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Denis Diderot's Anglophilia and its Impact upon his Salons

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DENIS DIDEROT'S ANGLOPHILIA AND ITS IMPACT UPON HIS *SALONS*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Louisiana State University and the School of Art
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
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in

The School of Art

by

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Professor Spieth, my advisor, has worked tirelessly to earn himself an enviable professional legacy, but I hope he is equally proud of another legacy: the knowledge he has imparted upon the thousands of students fortunate enough to have taken his classes at LSU, myself included.

Finally, I dedicate this to my mother, my father, and my fiancée.

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ABSTRACT

The work of Enlightenment *philosophe* Denis Diderot went largely unpublished during his lifetime, and upon its discovery in the nineteenth century, his originality was overlooked because of the perceived quaintness of his tastes. Thankfully, as his body of work became better understood and more accessible, his reputation steadily improved. The discipline of literary art criticism is now thought of as having its origins in Diderot's *Salons*, a series of letters containing his thoughts on the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture's biennial exhibitions in the Palace of the Louvre.¹ These were circulated among an elite clientele who were not able to attend the Salons themselves, and though these letters have been studied by numerous scholars, they are typically treated as a period compendium, the contents of which are better summarized than explained. Being that they are the founding documents of such a young discipline, and that the contents themselves are already sufficiently well-known, I have endeavored to understand these contents in light of the *anglomanie* which took France by storm in the first half of the eighteenth century. A general account of Diderot's Anglophilia was first given in R. Loyalty Cru's *Diderot as a Disciple of English Thought*, but Cru's treatment of the *Salons* figures only marginally in what is a very broad chapter on Diderot's general aesthetics.² As I am concerned with the *Salons* as an art historical document, I have instead organized this paper around those painters who are considered the major representatives of the eighteenth century and the ways in which Diderot's Anglophilia determined his perception of them. There are, in my opinion, three principal qualities which Diderot's exposure to English philosophy

¹ The *Salons* are Diderot's letters; the Salons are the events themselves.

² R.L. Cru, *Diderot as a Disciple of English Thought* (New York: Columbia, 1913).

predisposed him to seek out in art: the relatable, the explicit, and the useful. The first two are the means by which the third is reached, and each shall be covered in its own chapter.

INTRODUCTION: ANGLOPHILIA AND DENIS DIDEROT

Not on the smoke from the flame does he dwell, but on the light from the smoke, those marvelous wonders should it soon evoke.³

-Horace

Anglophilia was a by-product of the praises Voltaire lavished on the “Happy Island” as part of a campaign of shame he launched against France in the 1720s. Having been exiled to England in 1726, Voltaire produced during his three years there essays and letters that had a wide-ranging effect on the Continental intellectual climate. In France, it heralded the beginning of a new era of intellectual curiosity after decades of stagnation in the final years of Louis XIV’s reign. Whereas Voltaire, who belongs to the first generation of French Enlightenment thinkers, is thought of as one the eighteenth century’s most original minds, Denis Diderot is remembered as an *encyclopédiste* first, an author second, and an atheist third.⁴ Diderot, twenty years Voltaire’s junior, was very receptive to the growing influence of English culture, and raged against the *ancien régime* with more vigor than any other Enlightenment figure. There lurks behind nearly every line in his *oeuvre* the aim of undermining the existing social order.⁵ In articles for the *Encyclopédie* written and edited under his direction, we see a definite concern for equality under the law when France was still highly stratified. In his fiction, the themes and arguments are almost entirely subversive. The skepticism which he espoused questioned both heavenly and earthly hierarchies. Yet, of the myriad fields touched on in the *petit philosophe*’s voluminous writings, none owes a greater debt to his attention than literary art criticism.

³ Diderot uses this quote from Horace’s *Odes* to describe himself in the introduction to his *Salon de 1765*.

⁴ Aram Vartanian, "From Deist to Atheist: Diderot's Philosophical Orientation 1746-1749." *Diderot Studies* 1 (1949), 46.

⁵ Cru, 12.

