a moralizing comment on the image. These have been adduced by modern critics as evidence that Chardin's genre scenes embody the bourgeois social ideals of the mid-18th century. Exactly how far these verses translate Chardin's own intentions and meanings remains conjectural. Sometimes they seem appropriate, sometimes not; sometimes they are merely vulgar or salacious. These engravings do, however, attest to Chardin's wide audience; there can be little doubt that he adapted his subject-matter to suit public taste.

Chardin's first major success at the Salon was in 1739 with *The Governess* (1738; Ottawa, N.G.). In it, he raised his subject-matter from the kitchen to the salon and gave it narrative interest by introducing a dialogue. A governess is admonishing a shamefaced boy, who is about to go to his lessons. The playing cards and shuttlecock at his feet—the possible subject of the admonition—contrast with the loaded sewing-box next to the governess, which indicates the worthiness of work. However, this moral seems to take second place to the delicacy with which Chardin presented this minor domestic drama through gaze and gesture. Appropriately, his handling of paint is more refined and his colours delicate and powdery.

Chardin further explored the narrative possibilities of two or three figures in *Saying Grace* (c. 1740; Paris, Louvre), where a small child stumbles over the prayer before being served by his attentive mother, and the *Morning Toilet* (1741; Stockholm, Nmus.), where a coquettish child standing before a mirror is prepared for church by her doting mother. As in *Soap Bubbles* (c. 1733; versions Washington, DC, N.G.A. and New York, Met., see fig.), which Mariette believed to be the first figure painting made by Chardin in response to Aved's criticism of his subject-matter, the *Morning Toilet* combines genre elements with intimations of the transitoriness of human life, derived by Chardin from the *vanitas* pictures of 16th- and 17th-century northern European art. Several works by Chardin showing children playing at cards or board games probably have dual messages: that such idle activities waste time and that life itself is as precarious as a game. Among the masterpieces of his moralizing images of childhood are the *House of Cards* (c. 1735; Washington, DC, N.G.A.) and its pendant, *Girl with a Shuttlecock* (1737; priv. col., see Rosenberg, *L'opera*, 1983, pl. xxii). The former, depicting a theme Chardin treated several times (version, London, N.G.), shows a boy building a house of cards; in the

foreground is a prominent knave of hearts, representing the precarious nature of love. In the pendant, the shuttlecock and battledore held by the girl are emblems of the uncertainties of life and love, for the shuttlecock can be easily and unpredictably carried astray by the wind. Chardin's contemporaries did not comment much on these covert meanings, and they perhaps took them for granted. They were more engaged by his perceptive depictions of the psychology of an encounter or by the sheer skill and beauty of his craftsmanship.



Jean-Siméon Chardin: *Saying Grace*, oil on canvas, 495×410 mm, 1740 (Paris, Musée du Louvre); photo credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY

Chardin painted fewer figure subjects in the 1740s, but he continued to make and exhibit replicas of earlier designs into the 1760s. His last figure painting was the *Bird-song Organ* (1751; version, Paris, Louvre; autograph replica, New York, Frick), the refinement of which is typical of his late domestic interiors. A genteel lady in an elegant salon turns the handle of a bird-song organ, which encourages her caged canary to sing. Chardin's paint is much smoother than in his genre scenes of the 1730s, and

the tone and lighting more silvery and delicate. Some critics in the early 1750s regretted Chardin's more refined drawing and the less grainy texture of his paint, as compared with earlier works. The same tendencies towards greater refinement can be seen in his still-life painting from the late 1740s onwards.

3. Late still-lives, late 1740s–1766.

Chardin had virtually abandoned still-life between 1736 and 1747 in order to concentrate on the human figure; after 1751 he gave up figure painting and returned to still-life. He may have abandoned genre painting in the face of the new Neo-classical aesthetic promoted by the Académie in the early 1750s, or because his own works were more critically received or because his inventiveness in the genre was exhausted. Chardin returned to still-life with renewed energy, producing soft and atmospheric paintings of dead game, such as *Two Rabbits, Pheasant and Orange* (Washington, DC, N.G.A.), and a rare and delicate *Vase of Flowers* (Edinburgh, N.G.), both from the 1750s. He returned to the theme of the kitchen in this decade, of which the most complex example is the *Kitchen Table* (1755; Boston, MA, Mus. F.A.); in its earthy, coppery and creamy colours it recalls the works of the 1720s and 1730s, but its refined brushwork and subtly modulated chiaroscuro make it analogous to works such as the *Bird-song Organ*. One of the masterpieces among Chardin's later still-lives is the *Jar of Olives* (1760; Paris, Louvre), exhibited at the Salon of 1763. Some details from this large-scale composition—such as the dish of fruit—could form small, independent still-lives. It is more refined than the still-lives of the 1720s and 1730s, not only in handling and lighting but also in the quality of the items depicted, for example the fine wine-glasses or the Meissen soup tureen. Chardin's first wife had died in 1735, and in 1744 he had married a wealthy widow: the improved quality of objects in his later paintings may reflect his improved circumstances, as inventories reveal that he owned most of the objects in his pictures.

