STILL LIFES AND SUBLIME VISTAS

ON THE NON-MODERNITY OF DIDEROT’S  
APPROACH TO GENRE PAINTING

The most oft-cited and beloved entries in Diderots *Salons* must be  
those that deal with Chardin and Verner, two painters working in the tra-  
ditionally less prestigious genres of still life and landscape. The passages are  
familiar ones: Diderot sticking an imaginary knife in the painted pâté of  
Chardins *Le Bocal d’olives* (in the 1763 *Salon*; VS, IV: 265), or fantasizing  
a walk around Verner’s landscapes (1767; VS, IV: 594-635[[1]](#footnote-1))- And many  
like to locate in them something particularly *modern*—compared, that is,  
to Diderot’s effulgent praise for a painter like Greuze, whose middlebrow  
canvases drip with a now-dated hymn to Virtue: “Few art historians have  
concealed their discomfort with [Greuze’s] paintings themselves or their  
disapproval of the audience who went into raptures before them,” writes  
Michael Fried.[[2]](#footnote-2) Notwithstanding Fried’s efforts to rehabilitate Diderot’s  
taste for edifyingly domestic themes, that taste can still leave critics won-  
dering, in the words of Christopher Braider, “what someone otherwise  
so shrewd and forward-looking could possibly have seen in some of the  
paintings he championed.”[[3]](#footnote-3) How much safer, then, those passages on the  
non-moralistic Verner and Chardin, whose paintings provoke in Diderot  
more properly “aesthetic” musings on the very ontology of painting. “Ontouche ici,” writes Stéphane Lojkine, “à ce qui, des *Salons*, paraît le plus  
contemporain de notre expérience de l’art.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

A good deal of the difficulty, here, is Diderot’s relation to the traditional  
“hierarchy of the genres”—the indexing of artistic worth to the perceived  
importance of the subject matter depicted. In this view, whose roots reach  
back to Antiquity, works with living subjects are superior to “still life”; and  
similarly, works featuring historical or mythological heroes outclass those  
depicting prosaic nobodies such as tavern-goers. By Diderots “neoclassi-  
cal” time, rather than falling into decay, the hierarchy of the genres may  
have been actually increasing its hegemony. Classifications became more  
dogmatic,[[5]](#footnote-5) scorn for the “lower” genres more shrill.[[6]](#footnote-6) Given this context,  
Diderot’s art-historical writings can well appear revolutionary—as when,  
in his *Essai sur la peinture,* supplement to the 1765 *Salon,* he drastically  
simplifies the hierarchy by promoting scenes of contemporary bourgeois  
life, and even Verner’s landscapes, to the ranks of history painting (506).  
And Diderot might be said to go further still in his attention to Chardin,  
which for Harriet Stone—and many others—“upends” the old generic  
hierarchy and the royalist ideology that went along with it, thereby clear-  
ing a path from the Dutch Golden Age to modern theories of art in which  
“the unremarkable becomes remarkable.”[[7]](#footnote-7) If other scholars have not failed  
to point out that plenty of passages in the *Salons* betray Diderot’s ongoing  
devotion to the hierarchy of the genres,[[8]](#footnote-8) for the critics I will be engaging,  
those passages are misleading: the essential Diderot is elsewhere, in what  
Régis Michel calls the “aspiration confuse à la modernité” visible in the  
Chardin and Verner entries.[[9]](#footnote-9) Why not, then, follow Braider in positingtwo Diderots, one characterized by a “residual conservatism” and a second  
harboring “a decidedly non-traditional commitment to lower forms”?[[10]](#footnote-10)Diderot, it would seem, may not know which of his tastes have a future,  
diluting as he does his Modernity in too many parts Tradition. But are  
even his passages on the lower genres of landscape and still life *modern* in  
the first place? My argument is no: Diderot’s immersive theorizations of  
still life and landscape, I will show, are much better understood as a flam-  
boyant late-stage development of an old paradigm rather than the founda-  
tion of a new one.

Let me start by recalling briefly some of the well-known passages.

The opening feint in the 1767 *Salons* presentation of Verner is justifi-  
ably famous. “VERNET. J’avais écrit le nom de cet artiste au haut de ma  
page, et j’allais vous entretenir de ses ouvrages, lorsque je suis parti pour  
une campagne voisine de la mer et renommée par la beauté de ses sites”  
(594). But there was no trip to the seaside: after narrating a tour of six  
such sites taken in the company of a lay priest—punctuated by cries of  
admiration, and dilated by repeated discussions about the proper relation  
between Nature and Art—Diderot reveals to the reader that he has been  
talking about Verner’s canvases all along. “J ai oublié que je vous ai fait un  
conte à présent et que je m’étais supposé devant la nature (et l’illusion était  
bien facile), puis tout à coup je me suis retrouvé de la campagne au Salon”  
(625-26).

