

CHARDIN, AND HIS PAINTINGS IN THE NATIONAL
GALLERY OF IRELAND.

DERMOT F. DELAHUNT.

Paintings are there to be looked at; to be enjoyed visually just as music may be listened to without reference to outside data. Poetry too can have some of its intended effect by its rhythms, the placing, emphasis and repetition of sounds though poetry is an art form involving words and their meanings as well as their sounds. Perhaps it is because the visual sense is the most immediate that people find it difficult to approach paintings by simply looking at them and enjoying them for themselves as an entity. Our visual awareness is possibly overburdened with the tremendous input of data that we have to ^{cope} with every day. Our eyes are taught to treat things as significant only in so far as they have relevance to the necessities of our everyday life. Painting, having no immediate relevance is approached with some suspicion by the public at large and most profess not to understand painting but to know what they like. It is not hard to understand this confusion in the kaleidoscopic world of the visual arts today. Stories abound about painters and paintings; anecdotes surround works of art: how Michelangelo threw a mallet at his Moses and demanded that it should speak to him and indeed there is the very mark on the knee: how Chardin was taunted into painting portraits by his friend, Aved, who said that it was more difficult to paint faces than Saveloy sausages and so on. These anecdotes, somehow allow people to feel closer to a work of art but it prevents the correct approach. Too many words often have the same effect.

There is no doubt that when one is confronted by a painting that effects one subtly that there is a tendency to try to rationalize the whys and wherefores and since people usually think in words then words are used to express and communicate ones feelings. To do this adequately requires no small degree of skill. Communication with words is an art form in itself. In the hands of an expert and connoisseur words can sound the way; they can evoke interest, say what one might look for and allow a person to be guided to looking openly at painting. Though some artists have been very concerned about the intellectual basis for their art and have shown great skill in their handling of words this skill is no part of the painter's craft.

Jean Baptiste Simeon Chardin eschewed things intellectual. Born in 1699 the son of the cabinet-maker to the king, especially skilled at making billiard tables and whose background was solidly that of an artisan craftsman. He studied art with Pierre Jacques Cazes and Noel Nicholas Coypel. In 1724 he was sent to the Academy of Saint Luke, the craftsmens guild by his commonsense father, rather than to the Royal Academy of Painting. With little or no formal education nor grounding in the classics History Painting, the highest class of painting would always be

closed to him, a fact he regretted deeply as he did also his father's choice of academy. He considered it a bad start and left it in 1729, having been previously accepted into the Royal Academy on the basis of his two paintings, the Skate and the Buffet. He was admitted as a painter of "animals and fruit". This was the lowest ranking for an artist. He presented these two paintings to the Academy and they are in the Louvre today. The rest of his life revolved closely around the Academy and he was involved in hanging paintings in their exhibition and from 1755 onwards was treasurer and had a large say in its administration. Wildenstein goes to some trouble to show that the generally accepted portrait of Chardin as an easy-going, loveable, helpful bonhomme is not a good likeness. He implies rather than states that Chardin was in fact shrewd, often self-serving, thrifty to the point of miserliness and lazy. But all he shows really is that Chardin was human, careful with his money, possibly a little hard on his son, unkind to his enemies and kind to his friends. It must be remembered that Chardin had had a rather hard time of things though he was never as hard up as is generally thought. His son is thought to have committed suicide in Venice, but Cochin says that "his giddy head never made it possible for him to come to any good". His enemies among the painters were badly placed at the exhibitions and Chardin was ticked off by Diderot for this. Diderot, having been rather critical of Chardin and luke-warm at best in 1763 eventually became an admirer and friend of Chardin. Chardin had much to thank his friends for. Cochin, a life-long friend saw to it that he had lodgings and a sizeable pension for as long at least as Cochin had influence.

Comparatively few paintings have come down to us from Chardin. He has often been accused of laziness. Cochin, himself says that Chardin was not hardworking and even in his own day the critics were hard on him and wanted to see more work from him, but then his technique was slow and painstaking and it must have required quite some time to complete one. Yet one does suspect that he could have worked harder and in 1753, having been criticized the previous year for laziness, Chardin suddenly produced eight paintings for the exhibition. At least, though, everything he produced was of a consistently high standard.