Diderot, as a diligent writer often working on commission, saw in every assignment an opportunity to promote his values. He sincerely believed his activities as a man of letters served the greater edification of mankind.⁶ Being an auto-didact, he eagerly accepted the challenge offered to him in 1759 to write on the art exhibited in the French Academy's biennial Salon. Because he lacked direct experience with art, Diderot noted upon his acceptance of the job that he felt keenly unqualified to speak on artistic technique, despite simultaneously being supremely qualified to speak on aesthetics.⁷ Though he stepped into this role of art critic for the subscription newsletter the *Correspondance littéraire* quite unexpectedly, he would hold the position for the next twenty-two years, and missed only two exhibitions during that time. The aforementioned praise of strict reason that pervaded all of his major works is just as prevalent in his criticism of the eighteenth century's greatest painters. Diderot's moralizing value judgments, which often have a decidedly English flavor, were an appealing addition to the performance of an activity so decidedly French – that is, publicly passing judgment on the art of the Salons.⁸ The English influences Diderot both consciously and unconsciously introduced into his aesthetic writings have been documented in the select books that deal with Diderot's Anglophilia. R. Loyalty Cru devotes a comparatively short chapter to Diderot “the critic” in his sweeping *Diderot as a Disciple of English Thought*, and Charles Dedeyan does likewise in his treatment of the same subject in French.⁹ Numerous others have outlined the general characteristics of Diderot's aesthetics while always acknowledging his indebtedness to England.

What is lacking – and what this thesis concerns itself with – is the acknowledgment of the

⁶ Arthur McCandless Wilson, *Diderot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), 546.

⁷ Denis Diderot, *Salons. 1759, 1761, 1763* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1975), 67.

⁸ Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 103.

⁹ Charles Dedeyan, *Diderot et la pensée anglaise* (Florence: Biblioteca dell'Archivum Romanicum), 1998.

influence Diderot's Anglophilia had on the specific criteria by which he judged the art of the Salons.

To understand how Diderot came to be an Anglophile, one must first understand how the taste for all things English came to France. At the age of thirty-two, Voltaire found himself on the losing end of an argument over a woman. His rival was the son of a duke, and Voltaire, being the most minor of aristocrats, was threatened with incarceration for refusing to drop the matter. Having already been to prison in his twenties, and because of the futility of fighting someone of such high standing in court, he begged to be allowed to voluntarily exile himself to England. The intellectual climate there stimulated the most productive period in his life thus far. Voltaire, emboldened by the much more lenient censorship laws in England, wrote about the things the French members of the Republic of Letters could only dream of tackling. The England of Voltaire's day represented not only a present-day ideal society to the French Enlightenment thinkers, but the country also had an enviable history. The English had already taken action against the influences identified by Voltaire as being the most corruptive: the Church and the monarchy. Under Henry VIII, the Catholic Church was expelled from England, and the supremacy of the state over any religious authority was codified into law. The monasteries were looted, the centuries of hoarded wealth contained within them was "redistributed," and priests and pope had become targets for English wit. Equally inspiring to Voltaire was the English experiment in setting up a non-monarchical government under Oliver Cromwell in the aftermath of a civil war.¹⁰ The regicide of Charles I that preceded it was

¹⁰ Voltaire and Richard W. Ellis, *An essay upon the civil wars of France: extracted from curious manuscripts* (Westport: Printed by Richard W. Ellis, the Georgian Press, 1928), 89.

perhaps the most instructive incident in the whole sequence of events.¹¹ Voltaire's appreciation for this nation's radical actions is documented in his famous *Lettres philosophiques*, or *Letters on the English*, which were written over the course of his stay across the Channel from 1726 to 1729. In them, he discusses at length the Quakers, and praises their abandoning of any formal sacraments like the ones observed in Catholic France. He also equivocates on the death of Charles I by comparing it to the intrigues wrought by French meddlers in the court of the Holy Roman Empire. For the young Diderot, these letters were an incredibly important part of his early independent education. Though they were declared contraband and destroyed publicly in a symbolic execution by bonfire, the *Lettres* circulated widely in France in the 1730s. They were the founding document of Anglophilia, and France's introduction to the work of the great English minds of the past 150 years. Among Voltaire's chief goals was to foster in his readers admiration for the great personalities of England and their work. He discusses Bacon, Shakespeare, Newton, and the great literary minds of the day, like Alexander Pope and John Dryden. This "discovery of England" would be just the starting point, and, from here, French thinkers would begin to explore the English literature they had overlooked. In the process, they began to emulate the English customs so long unknown to them. Anglophilia, or *anglomanie*, in its more emphatic original form, presented an exciting new trend for a French audience still mired in the seventeenth century. The former perception of England as a backwater had been a state-approved position, and was part of the *grand siècle*'s obsession with establishing France as Europe's sole civilized power and the heir to classical antiquity. All of these efforts were undone in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, and the prior proscriptions on English

¹¹ Ibid.

culture gave way to a sudden rush of interest in a land that seemed, in contrast to France, to radiate vitality.