Diderot’s extraordinary *conte*, since known as the *promenade Vernet,*would appear to realize for the reader a type of immersion that the critic  
had already explored more than once. Indeed, Diderot’s interest in *entering*paintings—especially but not exclusively landscape paintings—is clear by  
1763. Describing a Loutherbourg, Diderot plays the tour guide by putting  
readers within the depicted space: “En sortant de ce bois, et vous avançant  
vers la droite, voyez ces masses de rochers [...]” (267); “Ah, mon ami, que  
la nature est belle dans ce petit canton! Arrêtons-nous-y” (268). Similarly,  
a Vernet invites us to forget its frame and to react to it as we would react  
to the spectacle of nature itself: “Regardez le *Port de La Rochelle* avec unelunette qui embrasse le champ du tableau, et qui exclut la bordure; et ou-  
bliant tout-à-coup que vous examinez un morceau de peinture, vous vous  
écrierez, comme si vous étiez placé au haut d’une montagne, spectateur de  
la nature même: ‘O le beau point de vue!’” (271). Thus, the *promenade  
Vernet* of 1767 is the endpoint of a multi-year experience with landscapes,  
one that finally leads Diderot in that very *Salon* to an explicit descriptive  
protocol: “C’est une assez bonne méthode pour décrire des tableaux, sur-  
tout champêtres, que d’entrer sur le lieu de la scène par le côté droit ou par  
le côté gauche, et s’avançant sur la bordure d’en bas, de décrire les objets à  
mesure qu’il se présentent. Je suis bien fâché de ne m’en être pas avisé plus  
tôt” (677). Landscape appears to have as phantasmatic ideal the total ab-  
sorption of the viewer into the representation. And Verner’s mastery allows  
him to “produire toutes les illusions possibles” (1763; 237).

If landscape invites the imaginary promenade, Chardin’s still lifes have  
their own effects. Chardin comes up in the first *Salon,* of 1759, where  
Diderot briefly mentions six of his paintings—four still lifes and two with  
human figures engaged in what Fried has taught us to recognize as “absorp-  
tive” activities (drawing, crocheting). Pace Fried, it is the objects, not the  
humans, that call to Diderot: “Vous prendriez les bouteilles par le goulot,  
si vous aviez soif; les pêches éveillent l’appétit et appellent la main” (197).[[11]](#footnote-11)If one *wanders* in Verner’s landscapes, one *touches* Chardin’s still lifes, and  
this haptic dimension carries over to the most famous Chardin entry, the  
1763 discussion of *Le Bocal d’olives* and *La Raie dépouillée. Le Bocal* pre-  
sents objects so convincing that “il n’y a qu’à prendre ces biscuits et les  
manger; cette bigarade, l’ouvrir et la presser, ce verre de vin, et le boire; ces  
fruits, et les peler; ce pâté, et y mettre le couteau” (265). The solicitation  
of the image comes from what would seem to be its perfect transparen-  
cy or equivalency: “C’est que ce vase de porcelaine est de la porcelaine”  
(264). Similarly, looking at the *Raie dépouillée* is like, well, looking at a *raie  
dépouillée,* an eviscerated skate: “c’est la chair même du poisson. C’est lapeau. C’est son sang” (265). Six years later, Chardin is still as perfectly and  
tautologically transparent: “Qu’est-ce que cette perdrix? Ne le voyez-vous  
pas? C’est une perdrix. Et celle-là? C’en est une encore” (844).

No doubt it is this peculiar self-evidence that stills the critic himself,  
far less loquacious in his Chardin bulletins than in his evocations of  
Verner (or Greuze). Indeed, what is there to say about perfect limpidity?[[12]](#footnote-12)In his longest entry on Chardin, in the *Salon* of 1765, Diderot imagines  
a descriptive conceit parallel to the one used to describe landscapes: “Je  
ne vous dirai de Chardin qu’un seul mot, et le voici: Choisissez son site,  
disposez sur ce site les objets comme je vous les indique, et soyez sûr que  
vous aurez vu ses tableaux” (346). In the eight descriptions of still lifes  
that follow, Diderot makes this his method, multiplying the imperatives  
addressed to the reader: “Placez dans l’intérieur de la fenêtre un verre plein  
de vin”; “Suspendez par la patte un oiseau de rivière”; “Placez sur un banc  
de pierre un panier d’osier plein de prunes” (347-48). And returning again  
and again in all the Chardin entries is the same praise for the illusory  
qualities of the paintings, for the thingyness of Chardin’s things: “C’est  
toujours la nature et la vérité” (1759; 197); “C’est la nature même” (1765;  
346); “Chardin est si vrai, si vrai” (1765; 345), “d’une vérité à tromper  
les yeux” (1763; 264). Only in one late Chardin does Diderot signal a  
painted statue of Mercury “qui ne fait pas toute l’illusion possible” (1769;  
843), in a phrase that recalls almost verbatim, in negative, his praise for  
Verner. But by 1771—the last *Salon* to contain an entry on Chardin of any  
significance—the painter has again found his groove: “l’illusion y est de la  
plus grande force” (895).

