

THE SALON OF 1765

To my dear friend Grimm.¹

Non fumum ex fulgore, sed ex fumo dare lucem Cogitat.
Horace²

IF I POSSESS a few considered ideas about painting and sculpture, it's to you, my friend, that I owe them. I'd have followed the lead of the crowd of idlers at the Salon, like them I'd have cast no more than a superficial, distracted glance at the productions of our artists; in a word, I'd have thrown precious works onto the fire or praised mediocre ones to the skies, approving or dismissing them without seeking out reasons for my infatuation or disdain. It's the task you set me that fixed my eyes on the canvas and made me circle around the marble. I gave my impressions time to coalesce and settle in. I opened my soul to the effects, I allowed them to penetrate through me. I collected the verdicts of old men and the thoughts of children, the judgments of men of letters, the opinions of sophisticates, and the views of the people; and if it sometimes happens that I wound artists, very often it's with weapons they themselves have sharpened for me. I've questioned them and come to understand fine draftsmanship and truth to nature; I've grasped the magic of light and shadow, become familiar with color, and developed a feeling for

1 Friedrich Melchior, known as Baron Grimm (1723–1807). A close friend of Diderot's and editor of the *Correspondance littéraire*, for which the *Salons* were written. See introduction.

2 "His intention is not to give smoke from the flame, but light from out the smoke": Horace, *Ars Poetica* vv. 143–4.

flesh. On my own I've reflected on what I've seen and heard, and artistic terms such as *unity*, *variety*, *contrast*, *symmetry*, *disposition*, *composition*, *character*, and *expression*, so comfortable on my lips but so indistinct in my mind, have taken on clear, fixed meanings.

Oh, my friend, how these arts whose object is the imitation of nature, whether by means of eloquence and poetry in discourse, sound in music, paint and brush in painting, chalk in drawing, chisel and clay in sculpture, burin, stone, and metal in printmaking, bow-drill in precious stone carving, stylus, hammer, and punch in chasing, are tedious, laborious, and difficult arts!

Remember that Chardin once said to us in the Salon:

Messieurs, Messieurs, go easy. Find the worst painting that's here, and bear in mind that two thousand wretches have broken their brushes between their teeth in despair of ever producing anything as good. Parrocel, whom you call a dauber, and who is one in comparison with Vernet, this Parrocel is an exceptional man relative to the crowd that abandoned the career they began to pursue at the same time as he. Lemoyne said it took thirty years to learn how to retain the qualities of one's original sketch, and Lemoyne was no fool.³ If you'll listen to me, you might learn to be a bit more indulgent.

Chardin seemed to doubt there was any education that took longer or was more laborious than that of painters, not excluding those of doctors, lawyers, and professors at the Sorbonne.

The chalk holder is placed in our hands, [he said], at the age of seven or eight years. We begin to draw eyes, mouths, noses, and ears after patterns, then feet and hands. After having crouched over our portfolios for a long time, we're placed in front of the *Hercules* or the *Torso*, and you've never seen such tears as those shed over the *Satyr*, the *Gladiator*, the *Medici Venus*, and the *Antinous*. You can be sure that these masterpieces by Greek artists would no longer excite the jealousy of the masters if they were placed at the mercy of the students' grudges. Then, after having spent entire days and even nights, by lamplight, in front of an immobile, inanimate nature, we're presented with living nature, and suddenly the work of all the preceding years seems reduced to nothing; it's as though one were taking up the chalk for the first time. The eye must be taught to look at nature; and many are those who've never seen it and never will! It's the bane of our existence. After having spent five or six years in front of the

3 François Lemoyne (1688–1737). His most famous work is the ceiling of the Hercules Salon in the palace of Versailles.

model, we turn to the resources of our own genius, if we have any. Talent doesn't reveal itself in a moment; judgments about one's limitations can't be reached on the basis of first efforts. How many such efforts there are, successful and unsuccessful! Valuable years slip away before the day arrives when distaste, lassitude, and boredom set in. The student is nineteen or twenty when, the palette having fallen from his hands, he finds himself without profession, without resources, and without moral character: for to be young and have unadorned nature ceaselessly before one's eyes, and yet exercise restraint, is impossible. What to do? What to make of oneself? One must either take up one of the subsidiary crafts that lead to financial misery or die of hunger. The first course is adopted, and while twenty or so come here every two years to expose themselves to the wild beasts, the others, unknown and perhaps less unfortunate, wear breastplates in guardrooms, or carry rifles over their shoulders in regiments, or dress themselves in theatrical attire and take to the boards. What I've just told you is the life story of Bellecour, Lekain, and Brizart,⁴ bad actors out of despair at being bad painters.

Chardin told us, if you recall, that one of his colleagues whose son was the drummer in a regiment answered queries about him by saying he'd abandoned painting for music. Then, adopting a serious tone again, he added:

Many fathers of these incapable, sidetracked children don't take the matter so lightly. What you see here is the fruit of the small number who've struggled more or less successfully. Those who've never felt art's difficulty will never produce anything of value; those who, like my son, feel it too early on, produce nothing at all; and rest assured that most of the high posts in our society would remain empty if one gained access to them only after trials as severe as those to which we must submit.

But Monsieur Chardin, I say to him, you mustn't hold it against us if

Mediocribus esse poetis

Non homines, non di, non concessere columnae;⁵

4 Jean Claude Gilles Colson, known as Bellecour (1725–78); Jean-Baptiste Britard, known as Brizard (1721–91); Henri-Louis Cain or Kain, known as Lekain (1729–78). Contemporary actors; the first two performed in Diderot's *Père de famille* in 1761.

5 "As for poets who are only mediocre, neither men nor the gods pardon them, nor even the columns of the place they recite their verses": Horace, *Ars Poetica*, vv. 372–3.

for this man who incites the irritation of gods, men, and columns against the mediocre imitation of nature was not unaware of the difficulty of his craft.

"Well then," he answered me,

it's better to think he warned the young student of the perils he ran than to make of him an apologist for gods, men, and columns. It's as if he said to him: My friend, take care, you mistake your judge; he knows nothing, but is no less cruel for that... Farewell, messieurs, go easy, go easy...

I'm rather afraid Chardin was soliciting alms from statues. Taste is deaf to all pleas. What Malherbe said of death, I'd apply to criticism; everything must bow to its law,

And the guard keeping watch at the gates of the Louvre
Cannot protect our kings from it.⁶

I'll describe the paintings for you, and my descriptions will be such that, with a bit of imagination and taste, you'll be able to envision them spatially, disposing the objects within them more or less as we see them on the canvas; and to facilitate judgment about the grounds of my criticism or praise, I'll close the Salon with some reflections on painting, sculpture, printmaking, and architecture. You'll read me like an ancient author who transmits an ordinary passage instead of a finely wrought line.

I can almost hear you declaiming sadly: All is lost: my friend is arranging, ordering, and leveling everything. One doesn't borrow crutches from Abbé Morellet⁷ except when one lacks genius oneself...

It's true that my head is weary. The burden I've carried for twenty years⁸ has so bowed me down that I'm desperate to stand up straight. However that may be, remember my epigraph, "Non fumum ex fulgore, sed ex fumo dare lucem."⁹ Let me smoke for a moment, and then we'll see.

Before getting down to business I must warn you, my friend, not to assume that all the paintings I discuss briefly are simply bad. The productions of Boizot, Nonotte, Francisque, Antoine, Lebel, Amand, Parrocel, Adam, Descamps, Deshays the younger, and

6 "Et la garde qui veille aux barrières du Louvre / N'en défend pas nos rois": François de Malherbe (1555-1628), *Consolation à Monsieur du Périer, gentilhomme d'Aix-en-Provence, sur la mort de sa fille*, vv. 79-80.

7 André Morellet, Abbé (1727-1819). French writer and translator a member of the circle that met regularly at the homes of Madame Geoffrin and Baron d'Holbach.

8 Diderot is referring to the *Encyclopédie*.

9 See above, note 2.

others are positively detestable, infamous. I except only Amand's middling *Mercury and Argus*, painted in Rome, and one or two heads by Deshays the younger, sketched for him by his rascal of a brother to improve his fortunes at the Academy.

When I point out flaws in a composition, assume, if it's bad, that it would remain bad even if its faults were corrected; and if it's good, that it would be perfect if these faults were corrected.

This year we lost two great painters and two accomplished sculptors: Carle Van Loo and Deshays the elder, Bouchardon and Slodtz. On the other hand, death has delivered us from the cruelest of amateurs, the comte de Caylus.¹⁰

This year we were less richly supplied with large paintings than two years ago, but as compensation we had more small compositions, and there's also consolation in the fact that some of our artists displayed gifts that might rise to all challenges. And who knows what Lagrenée will make of himself? Either I'm much mistaken, or the French school, the only one that remains vital, is still far from waning. Even if all the works of Europe's painters and sculptors could be brought together, our Salon would not be equalled. Paris is the only city in the world where such a spectacle can be enjoyed every two years.

PAINTING

THE LATE CARLE VAN LOO¹¹

Carle Van Loo alone left twelve pictures: *Augustus Closing the Doors of the Temple of Janus*, [*The Three Graces*], a *Susanna*, seven oil sketches for the *Life of Saint Gregory*, [a *Vestal Virgin*], a *Study of an Angel's Head*, and an *Allegorical Painting*.

10 Anne-Claude-Philippe de Tubières, comte de Caylus (1692-1766). Antiquarian, connoisseur, teacher, poet, and author of pornographic literature. In the 1750s he published three books intended to facilitate artists' access to classical subject matter. Diderot found him a tiresome pedant.

11 Charles-André Van Loo, known as Carle Van Loo (1705-65). Student of his elder brother Jean-Baptiste Van Loo, Benedetto Luti, and the sculptor Pierre II Legros. Received as a full Royal Academician on July 30, 1735.

it one saw the *Susanna*, the *Augustus*, and the *Three Graces*; to either side of it, oil sketches; below it, angels that seemed to carry not only Saint Gregory to heaven but the painter as well. Lower still, a short distance away, the *Vestal Virgin* and the *Suppliant Arts*. This was a mausoleum that Chardin had devised to honor his colleague. Carle, in dressing gown and studio cap, his body in profile, his head facing us directly, emerged from the midst of his own works. It's said to be an astonishing likeness; his widow can't look at it without shedding tears. The touch is vigorous; it's painted grandly, though it's a bit too red. In general Michel's male portraits are amply handled and well drawn; his women, however, are something else again. He's heavy-handed, he's without tonal finesse, he aims at Drouais' chalkiness. Michel is a bit cold; Drouais is completely false. When one examines all these dreary faces lining the walls of the Salon, one cries out: La Tour, La Tour, "ubi es?"²⁹

BOUCHER³⁰

I don't know what to say about this man. Degradation of taste, color, composition, character, expression, and drawing have kept pace with moral depravity. What can we expect this artist to throw onto the canvas? What he has in his imagination. And what can be in the imagination of a man who spends his life with prostitutes of the basest kind? The grace of his shepherdesses is the grace of Madame Favart in *Rose and Colas*;³¹ that of his goddesses is borrowed from La Deschamps.³² I defy you to find a single blade of grass in

29 "Where art thou?" Diderot here invokes Maurice-Quentin de La Tour (1704–88), the great contemporary master of the highly finished pastel portrait, who did not exhibit at the 1765 Salon. The Drouais in question is François-Hubert Drouais (1727–75), whose submissions to the Salon are discussed below.

30 François Boucher (1703–70). Student of François Lemoyne. Granted provisional membership in the Royal Academy on November 24, 1731; received as a full academicien on January 30, 1734. He became fashionable soon after his return from Italy (1731), his fluent handling and erotic imagery being perfectly attuned to the tastes of a certain prosperous clientele (he became Madame de Pompadour's favorite painter and was named first painter to the king in 1765).

31 Marie Benoîte Duronceray, known as Madame Favart (1727–72), was a contemporary actress. *Rose et Colas*, a one-act comedy by Sedaine with music by Monsigny, was first performed in March of 1764.

32 Deschamps was the pseudonym adopted by Anne-Marie Pagès, an actress and celebrated courtesan of the day.

any of his landscapes. And then there's such a confusion of objects piled one on top of the other, so poorly disposed, so motley, that we're dealing not so much with the pictures of a rational being as with the dreams of a madman. It's of him that it was written:

velut aegri somnia, vanae
fingentur species, ut nec pes, nec caput³³

I'd say this man has no conception of true grace; I'd say he's never encountered truth; I'd say the ideas of delicacy, forthrightness, innocence, and simplicity have become almost foreign to him; I'd say he's never for a single instant seen nature, at least not the one made to interest my soul, yours, that of a well-born child, that of a sensitive woman; I'd say he's without taste. Of the infinite number of proofs I could provide to support this, a single one will suffice: in all the multitude of male and female figures he's painted, I defy anyone to find four that would be suitable for treatment in relief, much less as free-standing sculpture. There are too many little pinched faces, too much mannerism and affectation for an austere art. He can show me all the clouds he likes, I'll always see in them the rouge, the beauty spots, the powder puffs, and all the little vials of the make-up table. Do you think he's ever had anything in his head as straightforward and charming as this image from Petrarch,

E'l riso, e'l canto, e'l parlar dolce, humano?³⁴

Those subtle, refined analogies that summon objects onto the canvas and bind them together by means of imperceptible threads, my God, he hasn't the vaguest notion of them. He's the most mortal enemy of silence known to me. He makes the prettiest marionettes in the world; he'll end up an illuminator. Well, my friend, it's at precisely the moment Boucher has ceased to be an artist that he's appointed first painter to the king. Don't get it into your head that he's to his genre as Crébillon the younger³⁵ is to his; their morals are largely the same, but the writer is far more gifted than the painter. The only advantage the latter has over the former is an inexhaustible fecundity, an incredible facility, especially in the accessories of his pastorals. When he does children he groups them well, but they're

33 "Only idle fancies, without motivation, like the dreams of a sick person; in which neither feet, nor head [may be assigned to a single shape]": Horace, *Ars Poetica*, vv. 7–8.

34 "And the laughter, and the song, and the sweet discourse of humankind: Petrarch, *Canzoniere*, sonnet CCXLIX."

35 Claude Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon (1707–77). French writer specializing in salacious fiction set in the *beau monde*; author of *Les Égarements du coeur et de l'esprit* (1736–8) and *Le Sofa* (1742).

best left to frolic on their clouds. In the whole of this numberless family you won't find a single one capable of the real activities of life, of studying his lesson, of reading, writing, or scutching hemp; they're fictive, ideal creatures, little bastards of Bacchus and Silenus. Such children are perfectly suited to sculptural treatment around antique vases; they're chubby, fleshy, plump. They'd give the artist an ideal occasion to show us whether he can sculpt marble. In a word, take all this man's paintings, and you'll have difficulty finding a single one before which one couldn't say, like Fontenelle³⁶ to the sonata: Sonata, what do you want from me? Painting, what do you want from me? There was a time when he couldn't stop making Virgins. And what were these Virgins? Precious little flirts. And his angels? Wanton little satyrs. And then in his landscapes there's a drabness of color and uniformity of tone such that, from two feet away, his canvas can be mistaken for a strip of lawn or bed of parsley cut into a rectangle. But he's no fool, he's a false good painter, like there are false wits. He doesn't command the wisdom of art, only its *concelli*.

