

Making The Quotidian Sacred

The Prado's Chardin show
steals a writer's heart

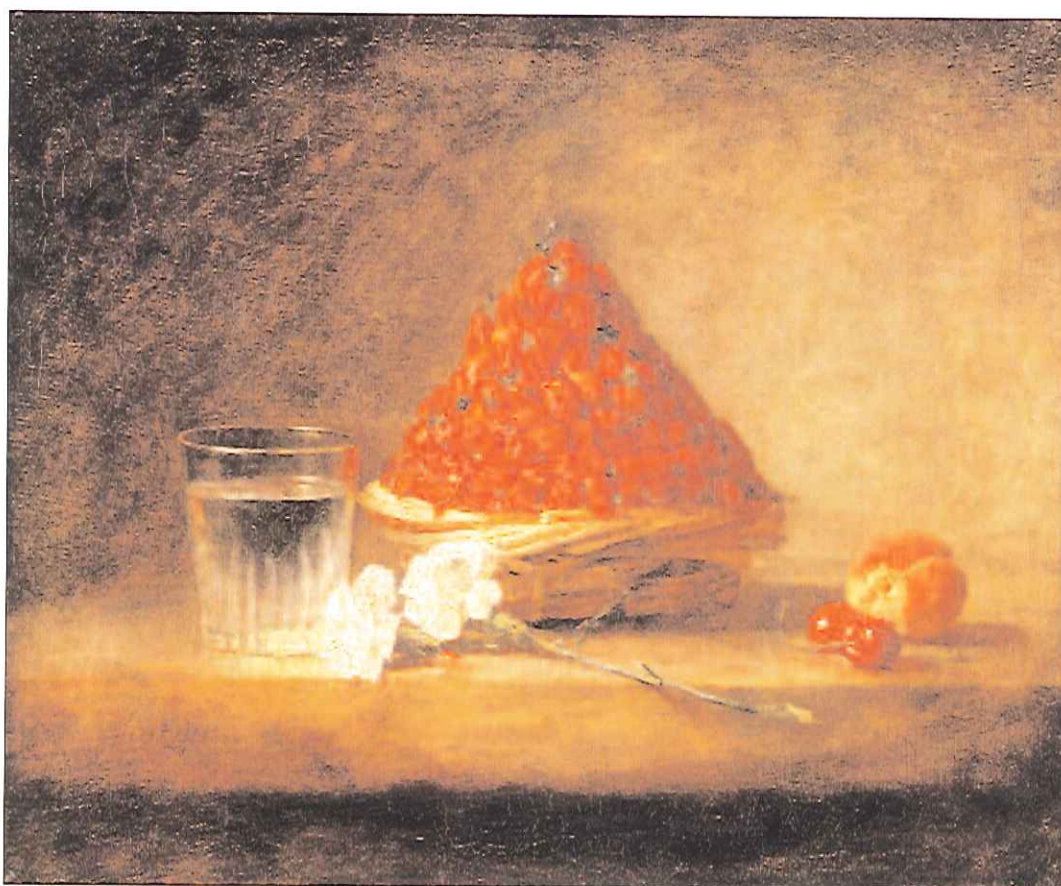
BY NICHOLAS FOX WEBER



I never forget that I like Chardin's work, but I sometimes forget that it is without equal—in its serenity as well as its intelligence, in its sublime textures, in its evocation of light as of earthly materials. The presentation of 67 paintings at the Prado in Madrid was a perfect *aide-mémoire*. There could have been no better reminder of why Proust considered the artist the quintessential teacher that everyday objects as rudimentary as a glass of water or a cup of tea are, in part because they are “beautiful to paint,” equally “beautiful to behold.” Chardin offers incomparable testimony to the marvels of art, of seeing, and of the existence of everything from stone slabs to rabbit pelts to almonds to copper bowls. He makes the quotidian sacred.

Major exhibitions devoted to Chardin have been few and far between. The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston held one in 1979; the Chardin show at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2000 was the last in the United States. I was curious to see how the quintessence of French reticence and elegant quietude would fare in the treasure house of dramatic, mystery-filled Spanish painting.

The exhibition at the Prado, entitled simply “Chardin (1699–1779),” was not as large as those in Boston or New York, but its smaller scale may be one of the reasons it was so stunning. First of all, my question as to how Chardin would fit into the bastion of Spanish art was answered. What's great and totally honest always does well in the company of other work that is great and totally honest, and the showplace of Velázquez



and Goya—not to mention Rogier van der Weyden's breathtaking *Deposition*—made a perfect setting for Chardin. The Prado is a rare example of intelligent art installation—enough space, no light-reflecting glass in front of masterpieces, an atmosphere of quiet seriousness. While wandering its galleries, one feels that the aims of the artists, the requisites of capability combined with genius, are uniform, for all the differences of epochs and of personalities.