On the face of things, Diderot’s treatments ofVernet and Chardin should  
appear old-school—specifically in their repeated recourse to traditional  
tropes about art as imitation of nature. Indeed, my argument will be that  
notwithstanding the winningness of Diderot’s prose, his treatments really  
are, at bottom, traditional. But I have to argue the obvious because a long  
line of critics have repeatedly detected here something else, something in  
fact subversive of inherited commonplaces. It is not every time the same  
something, but it is always enough to make Diderot properly or at least  
presciently modern.

One tack consists of saying that Diderot *evolves*, which is to say leaves  
behind the classical premises that are his starting point. Perhaps the best  
example of this reading is Norman Brysons chapter in his 1983 book  
*Word and Imaged* Bryson’s general argument is “Saussurian”: there are  
proper and improper ways of understanding how signs function, with the  
latter taking them for transparent windows on the world and the former  
acknowledging the material presence of the signifier. And the unfolding  
*Salons* track Diderots semiotic education: at first “written from within the  
configuration of transparency,” around 1765 the *Salons* start to change  
as Diderot takes increasing interest in “the technical side of painting.”[[13]](#footnote-13) [[14]](#footnote-14)Bryson sets this transition up as a shift from Verner to Chardin. The  
formers landscapes—and those of Loutherbourg as well—score very  
high for “hallucinability”; they are what Bryson calls *hieroglyphic* signs,  
which promise “sensory presence and plenitude.”[[15]](#footnote-15) But Chardin poses a  
“threat” to “the hieroglyphic system” by foregrounding “the materiality of  
painting” and the labor of the painter.[[16]](#footnote-16) Diderots first instinct is to treat  
Chardin as if he were Verner by insisting that his painted objects are “*hors  
de [la] toile*—off the canvas, existing in an imaginary three-dimensional  
space behind the signifying plane.”[[17]](#footnote-17) While this appreciation of Chardin  
as “the master of trompe 1’oeil” is genuinely felt on Diderots part, at the  
same time it is a “terrible distortion” and “misunderstanding” of Chardin,  
arrived at by “repressing part of [the critics] visual experience.”[[18]](#footnote-18) That  
experience, Bryson claims, is the experience of the signifier, which is to say  
the canvas, the pigment, the work of the brush.

Reading the *Salons* as “critical narrative,” Daniel Brewer has advanced a  
similarly evolutionary argument.[[19]](#footnote-19) For Brewer, the descriptive conceit that  
lies at the heart of the *Salons*—that is, the conceit that Diderot can describepaintings for the far-flung readers of the *Correspondance littéraire*—goes  
hand in hand with the mimetic theory of painting that Diderot initially  
embraces. Diderot, however, comes to realize that his descriptive abilities  
are limited: only seeing Verner's canvases will do. As the ideal of *utpicture  
poesis* crumbles, Diderot “slowly disengages himself” from “the ancient view  
of pictorial representation as the artful double of an absent model.”[[20]](#footnote-20) This  
is why “simple delight in mimetic illusion becomes harder to come by in  
the course of the *Salons*,” and why Chardins star starts to dim: “eventually  
Diderot wearies of the very predictability of a Chardin still life,” writes  
Brewer, and soon his paintings produce only “boredom.”[[21]](#footnote-21) In place of the  
mimetic topoi he discards, Diderot elaborates a model of artistic reception  
that foregrounds the libidinal investment and “phantasmic projection” of  
the viewer, thereby undoing the ideology of classicism he started with.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Thus, for Bryson and Brewer, the *Salon* passages that display Diderot’s  
mimetic enthrallment before the paintings of Verner and Chardin are  
misleading: at bottom, Diderot works to arrive at very different—much  
less “naïve,” no doubt—understandings of the artwork. Yet even on an  
empirical level, the chronology of the *Salons* does not support any idea  
of an evolution. Bryson detects a change in 1765, but choosing this year  
as a pivot works against his from-Vernet-to-Chardin argument: the un-  
deniably “hallucinatory” *promenade Vernet* dates of course from 1767,  
while attention to Chardins celebrated *faire*—“un faire rude et comme  
heurté” (218) that becomes illusion-producing only when viewed from  
afar—is visible three *Salons* earlier, in 1761. To say that the *Salons* “mov[e]  
to the banishing of illusion through attention to technics”[[23]](#footnote-23) by 1769 is  
doubly wrong: first, because the attention to technics is present from early  
on; second, because many of the passages praising Chardin’s illusionism  
come from the later *Salons.* “Il n’y a rien en lui qui sente la palette,” writes  
Diderot in 1769, just before dismissing the detail that “ne fait pas toute  
l’illusion possible” (843) and telling us that Chardin’s partridge is par-  
tridge (844). Similarly, Brewer’s remark that “simple delight in mimetic  
illusion” diminishes over time is backed up by no demonstration; and hiscontention that Diderot becomes “bored” with Chardin’s illusionistic can-  
vases is well-nigh inexplicable in the face of the later entries themselves.