8. *Jupiter Transformed into Diana to Surprise Callisto* Oval painting

Jupiter transformed is in the center. He's in profile; he leans over Callisto's knees. With one hand, his right, he tries gently to push aside her clothing; with his left he caresses her chin: here are two hands with plenty to do! Callisto is painted facing us; she weakly resists the hand trying to undress her. Below this figure the painter has spread out drapery, a quiver. Trees fill out the background. To the left is a group of children playing in the air; above this group, the eagle of Jupiter.

Do the figures of mythology have hands and feet different from ours? Ah! Lagrenée, what would you have me think of this, when I see you right beside it, and am struck by your firm color, by the beauty of your flesh and by the truths of nature that emanate from every point of your composition? Feet, hands, arms, shoulders, a throat, a neck, if you must have them as you've kissed them on occasion, Lagrenée will provide them for you; Boucher, no. Having reached fifty, my friend, scarcely any painter works from the model, they work by rote, and this goes for Boucher. Hackneyed figures turned this way and that. Hasn't he already shown us this Callisto, and this Jupiter, and this tiger's skin covering him a hundred times?

36 Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle (1657-1757). French author, poet, and playwright.

9. *Angelica and Medoro* Oval painting

The two main figures are placed at the viewer's right. Angelica reclines casually on the ground and is seen from the back, except for a small portion of her face that's visible and that makes her seem in a bad mood. On the same side but further back stands Medoro, facing us, his body hunched over, his hand moving towards the trunk of a tree on which he's apparently about to carve the two verses by Quinault, set to music so well by Lully, verses that provide an occasion for Roland to display all his goodness of soul and for me to weep as others laugh:

Angelica engages her heart,
Medoro is its conqueror.³⁷

Cupids are busy ringing the tree with garlands. Medoro is half covered with a tiger skin, and his left hand holds a hunting spear. Beneath Angelica imagine drapery, a cushion, a cushion, my friend! which is as appropriate here as the carpet of La Fontaine's Niçaise;³⁸ a quiver and flowers; on the ground, a large cupid stretched out on his back and two others playing in the air, in the vicinity of the tree to which Medoro confides his happiness; and then at left some landscape and trees.

It has pleased the painter to call this *Angelica and Medoro*, but that's the only pleasing thing about it. I defy anyone to show me anything in the scene that designates these characters. And my God! One need only have let the poet lead the way. How much more beautiful, grand, picturesque, and appropriate is the setting he provided for his adventure! It's a rustic lair, a remote spot, the abode of shadow and silence. It's there that, far from all distraction, a lover can be made happy, not in full daylight in the middle of the countryside, on a cushion. It's on the moss of a rock that Medoro inscribes his name and Angelica's.

This defies common sense; a little bedroom composition. And then neither feet, nor hands, nor truth, nor color, and always the same parsley trees. Look or rather don't look at the Medoro, especially his legs; they're the work of a little boy without taste or instruction. The Angelica is a little strumpet. What an ugly word! Very well, but I call it as he paints it. Drawing curvaceous, limp, and

37 "Angélique engage son coeur, / Médor en est vainqueur": from the opera *Roland Furieux* (1685), by P. Quinault and J.-B. Lully.

38 Jean de La Fontaine (1621-95). French poet; author of *Contes et Nouvelles* (1665) and *Fables* (1668; 1678; 1694). "Niçaise" is a reference to the eponymous heroine of one of the tales in the first of these collections.

perhaps, for his shepherdess. Further left, a few outcroppings of rock. To the right, greenery, a stream, sheep. Everything is simple and sensible; all that's missing is color.

2. One sees the courier pigeon, the ornithological Mercury, arriving at the left; it advances at full speed. The standing shepherdess, her hand pressed against a tree in front of her, sees it through the foliage and stares fixedly at it; she's the very picture of impatience and desire. Her posture, her action are simple, natural, interesting, elegant; and the dog that sees the bird arriving, that rises on its hind feet on a little promontory, that points its head towards the messenger, that barks joyfully and seems to wag its tail, is wittily conceived: the animal's action signals an amorous exchange that's been going on for some time. To the right, behind the shepherdess, one sees her distaff on the ground, a basket of flowers, a little hat and a shawl; at her feet a sheep. Even simpler and better composed; all that's missing is color. The subject is so clearly conveyed that the painter's inclusion of these details cannot obscure it.

3. To the right one sees two young girls, one in the foreground reading the letter, her companion immediately behind her. The first turns her back, which is unfortunate, for her face could easily have conveyed her action; it's her companion who should have been so disposed. The disclosure is made in a solitary, isolated spot, at the foot of a rustic stone building from which flows a fountain, above which is a small Cupid in relief. To the left, goats and sheep.

This is less interesting than the preceding one, and it's the artist's fault. This should have been the spot of the rendezvous; it's the fountain of love. The color still rings false.

4. The rendezvous. In the center, towards the viewer's right, the shepherdess seated on the ground, a sheep beside her, a lamb on her knees. Her shepherd gently embraces her and looks at her lovingly. Above the shepherd, his dog tied up; very good. To the left a basket of flowers. To the right, a shattered, broken tree; also very good. In the background, cottage, shed, a bit of a house. The letter should have been read here, and the rendezvous placed at the fountain of love.

However that may be, the whole is refined, delicate clearly thought through; these are four little eclogues in the spirit of Fontenelle. Perhaps the manners of Theocritus or those of Daphnis and Chloe, simpler, more naive, would have held greater interest for me. My shepherd and shepherdess would have done everything that these do, but they wouldn't have been able to anticipate the outcome, whereas these know exactly what will happen in advance, which I find irritating, given that it's not handled with candor.

13. *Another Pastoral*

This is a standing shepherdess who holds a crown in one hand and carries a basket of flowers in the other; she has stopped in front of a shepherd seated on the ground, his dog at his feet. What does this mean? Nothing. Behind, at the far left, some leafy trees towards the tops of which, one can't quite make out how, is a fountain, a round hole from which water is flowing. Apparently these trees hide a rock, but why obscure it? I'm easily placated; without the four preceding works, I'd easily have been capable of saying of this one: Out of the Salon; but in the end I'll let it pass.

14. *Another Pastoral*

Oval painting

Will I never be done with these cursed pastorals? This one's a girl who ties a letter around a pigeon's neck; she's seated, we see her in profile. The pigeon is on her knees, it's made for the part, it cooperates, as can be seen from its suspended wing. The bird, the hands of the shepherdess and her lap are encumbered with an entire rosebush. Tell me, I beg you, if it isn't a jealous rival out to ruin this little composition who's put this shrub here? One must be one's own worst enemy to sabotage one's own work like this.

The catalogue also mentions a *Landscape with a Water Mill*. I looked for it but never found it; I doubt you've missed much.

HALLÉ⁴⁰

15. *The Emperor Trajan, Departing on a Military Expedition in a Great Hurry, Dismounts from his Horse to Hear a Poor Woman's Complaints*

Large painting intended for Choisy

Trajan occupies the center foreground of the picture. He looks, he listens to a kneeling woman, some distance away from him between

40 Noël Hallé (1711-81). Student of his father Claude-Guy Hallé and his brother-in-law Jean Restout. Granted provisional membership in the Royal Academy on June 30, 1746; received as a full academician on May 31, 1748.

two children. Beside the emperor, further back, a soldier restrains his rearing horse by its bridle; this horse isn't at all like the one required by Father Canaye and of which he said: "Qualem me decet esse mansuetum."⁴¹ Behind the suppliant is another standing woman. Towards the right, in the background, the suggestion of a few soldiers.

Monsieur Hallé, your Trajan imitated from the antique is flat, without nobility, without expression, without character; he seems to say to this woman: Good woman, I see you're weary; I'd lend you my horse, but he's as temperamental as the devil . . . This horse is in effect the only remarkable figure in the scene; it's a poetic, gloomy, greyish horse such as a child might see in the clouds: the spots on its breast look just like a dappled sky. Trajan's legs are made of wood, as stiff as if a lining of steel or tin-plate were underneath the material. As a cape, he's been given a heavy garment of poorly dyed crimson wool. The woman, whose facial expression should set the pathetic tone for the scene, whose ample blue garment attracts the eye very well, is seen only from the back; I've identified her as a woman, but she might be a young man; on this point I must rely on her hair and the catalogue, for there's nothing about her that specifies her sex. And yet a woman bears no closer resemblance to a man from the back than from the front; there's a different hair style, different shoulders, a different lower back, different thighs, different legs, different feet; and this large yellow carpet I see hanging from her belt like an apron, that folds under her knees and that I then find behind her, she'd apparently brought it along to avoid soiling her beautiful blue robe; but this voluminous piece of material could never figure as part of her clothing if she were standing up. And then nothing's finished in either the hands, or the arms, or the coiffure, it's suffering from the *plica polonica*.⁴² The material covering her forearm seems like furrowed St-Leu stone. Trajan's side of the composition is without color; the sky, overly bright, makes the group seem as if in shadow and effectively wipes it out. But it's the arm and hand of this emperor that must be seen to be believed, the arm for its stiffness, the hand and thumb for their faulty draftsmanship. History painters regard these small details as mere trifles, they go after the grand effect; this rigorous imitation of nature, making them stop at each step of the way, would extinguish their fire, would snuff out their genius: Isn't this true, Monsieur Hallé? Such was not the view of Paolo Veronese, he took care with his flesh, his feet, his hands; but the futility of this has now been

41 Roughly, "I need a tame one." The Abbé Étienne de Canaye (1694-1782). A friend of Diderot and d'Alembert.

42 A contemporary name for an illness common in Poland, now unidentifiable.

recognized, and it's no longer customary to paint them, although it's still customary to have them. Do you know what this infant in the foreground rather closely resembles? A bunch of big gnarls; it's just that on his legs, undulating like snakes, they're a little more swollen than on his arms. This pot, this copper domestic vessel on which the other child leans, is such a peculiar color I had to be told what it was. The officers accompanying the emperor are every bit as ignoble as he is. These little bits of figures scattered about, do you really think they suggest the presence of an army? This picture's composition is completely lacking in consistency, it's nothing, absolutely nothing, neither in its color, which resembles the quintessence of dried grass, nor its expression, nor its characterizations, nor its drawing; it's a big enamel plaque, quite dreary and quite cold.

"But this subject was impossible." You're wrong, Monsieur Hallé, and I'm going to tell you how someone else would have handled it. He'd have placed Trajan in the center of the canvas. The main officers of his army would have surrounded him; each of their faces would have registered the impression made by the suppliant's speech. Look at how Poussin's *Esther* presents herself before Ahasuerus. What prevented you from having your woman, overwhelmed by her distress, similarly grouped with and sustained by female companions? You want her alone and on her knees? I consent to this; but my God, show me more than her back: backs aren't very expressive, whatever Madame Geoffrin⁴³ may say. Have her face convey the full extent of her pain; make her beautiful, with a nobility corresponding to that of her situation; make her gestures strong and moving. You clearly didn't know what to do with her two children; study the *Family of Darius*⁴⁴ (Pl. 8) and you'll learn how subordinate figures can be made to enhance the interest of the main ones. Why didn't you indicate the presence of an army with a crowd of heads pressed together beside the emperor? Then a few of these figures sliced by the edge of the canvas would have been sufficient to make me imagine the rest. And why, on the woman's side, are there no spectators, no witnesses to the scene? Was there no one, no relation, no friend, no neighbor, neither man, woman, nor child, curious about the outcome of her mission? Such, it seems to me, would have been the way to enrich your composition, which as it stands is sterile, insipid, and stripped down.

43 Madame Geoffrin was a well-known Parisian art lover and collector; she was notorious for meddling in the pictorial specifics of paintings being executed by her artist friends. She once commissioned a painting in which she was shown from the back.

44 *The Family of Darius before Alexander* (also known as *The Tent of Darius*: 1660-1, Versailles) by Charles Le Brun, one of the most celebrated paintings of the French seventeenth century.

But let's return to our Virgins. It seemed to me that in one of these compositions the Saint Anne appeared less aged in her lower face than in her forehead and hands; when one's forehead is furrowed with wrinkles and the joints of one's hands are gnarled, one's neck is covered with slack, flabby pockets of skin. In another I observed an old armchair, as well as a portion of a blanket and a striped pillow, of astonishing truth. If you should ever come across this work, take note of the Virgin's head. How beautiful and finely wrought it is! How beautifully coiffed! What grace, and how effective the narrow ribbons that circle her head and dress her hair! Note the characterization of the infant Jesus, his coloring and his flesh; but don't dwell on the Saint John, he's stiff, awkward and lacking in natural finesse. How is it that one of these children is so fine and the other so bad? I could explain this, but I don't dare; it would play right into Carmontelle's hands.

27. *The Return of Abraham to the Land of Canaan*

It's absolutely necessary to identify this subject underneath the painting, for a landscape with mountains could be Canaan, or it could be somewhere else; a man making his way towards these mountains, followed by a man and a woman, could be Abraham and Sarah with their servants, or some other master with his wife and manservant. In the past Sarah was often depicted riding a donkey, and this custom has not been entirely abandoned; cattle, sheep, and shepherds have always been included.

This work, whatever the subject, is admirable for its vigorous coloring, the beauty of the site, and the truth of the travellers and the animals. Is this a Berchem? No. Is it a Louthembourg?⁵³ Not that either.

28. *Roman Charity* (Pl. 12)

Small painting

To the left, the old man is seated on the ground; he seems uneasy. The woman standing on the right, leaning towards the old man, her bosom bared, seems more uneasy still. Both of them stare fixedly at a barred window of the prison, from which they can be observed and through which we see a soldier who watches them. The woman presents her breast to the old man, who dares not accept it; his hand and his left arm signal his dismay.

⁵³ On Louthembourg, see below, pp. 116 ff.

The woman is beautiful, her face is expressive, her drapery as convincing as one could hope. The old man is handsome, even too handsome, he's too ruddy, as hardy looking as if he had two cows at his disposal. He doesn't seem to have suffered for an instant, and if this young woman doesn't watch out he'll end up getting her pregnant. Those willing to indulge the artist's lack of common sense, his ignoring the sudden, terrible effect of imprisonment and condemnation to die from hunger, will be enchanted by this work. The details, especially in the figure of the old man, are admirable: fine head, beautiful beard, beautiful white hair, beautiful characterization, beautiful legs, beautiful feet, and such arms! Such flesh! But this is not the picture I have in my imagination.