Chardin is the great painter-craftsman, one of the very few to elevate craft and painting to an art form. There is an intrinsic quality in Chardin's paintings that is indefinable, as there is in all art, but in Chardin it is all the more mystifying because he has taken simplest and most humble category of Still-Life and raised it to the heights of great art. This is his achievement. The effect on seeing one of his paintings is immediate and startling and yet so subtle that it defies analysis. He was praised in his own time for being a realistic painter, for the atmosphere that almost tangibly permeates his paintings, for having "the very substance of an object on his brush". This praise is fine as far as it goes

but there is much more to his art. His constant meticulous searching into the simplest of things, the humblest of subjects and his honesty in front of them enabled him somehow to touch the truth. The obstinate of reality underlies all his works. He eternalizes his simple objects, his cauldrons, water-fountains, pots and pans, which we feel he knew intimately. He painted them and made them tangible, palpable not just to our senses, but to something deeper. They sit there in their simplicity of being just for themselves, not as symbols and they strike a chord, these objects, that vibrates through our being. How does he achieve this? One can, perhaps approach the answer. His craft is beautiful; the sheer skill of his handling, a joy. There is no bravura here, though. But it is more than pure skill, Chardin taps a deeper stream. An artist may use every device available to him and produce nothing but a surface brilliance of which one soon tires. Chardin had all the technical brilliance that he needed at his fingertips, but it never obtrudes except, perhaps to some degree in his early works, the Skate and the Buffet. The Skate is a tour de force and its rather gruesome aspect and exaggeration was bound to attract attention as indeed it did. It is not just a clever painting, however, and will rank always as a master-work. Chardin was never banal despite the simple subject-matter he chose but in the Buffet I feel that he comes perilously close. This work is obviously a superb piece of painting, but the dog and the bird are an obvious device and somehow the complexity of incident, the multiplication of detail, the very clever composition of which Cezanne surely took note leaves one in the end result rather lost, but again - what a painting! Nobody could have done it better but Chardin could rise higher.

So we see that when the technique becomes obvious we lose something of the magic of which Chardin was capable. Anything that obtrudes tends to destroy. It is the very appropriateness of technique to the objects depicted, the harmony of means and ends, the feeling of correctness in the placement of objects, the subtle colour harmonies, his drawing that synthesizes forms: this is what enables him to produce those simple monumental paintings of great strength. Wildenstein speaks of a certain stiffness in his early work and then of a fluid easy style in his maturity, but to me at least some of his early work is as fluid as his late work and I find often a stiffness throughout his oeuvre. The stiffness is there, I feel, because every object and every line adds strength to the composition and there is a feeling that if one moved an object one upsets the painting. Chardin's subtle rhythms overlie a strong basic structure. His paint surface too, despite its apparent simplicity is complex. He appears to have worked long and hard on his paintings. There is evidence of great care with preparation for painting and in the painting, in the glazes and scumbles and in the careful colour harmonies.

In the National Gallery of Ireland we are fortunate in having three remarkably fine Chardins. I want to talk about the Young Governess which is, I feel, among his finest paintings. But firstly let us look at the other two. The first one is entitled Two Hares, Game-bag and Partridge and is dated 1727/8 by Wildenstein. The composition is basically the classic triangle. At the apex of this triangle the feet of the dead game are tied by a string. The game, the loop of string and the shoulder-strap all hang from this point, presumably from a nail, and are distributed across the picture-plane. Their weight is taken by a stone shelf at the bottom of the painting except for one hare which hangs lifelessly over the shelf and breaks the line. Nowhere is there a straight line - even the shelf is curved and this curve is taken up by the arc of the outstretched wings, by the strap and the loop of string. The area between the strap and the string reiterates the basic triangular structure. The oval of the ear in the bottom right hand corner is repeated again and again in the ears of the other hare, in the loop of the string, in the area of the game-bag under the wing. The wing breaks the sweep of the strap. It would be overlong otherwise. There are so many curves that echo one another; so many rhythms broken and taken up again and yet the composition is very stable. The colour is limited: from a cool dark background the objects emerge: the warmer buff of the game-bag and the dead hares; the cooler grey of the partridge; the blue-green of the string more strongly stated by the leaves which gleam dully on the left; the blood on the plumage and stronger still the dull deep red of the blood on the dead hare's neck glowing out of the darkness. There is a poignancy in this picture, in the limp weight of the dead game. The coat of the hare, stilled now, no more to bristle and flow save in some chance breeze that might happen by; the nacreous beauty of the wings, stiff and outstretched - such beauty in death! This was a subject to which Chardin frequently returned throughout his life. His capacity to look again and again and to repeat is never tiring for he always seems to find something new.