Inexplicable—but at the same time easily comprehensible in the con-  
text of a common critical determination to spy modernity emerging out  
from under Diderots retrograde illusionist discourse. Brysons version of  
modernity is the most resonant. For in claiming that Chardin unseats  
Verner through his ability to make the critic “aware of the sheet of pig-  
ment worked by the brush,” Bryson is not only giving us a semiotical-  
ly aware, proto-Saussurian Diderot. More crucially, he is also giving us  
a proto-Greenbergian Diderot: the lesson must be that the vocation of  
the painter is to meditate on the specificity of the medium, and thus that  
(modern) paintings destiny is the exploration of paint and the quadrilat-  
eral surface of the canvas. This explains why Bryson finishes his analysis  
with Diderot’s attention to the *harmony* of Chardins paintings, an atten-  
tion he claims is distinct from the *philosophé*s celebration of the painters  
*trompe-l’oeil* magic. For harmony is a “formal” matter involving the “inter-  
nal relations” of the canvas—“a purely painterly reorganization, occurring  
exclusively on the picture-plane.”[[24]](#footnote-24) “Purely painterly”: the Greenbergian  
idiom is clear if unavowed, and it is fully compatible with Brysons Saussu-  
rian reference to “the plane of signifiers.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

It is certainly true that Diderot is aware of brushstrokes and often  
speaks of harmony. Doubtful, though, is the proposition that his attention  
to the canvas of a Chardin signals Diderot’s break with a classical paradigm  
and foundation of the Modernist lineage. Bryson concedes that harmony  
in Diderots usage can serve the cause of traditional mimetic theory: “In  
one sense it refers to the harmony of light that is already present in nature,  
to those elusive effects of radiation and reflection which are the province  
of the realist and the hyper-realist painter.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Bryson is probably thinking  
of passages such as the 1765 entry, where *harmonie* is yoked together with  
“l imitation de la nature” and “la science de la couleur” in the production  
of the simulacrum: “Comme Fair circule autour de ces objets! La lumière  
du soleil ne sauve pas mieux les disparates des êtres qu’elle éclaire” (345).We do indeed seem far, in such passages, from “a new, purely aesthetic  
harmony that is introduced into nature from the outside.”[[27]](#footnote-27) But where are  
we to find the harmony of the more purely—“purely,” again—aesthetic  
sort? Bryson quotes from one sentence from 1769,[[28]](#footnote-28) [[29]](#footnote-29) occurring just after  
the one previously cited about Chardin not smelling of the palette: “C’est  
une harmonie au-delà de laquelle on ne songe pas à désirer; elle serpente  
imperceptiblement dans sa composition, toute sous chaque partie de  
l’étendue de sa toile” (843). It’s true that here, *harmonie* does appear to  
apply to the painting itself, rather than the space represented. But it is also  
true that the sentence hardly amounts to an explicit theory, and comes  
drowned in any case in standard-issue classical mimetic discourse. “Tous  
voient la nature, mais Chardin la voit bien et s’épuise à la rendre comme  
il la voit,” begins the description of *Les Attributs des arts* in which the  
sentence on harmony occurs (842); the sentence is immediately followed  
by the criticism of Chardin’s treatment of the Mercury sculpture, the  
one that “ne fait pas toute l’illusion possible”; and describing the next  
canvas, Diderot returns to painterly harmony as the reproduction of a  
pre-existing natural harmony: “Il est ici également harmonieux, c’est la  
même entente des reflets, la même vérité des effets” (843). So the flaw  
lies not only with Bryson’s view of Diderot’s purported progress, which  
would consist in moving from a love of Verner ’s hallucinatory landscapes  
and Chardin’s *trompe-l’oeil* magic to a proper understanding of Chardin  
as “master of *harmonie."13* The deeper problem is that the *Salons* do  
not contain two distinct Chardins: it is only by selective quotation and  
teleological thinking that Diderot’s remarks on harmony can possibly be  
trumpeted as a discovery (or even just intuition) of the modern autonomy  
of the picture-plane.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Harmony aside, however, might Diderot’s undeniable attention  
to Chardin’s technique presage a modernist attention to the medium?  
Bryson gives us little sustained close reading, but the passages in whichDiderot tries to reckon with Chardin’s *faire* are indeed some of the most  
interesting. Both at the beginning of the *Salons* and toward the end,  
Chardin is distinguished for the unfinishedness of his canvases. Thus, in  
1761: “Il y a longtemps que ce peintre ne finit plus rien” (218); while in  
1771: “ce morceau est beaucoup moins fini que ses ouvrages précédents”  
(895). And as we’ve seen, the word *heurté* makes a series of appearances—  
in the 1761 mention of th*e faire* “rude et comme heurté”; in the 1763  
reference to Chardins “genre heurté,” composed of “une infinité de chocs  
fiers et vigoureux” (269); and again in 1765 s “manière heurtée” (349).  
On the face of it, this attention-getting style would seem at odds with the  
characterization of Chardin as “simple et vrai” (1763; 237), and indeed  
each time he mentions Chardins *faire,* Diderot works the paradox himself.  
After all, how can what the viewer recognizes up close as “des couches  
épaisses de couleur, appliquées les unes sur les autres” (1763; 265), “un  
tas informe de couleurs grossièrement appliquées” (1763; 268), end up  
producing from afar the sought-after mimetic transparency, whereby  
“l’objet se crée et finit par être celui de la nature” (1765; 349)?