England's appeal to Diderot was multi-faceted. He is sometimes portrayed as an intellectual "also-ran" who was merely following the trends set by other French Enlightenment thinkers. While Voltaire's influence was no doubt inescapable for the illuminated socialites of the mid-century, Diderot's own appreciation for English thought was independent of such trends and is apparent in each phase of his intellectual development.

Diderot was destined from birth to be one to challenge the existing social order. Born into a family of artisans in the town of Langres, Diderot became acquainted with the tragedies that originated from France's strict class conventions early on. Diderot's admiration for Greuze's paintings of middle-class families are evidence enough that, despite any hardships, he looked back on his family life with sentiment, not shame.¹² Family tragedy was instead turned into source material. Angélique, his youngest sibling, was made to enter an Ursuline convent in her late teens against her will. By the age of twenty-two, she was dead. Diderot claimed that her illness was brought on by insanity which in itself was a result of being overworked by cruel nuns. This event no doubt instilled the hostility toward organized religion that was characteristic of his mature works. In the year before his death, he wrote *La Religieuse*, a complicated novel about a nun sent to a convent against her will who pleads to a real-life acquaintance of Diderot's to rescue her. The character was no doubt based on his sister Angélique, then thirty years dead, and was conceived of with the thought of bringing awareness to the still-prevalent practice of sending girls without marriage prospects off to convents.

¹² Ibid., 22.

In his teens, the young Denis was pressed by his father to take an interest in his future. He was first pushed by his parents into religious training, but, refusing to go further down that path, was encouraged to take over the family business and become a cutler like his father. Diderot, in reality, just wanted an education for its own sake, and his family consented, thinking that by sending him to Paris he would eventually become a lawyer. Law did hold his interest for a year, but the Sorbonne's more liberal scholastic setting excited and eventually distracted him from his study. Diderot threw himself headlong into the learning of as many languages as he could handle. Diderot actually excelled in the classics, and he would remain a steadfast classicist until his death. He had a perfect command of Latin, and excellent Greek, and was intimately familiar with even the most obscure myths and historical episodes, which served him well at the Salon. In spite of this, Diderot thought that modern languages were equally important to old ones.¹³ It is now, in the early 1730s, that Diderot makes one of the most fateful decisions of his life thus far. The young scholar, who had been disowned by his father for his indolence, decided that he must make a choice between devoting himself fully to either the English or Italian language. How he came to choose English is perhaps most easily understood when calling to mind the spectacle of the public destruction of Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques* on the steps of the Palais de Justice, which is not far at all from the university district. Diderot no doubt was in possession of this book, as it was reproduced widely precisely because it made for profitable illicit printing during a period of intense public interest in England. He no doubt read with pleasure about the land and its men, and, holding in his hands a book that had had its

¹³ Cru, 25.

life symbolically ended, Diderot looked to England as a kind of tolerant utopia that had surpassed France precisely because of its readiness to accept intellectual diversity.

Diderot brought his family considerable shame by taking up the philosopher's mantle. With their attention no longer on him, however, he was able to turn himself fully to writing. Much of his income came from providing French translations for the English works the public had begun demanding in the wake of *Lettres philosophiques* in order to satisfy their growing *anglomanie*. He was occupied between 1733, and the start of his involvement with the *Encyclopédie* in the middle of the 1740s, with providing translations and writing a few original treatises and works of fiction that had limited circulation.

In a way, the entire business of the *Encyclopédie* was seated in Anglophilia. From the title alone (*Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*), the influence of Englishman Ephraim Chambers' 1728 two-volume *Cyclopaedia, or, an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* on the French *Encyclopédistes* is evident. The project began as little more than an effort to translate Chambers' work into French, and Diderot, having languished for ten years in Paris as a proto-Bohemian, was brought on board because of his reputation as a reliable Parisian authority on the English language.¹⁴ Despite its English origins, this French effort eventually distinguished itself by its unprecedented scope and the illustrious names which came to be associated with it. Diderot played two very vital roles in its production; he was both editor-in-chief and the second-most prolific contributor of articles, writing more than 10,000 in less than two decades. Diderot's real indispensability was defined by his tireless editorial energy. From 1747 onward, as he prepared the first editions of the text