The Card Trick in the Gallery is once again a subject to which he returned. He seemed to have been fascinated by the concentration called for in games where a person's attention is focussed totally on what he is doing. Cezanne's card-players owe some debt at least to Chardin's. This painting was intended as a companion piece to a game of goose, various versions of which are now lost. There is, fortunately, an engraving by Surugue dated 1745 after the lost painting. This engraving shows people gathered around a table and engrossed in a game. The Card-Trick also shows people gathered around a table: on the left a young man sits with the cards, one, which he is about to put down, is in his right hand. Across the table from him, on the right, is a young girl, and behind the table; another girl. The table is covered with a rich table carpet. The

colour again is very limited. The dark cool background of which the young man's coat is a lighter version, the strongest colour being on the right-hand side, the rich red of the girl's tunic. The painting is rather stiff, but one feels that the stiffness is deliberate - part of the fabric he wove, essential to the completeness of the work of art. The human capacity for motion is halted for an instant. The action is stopped and ~~and~~ distilled in such a way that one is not aware of the motion. There is no sword of Damocles about to fall, though there is a potential for motion, ~~which~~ is quiet and contained and stilled, one feels, for eternity. The atmosphere is one of breath-holding anticipation as the children wait to see the card that young man looks at in his hand. The girl in the middle looks down at the cards already on the table while the other girl looks at the young man's face in an effort to decipher there what he knows. Her tenseness makes her lean forward; he is relaxed, his feet crossed, and all is still; poised on the card. For once the card is down the moment is over and they will breathe again.

The Young Governess, painted in 1731/2 according to Wildenstein, hangs in the French Room in the National Gallery of Ireland. The very merits of the painting fight against it. It's quiet concentrated atmosphere is rather lost in the hullabaloo of fêtes gallantes. But every gallery has these problems and I intend no criticism. I mention it only to point out difficulties of looking at such a painting in situ. There is a version, or copy of this painting in the London National, very slightly different from the Irish painting. Indeed the Irish painting is closer to the engraving by L'Epicie dated 1740, which date would appear to argue a later date for the Dublin painting as the paintings were usually engraved within a year or two of their execution. The London National Gallery painting has been damaged in restoration and cannot therefore be taken as altogether being as Chardin intended. Wildenstein states that the Dublin painting may be perhaps Mother Giving a Lesson to her Child from the Laroque sale where it was held to be "copie retouchee en plusieurs parties par M. Chardin". However nobody could possibly imagine the young governess aged 12 to 14 to be the mother of the child. Is it possible that the picture in the Laroque sale is the Good Education which indeed shows a mother reading to her child? A version of this was sent to Sweden and entered the Royal collection there. The date postulated for this painting was 1749, but there is or was another known version which appears in the Lives de Jully sale in 1770. This painting is now missing. There could have been other versions of this subject. The date 1749, which Wildenstein suggests may be too

late. The painting is very similar to work that Chardin was doing around 1740 (Wildenstein's dating), for example the Diligent Mother, Saying Grace, The Governess. I do not intend to prove that London Painting is not a Chardin - simply that the Dublin painting is and that I consider it superior. One rather disconcerting thing about the London painting is the obvious size of the Child's head. It appears ^{plane} than that of the governess, is lighter in tone and appears to be in a nearer picture than the governess. This rather mars the painting. In the Dublin painting which is slightly larger, this problem has been dealt with in an efficacious and wholly artistic manner. The child's head is more in shadow. Only the upper left side of her face receives the light. This at once gives the impression that her head is tilted forwards and that it is in a plane behind that of the governess. The highest light, apart from that on the hands is on the neck and cheek in the area of the ear of the governess. This has the effect of giving an apparent turn inwards to the face of the governess and because of this the apparent space between the heads is greater. Thus the profile of the governess does not grate against the rounded head of the child as it does in the London painting.

The Dublin painting, then, was painted in 1731, though I suspect a later dating. It is hard to substantiate and a tome could be written on the difficulties of dating Chardin's paintings. It shows, quite simply a young governess pointing out with a needle something in a book to a child. The book lies on a bureau which is parallel to the picture plane. This helps to place the figures in space as the governess is to the right and slightly in front of the bureau, at least, her left arm lies in front of it. The child is slightly left of centre and behind the bureau. Only her head, arms and shoulders show over it. From the lock in the front of the bureau a key projects outwards into the picture plane. The bureau and the two figures are contained loosely in a triangle having its apex over the head of the governess. The bureau gives a solid base to this triangle and the line of the front edge of the bureau broken only by the the governess's sleeve is continued her dress to the right hand border of the painting. There is a kind of spiral motion too, down the needle, up the child's arm, across the faces and down the sleeve and back again to the book, the subject of concentration. And then, of course there is that empty space between the figures which leads our eyes down once again to the pointer and back to where we started. Indeed there is something almost cubist about this painting that Braque might have appreciated: the simple rounded forms, the massing of light and dark, the balance between the negative and positive space and even the colour. The colour is very simple and is confined basically, to blue, red and yellow. The background is that cool, mysterious grey so typical of Chardin and the buff