Each reappearance of this paradox in the *Salons* ends up reaffirming  
Diderot’s ideological commitment to the hierarchy of genres. It’s no  
accident that it’s the *virility* of Chardin’s style—“[des] chocs fiers et  
vigoureux”—that “sauve l’ouvrage de la petitesse de forme” (1763; 269)  
and makes for an admiration that by all rights such low subjects should not  
possess. “Ne croyez pas que cette harmonie soit le résultat d’une manière  
faible, douce et léchée,” warns Diderot, anxious that his taste for Chardin’s  
still fifes might come across as too feminine: “Point du tout, c’est partout  
la touche la plus vigoureuse” (1765; 348). It makes sense, then, that the  
*heurté* style is not actually specific to Chardin’s canvases. The phrasing in  
the 1765 entry is significant. “Le faire de Chardin est particulier. *Il a de  
commun avec la manière heurtée* que de près on ne sait ce que c’est” (349,  
my emphasis): Chardin’s style *resembles* the valorized “manière heurtée”  
practiced by masters of other, less debased genres—the landscapes of  
Loutherbourg, the battles of Casanove, the domestic drama of Greuze, and  
then Rubens himself (1763; 265, 269). But even the painter’s reassuring  
*touche vigoureuse* can’t forestall the concession that he is working with  
inanimate matter, and thus aims at a too easy of a target: “il est vrai  
que ces objets ne changent pas sous les yeux de l’artiste” (348). Diderot  
concludes: “Si le sublime du technique n’y était pas, l’idéal de Chardinserait misérable” (342). Talking up Chardin’s technique inevitably leads  
to pondering the worthlessness and facility of painting inanimate objects.

Certainly, it is curious that Chardin can both be praised for his  
illusionism and at the same time give us canvases whos*e faire* marks them as  
unmistakably his own. But is the classical mimetic ideal crumbling under  
the weight of this contradiction? Bryson himself gestures in this direction,  
certainly, and another proponent of the thesis is Marian Hobson. In her  
1982 *The Object of Art,* Hobson points to Diderots entries on Chardin  
as the first sign of a sea-change in the theorized relation of the art object  
and nature. While a contemporary such as La Font de Saint-Yenne could  
certainly recognize Chardins “vérité d’illusion,” “it is with Diderot that  
the problem posed by Chardin precipitates an aesthetic mutation.”[[31]](#footnote-31)Like Bryson’s, Hobson’s Chardin forces Diderot “to recognize that art  
is mediation and not transparency,” thus exposing “the central problem  
in the relation between ‘illusion,’ ‘faire’ and the low genres.”[[32]](#footnote-32) As such,  
Diderot become representative of what will be the paradigm of the second  
half of the century, and which is still that of our own time: “The whole  
notion of the relation between art object and nature is changing from that  
of reference to that of replica.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

What Hobson means by these terms is unfortunately not obvious.[[34]](#footnote-34)Be that as it may the place of Chardin and Diderot is starting to seem  
familiar: it’s the place of a crisis in Western representation. The crisis  
occurs within the mimetic paradigm; its outcome is the invention of the  
aesthetic, which is to say things like the autonomy of the artwork, the  
specificity of the medium, and non-referential, legitimately fictive play.  
Space constraints prevent me from situating these readings of Diderot’s  
*Salons* specifically within a larger set of arguments—within what seems  
very nearly a consensus—about a broader shift from poetics, understood  
as a body of compositional rules for artists, to aesthetics, understood as aphenomenology of the percipient’s experience of the artwork.[[35]](#footnote-35) Instead,  
in the remainder of this article I would like to establish that the above  
interpretations of Diderots novelty inexcusably skirt the profound  
commonalities between his reasoning and longstanding formulations  
regarding mimesis (especially the representation of base subject matter).

As I just pointed out, each time Diderot praises Chardins technique, he  
concedes the worthlessness of the object imitated. Yet similar concessions  
are not necessary in the case of Vernet: in theory, landscape is a lesser genre  
too, but Diderot has no problem arguing for its inclusion within the rubric  
of history painting. Grosso modo this is because Vernet creates not mere  
scenery but *scenes*—scenes of people doing things of sufficient drama.  
Diderot compares his landscapes to Loutherbourg’s, whose technique  
is nearly the equal, he feels, of Verner’s. Unfortunately, Loutherbourg  
introduces into his paintings only shepherds and animals—“toujours  
des pâtres et des animaux,” complains Diderot (1767; 742). Vernet, by  
contrast, “y sème des personnages et des incidents de toute espèce, et ces  
personnages et ces incidents, quoique vrais, ne sont pas la nature commune  
des champs” (742). Vernet might do still better: he could be Poussin, whose  
landscapes tell metaphysical tales of doom that are ultimately productive  
of *crainte* and *pitié*—obviously, the very emotions that characterize  
that highest of the genres, tragedy. Perhaps this is why as laudatory as  
the *promenade Vernet* is, Diderot crowns it with a fantasy marine of his  
own confection. This is the dream supposedly provoked by Verner’s seven  
canvases—a dream full of *terribles, pathétiques*, and *touchantes* scenes that  
make the dreamer shed “des larmes réelles” (631). At its best, landscape—  
and *a fortiori* marines—can rise to the level of good Aristotelian mimesis,  
which is the imitation of people doing important—which is to say life-or-  
death—things.