¹⁴ Cru, 407.

for publication, a very grateful Diderot counted himself fortunate for the way his editorship had given him direction in life. Thanks to his involvement in this project, he achieved small notoriety as an intellectual figure in eighteenth-century Paris. As he was never inducted into the French Academy, this was a small consolation for a man who, in the *Salons* and elsewhere, seemed to lust after credentials that would give his ideas respectability.¹⁵

Several volumes of the *Encyclopédie*, like so much of Diderot's literary output, were confiscated or destroyed before being published. From *Les Bijoux indiscrets* of 1748, to his philosophical meditations on the deaf and blind, and finally to his masterpiece, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, Diderot's career was characterized by both official censorship and self-suppression. The *Salons* themselves are thought of as a nineteenth-century phenomenon, having been made widely available for the first time 1798. His transition into his later career (he is forty-six when he attends his first Salon) is characterized by success in dealing with a select group of cultured elites, and was not a product of winning a mass audience as an author. Of the many relationships he formed in this period as a result of the collaborative nature of the *Encyclopédie*, none was more important to his professional development than the one with Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm, who asked Diderot to take up art criticism in 1759. Moreover, Jean-Jacques Rousseau himself was an ally to Diderot for a time, and interceded for him during a jail sentence. Other public intellectual figures, like Jean le Rond d'Alembert, co-editor of the *Encyclopédie*, and the avowed atheist, Baron d'Holbach, influenced his milieu and intake of ideas.

¹⁵ John Goodman, *Diderot on Art*, 2 vols. (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1995), 1:77.

Grimm, a minor German nobleman, was an avid Francophile, and had found his way into several of the most prominent private salons of the mid-century. Having established himself as an intellectual, he eventually came to meet Rousseau, who was his point of contact with the *Encyclopédistes*. Diderot was fortunate to make the acquaintance of one such as Grimm; despite his oppositional stance toward traditional, aristocratic power structures in France and abroad, Diderot always met with success when addressing the aristocracy. Grimm himself had been cultivating a contact list that included members of Europe's royal houses, and, in 1753, he launched the *Correspondance littéraire* with them as his initial subscribers. This publication covered the essential social events in the French capital, but, for posterity, its most prized contributions were those reviews of the French Academy of Painting and Sculpture's official Salons. Grimm himself was the author of the first few Salon reviews, but handed the reins over to his close friend Diderot in 1759. He persisted in the role and covered nine of the next eleven Salons, missing two in the 1770s when he served as the court philosopher to Catherine II of Russia. Although he did not quite find the enlightened, receptive monarch that he had hoped for, he did find a benefactress who graciously provided for him until his death in 1784.

CHAPTER I: HOW DIDEROT'S ANGLOPHILIA PREPARED HIM TO STEP INTO THE ROLE OF CRITIC

Grimm's fateful decision to send Diderot to the Salon in his stead was seen by Diderot as an opportunity to test his limits. He jumped at the occasion, and believed from the beginning that his contribution to art appreciation would be significant and remembered for its originality.¹⁶ By the late 1750s, Diderot was at the height of his powers; he was enjoying the highest degree of public recognition that he would ever enjoy, and his self-education in philosophy was, in his opinion, nearly complete.¹⁷ The only thing he lacked, and what all of the contemporary Salon critics were lacking, was a technical background. He would soon find himself playing a dual role, both continuing a recently-founded tradition of aesthetic inquiry as well as meeting a popular demand for critical writing on the offerings at the Salons.

When Diderot took up art criticism it was on the heels of the first generation of professional writers who made it their business to offer descriptions and judgments of contemporary painting and sculpture. The demand for such commentary was a product of the similarly novel institution of regular, free, public exhibitions of the latest art.¹⁸

What was new, then, was not the concept, but his approach. Étienne la Font de Saint-Yenne, believed by Thomas Crow to have been the first individual to establish himself as a journalistic critic of contemporary art, published his *Salon of 1746* in 1747. Saint-Yenne was himself an outsider: a member of the Academy of Lyon and a Jansenist. The dismissive and "diaphragmatic" persona he created for himself was in many ways emulated by Diderot when he became a critic in 1759.¹⁹ He wrote that his judgments, at which he arrived with a great deal of spontaneity and force, emanated naturally from his well-cultivated aesthetic sensibility. La

¹⁶ Seznec, 22.

¹⁷ Ibid., 25.

¹⁸ Crow, 93.