The selection of Chardin's works could not have been better. Within minutes, I was reminded that Chardin is the artist who always makes me feel right about everything in life. The balance of Chardin's canvases, the wisdom of his vision, penetrates one's own being. This art enchants its viewers with so much that is miraculous: the presence of air, light, food, the most mundane objects that have weight and function as intended. It is all there in Chardin's work, and the way the masterpieces were assembled in Madrid, reuniting pictures that originated at the same time in the artist's studio, was an incredible treat.

OPPOSITE *Soap Bubbles*, 1733–34, one of three extant versions of the painting, comes from the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.
ABOVE *Basket of Wild Strawberries*, ca. 1760, a vision of plenitude.

There were, for example, all three extant versions of *Soap Bubbles*. The three canvases, which at first view appear identical, were painted in about 1734. Today one of them belongs to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, another to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and the third to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Each is a vision of a handsome, ruddy-skinned young man leaning on a stone ledge and blowing, through the thinnest tube, a large, clean soap bubble. A child next to him looks in rapt attention. The scene is alive, and the bubble—having just reached its bulbous form yet about to pop—becomes an analogy to the passing of time.

Seeing the three versions together enabled us to observe the slight changes Chardin made in tonality as well as in the positions of the man's fingers and the way he purses his lips while blowing. To my eye, the Los Angeles picture has been overcleaned, made so snappy and bright that it appears to have had a visit with a Beverly Hills beautician, while the version from the Met is the one that seems most likely to be as it was when it left the artist's studio.



At the Prado there were also two nearly identical versions of a young draftsman whittling his pencil and a pair of paintings of a young kitchen assistant cleaning a water jug. Seeing them together made one feel what happens with subtle shifts of vantage point: each image of the young man in his white uniform, cleaning a large earthenware jug with a wooden device, flanked by a large wooden bucket and a red ceramic water carrier, is a masterpiece, and remarking that in one the luminosity is stepped up and the focus sharpened does not make us choose it as superior to the other, but rather makes us aware how subtle and determined and diligent a painter Chardin was. The three depictions of a schoolmistress and her pupil made for equally rich viewing. Each is tender; each is a marvelous composition of mass and void, a superb juxtaposition of fabric and flesh and wood; yet they give quite different impressions, just as three recordings of the same Beethoven trio do, which is not to say one is higher quality than the other, only that they are subtly different.

***The Young Schoolmistress*, ca. 1735–36. The three versions on view in Madrid (this one comes from the National Gallery, London) gave subtly different impressions.**

Even more than these groupings, which caused the viewer to exercise the powers of observation and to look for points of contrast as well as similarity, what stole the heart in Madrid were the still lifes. Beyond the old friends often on view at the Louvre, there were rarely seen jewels from private collections, like the canvas, painted in 1760, showing a straw basket in which a pyramid of wild strawberries has been carefully heaped and, next to it, a shimmering glass of water, two long-stemmed white carnations, two cherries, and a peach. The sense of bounty is unbeatable. The berries are a remarkable ripe red; the interstices between them have been painted so that they are like the intervals between the notes of a Mozart piano sonata.

Commenting on the Paris Salon of 1767, the great art critic Denis Diderot wrote, provocatively, “I’m well aware that Chardin’s models, the inanimate objects he depicts, neither move nor change color or form, and that, other things being equal, a portrait by La Tour has greater merit than a still life



by Chardin." Clearly Diderot was leading somewhere when he wrote that. He wanted viewers to recognize that what appears limited in Chardin is in fact the opposite. He continued: "But a flap of time's wings will leave nothing to support the former's reputation. . . . La Tour will be discussed, but Chardin will be seen."

In fact, today there are far fewer people talking about Maurice Quentin de La Tour and his pleasant pastel portraits of noblemen in full regalia and Madame de Pompadour in splendid gowns than about the humble painter of raw eggs and cucumbers. Diderot attributed some of this to Chardin's unusual ways—saying that Chardin "uses his thumb as much as his brush" and that no one ever got to see Chardin at work. "However that might be," Diderot concluded, "his compositions appeal equally to the uninitiated and to the connoisseur. They have a coloristic vigor, an overall harmony, a liveliness and truth, beautiful massing, a handling so magical as to induce despair, and an energy in their disposition and

The Boy with the Spinning Top, 1738. In Chardin's paintings, wrote the great critic Diderot, there is "no confusion, no artificiality, no distracting flickering effects:"

arrangement that's incredible. Back away, move in close, the illusion is the same, there's no confusion, no artificiality, no distracting flickering effects; the eye is always diverted, because calm and serenity are everywhere. One stops in front of a Chardin as if by instinct, just as a traveler exhausted by his trip tends to sit down, almost without noticing it, in a place that's green, quiet, well-watered, shady, and cool."

The show in Madrid, which was previously at the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara, Italy, was organized by Pierre Rosenberg, the distinguished art historian who was formerly director of the Louvre. This is one of Rosenberg's many splendid contributions to our world. How marvelous it was to see all of Diderot's exuberance, the courage requisite to such an expression of ecstasy, more than justified. ■

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