Still life, however, cannot be elevated in such a manner. The well-  
known passage from the 1765 *Essai sur la peinture* where Diderot opens  
up the privileged category of history painting to the lower genres merits  
recalling. He starts by dividing genre painting into two categories, one of  
nature and one of domestic scenes. In this wide sense, Diderot continues,“Teniers, Wouwerman, Greuze, Chardin, Loutherbourg, Verner même  
sont des peintres de genre” (506). But only two of these six are named as  
examples of Diderots expanded definition of history painting: Greuze and  
Verner, whose paintings “offrent toutes sortes d’incidents et de scènes.”  
Loutherbourg, with his shepherds and animals, fails to make the cut, as  
do the two Dutch painters, and Chardin: the line between animate and  
inanimate, Diderot would seem to concede, is hard and fast. The Salon of  
1765 contains a similar passage that at first couples Vernet and Chardin,  
only to drop the latter. “Chardin et Vernet, mon ami, sont deux grands  
magiciens,” writes Diderot, and then proceeds to compare Vernet—  
but only Vernet—to Jupiter in his ability to “peuple[r] sa toile comme  
on peuple une colonie” and then afflict his humans with “le temps, le  
ciel, la saison, le bonheur, le malheur qui lui plaît” (356). And in this  
sense, Diderots recourse to the new discourse of the sublime, rather than  
being the “modernizing” gesture so often claimed, merely allows him to  
invest landscape with the metaphysical seriousness demanded by the old  
hierarchies. “Si le peintre de ruines ne me ramène pas aux vicissitudes de  
la vie et à la vanité des travaux de l’homme, il n’a fait qu’un amas informe  
de pierres” (1023). Chardin’s genre scenes—even when he works with  
humans—cannot possibly aspire to conjuring such lofty thoughts.

No doubt still life too can be redeemed by metaphysical messaging:  
scholarship on Netherlandish genre painting has long been divided over  
whether its objects invite Christian meditation on the transience of worldly  
pleasure, or whether they are simply set before a leveling, non-judgmental  
gaze that one might qualify as *avant la lettre* aesthetic.[[36]](#footnote-36) Yet Chardin is  
never the occasion for Diderot to brood over life’s vicissitudes; the flesh  
of the famous skate is not the occasion for ashes-to-ashes thoughts on  
the perishability of all flesh.[[37]](#footnote-37) But nor is the “it’s-the-very-thing” mode  
that Diderot does adopt anything like a dispassionate gaze upon the real:  
instead, he is drawn into the commonplaces of early modern discourse onthe arts and their effect. According to such commonplaces, the hierarchy  
of artistic subject matter merely repeats the hierarchy inscribed in nature  
itself. We admire heroes in reality and therefore also in representation,  
whereas the reason we are not deeply affected by pictures of fruit is that  
real fruit is not interesting, and the reason painters should not paint ugly  
objects is that their paintings of them will be, by definition, ugly.

Yet, for some reason, not quite: “Quelle vanité que la peinture, qui attire  
notre admiration par la ressemblance des choses dont on n’admire point les  
originaux.”[[38]](#footnote-38) [[39]](#footnote-39) While not following Pascal in taking the paradox as proof of  
mankind’s perversity, theorists routinely allowed, as did he, for some sort of  
pleasure in representation of the low. “We enjoy looking at the most exact  
portrayals of things we do not like to see in real life, the lowest animals, for  
instance, or corpses,” observed Aristotle in the *Poetics, '''* and while he didn’t  
explain the source of the pleasure, his seventeenth-century followers did. It’s  
a pleasurable reaction to human handiwork itself, one that implies that the  
illusion is always transparent. Boileau’s formulation is the most famous: “Il  
n est point de serpent ni de monstre odieux / Qui par l’art imité ne puisse  
plaire aux yeux / D’un pinceau délicat l’artifice agréable / Du plus affreux  
objet fait un objet aimable.”[[40]](#footnote-40) But it is far from the only one. Lamy, to cite  
but one other example: “Ce qui plait n’est pas la vue d’un serpent qui est  
peint; [...] mais ce qui fait plaisir c’est l’esprit du peintre qui a su atteindre la  
fin de son art.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Surely, then, Jacqueline Lichtenstein is right not only to say  
that eighteenth-century theorists “s’efforcent de montrer [...] que l’illusion  
picturale [...] n’est pas une véritable illusion,” but also that when they do so,  
they are prolonging a line of thought present since the Renaissance.[[42]](#footnote-42)

It is in this context that we should reread the passage on *La Raie  
dépouillée.*