I absolutely reject the notion of having this unfortunate old man and this benevolent woman suspicious of being observed; this suspicion impedes the action and destroys the subject. I'd have the old man in chains and the chain, fixed to the dungeon wall, binding his hands behind his back. Immediately upon his nurse's appearance and baring of her breast, I'd have his avid mouth move towards it and seize it; I'd like to see his hunger reflected in his gestures, and his body betray some effects of his suffering: not allowing the woman time to move towards him, but hurling himself towards her, his chain stretching his arms out behind him. I wouldn't want it to be a young woman, I'd require a woman of at least thirty, of an imposing, austere, and seemly character; with an expression conveying tenderness and compassion. Luxurious drapery would be ridiculous here; she should be coiffed rather carelessly, her long, loose hair falling out from beneath her head-scarf, which should be broadly handled; she shouldn't have beautiful, rounded breasts but hardy, large ones that are full of milk; she should be impressive and robust. The old man, despite his suffering, shouldn't be hideous, if I've construed nature correctly; we should see in his muscles, in his entire body a constitution that's vigorous, athletic. In a word, I'd require that the entire scene be depicted in the grandest style, and that such a compassionate humanitarian act not be turned into something trivial.

29. *The Magdalen*

She faces us. Her eyes gaze heavenward, tears run down her cheeks, but it's not only her eyes, it's her mouth and all her facial features that are crying. Her arms are crossed over her chest; her long hair meanders down to obscure her breast; only her arms and a portion of her shoulders are nude. As in her pain she presses her arms against her chest and her hands against her arms, the ends of her fingers depress her flesh slightly. The expression of her repentance is tender

May sophists go to the devil, these people can't tell right from wrong; they'll get what's coming to them from Providence.

CHARDIN⁷¹

You come just in time, Chardin, to refresh my eyes after your colleague Challe mortally wounded them. Here you are again, great magician, with your silent arrangements! How eloquently they speak to the artist! How much they have to tell about the imitation of nature, the science of color and harmony! How freely the air circulates around your objects! The light of the sun is no better at preserving the individual qualities of the things it illuminates. You pay scarcely any heed to the notions of complementary and clashing colors.

If it's true, as the philosophers claim, that nothing is real save our sensations, that the emptiness of space and the solidity of bodies have virtually nothing to do with our experience, let these philosophers explain to me what difference there is, four feet away from your paintings, between the Creator and yourself.

Chardin is so true, so harmonious, that even though one sees only inanimate nature on his canvases, vases, cups, bowls, bottles, bread, wine, water, grapes, fruit, pâté, he holds his own against and perhaps even draws you away from the two beautiful Vernets he didn't hesitate to put beside his own work. My friend, it's like the universe, in which the presence of a man, a horse, or an animal doesn't destroy the effect of a bit of rock, a tree, a stream; without doubt the stream, the tree, the bit of rock hold less interest for us than the man, the woman, the horse, the animal, but they are equally true.

I must, my friend, communicate to you an idea that's just come to me and that I might not be able to recall at a different moment. It's that the category of painting we call genre is best suited to old men or to those born old; it requires only study and patience, no verve, little genius, scarcely any poetry, much technique and truth, and that's all. You yourself know that the time we devote to what's conventionally known as the search for truth, philosophy, is precisely when our hair turns grey, when we'd find it very difficult to

71 Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699–1779). Student of P.-J. Cazes and N.-N. Coypel; granted provisional membership and received as a full academician on the same day, September 25, 1728.

write a flirtatious letter. Regarding, my friend, these grey hairs, this morning I saw that my entire head was silvered over, and I cried out like Sophocles when Socrates asked him how his love life was going: "A domino agresti et furioso profugi,"⁷² I'm free of that savage, merciless master.

I'm all the more willing to digress with you like this because I'm only going to say one thing about Chardin, and here it is: Select a spot, arrange the objects on it just as I describe them, and you can be sure you'll have seen his paintings.

He painted *Attributes of the Sciences*, *Attributes of the Arts* and of *Music*, *Refreshments*, *Fruit*, and *Animals*. It's all but impossible to choose between them, they're all of like perfection. I'll sketch them for you as rapidly as I can.

45. *Attributes of the Sciences*

One sees, on a table covered by a reddish carpet, proceeding, I think, from right to left, some upended books, a microscope, a small bell, a globe half obscured by a green taffeta curtain, a thermometer, a concave mirror on its stand, a pair of glasses with its case, some rolled-up maps, the end of a telescope.

It's nature itself, so truthful are the shapes and colors; the objects separate from one another, move forward, recede as if they were real; nothing could be more harmonious, and there's no confusion, despite their great number and the small space.

46. *Attributes of the Arts*

Here there are books lying flat, an antique vase, drawings, hammers, chisels, rulers, compasses, a marble statue, brushes, palettes, and other such objects. They're arranged on a kind of balustrade. The statue is from the Grenelle Fountain, Bouchardon's masterpiece.⁷³

Same truth, same color, same harmony.

47. *Attributes of Music* (Pl. 17)

Across a table covered with a reddish carpet, the painter has placed an array of various objects distributed as naturally, as picturesquely as

72 Cicero, *Cato the Elder or Dialogue on Old Age*, XIV, 47; Diderot's rendering follows.

73 The Fountain of the Four Seasons on the rue de Grenelle in Paris, executed by Edmé Bouchardon between 1739 and 1745.

peasant couple and a Bishop of Avranches; everything resembles a scene from comic opera.

*More Landscapes
Two Heads in Pastel*

To the Notre Dame bridge.⁸⁰

NONOTTE⁸¹

I can't imagine how this one got into the Academy. I must take a look at his reception piece.

BOIZOT⁸²

56. *The Graces Binding Cupid*

The scene is set in the open air and features a wriggling cupid and Graces that are heavier, stouter, more chubby-cheeked than the ones I see behind the fish and fruit stands on my way home along the rue des Boucheries.

57. *Mars and Cupid Arguing about the Power of
their Weapons (Subject from Anacreon)*

How agreeable to see how Monsieur Boizot has flat-footedly parodied in paint the most elegant and delicate of Greek poets; I haven't the courage to describe this thing. Read Anacreon, and if you have a copy of his bust, burn Boizot's painting in front of it, pleading that he never again be permitted to produce anything so limp based upon so charming an author.

80 The Notre Dame bridge over the Seine, lined with shops, was known for its dealers in cheap paintings by hack artists.

81 Donat or Donatien Nonotte or Nonnotte (1708-85). Student of Lemoyne. Received as a full royal academician on August 26, 1741.

82 Antoine Boizot (1702-82). Received as a full royal academician on May 25, 1737.

LEBEL⁸³

58. *Several Landscape Paintings*

I'd very much like to know how it is that Chardin, Vernet, and Louthembourg don't make all these artists abandon their brushes. But then Homer, Horace, and Virgil wrote, and I dare to write in their wake. So, Monsieur Lebel, go right ahead and paint.

In one there's a gorge through some mountains, those to the right high and in shadow, those to the left low and in the light, with a few travellers crossing them. In another one there's another gorge through the mountains; those to the right high and in shadow, those to the left low and in the light, with a torrential stream roaring through the gap.

Figures bad, nature false, not the slightest spark of talent. Monsieur Lebel doesn't understand that a landscapist is a portrait painter whose sole merit consists of his ability to capture a likeness.

PERRONEAU⁸⁴

Among his portraits there was one of a woman worth looking at; well drawn, better than usual for him; it seemed alive, and the shawl was really convincing.

VERNET⁸⁵

View of the port of Dieppe. The four times of day. Two views of the environs around Nogent-sur-Seine. A shipwreck; another shipwreck. A marine at sunset. Seven small landscapes; two more marines. A storm, and several additional paintings listed under the

83 Antoine Lebel (1705-93). Received as a full royal academician on August 27, 1746.

84 Jean-Baptiste Perroneau (1715-83). Student of Natoire and Laurent Cars. Granted provisional membership on August 27, 1746; received as a full academician on July 28, 1753.

85 Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714-89). Granted provisional membership on August 6, 1746; received as a full academician on August 23, 1753.

same number. Twenty-five pictures, my friend, twenty-five pictures! His speed is like the Creator's, his truth is like that of Nature. A painter wouldn't have been wasting his time devoting two years to almost any of these compositions, and Vernet produced them all in that time. What incredible lighting effects! What beautiful skies! What water! What compositional intelligence! What prodigious variety in these scenes! Here, a child who's survived a shipwreck is carried on his father's shoulders; there, a dead woman stretched out on the shore, with her distraught husband. The sea roars, the wind whistles, the thunder cracks, the pale, sombre glow of lightning pierces through the clouds, momentarily revealing the scene. One hears the noise of a ship's hull being breached, its masts tipped over, its sails ripped. The crew is terrified; some on the bridge lift their arms towards the heavens, others throw themselves into the water, the waves smash them against the neighboring rocks where their blood intermingles with the whitening foam; I see some of them floating, I see others about to be swallowed up, I see still others straining to reach the very shore against which they'll be dashed to pieces. The same variety of character, action, and expression prevails among the spectators: some of them shudder and turn away, others offer help, others still are immobilized by what they're seeing; some have lit a fire at the foot of a boulder; they busy themselves trying to revive a dying woman, and I find myself hoping they'll succeed. Direct your gaze at another sea, and you'll see serenity and the full complement of its charms: tranquil, smooth, smiling waters stretching into the distance, their transparency diminishing and their surface gloss increasing all imperceptibly as the eye moves out from the shore to the point at which the horizon meets the sky; the ships are immobile, sailors and passengers alike indulge in whatever diversions might outwit their impatience. If it's morning, what hazy vapors rise! How they refresh and revivify the objects of nature! If it's evening, how profoundly the mountain peaks sleep! How nuanced are the colors of the sky! How wonderfully the clouds move and advance, casting the hues with which they're colored into the water! Go into the countryside, direct your gaze towards the sky, note carefully the phenomena of that single instant, and you'll swear a patch of the great luminous canvas lit by the sun has been cut away and transferred to the artist's easel; or close your hand, make a tube of it through which you can see only a small segment of the large canvas, and you'll swear it's a picture by Vernet that's been taken from his easel and moved into the heavens. While of all our painters he's the most prolific, he's the one that makes me work the least. It's impossible to describe his compositions; they must be seen. His nights are as affecting as his days are beautiful; his ports are as beautiful as his original compositions are pungent. Equally

marvellous, whether his brush is captive to natural givens, or his muse, liberated from its shackles, is left to its own devices; incomprehensible, whether he uses the day star or that of night, natural or artificial light, to illuminate his paintings; always harmonious, vigorous, and controlled, like those great poets, those rare men in whom judgment and verve are so perfectly balanced they're never exaggerated or cold; his utilitarian structures, his buildings, his attire, his actions, his men, his animals all ring true. He's astonishing from close up and even more astonishing from a distance. Chardin and Vernet, my friend, are two great magicians. One would say of the latter that he begins by creating the topography, and that he has men, women, and children in reserve whom he uses to populate his canvas as one populates a colony; then he adds weather, sky, season, good or bad fortune to suit his taste; he's Lucian's Jupiter, who, tired of hearing human beings complain, rises from the table and says: "Hail in Thrace" and instantaneously one sees trees stripped, harvests smashed, huts destroyed and blown away; "Plague in Asia" and one sees the doors of houses closed, streets deserted, and men in flight; "Here, a volcano" and the earth trembles underfoot, buildings collapse, animals take fright, and city dwellers head for the countryside; "There, a war" and entire nations take up arms and slit one another's throats; "In this region a poor harvest" and the old laborer perishes from hunger at his doorstep. Jupiter calls that governing the world, and he's wrong; Vernet calls that making paintings, and he's right.

66. *View of the Port of Dieppe* (Pl. 22)

Immense and imposing composition. Sky lightly overcast, silvery. Handsome mass of buildings. Lively, picturesque view: a multitude of figures busy fishing, preparing and selling the catch, working, mending the nets, and other such tasks; gestures truthful and unforced; figures lively and vigorous of touch; however, as I must be totally candid, neither as lively nor as vigorous as usual.

67. *The Four Times of Day*

Lighting effects that couldn't be more beautifully controlled. Examining these works, I can't get over the special talents, the specific strengths distinguishing them from one another; what results from this? In the end, you begin to think this artist has every talent, that he's capable of anything.

adjust her corset and shawl, and they're all askew. Beside her, halfway up the cellar stairs, we see the back of a large fellow running off; the position of his arms and hands allows for no doubt about which article of clothing he's adjusting. Our lovers were well prepared; at the foot of the stairs, on a barrel, are a loaf of bread, some fruit, a napkin, and a bottle of wine.

This is quite lascivious, but one can go this far. I look at it, I smile, and I move on.

101. *A Young Girl Recognizing Her Child at Notre-Dame among the Foundlings, or the Strength of Kinship*

The church. Between two pillars, the foundlings' pew. Around the pew, a crowd, joy, commotion, surprise. Within the crowd, behind a nun, a tall girl holding an infant and kissing it.

A beautiful subject botched. I argue that the crowd ruins the effect, reducing a touching, moving event to an incident that's difficult to make out; that there's no silence, no serenity, and that only a few spectators should have been present. Cochin the draftsman-designer [*dessinateur*] responds that the more people there are in the scene, the more forceful the evocation of kinship ties will be. Cochin is arguing like a man of letters, and I'm arguing like a painter. You want to evoke the full force and intensity of these blood ties and yet retain the scene's calm, solitude, and silence? Here's how that might have been done, and how Greuze would have handled it. I imagine a mother and father have gone to Notre Dame with their family, which includes an elder daughter, her sister, and a young son. They come upon the foundlings' pew, the father, mother, and son on one side, the two sisters on the other. The elder girl recognizes her child; at that moment, overcome by maternal affection which makes her forget the presence of her father, a violent man from whom her lapse had been kept secret, she cries out, she rushes forward and picks up the infant; her younger sister pulls at her clothing, but in vain; she pays no heed. She whispers: My sister, what are you doing? Don't you realize the risk . . . Our father . . . The mother's face turns pale and the father takes on a terrible, menacing air: he casts a furious glance at his wife. The little boy, for whom all this remains a closed book, stares vacantly. The nun is amazed; a few spectators, men and women of a certain age, for there shouldn't be any others, react, the women with joy and pity, the men with surprise; and there's my composition, which is much better than Baudouin's. But the right expression for the elder daughter must still be found, and that won't be easy. I've said there should only be spectators of a certain age around the pew because experience suggests that others, young men and women, wouldn't

linger there. So? So Cochin doesn't know what he's talking about. If he wants to defend his colleague against his own better judgment and his own taste, then let him.