of the little girl's sleeve merges, in places with the background. The bureau is a warm brown and is close enough in colour to parts of the girl's cap and that of the governess to cause them to ring in sympathy. There is ochre and red in the caps as well and these are the warmest tones in the painting. The fresh young skin is beautifully suggested as is the slight glow of colour on the governess's cheeks. The whites are pure and beautiful and it is hard to imagine a more satisfying use of white. In one part it suggests stiffness as in the front of the governess's apron; in other places a flimsy gauziness and transparency when for example it lies around her neck. Her sleeve, too, is a joy and reminiscent of Vermeer in its near Cubist approach to shading. Look too, at those echoes of colour across the painting, one, the splash of blue on the child's cap, and the colour of the dress, another, where the governess's sleeve is pulled back to allow a glimpse of the material the colour of her cap. The harmony of colour was not easily achieved as a close look at the painting testifies. The complexity of the paint surface is extraordinary. One colour lies on top of another, glazes and scumbles abound and all harmonized by a sort of scumble which adheres in places to the surface and in other places peeps out from underneath.

The painting tells of a small drama and this takes me back to the point I made about the Dublin painting being superior in artistic merit to the London painting. Here there is a rightness of technique for the subject. The sharp needle glinting in the light conjures up the sharp alert mind of the governess. The forward lean of her body bespeaks her anticipation of an answer from the child. The fumbling hands of the child as they grope uncertainly over the page; the mouth and face lost in shadow, a mouth mumbling or about to mumble hesitantly the answer - an answer we suspect that will be wrong. Am I reading too much in? I think not for it is all there to see. For is the state of mind of the child not suggested by her groping hands, by her inability to articulate her fingers. This suggests surely her inability to ^{articulate} answer and the shadow on her face suggests a doubt in her mind.

Firstly and finally, the paint as it evokes and synthesizes forms in its own painterliness; in the way it gives to the paintings that extraordinary quality like a glass flower in a ^{Baccarat} paperweight of finest crystal - tantalizingly immediate yet utterly remote. In this painting Chardin brings all his powers to concentration and creates a masterpiece. - Chardin, the master-craftsman typified, perhaps, by those late pastel self-portraits, now in the Louvre. It might in fact be worthwhile to quote in part what the Goncourts said of these pastels "Go" they tell us "Go to the Louvre and see the two portraits in which he depicted himself, veteran progenitor of a mighty oeuvre, without a hint of personal vanity, in the homely, slovenly attire of a septegenarian bourgeois, wearing

a night-cap, an eye-shade on his forehead, spectacles perched on his nose, a muffler round his neck. What astonishing images! The work so violent and so passionate, the density, the hammerings and dabbings, the scratches, the thickness of the chalk, the strokes spread so freely, the boldness which marries unmarriageable tones and throws colours onto the paper in all their harshness - these undertones similar to those which the scalpel finds under the skin, when we step back a few paces all this blends, fuses and becomes luminous and then amazingly we have before us real living flesh with its creases pores and sheen and the soft bloom of healthy skin. To paint everything in its true tone without painting anything in its real tone - by this tour de force the painter has wrought a miracle." So say the Goncourts and no doubt they say it better than I can. The painting I have been discussing is surely Chardin at his best.

He produced much that is great. He touches the quintessential in art and there is no intellectualising here, simply a master-craftsman working with his materials and imbuing them with a quality gleaned from God knows where, which lifts them to the highest plane of art. He has been compared to Rembrandt and Vermeer and has undoubtedly influenced Courbet, Manet, Cezanne, Braque, Picasso, Morandi. The list is long, but it is his apparently unending popularity among painters that is significant, for paint is his tool - not ideas, not words, and he will always exert a powerful force on those who care about painting.

Bibliography -----

De La Mare, Walter: Chardin (1699-1779), Faber and Faber.
London 1948.

Denvir, Bernard: Chardin, Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd.
Amsterdam 1950

Rosenberg, Pierre: Chardin, Editions d'Art, Albert Skira
Lausanne 1963

Wildenstein, George: Chardin (translated from French by
Stuart Gilbert) Cassirer, Oxford 1969

Medici Society: Chardin French School London 1961



THE YOUNG GOVERNESS



TWO HARES, GAME BAG AND PARTRIDGE.



THE CARD TRICK

THE YOUNG GOVERNESS



THE LONDON NAT. GALLERY PAINTING.



THE DUBLIN NAT. GALLERY PAINTING.

THE YOUNG GOVERNESS



THE LONDON PAINTING



THE DUBLIN PAINTING