L’objet est dégoûtant; mais c’est la chair même du poisson. C’est la peau.  
C’est son sang; l’aspect même de la chose n’affecterait pas autrement.  
M. Pierre, regardez bien ce morceau [...] et apprenez, si vous pouvez, le  
secret de sauver par le talent le dégoût de certaines natures. (265)

The articulations are not always explicit: for example, what work is the *mais*doing here?[[43]](#footnote-43) Still, the basic idea of talent somehow “secret[ly]” redeeming  
our disgust before the accurately represented object is such a commonplace  
that there’s little call to kick into hermeneutic overdrive. And the fact that  
it’s at this point that Diderot starts cooing over Chardin’s brushwork (“Ce  
sont des couches épaisses [...]”) confirms that the basic argumentative  
infrastructure is standard-issue for the period: anyone familiar with  
passages such as Boileau’s and Lamy’s will find that Diderot attends to paint  
and the canvas exactly when one would expect him to. Meanwhile, we’ve  
already seen the verb *sauver* come up in the context of subject matter of  
doubtful interest, as when the *manière heurtée* of Loutherbourg, Casanove,  
and Chardin “sauve l’ouvrage de la petitesse de forme” (1763; 269). Yet  
the transgression of generic hierarchy entails effects that can be *mitigated*by technical magic, but never overcome. “Celui [...] qui se négligera sur  
le choix du sujet se privera de la meilleure partie de son avantage; c’est un  
magicien maladroit qui casse en deux sa baguette” (1767; 611). And so  
Diderot dreams more than once of an artist capable of combining worthy  
subject matter (“des idées intéressantes”) and perfect technique (“un faire  
étonnant” [1765; 342]).

Are Diderot’s entries on Chardin and Verner ambiguous and rich in  
ways that the works of predecessors and contemporaries are not? Of course.  
But this does not mean that Diderot’s *Salons* do anything particularly  
momentous in the history of aesthetic discourse. Characterizing his  
attention to Chardin’s redemptive *faire* as a new attention to the medium  
and an epochal recognition of the barrenness of the western mimetic  
tradition is simply wishful thinking. No less wishful is the idea that hisadmiration for Verner and Chardin breaks down the hierarchy of the  
genres, whose premise—the interest of a represented object or person is  
the same as that of a real object or person—is instead *everywhere* restated  
and reaffirmed. Diderot does certainly turn over the paradox that this  
premise leads to: even though art’s effects depend on us taking the thing  
depicted for a real thing, we always know that we are looking at art. But  
the paradox was nothing new, and exploring it is not the same as setting  
it aside in order to develop a competing discourse on art’s functioning.  
Competing discourses would come: the passages on Dutch painting in  
Hegel’s *Aesthetics*—to take one example—are a good place to observe the  
tried-and-true commonplaces on subject matter mixing with legitimately  
non-Aristotelian categories such as “liveliness” *(Lebendigkeit)* and  
“intimacy” *(Innigkeit). ' '* Hegel read the *Essai sur la peinture* in Goethe’s  
translation, and this fact may tempt us into suspecting that Diderot may  
deserve some credit for initiating these very different ways of speaking. Yet  
the evidence simply does not bear this out. In his *Salons*, Diderot is just  
giving his own riff—inimitable, but nevertheless not “modern”—on the  
thoroughly Aristotelian commonplaces that in his age still dominated the  
way people talked about art.

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1. See for instance chapter 2 of Benjamin Rutter, *Hegel on the Modern Arts,* Cambridge,  
   Cambridge University Press, 2010.

1. Since all references to Diderot s writings will be drawn from this same edition and  
   volume, parentheses will supply page numbers alone, along with the year of the *Salon*if not evident from the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of  
   Diderot*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Christopher Braider, “Groping in the Dark: Aesthetics and Ontology in Diderot and  
   Kant,” *Word and Image 29 A* (2013), p. 105-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Stéphane Lojkine, *L’Œil révolté: Les Salons de Diderot*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2007, p. 448. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Emmanuelle Hénin, “Les Enfants de Piraïcos: L'Ambivalence des genres mineurs

   au XVIIe siècle,” in *Subversion des hiérarchies et séduction des genres mineurs*, ed. Cécile  
   Gauthier, Emmanuelle Hénin, and Virginie Leroux, Paris, Peeters, 2016, p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Thus, according to René Démoris, the Abbé Du Bos’s *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et  
   sur la peinture* (1719) goes further than any text to date in “la condemnation des genres  
   mineurs” (René Démoris, *Chardin: La Chair et l’objet,* Paris, Olbia, 1999, p. 24). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Harriet Stone, *Crowning Glories: Netherlandish Realism and the French Imagination  
   during the Reign ofLouis XIV,* Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2019, p. 219 and  
   210. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Roland Mortier, *Diderot and the “Grand Goût”: The Prestige of History Painting in the  
   Eighteenth Century*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Régis Michel, “Diderot et la modernité”, in *Diderot et l’art de Boucher à David: Les  
   Salons 1759'1781*, Paris: Réunion des Musées nationaux, 1985, p. 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Christopher Braider, art. cit., p. 110. Similarly, Katalin Kovacs concludes that  
    Diderot “recule au moment où l’on s’attendrait justement a une énonciation allant  
    au-delà d’une hiérarchie traditionnelle des genres” (Katalin Kovâcs, “La couleur et  
    le sentiment de la chair dans les premiers ‘Salons’ de Diderot”, *Diderot Studies* 30  
    [2007], p. 141). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Significantly if surprisingly, Michel Fried, *op. cit.y* is interested in a Chardin that  
    Diderot never comments on—the painter of “genre scenes” featuring absorbed  
    humans. In the rest of this article, I will set aside Fried’s classic study, focused as it  
    is not on the problem of generic hierarchy frequently raised by critics, but on the  
    supposed invention of a new relationship between painting and beholder. Despite its  
    distinctiveness, in my view Fried’s modernity narrative is no less compromised than  
    those I will be dealing with here. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. “La nature morte semble prendre pour acte fondateur le rejet du discours” (Philippe  
    Déan, *Diderot devant 1''image*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2000, p. 87). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “Diderot and the Image”, in Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the*