Greuze has made himself a painter-preacher of good morals, Baudouin, a painter-preacher of bad; Greuze, a painter of the family and of respectable people; Baudouin, a painter of rakes and houses of ill repute. But fortunately he's not a skilled draftsman, he lacks color and genius, while we have genius, drawing, and color on our side, so we're the stronger. One day Baudouin spoke to me of the subject for a picture: he wanted to show a prostitute who'd come to the rooms of a midwife to give birth in secret, and who was obliged by poverty to abandon her child to the foundling hospital. Why don't you set your scene, I responded, in a garret, and depict a decent woman compelled to do the same thing for the same reason? That would be more beautiful, more moving, and more seemly. A garret is a more appropriate subject for a man of talent than a midwife's wretched quarters. When it doesn't entail any artistic sacrifice, isn't it better to represent virtue rather than vice? Your composition will inspire only a sterile form of pity; mine would inspire the same feelings, but in a fruitful way. —Oh! That's too serious; and then, it's so easy to find prostitutes to model. —Well, do you want an amusing subject? —Yes, one that's even a bit smutty, if you can manage, for I admit it, I like smut, and the public doesn't despise it, either. —If smut you must have, so be it, and you'll even be able to use models from the rue Fromonteau. —Tell me quickly . . . and he rubbed his hands in anticipation. —Imagine, I continued, a hackney-coach moving along the St Denis road between eleven and twelve o'clock. In the middle of the rue St Denis one of the coach's braces gives way, and the compartment is thrown on its side. The window panels slide down, the door opens, and a monk and three prostitutes emerge. The monk begins to run away. The driver's poodle leaves his master's side, follows the monk, and, on catching up with him, grips his long robe between his teeth. While the monk tries desperately to get rid of the dog, the driver, who doesn't want to lose his fare, climbs down from his seat and heads towards the monk. One of the prostitutes applies her hand to a bump on the forehead of one of her companions, while the other, struck by the comedy of this misadventure, completely dishevelled, her hands on her hips, bursts into laughter; the shopkeepers are also laughing on their doorsteps, and some rascally members of the gathering crowd screamed at the monk: "He shit his bed! He shit his bed!" —"That's excellent," said Baudouin. —"And it even has a moral," I added. It's vice punished. And who can say whether the monk of my acquaintance who experienced this mishap eight days ago, visiting the Salon, might not recognize himself and blush? And isn't it something to have made a monk blush?

A Mother Quarreling with her Daughter is the best of Baudouin's small pictures; it's better drawn than the others and rather agreeably colored, though still a bit drab. The weariness of the man on the sofa of the prostitute freshening her rouge, not bad. Everything in *The Confessional* should be better drawn, calls for more temperament, more force. It makes no impression and, into the bargain, has need of more patience, time, of just about everything, and could use revisions and corrections by the father-in-law. —There are also some miniatures and portraits, pretty portraits rather prettily painted; a *Silenus Carried by Satyrs* that's hard, dry, reddish, satyrs and Silenus both. All this isn't completely without merit, but it lacks . . . How to describe what it lacks? This is no less difficult to say than it is essential to have, and unfortunately it's not popping up as easily as mushrooms. Why am I having so much difficulty saying this? You know very well how precious one's two pupils are.¹⁰⁷ Once there was a university professor who fell in love with the niece of a canon while teaching her Latin; he got his student pregnant. The canon exacted a very cruel form of revenge.¹⁰⁸ —Did Baudouin give painting lessons, fall in love, and impregnate the niece of a canon? Well, he doesn't seem to have what Abélard lost as a result of that episode. I bid Monsieur Baudouin a pleasant evening, and I pray God that He keep watch over you, my friend, and, unless His will dictates otherwise, that He protect you from canons' nieces, so that you'll be safe from their uncles.

ROLAND DE LA PORTE¹⁰⁹

It has been said, my friend, that those who haven't laughed at Regnard's comedies¹¹⁰ have no right to laugh at the comedies of Molière. Well, tell those who pass by Roland de La Porte's work

107 "Vous savez bien ce qu'il faut garder comme ses deux prunelles." In French, *prunelle* means both "pupil" (of the eye) and "wild plum." Diderot here exploits this double meaning to make suggestive allusions to the relation between visual stimulation, the male sexual organs, and male arousal. As becomes clear in the following lines, he feels that, for all its smuttiness, Baudouin's work lacks "balls."

108 Diderot is alluding to the story of the medieval lovers Abélard and Héloïse. Abélard, a philosopher monk, was castrated for his offense.

109 Henri Horace Roland de La Porte (1724–93). Probably studied with Oudry. Received as a full royal academician on November 26, 1763.

110 Jean-François Regnard (1655–1709). French playwright; author of *Le Joueur* (1696) and *Les Ménechmes* (1705).

without stopping that they have no right to look at Chardin. It doesn't have Chardin's touch, nor his vigor, nor his truth, nor his harmony; it's not that it falls a thousand leagues, a thousand years short; it's a matter of the little, imperceptible distance that one's aware of but can't close. You work, study, take pains, strike out, start over, all wasted effort; nature has made its pronouncement: You will go so far, just this far, and no further. It's easier to advance from the Notre-Dame bridge to Roland de La Porte than from Roland de La Porte to Chardin.

102. *A Medallion Representing an Old Portrait of the King in Imitation Relief*

This is an imitation of an old plaster, replete with all the accidents worked by age. It has cracks and holes, there's dust, dirt, grime; it's convincing *ma un poco freddo*.¹¹¹ And then this genre is so facile that only the people continue to admire it.

103. *A Genre Work*

On a wooden table, a fancy handkerchief, a faience pitcher, a glass of water, a cardboard snuffbox, a pamphlet on top of a book . . . Poor victim of Chardin! Just compare Chardin's handkerchief with this one; how hard, dry, and stiff Roland's will seem to you!

103. *Another Genre Work*

A long sink cuts the canvas horizontally in two; moving from right to left, one sees mushrooms around a clay pot in which sits a branch of bay leaves, a bunch of asparagus, and some fresh eggs on a kitchen table, a portion of which comes in front of the sink, and the rest of which, in the background and in shadow, passes behind the bunch of asparagus; a copper cauldron at an angle so the inside is visible; a tin pepper pot; a wooden mortar with its pestle.

Another of Chardin's victims; but Monsieur Roland de La Porte, be comforted: may the devil take me if anyone besides yourself and Chardin realizes this; and rest assured that anyone in the ancient world who'd been able to produce such an illusion, however much this might displease Caylus' remains and the living ears of Webb,

111 "But a little cold."

This Parrocel is a family man whose only way of feeding his wife and five or six children is with his palette. Looking at this Cephalus killing Procris in the Salon, I said out loud to him: "You commit even worse crimes than you know." Parrocel is my neighbor; he's a fine fellow, and I'm told he has a gift for decoration. He sees me, he comes up to me, "Here are my paintings," he says; "What do you make of them?" —Well, I like your Procris, she has big beautiful breasts. —Why yes, she's seductive, she's seductive . . . —Think of a better response, if you can.

GREUZE¹¹⁵

Perhaps I'm a bit long-winded, but if you only knew how much fun I'm having boring you! I'm no different from the other bores in this world. But then a hundred and ten paintings have been described and thirty-one painters assessed.

Here we have your painter and mine; the first who has set out to give art some morals, and to organize events into series that could easily be turned into novels. He's a bit vain, our painter, but his vanity is that of a child, it's the intoxication of talent. Deprive him of the naiveté that enables him to say of his own work: Look at that, how beautiful it is! . . . and you'll deprive him of verve, you'll extinguish his fire, and his genius will be eclipsed. I suspect that if he were to become modest he'd have no further reason for being. Our best qualities are closely related to our faults. Most respectable women are moody. Great artists are capable of hatchet blows in their heads; almost all female flirts are generous; even good, pious folk sometimes speak ill of others; it's difficult for a master who thinks he's doing good not to be a bit of a despot. I hate all the mean, petty gestures that indicate merely a base soul, but I don't hate great crimes, first because they make for beautiful paintings and

¹¹⁵ Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805). Student of C. Grandon, an obscure artist in Lyon. Granted provisional membership in the Royal Academy on June 28, 1755; received as a full academician on August 23, 1769. Greuze and Diderot were friends in 1765, but their relations soon became strained. They had a spectacular falling out in 1769, in the weeks surrounding Greuze's abortive attempt to have himself accepted by the Royal Academy as a history painter, not a genre painter, with his *Septimius Severus*. In the wake of this humiliating episode, Greuze refused to exhibit his work at the Salon and kept somewhat aloof from the institution that had rebuffed him.

fine tragedies; and also because grand, sublime actions and great crimes have the same characteristic energy. If a man weren't capable of setting fire to a city, another man wouldn't be able to throw himself into the pit to save it. If Caesar's soul had not been possible, Cato's would not have been either. Every man is born a citizen of either Tenares or the heavens; it's Castor and Pollux, a hero, a villain, Marcus Aurelius, Borgia, "diversis studiis ovo prognatus eodem."¹¹⁶

We have three painters who are skillful, prolific, and studious observers of nature, who begin nothing, finish nothing without having consulted the model several times, and they are Lagrenée, Greuze, and Vernet. The second carries his talent everywhere, into popular crowds, into churches, to market, to the fashionable promenades, into private homes, into the street; endlessly he gathers actions, characters, passions, expressions. Chardin and he both speak quite well about their art, Chardin with discretion and objectivity, Greuze with warmth and enthusiasm. La Tour is also worth listening to in intimate conversation.

There are a great many works by Greuze, some mediocre, some good, many excellent. Let's examine them.

110. *Young Girl Crying over her Dead Bird* (Pl. 28)

What a pretty elegy! What a pretty poem! What a fine idyll Gessner¹¹⁷ would make of it! It could be a vignette drawn from this poet's work. A delicious painting, the most attractive and perhaps the most interesting in the Salon. She faces us, her head rests on her left hand. The dead bird lies on top of the cage, its head hanging down, its wings limp, its feet in the air. How natural her pose! How beautiful her head! How elegantly her hair is arranged! How expressive her face! Her pain is profound, she feels the full brunt of her misfortune, she's consumed by it. What a pretty catafalque the cage makes! How graceful is the garland of greenery that winds around it! Oh, what a beautiful hand! What a beautiful hand! What a beautiful arm! Note the truthful detailing of these fingers, and these dimples, and this softness, and the reddish cast resulting from the pressure of the head against these delicate fingers, and the charm of it all. One would approach this hand to kiss it, if one didn't respect this child and her suffering. Everything about her enchants, including the fall

¹¹⁶ "From the same egg but with different interests": a corrupt citation of Horace, *Satires*, Book II, i, vv. 26–8.

¹¹⁷ Johann Matthias Gessner (1691–1761). German humanist and translator/adaptor of Latin literature.

of her clothing; how beautifully the shawl is draped! How light and supple it is! When one first perceives this painting, one says: Delicious! If one pauses before it or comes back to it, one cries out: Delicious! Delicious! Soon one is surprised to find oneself conversing with this child and consoling her. This is so true, that I'll recount some of the remarks I've made to her on different occasions.

Poor little one, how intense, how thoughtful is your pain! Why this dreamy, melancholy air? What, for a bird? You don't cry, you suffer, and your thoughts are consistent with your pain. Come, little one, open up your heart to me, tell my truly, is it really the death of this bird that's caused you to withdraw so sadly, so completely into yourself? . . . You lower your eyes, you don't answer. Your tears are about to flow. I'm not your father, I'm neither indiscreet nor severe. Well, well, I've figured it out, he loved you, and for such a long time, he swore to it! He suffered so much! How difficult to see an object of our love suffer! . . . Let me go on; why do you put your hand over my mouth? On this morning, unfortunately, your mother was absent; he came, you were alone; he was so handsome, his expressions so truthful! He said things that went right to your soul! And while saying them he was at your knees; that too can easily be surmised; he took one of your hands, from time to time you felt the warmth of the tears falling from his eyes and running the length of your arm. Still your mother didn't return; it's not your fault, it's your mother's fault . . . My goodness, how you're crying! But what I say to you isn't intended to make you cry. And why cry? He promised you, he'll keep all his promises to you. When one has been fortunate enough to meet a charming child like yourself, become attached to her, give her pleasure, it's for life . . . And my bird? . . . My friend, she smiled . . . Ah, how beautiful she was! If only you'd seen her smile and weep! I continued: Your bird? When one forgets oneself, does one remember one's bird? When the hour of your mother's return drew near, the one you love went away. How difficult it was for him to tear himself away from you! . . . How you look at me! Yes, I know all that. How he got up and sat down again countless times! How he said goodbye to you over and over without leaving! How he left and returned repeatedly! I've just seen him at his father's, he's in charmingly good spirits, with that gaiety from which none of them are safe . . . And my mother? . . . Your mother, she returned almost immediately after his departure, she found you in the dreamy state you were in a moment ago; one is always like that. Your mother spoke to you and you didn't hear what she said; she told you to do one thing and you did another. A few tears threatened to appear

beneath your eyelids, you either held them back as best you could or turned away your head to dry them in secret. Your continued distraction made your mother lose her patience, she scolded you, and this provided an occasion for you to cry without restraint and so lighten your heart. Should I go on? I fear what I'm going to say might rekindle your pain. You want me to? Well then, your good mother regretted having upset you, she approached you, she took your hands, she kissed your forehead and cheeks, and this made you cry even harder. You put your head on her breast, and you buried your face there, which was beginning to turn red, like everything else. How many sweet things this good mother said to you, and how these sweet things caused you pain! Your canary warbled, warned you, called to you, flapped its wings, complained of your having forgotten it, but to no avail; you didn't see it, you didn't hear it, your thoughts were elsewhere; it got neither its water nor its seeds, and this morning the bird was no more . . . You're still looking at me; is it because I forgot something? Ah, I understand, little one; this bird, it was he who gave it to you. Well, he'll find another just as beautiful . . . That's still not all; your eyes stare at me and fill up with tears again. What more is there? Speak, I'll never figure it out myself . . . And if the bird's death were an omen . . . what would I do? What would become of me? What if he's dishonorable? . . . What an idea! Have no fear, it's not like that, it couldn't be like that . . . —Why my friend, you're laughing at me; you're making fun of a serious person who amuses himself by consoling a painted child for having lost her bird, for having lost what you will? But also observe how beautiful she is! How interesting! I don't like to trouble anyone; despite that, I wouldn't be too displeased to have been the cause of her pain.