Given the character of his art, there were few opportunities for Chardin to receive official commissions. Nevertheless, a large programme of decoration was being undertaken at the royal château of Choisy in 1764, mainly involving history painters; Chardin received a commission for three overdoor paintings, of which two survive: the *Attributes of the Arts* and the *Attributes of Music* (both Paris, Louvre). These show his ability to create decorative still-lives on a large scale and were well received; so much so that in 1766 he was given another royal commission, to paint overdoors for the Château de Bellevue: the *Attributes of Military Music* and the *Attributes of Civilian Music* (priv. col., see Rosenberg, *L'opera*, 1983, pls xlv and xlvi). Chardin owed these commissions to the intervention of his friend Cochin, by then secretary of the Académie and adviser to the Marquis de Marigny, Directeur des Bâtiments du Roi. In these works Chardin gave still-life something of the grandeur of conception of the history paintings they were to accompany; they were exceptional in his output, which consisted mostly of small still-lives for private collectors.

4. Pastel drawings and painting technique.

In the 1770s Chardin began to have trouble with his eyes, perhaps aggravated by the fumes of oil paint. This may have been the reason he began to work in pastel, producing portraits (e.g. *Self-portrait with Spectacles*, 1771; Paris, Louvre), ideal heads and a moving copy after Rembrandt, the *Head of an Old Woman* (1776; Besançon, Mus. B.-A. & Archéol.). In this medium Chardin was able to retain a bold and painterly touch, as well as some of the impasto and texture of oils. A pair of portraits of himself

and his wife (both 1775; Paris, Louvre) shows the artist looking directly out from under his eyeshade at the spectator, while the image of his wife is equally forthright, even austere. The sureness of the drawing in these works—where form is built up from strokes of the pastel rather than defined by outline—shows Chardin to have been one of the great draughtsmen of the 18th century in this medium. With a few early exceptions, Chardin did not normally make drawings. Virtually nothing is known of his painting technique, for he was secretive about this, but he presumably painted his still-lives directly from the objects, slowly and carefully building up a dense impasto. Oil sketches of some of his genre scenes exist in private collections; they show that he worked out the figure designs first in broad areas to establish the pattern of light and shade.



Jean-Siméon Chardin: Self-portrait with Spectacles, pastel on grey-blue paper, 459×375mm, 1771 (Paris, Musée du Louvre); Photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

5. Character and posthumous reputation.

Once accepted into the Académie as a painter of 'animals and fruits' in 1728, Chardin remained one of its most loyal members, assiduously attending its meetings and being treasurer from 1755 to 1774. Although critical of the Académie's slow and laborious teaching methods, he believed in the institution, the standing it gave its members and the opportunities it gave them to exhibit at the Salon. From 1755 he was also in charge of hanging the pictures at the Salon. Chardin had a reputation for probity, and this was reflected in his careful husbandry of the Académie's finances during his long period as treasurer. After the liberal and amiable rule of his friends Cochin and Marigny, however, Chardin did not fare well under Jean-Baptiste-Marie Pierre, Director of the Académie from 1770, and the new Directeur des Bâtiments, Charles-Claude de La Billarderie, Comte d'Angiviller. While he never ceased to have patrons and admirers in his lifetime, his art seemed out of date in the Neo-classical climate of the 1770s, and he was quickly forgotten after his death in 1779.

Chardin's only child to survive infancy, Jean-Pierre Chardin (b 1731), won the Prix de Rome for painting at the Académie in 1754. There are various documentary references to Jean-Pierre during the 1750s and 1760s, including a legal wrangle with his father in 1757 over his mother's inheritance. Nothing is known of his art; he died in Italy in the second half of the 1760s.

In the 1840s Chardin's reputation was revived by Realist critics such as Jules Champfleury and Théophile Thoré. Thoré wrote eloquently about Chardin, both as a realist in the manner of the Dutch 17th-century painters and as a brave individualist who refused to paint in the elegant Rococo decorative style of his day. Chardin's reputation received official sanction in the 1850s and 1860s, when the Louvre made its first acquisitions of his works; that museum has the greatest collection of them.

In 1863 and 1864 Edmond and Jules de Goncourt published scholarly articles on Chardin, which formed the basis of their chapter on him in the influential *L'Art du XVIIIe siècle* (1880–84); following these, admiration for Chardin did not waver. His painting satisfied those who preferred an art based on the observation of nature, as well as those who sought formal perfection. Historians in the 20th century explored the emblematic and moralizing meanings embodied in his works, and the exhibition held in Paris, Boston and Cleveland in 1979 did much to clarify issues of chronology.

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See also

Exhibition, §2: c 1700–c 1850

Paris, §III, 3: Art life and organization, 1715–88

Paris, §III, 3: Art life and organization, 1715–88

Paris, §VI, 1(i): Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture: Origins and development

Paris, §VI, 1(iii): Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture: Exhibitions

Pastel, §2: History and use

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