    *Ancien Régimey* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 179-203. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Norman Bryson, *op. cit.,* p. 189 and 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Norman Bryson, *ibid.,* p. 190 and 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Norman Bryson, *ibid.,* p. 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Norman Bryson, *ibid.,* p. 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Norman Bryson, *ibid.,* p. 193 and 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Daniel Brewer, “Critical Narratives: Diderots *Salons*in *The Discourse of Enlighten-  
    ment in Eighteenth-Century France: Diderot and the Art of Philosophizing,* Cambridge,  
    Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 132-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Daniel Brewer, *ibid.,* p. 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Daniel Brewer, *ibid.,* p. 144, 157, 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Daniel Brewer, *ibid.,* p. 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Norman Bryson, *op. cit.,* p. 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Norman Bryson, *op. cit.y* p. 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Ibid.* Space constraints keep me from taking up the similarly Greenbergian argument  
    of Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *La Tache aveugle: Essai sur les relations de la peinture et de  
    la sculpture à l’âge moderne.,* Paris, Gallimard, 2003, p. 110-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Ibid. y* p. 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Admittedly, Bryson does not try to push Diderot toward full semiotic disenchant-  
    ment, but has him finding a charmed “point of balance” where signifier and signi-  
    fied are simultaneously experienced (Norman Bryson, *ibid.,* p. 203). Nonetheless,  
    Brysons overall modernity narrative is patent. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. • Marian Hobson, *The Object of Art: The Theory of Illusion in Eighteenth-Century France.,*Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 77. La Font de Saint-Yenne s  
    expression, quoted by Hobson, occurs in his 1754 *Sentiments sur quelques ouvrages de  
    peinture.* [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. 1. Marian Hobson, *ibid.y* p. 77-78 and 79-80.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. 1. Marian Hobson, *ibid.,* p. 61.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. 1. Hobson redefines her terms and restates her narrative in ways that are, for this reader,  
       barely coherent.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See for example the narrative of Pierre Frantz, *L'Esthétique du tableau dans le théâtre  
    du XVIIIe siècle,* Paris, PUF, 1998, who holds moreover that the *philosophes* fascination  
    with Chardins magic “parachève le protocole de la représentation en instillant en son  
    cœur *une crise*’ (p. 251, my emphasis). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See Eric J. Sluijter, “Didactic and Disguised Meanings? Several Seventeenth-Century  
    Texts on Painting and the Iconographical Approach to Northern Dutch Paintings of  
    This Period”, in *Art in History, History in Art: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Dutch  
    Culture*, ed. David Freedberg and Jan de Vries, Los Angeles, Getty Center, 1991,  
    p. 175-207. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Psychoanalytically disposed critics, however, have detected in *La Raie* a preoccupa-  
    tion with bodies and sex; see, e.g., René Démoris, *op. cit*., p. 31-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Blaise Pascal, *Les Pensées,* ed. Michel Le Guern, Paris, Gallimard, 1977, p. 75-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Poetics* 1448b, in *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in New Translations,*ed. D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972,  
    p. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Nicolas Boileau, *Art poétique,* ed. Sylvain Menant, Paris, GF Flammarion, 1969,  
    p. 98 (III, 1-4). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Bernard Lamy, *La rhétorique ou Tart de parler* (1675), ed. Christine Noille-Clauzade,  
    Paris, Champion, 1998, p. 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *op. cit*., p. 80 and 235. Such a concession—essential, in  
    my view—works not only against Marion Hobsons thesis *(op. cité),* but also against  
    Lichtensteins own arguments for seeing Roger de Pile’s work on *coloris* as an aesthetic  
    watershed; see Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *La Couleur éloquente: Rhétorique et peinture à  
    T âge classique,* Paris, Flammarion, 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See Kate E. Tunstall, “Diderot, Chardin et la matière sensible”, *Dix-Huitième Siècle*39 (2007), p. 586-87. As stimulating as her reading of the Chardin passages is,  
    Tunstall too is ultimately committed to Diderot’s subversion of the hierarchy of the  
    genres (p. 593). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)