The subject of this little poem is so cunning that many people haven't understood it; they think this young girl is crying only for her canary. Greuze has already painted this subject once. He placed in front of a broken mirror a tall girl in white satin, overcome by deep melancholy. Don't you think it would be just as stupid to attribute the tears of the young girl in this Salon to the loss of her bird, as the melancholy of the other girl to her broken mirror? This child is crying about something else, I tell you. And you've heard for yourself, she agrees, and her distress says the rest. Such pain! At her age! And for a bird! —But how old is she, then? How shall I answer you, and what a question you've posed. Her head is fifteen or sixteen, and her arm and hand eighteen or nineteen. This is a flaw in the composition that becomes all the more apparent because her head is supported by her hand, and the one part is inconsistent with the other. Place the hand somewhere else and no one would

notice it's a bit too robust, too developed. This happened, my friend, because the head was done from one model and the hand from another. Otherwise this hand is quite truthful, very beautiful, perfectly colored and drawn. If you can overlook the small patch that's a bit too purplish in color, it's a very beautiful thing. The head is nicely lit, as agreeably colored as a blonde's could be; perhaps she could have a bit more relief. The striped handkerchief is loose, light, beautifully transparent, everything's handled with vigor, without compromising the details. This painter may have done as well, but he's never done anything better.

This work is oval, it's two feet high, and it belongs to Monsieur de La Live de La Briche.

After the Salon was hung, Monsieur de Marigny did the initial honors. The Fish Maecenas¹¹⁸ arrived with a cortège of artists in his favor and admitted to his table; the others were already there. He moved about, he looked, he registered approval, disapproval; Greuze's *Young Girl Crying* caught his attention and surprised him. That is beautiful, he said to the artist, who answered him: Monsieur, I know it; I am much praised, but I lack work. —*That*, Vernet interjected, *is because you have a host of enemies, and among these enemies there is someone who seems to love you to distraction but who will bring about your downfall.* —And who is this enemy? Greuze asked him. —*You yourself*, Vernet answered.

III. *The Spoiled Child*

This is a mother beside a table looking complacently at her son, who is giving some of his soup to a dog. The child serves it to the dog in his spoon. That's the subject, but there are a great many accessories; such as, at right, a jug with an earthenware pan in which laundry is soaking; above, a kind of armoire; beside the armoire, a hanging rope of onions; higher up, a cage fixed to one of the armoire's side panels; and two or three poles leaning against the wall. From left to right, up to the armoire, there's a kind of buffet on which the artist has placed an earthenware pot, a glass half full of wine, some material hanging down; and behind the child, a cane chair and an earthenware pan. All of which indicates that this is his little laundress, from the picture exhibited four years ago and very recently engraved, who's gotten married and whose story the painter intends to follow.

118 "*Poisson Mécène*": Marigny's family name was Poisson, which means "fish" in French.

The subject of this picture isn't clear. The idea is not properly characterized; it could be either the child or the dog who's spoiled. There are patches of flickering light effects throughout that trouble the eyes. The mother's head is charmingly colored; but her head-dress doesn't sit right on her head and prevents it from seeming three-dimensional. Her clothing is clumsy, and the piece of laundry she holds even more so. The boy's head is very beautiful, in a painterly way, you understand, it's a painter's version of a pretty child's head, not the way a mother would want it to be. The handling of this head couldn't have greater finesse; the hair even lighter than Greuze usually tends to make it; and what a dog! The mother's bosom is opaque, lacking in transparency, and even a bit red. There are also too many accessories, too many details. As a result the composition is blunted, confused. Just the mother, the child, the dog, and a few household objects would have produced a finer effect. The work would have had the tranquility it now lacks.

112. *A Girl's Head*

Yes, a prostitute's on a street corner, her nose in the air, reading a poster while waiting for a client. This could aptly be described as a work of exemplary coloristic vigor. She's in profile. One would almost say she was in relief, the planes are articulated so well. Here we have a vicious strumpet indeed. Look at how Monsieur the Introducer of Ambassadors, who's beside her, is made to seem pale, cold, flat, and wan; what a blow she strikes from afar against Roslin and his dismal family! I've never seen such havoc.

113. *A Little Girl Holding a Wooden Doll of a Capuchin Friar*

What truth! What tonal variety! And these red blotches, who hasn't seen them on the faces of children who are cold or in pain from teeth coming in? And these tearful eyes, and these swollen, frozen little hands, and these blond tresses on her forehead, all mussed, they're so light and true: one wants to push them back under her cap. The crude material of the doll's clothing good, with typical folds. Hood of thick cloth on its neck, arranged in the familiar way. A little Capuchin friar that's quite rigid, quite wooden, quite stiffly draped. Monsieur Drouais, come here, do you see this child? She's made of flesh. And this Capuchin, he's made of plaster. For truth and vitality of color, a little Rubens.

114. *A Head in Pastel*

Another rather beautiful thing. All the flesh is convincing and wonderfully soft, the relief is successful and the strokes thickly applied, though it's a bit grey; the fallen corners of the mouth convey pain mixed with pleasure. It may be, my friend, that I'm mixing two paintings together; I bang my head, paint and repaint the thing in front of me, return to the Salon in my imagination; wasted effort, this has to stay as it is.

115. *Portrait of Madame Greuze* (Pl. 29)

Here, my friend, is a demonstration of how there can be something equivocal about even the best painting. Look closely at this fine, fat fishwife, with her head twisted backwards, and whose pale coloring, showy kerchief, all mussed, and expression of pain mixed with pleasure depict a paroxysm that's sweeter to experience than it is decorous to paint; it's a study, a sketch for *The Well-Loved Mother*. How is it that in one place a given expression is decent, while in another it's not? Must we have accessories and circumstances before we can judge facial expressions? Do they remain ambiguous without these aids? There must be something in this idea. This open mouth, these swimming eyes, this unstable posture, this swollen neck, this voluptuous fusion of pain and pleasure make all respectable women lower their eyes and blush in its vicinity. Not far off, in the sketch of the well-loved mother, we have the same posture, the same eyes, the same neck, the same mixture of passions, and none of them even notice. Furthermore, while women pass by this head quickly, men linger in front of it, I mean those who are connoisseurs, and those who under the pretext of being connoisseurs remain to enjoy a powerful display of voluptuousness, and those, like myself, to whom both descriptions apply. In the forehead, on the cheeks, on the bosom there are incredible passages of tonal mastery; they teach you how to look at nature and recall her to you. The details of this swollen neck must be seen to be believed; they are beautiful, true, perfectly achieved. You've never seen two opposed expressions so clearly evoked together. This *tour de force*, Rubens didn't succeed any better with it in the painting in the Luxembourg gallery, in which the painter showed on the queen's face¹¹⁹ both her pleasure at having brought a son into the world and the traces of her preceding pain.

119 Marie de Medici, in Rubens' celebrated Marie de Medici cycle, now in the Louvre.

116. *Portrait of Monsieur Watelet*

He is dull; he seems dried out, dim-witted. It's the man himself, take the painting away.

117. *Another Portrait of Madame Greuze*

This painter certainly is in love with his wife, and he has good reason; I loved her myself when I was young and she was Mademoiselle Babuti. She ran a little bookshop on the Quai des Augustins; fresh and doll-like, as white and upright as a lily, ruddy as a rose. I'd enter with that lively, ardent, slightly crazed air that was mine at the time, and I'd say to her: Mademoiselle, La Fontaine's *Tales* and a Petronius, please. —Here they are, Monsieur. Would you like any other books? —Excuse me, Mademoiselle, but . . . —Yes, continue. —*The Nun in a Nightgown*. —For shame, sir! Does anyone keep, does anyone read such vile things? —Ah, ah, it's vile; Mademoiselle, I had no idea . . . —And another day, when I passed by, she smiled and so did I.

At the last Salon there was a *Portrait of Madame Greuze with Child*; at first one was interested by her state, then the beautiful color and truthful details made one's arms go limp. This work is not as beautiful, but it is attractive overall, it's well posed, the posture has a certain sensuality, the two hands are enchanting in the finesse of their tonal handling, though the left one doesn't fully cohere; one of its fingers seems broken, which is a shame. The dog being patted by the beautiful hand is a black spaniel, its muzzle and paws flecked with spots. Its eyes are full of life; if you look at it a while, you hear it bark. The lace on her head makes one want to know who made it; I'd say the same about the rest of her clothing too. The head gave both painter and model a lot of trouble, you can tell, and that's already a fault. The patches on the forehead are too yellow; everyone knows that women who've given birth have such spots, but if one takes the imitation of nature so far as to depict them, they should be toned down; this is an instance where the original can be enhanced a bit without compromising the resemblance. But these facial irregularities give painters opportunities to display their skill, and they rarely pass them up. These patches have a reddish gleam that rings true but that's disagreeable. Her lips are flat; the pinched quality of her mouth makes her seem a bit prim; the result is mannered. If this mannerism is to be found in the individual, so much the worse for the individual, the painter, and the painting. Is this woman maliciously setting her spaniel against someone? Then her arch, prim air would be less false, though just as unpleasant.

Otherwise, the mouth, the eyes, all the other details are ravishing; countless coloristic subtleties; the neck supports the head wonderfully, its drawing and coloring are beautiful, and it seems attached to the shoulders as it ought to be. But as for this bosom, I can't bear to look at it, and this, even though at the age of fifty I don't hate bosoms. The painter has his figure bend forward, and with this posture it's as if he were saying to the viewer: Look at my wife's bosom. I see it, Monsieur Greuze; your wife's bosom is slack and yellow; if this is a good resemblance, so much the worse for you, for her, and for the painting. One day Monsieur de La Martelière was leaving his rooms; encountered on the stairs a tall young man going up to Madame's rooms. Madame de La Martelière had the most beautiful head in the world, and Monsieur de La Martelière, watching the young gallant ascend to his wife, mumbled: "Yes, yes, but wait till you see her thighs." Madame Greuze's head is just as beautiful, and there's nothing to prevent Monsieur Greuze from mumbling one day to someone he's met on the stairs: "Yes, yes, but wait till you see her bosom." That won't happen, because his wife is as virtuous as she is amiable. This bosom's yellow cast and slackness are Madame's, but its lack of transparency and deadened quality are Monsieur's.

118. *Portrait of Monsieur Wille, Engraver* (Pl. 30)

Very beautiful portrait. This is Wille's blunt, brusque manner, his stiff neck and shoulders; these are his small, ardent, intense eyes, his blotchy cheeks. How the hair is rendered! How beautiful the drawing! How forceful the handling! What truth and variety in the tones! How superb the velvet of his clothing, and the jabot and ruffles of his shirt! I'd like to see this portrait next to a Rubens, a Rembrandt, or a Van Dyck; I'd like to see how our painter would stand up against them. When one has seen this Wille, one turns one's back on other portraits, even those by Greuze.

123. *The Well-Loved Mother, Sketch*

Sketches frequently have a fire that the finished paintings lack; they're the moment of the artist's zeal, his pure verve, undiluted by any carefully considered preparation, they're the painter's soul freely transferred to canvas. The poet's pen, the skilled draftsman's pencil seem to frolic and amuse themselves. Rapid sketches characterize everything with a few strokes. The more ambiguity there is in artistic expression, the more comfortable the imagination. In vocal music one can't help but hear the words it expresses. I make out a

good piece of orchestral music to be saying whatever I like, and as I know from experience better than anyone else what touches my heart, it rarely happens that the expression I attribute to the sounds, analogous to my current situation, serious, tender, or gay, is less affecting than another one that's less well suited to me. It's rather like this with sketches and paintings: in a painting I see something that's fully articulated, while in a sketch there are so many things I imagine to be there that in fact are scarcely indicated!

The composition of *The Well-Loved Mother* is so natural, so simple, that those who don't give the matter much thought will tend to believe they could have imagined it themselves, and that it didn't require a great deal of mental effort. I answer these people: Yes, I can well believe you'd have distributed all these children around their mother and that you'd have made them caress her; but would you have made one of them cry because he's not singled out from the others, and would you have introduced this man who's so gay, so happy to be this woman's husband and so vain about being the father of so many children; would you have made him say: "I'm the one who did all that." And this grandmother, you'd have thought to place her in the middle of the scene? Are you quite sure?

Let's establish the locale. The scene unfolds in the country. In a low room one sees, moving from right to left, a bed; in front of this bed, a cat on a stool, then the well-loved mother leaning backwards in a large armchair and all her children thronging about her; there are at least six of them. The youngest is in her arms; a second clings to one side, a third clings to the other; a fourth grips the back of the chair and looks down; a fifth is at her cheeks; a sixth stands with his head in her lap, dissatisfied with his role. The mother of all these children has joy and tenderness painted on her face, along with a bit of the strain inevitably following from the overwhelming movement and weight of so many children, whose violent caresses will become too much for her if they continue much longer; this is the sensation bordering on pain, though it's blended with tenderness and joy in this thrown-back posture suggestive of weariness, and the open mouth which gives this head, considered apart from the rest of the composition, its singular character. Around this charming group one sees, in the foreground of the image, a child's garment and a small wagon on the floor. Towards the back of the room, facing the viewer, her back turned to a fireplace with a mirror, the grandmother seated in a chair, her head and clothing very grandmotherly, enjoying the scene before her. Further left and in the foreground, a dog barking joyously, enjoying itself. Much further left, almost as far from the grandmother as she is from the well-loved mother, the husband returning from the hunt; he joins in the scene by extending his arms, tilting backwards a bit, and laughing. He's a big young fellow who carries himself well, and his satisfaction betrays his vanity

at having sired this pretty swarm of brats. Beside the father, his dog; behind him, at the left edge of the canvas, a laundry basket; then, at the door, a glimpse of a servant departing.

This is excellent both for the talent it demonstrates and for its moral content; it preaches population, and paints a sympathetic picture of the happiness and advantages deriving from domesticity; it announces to any man with soul and feelings: Maintain your family comfortably, make children with your wife, as many as you can, but only with her, and you can be sure of a happy home.

124. *The Ungrateful Son* (Pl. 31)
Sketch

I don't know how I'll manage this one, and the next will be even harder. My friend, this Greuze will end up ruining you.

Imagine a room into which scarcely any light enters except through the door when it's open, or through a rectangular opening above the door when it's closed. Let your eyes travel about this sad abode and you'll see evidence of poverty everywhere. There is however at right, in a corner, a bed which doesn't seem too bad; it's carefully made. In the foreground, on the same side, a large leather armchair which looks quite comfortable. The father of the ungrateful son sits here. Place a low armoire near the door, and close to the decrepit old man a small table on which is a bowl of soup that's just been served him.

Notwithstanding the help the eldest son of the household could offer his old father, his mother, and his brothers, he has enrolled in the army; but he's not going away without soliciting money from these unfortunates. He has made his request. The father is indignant, he spares no words in rebuking this unnatural child who no longer acknowledges his father, nor his mother, nor his obligations, and who answers his reproaches with insults. We see him in the center of the image; he seems insolent and impetuous; his right arm is raised on his father's side above the head of one of his sisters; he prepares to leave, he threatens with his hand; his hat is on his head, and his gesture and his face are equally impertinent. The good old man who has loved his children, but who has never been able to bear being separated from any of them, tries to stand up, but one of his daughters on her knees before him holds him down by the tails of his jacket. The young libertine is surrounded by his eldest sister, his mother, and one of his little brothers; the mother tries to hold him back, the brute tries to free himself from her and pushes her away with his foot; this mother seems overwhelmed, heartbroken. The eldest sister has also tried to intervene between her brother and

her father; the mother and sister's postures suggest they're trying to keep them apart; the latter has grabbed hold of her brother's clothing, and the way she pulls at it seems to say to him: Wretch! What are you doing? You push away your mother? You threaten your father? Get down on your knees and beg forgiveness . . . But the little brother is crying; he lifts one hand to his eyes and holds onto his big brother's right arm with the other one, straining to pull him out of the house. Behind the old man's armchair, the youngest of all seems frightened, stupefied. At the other end of the scene, towards the door, the old soldier who recruited and accompanied the ungrateful son to his parents' home is leaving, his back turned to everything that's happening, his sword under his arm and his head lowered. I forgot to mention that in the middle of this tumult there's a dog in the foreground whose barking makes it even worse.

Everything in this sketch is thought through, carefully organized, well described, and clear: the mother's pain and even her partiality for a child she has spoiled, and the old man's violence, and the various actions of the sisters and young children, and the ingrate's insolence, and the indifference of the old soldier who can't help shrugging his shoulders at what's happening, and the barking dog, an accessory for which Greuze has a special predilection and knows how to use well.

This sketch is very beautiful but, in my view, nowhere near as fine as the next one.

125. *The Bad Son Punished*
Sketch

He's been on campaign, he returns, and at what moment? The moment immediately following his father's death. Everything in the house has changed; it was the abode of poverty, now it's that of pain and misery. The bed is wretched, with no mattress. The deceased old man reclines on this bed; light from a window falls only on his face, all else is in shadow. One sees at the foot of the bed on a stool the sacred taper burning and the holy-water basin. At the head of the bed the eldest daughter seated in the old leather armchair, her body thrown back, in a posture of despair, one hand at her temple, the other holding up the crucifix she'd asked her father to kiss. One of his frightened little children hides his head in her breast; the other, on the opposite side of the bed, a bit further down, arms in the air and fingers spread wide, seems to have grasped the nature of death for the first time. The younger sister, on the same side of the bed, at its head, between the window and the bed,

cannot persuade herself that her father is no more; she leans towards him, she seems to be looking for a last glance. She lifts one of his arms, and her open mouth cries out: My father, my father, can't you hear me? . . . The poor mother is standing near the door, her back towards the wall, devastated, and her knees are giving way beneath her.

Such is the spectacle awaiting the ungrateful son. He steps forward, he's at the threshold. He has lost the leg he used to push away his mother, the arm with which he threatened his father is crippled.

He enters. His mother receives him; she remains mute, but her arms indicating the corpse seem to say to him: Look, just look at what you've done! . . . The ungrateful son seems astounded, his head falls forward, he beats his forehead with his fist.

What a lesson for fathers and children!

That's not all. This artist gives just as much consideration to his accessories as to the core of his subjects.

In the book on a table, in front of the eldest daughter, I detect that she, poor thing, had been assigned the painful task of reciting prayers for the dying.

The flask beside the book appears to contain the remains of a cordial.

And the warming-pan on the floor had been brought to warm the dying man's frozen feet.

And here again we have the same dog, not sure whether to acknowledge this cripple as the son of the house or to take him for a beggar.

I can't say what effect this short, simple description of a sketch for a painting will have on others; for myself, I confess that I've not written it without emotion.

This is beautiful, very beautiful, sublime, all of it. But as it's said man can produce nothing that's perfect, I don't think the mother's action rings true for this moment; it seems to me she'd have put one of her hands over her eyes, to block out both her son and her husband's corpse, and directed the ungrateful son's attention to his father's body with the other. The rest of her face could have expressed the intensity of her pain just as clearly, and her figure would have been even simpler and more sympathetic. And then there's a lapse in the accessories, a trivial one in truth, but Greuze forgives himself nothing: the large round basin for the holy water with its aspergillum is the one the church puts at the foot of a coffin; at the foot of a dying man in a cottage it would place a flask of water with a branch of boxwood that had been blessed on Palm Sunday.

Otherwise, these two works are, in my view, masterpieces of composition; none of the postures is awkward or forced; the actions

are true and appropriate for painting; and this last one especially has an intensity that's unified and pervasive. Nonetheless, current tastes are so wretched, so trivialized that these two sketches might never be painted, and if they're painted Boucher will have sold fifty of his flat, indecent marionettes before Greuze manages to sell his two sublime paintings. My friend, I know what I'm talking about. Isn't *The Paralytic*, his painting of the reward earned by having educated one's children properly, still in his studio? And it's a masterpiece of the art. Word of it reached the court, it was sent for, it was much admired, but it wasn't purchased, and it cost the artist twenty écus to obtain the inestimable privilege . . . But I've said enough, I'm becoming ill-humored, in this state I could even get myself into trouble.

About this genre of Greuze's, allow me to ask you a few questions. The first is: What is real poetry? The second: Is there poetry in these last two sketches by Greuze? The third: What would you say was the difference between this poetry and that of the sketch of *Artemisia's Tomb*,¹²⁰ and which do you prefer? The fourth: Of two cupolas, one of them obviously painted, and the other, though it appears to be real, is actually painted, which is the more beautiful? The fifth: Of two letters, for example from a mother to her daughter, one of them full of beautiful and impressive demonstrations of eloquence and expressions of affection which one savors at length but which deceive no one, and the other simple and natural, so simple, so natural that everyone is fooled and believes it really was written by a mother to her daughter, which is the good one and which is the more difficult to write? You'll have surmised that I have no intention of pursuing these questions; neither your project nor my own will permit me to insert one book inside another.

126. *The Nursemaids* Another sketch

Chardin hung this beneath Roslin's family portrait.¹²¹ It's as though he'd written below one of these paintings, "Example of Discord," and below the other, "Example of Harmony."

Moving from right to left, three upended barrels in a row; a table; on this table a bowl, a small saucepan, a cauldron, and other household utensils. In the foreground, a child leading a dog by a leash; to this child is turned the back of a peasant woman in whose lap a little girl is asleep. Further back, an older child holding a

120 By Jean-Baptiste Deshayes; see above, no. 37.

121 See above, no. 77.

169. *Rinaldo and Armida*

Even worse, a hundred times worse than Boucher. Off to Tremblin's shop!

172. *Cambyzes, Furious with the Egyptians,
Kills their God Apis*

Great subjects treated by I can't say what, for this man isn't an artist, he has none of the necessary parts, unless it be a spark of verve that's extinguished when he proceeds from sketch to canvas. Ah, Monsieur Amand, how right Lemoyne was.¹⁴⁶ This *Cambyzes Killing the God Apis*, oil sketch, is summary, but it's energetically executed and certainly is furious.

173. *Psammitichus, One of the Twelve Kings of Egypt,
in a Solemn Sacrifice, Lacking a Bowl,
Uses his Helmet to Offer Libations to Vulcan*
Sketch

Beautiful subject, very poetic, very picturesque, but all I can find in it is five or six slaughterhouse workers subduing a bull. It's certainly exuberant, but as messy as could be imagined.

175. *Magon Distributing, in the Carthaginian Senate,
the Rings of the Roman Soldiers Killed in the Battle of Cannae*
Sketch

Another great subject! This sketch is less impetuous than its predecessors but has more successful lighting effects and is better organized.

Ah! If only I could strip this Amand of his zeal and poetry and give it to Lagrenée! And if I had a child who'd already made some progress in art, by having him look awhile at Lagrenée's *Justice and Clemency*, between Boucher's *Angelica and Medoro* and Amand's *Rinaldo and Armida*, he'd soon understand the difference between the true and the false, the extravagant and the intelligent, the hot and the cold, the noble and the mannered, good and bad color, etc.!

¹⁴⁶ The reference is to Lemoyne's observation that it took thirty years to learn how to preserve the merits of a sketch in a finished painting (cited by Diderot on p. 4 above).

FRAGONARD¹⁴⁷179. *The High Priest Corésus Sacrificing Himself
to Save Callirhoé* (Pl. 35)
Large painting

It's impossible for me to talk to you about this painting; you know that it was no longer at the Salon when the incredible stir it created summoned me there. It will be up to you to give an account of it; we'll discuss it together; and so much the better, for perhaps we'll discover why, after a first round of tributes paid to the artist, after the first expressions of praise, the public seemed to cool towards it. Every composition whose success is short-lived is lacking in some important respect. But to fill out this entry on Fragonard I'm going to tell you about a very strange vision which tormented me one night, after a day on which I'd spent the morning looking at the paintings and the evening reading some of Plato's dialogues.

PLATO'S CAVE

It seemed to me I was confined in the place known as this philosopher's cave. It was a long dark cavern. I was seated there along with a multitude of men, women, and children. All our hands and feet were chained and our heads so well secured by wooden restraints that it was impossible for us to turn them. But what astonished me was that most of them drank, laughed, and sang without seeming the least bit encumbered by their chains, such that if you were to see them you'd say this was their natural state; I even had the impression that those who made any effort to free their own hands, feet, and heads were regarded with suspicion and called by loathsome names, were avoided as if infected with some contagious disease, and that when anything disastrous happened in the cave they were always held responsible for it. Fitted out as I've just described, all our backs were turned to the entrance of this place and we could see nothing but its inner reaches, across which an immense canvas had been hung.

¹⁴⁷ Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806). Student of Chardin (?) and Boucher. Granted provisional admission to the Royal Academy on March 30, 1765; he never became a full academician.

Behind us were kings, ministers, priests, doctors, apostles, prophets, theologians, politicians, cheats, charlatans, masters of illusion, and the whole band of dealers in hopes and fears. Each of them had a small set of transparent, colored figures corresponding to his station, all so well made, so well painted, so numerous and diverse that they were adequate to represent all the comic, tragic, and burlesque scenes in life.

These charlatans, as I subsequently realized, between us and the entrance to the cave, had a large hanging lamp behind them in front of whose light they placed their little figures such that their shadows were projected over our heads, all the while increasing in size, and came to rest on the canvas at the back of the cave, composing scenes so natural, so true, that we took them to be real, now splitting our sides from laughing at them, now crying over them with ardent tears, which will seem a bit less strange when you know that behind the canvas there were subordinate knaves, hired by the first set, who furnished these shadows with the accents, the discourse, the true voices of their roles.

Despite the illusion created by this arrangement, there were a few in the crowd who were suspicious, who rattled their chains from time to time and who had an intense desire to rid themselves of their restraints and turn their heads; but at that very instant first one then another of the charlatans at our backs would begin screaming in a terrifying voice: Beware of turning your head! Calamity will befall anyone rattling his chains! Show respect for the restraints . . . On another occasion I'll tell you what happened to anyone disregarding the voice's advice, the danger he ran, the persecution that was his lot; I'll save that for when we talk philosophy. Today, since we're dealing with pictures, I'd prefer to describe to you some of the ones I saw on the large canvas; I swear to you they were easily on a par with the best in the Salon. On this canvas everything seemed rather disconnected at first; figures laughed, cried, played, drank, sang, fought, pulled out one another's hair, caressed one other, whipped one other; when one was drowning, another was being hung, a third lifted up on a pedestal; but gradually everything coalesced, became clear, and was understandable. Here is what I saw pass by at different intervals, which I'll string together for the sake of brevity.

First there was a young man, his long priest's robes in disorder, one hand grasping a thyrsus, his forehead crowned with ivy, who poured a stream of wine from a large antique vase into large, deep goblets which he then held up to the mouths of some women with wild eyes and dishevelled hair. He drank with them, they drank with him, and when they were intoxicated, they rose and ran through the streets uttering cries of fury mixed with joy. The people, struck by these cries, closed themselves into their houses,

fearful of running into them. They were capable of tearing to pieces any foolish person putting himself in their way, and I saw them do it several times. Well, my friend, what do you say to that?

GRIMM: I say here are two rather beautiful pictures, more or less of the same genre.

DIDEROT: Here's a third one in a different genre. The young priest leading these furies was extremely handsome; I took note of him, and it seemed to me, in the course of my dream, that, overcome by an intoxication more dangerous than that induced by wine, he directed his gaze, his gestures, and his most passionate, most tender utterances to a young woman who refused to listen to him and whose knees he embraced, to no avail.

GRIMM: Though this one has only two figures, that wouldn't make it any easier to execute.

DIDEROT: Especially if they were to have the strong expressions and unusual character they possessed on the canvas in the cave.

While this priest was entreating his inflexible young woman, all of a sudden I heard cries, laughter, screams coming from inside the houses and saw fathers, mothers, women, girls, children emerge from them. The fathers threw themselves on their daughters, who'd lost all sense of shame, the mothers on their sons, who refused to acknowledge them, and the children of both sexes, mingling together, rolled about on the ground; it was a spectacle of extravagant joy, of unbridled license, of a fury and intoxication that were inconceivable. Ah! If only I were a painter! All these faces are still vivid in my mind.

GRIMM: I'm pretty familiar with what our artists can do, and I swear to you there isn't a single one who'd be capable of sketching such a picture.

DIDEROT: In the midst of this tumult some old men who'd been spared by the epidemic, their eyes overflowing with tears, prostrated themselves in a temple, beat their heads against the ground, fervently embracing the god's altars, and I heard the god, or perhaps the subordinate knave behind the canvas, say very distinctly: "She must die, or another must die in her place."

GRIMM: But my friend, at this rate don't you realize that only one of your dreams would suffice to fill an entire gallery?

DIDEROT: Wait, wait, I'm not finished. I was extremely impatient to discover the outcome of this ominous oracle, when the temple was newly revealed to my eyes. Its floor was covered with a red carpet bordered by a wide gold fringe; this rich carpet and its fringe fell over the edge of a long step extending the full width of the façade. At right, near this step, was one of those broad sacrificial vessels intended to receive victims' blood. On

either side of that portion of the temple visible to me, two large columns of white, transparent marble rose towards the roof. At right, at the foot of the foremost column, had been placed a black marble urn partly covered by some of the material needed in such bloody ceremonies. On the other side of the same column was a large candelabrum of the noblest form; it was so high it almost reached the top of the column. In the interval before the two columns on the other side, there was a large altar or triangular tripod on which the sacrificial fire had been lit. I saw the reddish glow of the burning braziers, and the smoke of the incense obscured part of the inner column. There you have the theatre of one of the most terrible and moving representations unfolding on the canvas of the cave during my vision.

GRIMM: But tell me, my friend, have you confided your dream to anyone?

DIDEROT: No. Why do you ask me this question?

GRIMM: Because the temple you've just described is exactly like the scene in Fragonard's picture.

DIDEROT: That could be. I've heard so much talk about this painting over the last few days that, obliged to make up a temple in my dreams, I'd have made up his. However that may be, while my eyes surveyed this temple and the preparations that portended I knew not what with a heavy heart, I saw a single young acolyte dressed in white arrive; he seemed sad. He crouched at the foot of the candelabrum and leaned against the molding of the inner column's base. He was followed by a priest. This priest had his arms crossed over his chest, his head was bent forward, he seemed absorbed in reflections that caused him great pain; he advanced with deliberate steps. I waited for him to lift his head; he did so, turning his eyes towards the heavens and giving voice to the most mournful of sighs, and I added a cry of my own when I recognized this priest. He was the same one I'd seen entreating the inflexible young woman so earnestly and so unsuccessfully just a few moments before; he too was dressed in white; still handsome, but anguish had deeply marked his face. His forehead was crowned with ivy and his right hand grasped the sacrificial knife. He went and stood not far from the young acolyte who'd preceded him. A second acolyte arrived, also in white, who stopped behind him.

Next I saw a young woman enter; she was likewise dressed in white, a crown of roses circled her head. Her face wore a deathly pallor, her trembling knees gave way beneath her; she barely had strength enough to reach the feet of he who adored her, for it was she who had so proudly disdained his tenderness and his pleas. Though everything transpired in silence, one had only to look at

the two of them and recall the words of the oracle to understand that she was the victim and that he was going to sacrifice her. When she was near the high priest her wretched lover, alas! a hundred times more wretched than she, she lost all her strength and fell backwards onto the bed, the very spot on which she was to receive the mortal blow. Her face was tilted heavenwards, her eyes were closed, her two arms which already seemed lifeless hung at her sides, the back of her head almost touched the robes of the high priest her sacrificer and lover; the rest of her body was limp, but the acolyte who'd stopped behind the high priest gave it some support.

While I was reflecting on the unhappy fate of man and the cruelty of the gods or rather of their priests, for the gods are nothing, and dried a few tears that had fallen from my eyes, a third acolyte entered, dressed in white like the others and crowned with roses. How beautiful this young acolyte was! I can't say whether it was his modesty, his youth, his kindness, or his nobility that interested me, but I found him even more impressive than the high priest. He crouched down some distance from the swooning victim and his pitying eyes were fixed on her. A fourth acolyte, also in a white robe, moved near to the one holding the victim; he bent down on one knee, and on his other knee he placed a wide basin which he held by the edges as if preparing to receive the blood about to flow. The cruel implications of this basin, the place occupied by the acolyte, and his posture were only too clear. By this time many other people had hastened into the temple. Men, born capable of compassion, seek out cruel spectacles so they can exercise this capacity.

Towards the back, near the inner column on the left, I noticed two elderly priests standing, as remarkable for the unusual way their heads were cloaked as for the severity of their character and the gravity of their demeanor.

Almost outside, against the forward column on the same side, was a solitary woman; a bit further on and still more outside, another woman, her back against a stone marker, with a young child naked on her knees. The beauty of this child and, perhaps even more, the singular effect created by the light that fell over them both fixed them in my memory. Beyond these women, inside the temple, two more observers. In front of these two observers, exactly between the two columns, with a view of the altar and its burning brazier, an old man whose character and grey hair made an impression on me. I don't doubt the space further back was full of people, but from the spot I occupied in my dream and in the cave I could see nothing more.

GRIMM: This is because there was nothing more to see, because these are all the figures in Fragonard's picture. In your dream they're disposed exactly as they are in his canvas.

DIDEROT: If that's the case, what a beautiful picture Fragonard has made! But hear out the rest. The sky shone forth with crystalline clarity; it seemed the sun had precipitated the entire mass of its light into the temple and took delight in directing it at the victim, when the ceiling darkened, obscured by thick clouds which, spreading about our heads and blending with the light and air, brought forth an unexpected horror. Through these clouds an infernal demon glided forward. I saw him myself: wild eyes bulged from his head; he held a dagger in one hand, the other brandished a burning torch; he screamed. He was Despair, and he carried Love, fearsome Love, on his back. At that very instant the high priest grips the sacrificial knife, he raises his arm; I think he's about to strike the victim, to plunge it into the breast of she who had scorned him and whom the heavens had now delivered to him; not at all, he strikes himself. A generalized shriek pierces and rents the air. I see death's symptoms make their way over the cheeks, the forehead of the loving, generous unfortunate; his knees give way, his head falls back, one of his arms hangs limp, the hand wielding the knife still fixes it in his heart. All eyes are glued to him or fear becoming so; everything signals pain and dread. The acolyte at the foot of the candelabrum stares and gapes in horror; the one supporting the victim turns his head and looks on in horror; the one holding the sinister basin lifts up his frightened eyes; the face and extended arms of the one I found so beautiful reveal all his pain and fright; these two aged priests, whose cruel stares must have feasted so often on steam rising from blood with which they'd soaked the altar, cannot not help but experience pain, empathy, fear; they feel sorry for the unfortunate, they suffer, they are astounded; this solitary woman leaning against one of the columns, overcome by horror and fright, turns away quickly; and the other one with her back against a stone marker falls backwards, one of her hands rises to cover her eyes, and her other arm seems to push this frightening spectacle away; surprise and fear can be read on the faces of the spectators farthest from her; but nothing compares with the astonishment and pain of the grey-haired old man, his hair standing on end, I can still see him, lit by the glow of the burning brazier, his arms extended over the altar: I see his eyes, I see his mouth, I see him lurch forward, I hear his screams, they awaken me, the canvas withdraws and the cave disappears.

GRIMM: That's Fragonard's painting, that's exactly the effect it creates.

DIDEROT: Truly?

GRIMM: It's the same temple, the same arrangement, the same figures, the same action, the same characterizations, the same overall effect, the same virtues, the same faults. In the cave you saw only apparitions, and in his canvas Fragonard, too, has shown us only apparitions. You had a beautiful dream, and a beautiful dream is what he's painted. When one momentarily loses sight of his picture, one fears his canvas might withdraw just as yours did, that these fascinating, sublime phantoms might vanish like those of the night. If you had seen his painting, you'd have been struck by the same magical handling of light and the way the clouds blended with it, and by the ominous effect this mixture created throughout the composition; you'd have experienced the same empathy, the same fright; you'd have seen the mass of this light, strong at first, diminish with surprising speed and skill; you'd have noted the accomplished play of reflected light among the figures. This old man whose piercing screams awakened you, he was just where you saw him, and the two women and the young child, all clothed, lit, frightened just as you've described. Likewise the aged priests, with their loose, full, picturesque cloaked heads, and the acolytes, with their white religious robes, were also distributed on his canvas exactly as on yours. The one you found so beautiful was just as beautiful in the painting, being illuminated from the back such that his forward parts were in half-light or shadow, a painterly effect easier to dream than to achieve, but which deprived him of neither his nobility nor his expressivity.

DIDEROT: What you tell me almost makes me believe, though I don't think this is true during the day, that by night I'm in communication with him.

GRIMM: Surely. But in the painting we observed that the high priest's robes were a bit too much like those of a woman.

DIDEROT: But wait; that's just as in my dream.

GRIMM: That these young acolytes, as noble, as charming as they were, were of indeterminate sex, like hermaphrodites.

DIDEROT: It was just like that in my dream.

GRIMM: That while the victim fell and slumped convincingly, perhaps her lower body was too completely covered by her robes.

DIDEROT: I noticed the same thing in my dream, but I counted such decency a merit, even in such a moment as this.

GRIMM: That her head, weak in color, rather inexpressive, without complexion, without transitions, was more like that of a woman asleep than of one who'd fainted.

DIDEROT: I dreamed her with these same faults.

GRIMM: As for the woman holding her child on her knees, we found her superbly well painted and posed, and the stray ray of light falling on her quite convincing; the reflected light on the

forward column the very limit of truth; the candelabrum, of the most beautiful form and seemingly made of gold. Only figures as vigorously colored as Fragonard's could have held their own against this red carpet with its gold fringe. The old men's heads seemed to us strongly characterized, vividly indicating surprise and horror; the demons quite fierce, quite airy, and the black clouds they brought with them well distributed, giving the scene an air of astonishing terror; the masses of shadow highlighting in the strongest, most piquant way the dazzling splendor of the bright areas. And then a unique feature. Wherever one's eyes settled they encountered fright, it was in every figure: it emanated from the high priest, it spread, it was intensified by the two demons, by the dark clouds accompanying them, but the sombre glow of the braziers. It proved impossible to keep one's soul at a distance from an impression repeated in this way. It was like popular uprisings, in which the passion of the majority takes hold of you even before the cause is known. But in addition to the fear that at the first sign of the cross all these apparitions might disappear, there were judges of demanding taste who discerned something theatrical in the composition that they disliked. Whatever they may say, rest assured that you had a beautiful dream and Fragonard made a beautiful painting. It has all the magic, all the intelligence, all the essentials of pictorial mechanics. This artist has a sublime imagination;¹⁴⁸ all he lacks is a truer sense of color and a technical perfection that he could acquire with time and experience.

177. *A Landscape*

We see a shepherd standing on a knoll; he plays the flute; his dog is beside him, and a peasant woman who listens to him. On this same side a landscape view. On the other some rocks and trees. The rocks are beautiful; the shepherd is well lit and makes a fine effect; the woman is weak and indistinct; the sky poor.

178. *The Parents' Absence Turned to Account*

To the right, on some straw, a knapsack with a game bag; beside it a small drum. Further back, a wooden tub with some wet, twisted cloth thrown over it. Still further back, in an alcove, a stoneware urn with a kettle. Then a door into the cottage with a yellow dog

¹⁴⁸ "La partie idéale est sublime dans cet artiste."

coming in, of whom we see only the head and something of the shoulders, the rest of its body being obscured by a white dog with a clog around its neck; this dog is in the foreground, its muzzle resting on a kind of cask or large tub serving as a table. On this table place a bit of cloth, a green-glazed earthenware plate, and some fruit.

On one side of the table, somewhat back and to the right, a seated little girl, facing us, one of her hands on the fruit, the other on the back of the yellow dog. Behind and beside this little girl, a somewhat older little boy signaling with his hand and speaking to one of his brothers sitting on the floor near the hearth; his other hand rests on his little sister and the yellow dog; his head and torso lean slightly forward.

On the other side of the table, in front of the fireplace at the far left of the painting, signaled only by the glow of its fire, an older brother sitting on the floor, one hand resting on the table and the other holding the handle of a small saucepan. It's to him that his younger brother gestures and speaks.

In the background, very much in shadow, we make out another boy who's already a bit older, clasping and vigorously embracing the elder sister of all these brats. She seems to defend herself as best she can.

All these children resemble one another as well as their elder sister, and I presume that if this cottage doesn't belong to a Parsi, the older fellow is a young neighbor who's seized on the parents' momentary absence to play around with his little neighbor of the opposite sex.

We see to the left, above the fireplace, in an alcove in the wall, some pots, bottles, and other household objects.

The subject is prettily imagined; it makes its effect and is attractively colored. One can't quite make out where the light comes from; but it's enlivening, though less so than in the *Callirhoé*; it seems to originate outside the canvas and falls from left to right. Half the hand of the youngster with the saucepan, the one resting on the table, is especially satisfying, being partly in shadow and partly in the light. From that point, spreading out, the light falls on the two dogs, on the other two children, on all the adjacent objects, and it brings them vividly to life. This white dog placed squarely in the light and in the foreground is a small *tour de force*. One asks oneself why the background shadows are so dark one can barely see the most interesting part of the subject, the older fellow so tightly embracing his little neighbor, but I'd bet my life there's no answer. The dogs are good, but more successful as conceptions than in their handling, they're blurry, blurry, though otherwise respectable. Compare these dogs with those by Louthembourg and Greuze, and you'll see that

arm, of the shadow of those fingers on her palm, of the shadow of this hand and arm on her breast! The beauty and delicacy of the transitions from the forehead to the cheeks, from the cheeks to the neck, from the neck to the breast! How beautifully her hair is arranged! How beautifully the planes of her head are disposed, how it jumps off the canvas! And the voluptuous limpness reigning from the tips of her fingers through the rest of the figure; and how this limpness overtakes the spectator, coursing through his veins as it courses through this enchanting figure! It's a picture to turn one's head, even yours which is so good.

Goodnight, by friend; come what may, on this note I'm going to put myself to bed. So much for the painters. I'll take up the sculptors tomorrow.

SCULPTURE

I'm fond of fanatics, not the ones who present you with an absurd article of faith and who, holding a knife to your throat, scream at you: "Sign or die," but rather those who, deeply committed to some specific, innocent taste, hold it to be beyond compare, defend it with all their might, who go into street and household, not with a lance but with their syllogistic decree in hand, calling on everyone they meet to either embrace their absurd view or to avow that the charms of their *Dulcinea* surpass those of every other earthly creature. People like this are droll; they amuse me, sometimes they astonish me. When they've happened upon some truth, they advocate it with an energy that shatters and demolishes all before it. Courting paradox, piling image on image, exploiting all the resources of eloquence, figurative expressions, daring comparisons, turns of phrase, rhythmic devices, appealing to sentiment, imagination, attacking soul and sensibility from every conceivable angle, the spectacle of their efforts is always beautiful. Such a one is Jean-Jacques Rousseau¹⁵⁹ when he lashes out against the literature he's cultivated all his life, the philosophy he himself professes, The

159 Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78). French writer and social theorist. Author of *A Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* (1750) *Julie or the New Heloise* (1761), *The Social Contract* (1762), and *Émile* (1762). He and Diderot had been close friends in the century's middle years, but by the 1760s their relations had soured.

society of our corrupt cities in the midst of which he burns to reside and whose acknowledgement, approbation, tribute he craves. It's all very well for him to close the window of his country retreat that faces towards Paris, but it's still the only spot in the world for which he has eyes; in the depths of his forest he's elsewhere, he's in Paris. Such a one is Winckelmann¹⁶⁰ when he compares the productions of ancient artists with those of modern artists. What doesn't he see in this stump of a man we call the *Torso*? The swelling muscles of his chest, they're nothing less than the undulations of the sea; his broad bent shoulders, they're a great concave vault that, far from being broken, is strengthened by the burdens it's made to carry; and as for his nerves, the ropes of ancient catapults that hurled large rocks over immense distances are mere spiderwebs in comparison. Inquire of this charming enthusiast by what means Glycon, Phidias, and the others managed to produce such beautiful, perfect works and he'll answer you: by the sentiment of liberty which elevates the soul and inspires great things; by rewards offered by the nation, and public respect; by the constant observation, study, and imitation of the beautiful in nature, respect for posterity, intoxication at the prospect of immortality, assiduous work, propitious social mores and climate, and genius . . . There's not a single point of this response one would dare contradict. But put a second question to him, ask him if it's better to study the antique or nature, without the knowledge and study of which, without a taste for which ancient artists, even with all the specific advantages they enjoyed, would have left us only mediocre works: The antique! he'll reply without skipping a beat; The antique! . . . and in one fell swoop a man whose intelligence, enthusiasm, and taste are without equal betrays all these gifts in the middle of the *Toboso*.¹⁶¹ Anyone who scorns nature in favor of the antique risks never producing anything that's not trivial, weak, and paltry in its drawing, character, drapery, and expression. Anyone who's neglected nature in favor of the antique will risk being cold, lifeless, devoid of the hidden, secret truths which can only be perceived in nature itself. It seems to me one must study the antique to learn how to look at nature.

Modern artists have rebelled against study of the antique because amateurs have tried to force it on them; and modern men of letters

160 Johann-Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68). German archeologist and art historian, author of *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* (1755) and *A History of Ancient Art* (1764).

161 *Toboso* was a small town outside Toledo in which Cervantes placed the residence of *Dulcinea*. As E.M. Bukdahl has suggested (1765, 1984, note 714, pp. 278–9), Diderot here seems to suggest an image of *Toboso* as a river in which Winckelmann, having begun to cross, stops in midstream.

have defended study of the antique because it's been attacked by the *philosophes*.

It seems to me, my friend, that sculptors are more attached to the antique than painters. Could this be because the ancients left behind some beautiful statues while their paintings are known to us only through the descriptions and accounts of writers? There's a considerable difference between the most beautiful line by Pliny and the *Gladiator* of Agasias (Pl. 40).

It also seems to me that it's more difficult to judge sculpture than painting, and this opinion of mine, if it's valid, should make me more circumspect. Few people other than practitioners of the art can distinguish a very beautiful work of sculpture from an ordinary one. Certainly the *Dying Athlete* (Pl. 41) will touch you, move you, perhaps even make so violent an impression on you that you can neither look away nor stop looking at it; still, if you had to choose between this statue and the *Gladiator*, whose action, while beautiful and true certainly, is nonetheless incapable of touching your soul, you'd make Pigalle¹⁶² and Falconet laugh if you preferred the former to the latter. A large single figure that's all white is so simple, it has so few of the particulars that would facilitate a comparison of the work of art with that of nature! Paintings remind me a hundred times over of what I see, of what I've seen; this is not true of sculpture. I'd take the chance of buying a picture on the basis of my own taste, my own judgment; if it were a statue, I'd ask an artist's advice.

So you think, you say to me, it's more difficult to sculpt than to paint? —I don't say that. Judging is one thing and making is another. There's the block of marble, the figure is within it, it must be extracted. There's the canvas, it's flat, it's on this surface that one must create. The image must spring forth, advance, take on relief so that I can move around it; if not I myself, then my eye; it must take on life. But if it's modelled, it must live through its modelling, without resorting to the life-bestowing resources of the palette. — But these same resources, is it easy to use them? The sculptor has everything when he has drawing, expression, and facility with the chisel; with these resources he can successfully essay a nude figure. Painting requires still more. As for the difficulties inherent in more complex subjects, it seems to me they increase more for the painter than for the sculptor. The art of composing groups is the same, the art of draping is the same; but lighting, overall composition the sense of place, skies, trees, water, accessories, backgrounds, color, the full array of accidents? "*Sed non nostrum inter vos tantas componere*

162 Jean-Baptiste Pigalle (1714–85). Student of J.-B. II Lemoyne. Granted provisional membership in the Royal Academy on November 4, 1741; received as a full academician on July 30, 1744.

lites."¹⁶³ Sculpture is made for both the blind and those who can see; painting addresses itself only to the eyes. On the other hand, the first certainly has fewer objects and fewer subjects than the second: one can paint whatever one wants; sculpture—severe, grave, chaste—must choose. Sometimes it makes play with an urn or a vase, even in the grandest, most moving compositions: one sees reliefs of frolicking children on bowls about to collect human blood; but this play maintains a certain dignity: it is serious, even when striking a light note. Undoubtedly it exaggerates; exaggeration might even suit it better than it does painting. The painter and the sculptor are both poets, but the latter never makes jokes. Sculpture can't bear the facetious, the burlesque, the droll, and can sustain the comic only rarely. But it delights in fauns and sylphs; without strain it can help satyrs put the aging Silenus back on his mount or bear up the tottering steps of a disciple. It is voluptuous but never lewd. In a voluptuous mode it retains something that's refined, rarefied, exquisite, which alerts me to how protracted, laborious, difficult the work is, and that while it's possible to brush onto the canvas a frivolous idea that can be created in an instant and painted out in the same breath, such is not true of the chisel, which, instilling the artist's idea into material that's hard, resistant, and eternal, should be governed by choices that are original and unusual. The pencil is more licentious than the brush and the brush more licentious than the chisel. Sculpture requires an enthusiasm that's more obstinate and deep-seated, more of a kind of verve that seems strong and tranquil, more of this covered, hidden fire that burns within; its muse is violent, but secretive and silent.

If sculpture cannot tolerate ordinary ideas, it's even less tolerant of middling execution; a slight imperfection in drawing that's scarcely noticeable in a painting is unforgivable in a statue. Michelangelo knew this well; when he despaired of achieving flawless perfection he preferred to leave the marble rough-hewn. —But this is proof that because sculpture can do fewer things than painting, we're more demanding with regard to what we have a right to expect of it. —My thought exactly.

Several questions have occurred to me concerning sculpture.

The first: Why is it that sculpture, while chaste, is less bashful than painting and displays the sex organs more often and more frankly?

That, I think, is because in the end it provides a less convincing likeness than painting; because the material it uses is so cold, so

163 "It is not our place to compose such great strife": based on Virgil, *Ecloques*, IV, v. 108 ("*non nostrum inter vos tantas componere lites*").

recalcitrant, so impenetrable; but above all because its principal difficulty resides in the secret of softening this hard and cold material, of making it into soft, pliant flesh, of capturing the contours of the human body, of vividly yet accurately rendering its veins, its muscles, its articulations, its obtrusions, its indentations, its inflections, its sinuosities, and because a bit of drapery can consume months of work and study; perhaps because its more primitive, innocent morals are superior to those of painting, and because it is less preoccupied by the present than by the future. Men have not always been clothed; who knows if they always will be?

The second: Why is it that sculpture, both ancient and modern, strips away from women that veil which nature's own modesty and the age of puberty throw over the sexual organs, while leaving it in place for men?¹⁶⁴

I'm going to try to pile up my answers, so that they'll provide cover for one another.¹⁶⁵

Cleanliness, periodic indisposition, a hot climate, the conveniences associated with pleasure, libertine curiosity, and the use of courtesans as models in Athens and Rome, such are the reasons that first occur to a sensible man, and I think they're good ones. It's a simple matter not to depict what one doesn't find in one's model. But it may be that art has more studied motives: it wants you to note the beauty of this contour, the charm of this meandering line, of this long, soft, and delicate sinuosity which begins at the end of one groin and continues with alternating up and down motions until it has reached the end of the other groin; it wants you to feel that the course of this infinitely agreeable line would be broken by an interposed tuft of hair; that this isolated tuft of hair is connected to nothing and is a stain on a woman, whereas on a man this kind of natural garment, rather thick on the chest, continues along the ribs and sides of the belly, thinning but still present, and proceeds, without interruption, to make itself thicker, higher, bushier around the natural parts; it wants to demonstrate to you that these natural parts of a man, shorn of hair, would seem like a bit of small intestine, like a worm of disagreeable aspect.

The third: Why did the ancients always drape their figures with damp cloth?

Because however hard one tries to capture the effect of fabric in marble, one will only succeed imperfectly; because thick, coarse material obscures the nude figure, which sculpture is even more set

¹⁶⁴ Diderot is alluding to pubic hair.

¹⁶⁵ "Je vais tacher d'entasser mes réponses, afin qu'elles se dérobent les unes par les autres": Diderot is making a casual pun here with the verb *dérober* (to conceal), the root of which is *robe* (gown, dress).

on articulating than is painting, and because, however truthful its folds, it will always retain something of the heavy quality of stone, coming across as rock.

The fourth: In the *Laocoön* (Pl. 42), why is one of the foreshortened legs longer than the other?

Because without this daring inaccuracy the figure would have been unpleasant to look at. Because there are natural effects that must be mitigated or ignored; I'll cite an example that's very commonplace, very simple, but which I'd defy even the greatest artist to handle without offending either truth or grace. I imagine a nude woman seated on a stone bench; however firm her flesh, the weight of her body solidly pushes her thighs against the stone on which she's sitting, they puff out disagreeably on either side and form, at the back, both of them together, the most impertinent cushion one could possibly imagine. What to do? There's no middle course; one must either close one's eyes to these effects and imagine that the woman's buttocks are as hard as the stone and that her pliant flesh doesn't yield to the weight of her body, or throw some drapery all around her figure that simultaneously hides the disagreeable effect and the most beautiful parts of her body from me.

The fifth: What sort of effect would be produced by introducing the most beautiful, the truest painted color onto a statue?

A bad one, I think. First, there would be only one vantage point from which the statue's coloring would be convincing. Second, there's nothing more disagreeable than the immediate juxtaposition of the true and the untrue, and the color's truth would never coincide perfectly with the truth of the object, that object being the statue—solitary, isolated, solid, poised to move. It's like Roslin's beautiful embroidery falling over wooden hands, his beautiful satin, so convincing, placed on mannequins. Hollow out a statue's eyes and fill them with enamel or precious stones, and just see if you find the effect bearable. We see that in most of their busts the ancients preferred to leave the eyes whole and solid rather than trace the iris and outline the pupil, that they preferred to leave one free to imagine a blind person rather than depict pierced eyes; and while this might displease our modern sculptors, in this respect I feel their taste was more austere than ours.

Painting is part technique and part idea, and their relative proportions vary in portrait painting, genre painting, and history painting. The same divisions pretty well apply to sculpture; and seeing that there are women who paint heads, I find nothing strange in seeing the emergence of one who makes busts. Marbles, as is well known, are copies from terra cotta. Some have maintained that the ancients worked directly in marble, but I think these people haven't given the matter sufficient thought.

One day Falconet showed me the submissions of the young students competing for the grand prize in sculpture, and saw how astonished I was by the vigor of expression, the grandeur and nobility of these works produced by the hands of youths between nineteen and twenty years old. Wait ten years, he said to me, and I promise you they'll have forgotten all that . . . That's because sculptors need to use models over even longer periods than painters and, whether due to laziness, avarice, or poverty, the greater number dispense with them after their forty-fifth year. Because sculpture demands a simplicity, a naiveté, a hardy brand of verve that's rarely retained beyond a certain age; and that's why sculptors decline more rapidly than painters, unless this hardy quality is natural, is part of their character. Pigalle is hard-headed, Falconet even more so; they'll both produce good work till the day they die. Lemoyne is polite, good-natured, affected, and respectable; he is and will remain mediocre.

Plagiarism occurs in sculpture, but it's hard to miss. It's neither as easy to bring off nor as easy to hide as it is in painting . . . And now let's move on to our artists.

LEMOYNE¹⁶⁶

This artist makes fine portraits, that's his only merit. When he attempts a grand machine one feels his head isn't in it. He can knock on his forehead all he wants, no one's there. His compositions are without grandeur, without genius, without verve, without effect; his figures are insipid, cold, heavy, and affected; they're like his character, in which not the slightest trace of the man of nature remains. Look at his monument for Bordeaux; if you deprive it of its imposing mass, what's left? Make portraits, Monsieur Lemoyne, but leave monuments alone, especially funerary monuments. Look, I'm sorry, but you don't even have enough imagination to bring off the hair of a mourning woman. Take a look at Deshays' mausoleum¹⁶⁷ and you'll agree that this particular muse is a stranger to you.

What a beautiful head, my friend, is that of the Marquise de Gléon! How wonderfully beautiful! It lives, it holds the interest, it smiles a melancholy smile; one is tempted to stop and ask her who

¹⁶⁶ Jean-Baptiste II Lemoyne (1704-78). Student of his father Jean-Louis Lemoyne and Robert Le Lorrain. Granted provisional membership in the Royal Academy on May 29, 1728; received a full academician on July 26, 1738.

¹⁶⁷ The sketch of *Artemis at her Husband's Tomb* by J.-B. Deshays; see above, no. 36.

is meant to be happy, for she is not. I'm unacquainted with this charming woman, I've never heard of her, but I can tell she's in pain, and it's a shame. If this creature's intelligence and character aren't as admirable as her expression and her countenance suggest, renounce all faith in physiognomy forever and write on the back of your hand: "fronti nulla fides."¹⁶⁸

The bust of Garrick¹⁶⁹ is good. This isn't the infantile Garrick who acts foolishly in the street, who plays, jumps, pirouettes, and gambols about his rooms; this is Roscius¹⁷⁰ ordering his eyes, forehead, cheeks, mouth, and all the muscles of his face, or rather his soul, to assume the feelings he wants and who controls the actions of his entire person as you do your feet when you walk, or your hands when you pick something up or put it down. He's acting on stage.

Madame la Comtesse de Brionne, well, my friend, what can I say about her? Mme de Brionne is still only a beautiful preparatory effort; grace and life are about to blossom forth, but they aren't there yet, they're waiting for the work to be finished, and when will it be? The hair is only roughed in; Lemoyne thought black chalk could to the work of the chisel: "Sure, go see if it does." And then this bosom! I've seen knitting that looked like this. Monsieur Lemoyne! Monsieur Lemoyne! One must master the craft of working marble, for this refractory stone does not allow itself to be shaped by unskilled hands. If a fellow practitioner, say Falconet, wanted to be frank, he'd tell you the eyes are cold and dry; that when the nostrils are left solid the mouth must be open, otherwise the bust seems to suffocate; he'd tell you your other portraits are more carefully worked, more detailed, but not fully finished, though they ought to be because nature is, and everything should be finished enough to be seen from close up.

FALCONET¹⁷¹

Here's a man who has genius and all kinds of character traits compatible and incompatible with genius, though these last are also

¹⁶⁸ "One cannot trust faces."

¹⁶⁹ David Garrick (1717-79). Actor, producer, dramatist, poet, and co-manager of the Drury Lane Theatre in London. He was in Paris in 1763-4.

¹⁷⁰ Q. R. Gallus Roscius, a celebrated actor of ancient Rome.

¹⁷¹ Étienne-Maurice Falconet (1716-91). Student of his uncle Nicolas Guillaume and Jean-Baptiste II Lemoyne. Granted provisional membership in the Royal Academy on August 29, 1744; received as a full academician on August 31, 1754.