¹⁹ Ibid., 99.

Font de Saint-Yenne's aesthetic sense, which was heavily based on the work of the Abbé du Bos (for a long time the preeminent philosopher of aesthetics in France and abroad), dictated that art expresses something about the nation in which it is produced.²⁰ No wonder, then, that Saint-Yenne and Diderot come to similar conclusions concerning the work of Boucher, which they both see as being degenerate, and praise the simplicity of Chardin as a kind of antidote to Rococo frivolity. With that said, English moralist philosophers are the greatest exponents of moral sense theory in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and Denis Diderot's Anglophilia is what introduces these themes into his art writing in the *Salons*. In order to explain how it was that these philosophers and other English influences came to be incorporated into his work, some words on Diderot's aesthetic education are necessary to understand the judgments of French artists encountered later.

Much like the frenzy which characterized the encyclopedic efforts of the Renaissance and seventeenth century, there was a madness, born perhaps out of a very specific reading of Horace's famous dictate *ut pictura poesis*, that engendered a rush among French academics to seek out a unifying theory of aesthetics.²¹ These academics, who were, by and large, Jesuits, will set the tone for aesthetic writing in Louis XIV's France and beyond, and espoused an essentially Neoclassicist view on art. To Louis XIV, establishing France as the cultural heir to Europe's classical history was as important as winning military victories. England, for so long looking on from the wilderness at French civilization, was deeply impacted. As French supremacy wanes during the *Régence*, English supremacy asserted itself in the work of John Locke and his Neo-Platonist follower Shaftesbury. Locke was a popular foreign philosophical

²⁰ Dedeyan, 202.

²¹ John Middleton Murry, *The Problem of Style* (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), 90.

phenomenon unlike anything seen in France previously. His 1690 masterpiece written in exile, the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, was heavily marketed towards the French, who received their first translation in 1700. The *Essay* was well-known to Diderot and all the *Encyclopédistes*, and the ideas on aesthetics within, though broad-ranging and hardly explicit, had a significant impact on Diderot's appreciation of the imagination. Consider the following quotation drawn from its eighth chapter:

Whatsoever the mind perceives in itself, or is the immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding, that I call *idea*; and the power to produce any idea in our mind, I call *quality* of the subject wherein that power is.²²

This quote is invaluable when endeavoring to understand the origin of Diderot's thoughts on his "gift" to suggest definite forms by word or evocation and bring them into the mind of his reader. The power of words to suggest forms and the power of the visual imagination are touched on in the introduction to the first-ever piece of literary art criticism, his *Salon of 1765*:

I'll describe such 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 with some reflections on (the arts)...²³

Locke's work was not as explicitly concerned with aesthetics as the treatises produced by the Earl of Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson. Both of these men put forth frameworks for interpreting the quality of the "beautiful," and link aesthetics inextricably with morality. Today, they are both categorized as moralists; or, those who believe that our reaction to sense experiences could inform us as to the morality or immorality of the thing experienced. Shaftesbury, or Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, was one of those English

²² John Locke and John W. Yolton, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: Dent, 1974), 117.

²³ Goodman, 4.

philosophers whose work Diderot was translating for circulation in the 1740s before joining the *Encyclopédistes*. Diderot essentially plagiarized his *Inquiry Concerning Virtue*, rendering it in French in paraphrase in 1745 and retitling it the *Essai sur le Mérite et la Vertu*.²⁴ The work of the moralists, and especially Shaftesbury, pleased Diderot because it puts forward a non-specific deistic philosophy with which man is able to justify the ways of God and nature to himself and govern accordingly. His thoughts on aesthetics and beauty are equally concerned with using human senses to identify and qualify our reaction to visual stimuli. Shaftesbury here becomes an early and important philosopher of the sublime, which contributes much to his popularity among later philosophers in Germany. For these reason, Diderot writes that he much prefers Shaftesbury to Locke.²⁵ Francis Hutcheson, a Scottish minister and Diderot's first exposure to any figure from the Scottish Enlightenment, was himself heavily influenced by Shaftesbury and Locke. His *Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* is essentially a continuation of the former's work, and, in it, "the 'moral sense' and the 'esthetic sense'" were spoken of as though they had been "as real as the sense of sight or the sense of hearing."²⁶ Enlightenment authors, Diderot among them, were attracted to such theories because they were essentially optimistic and offered an alternative to the conception of man as a powerless but inherently political animal espoused in Thomas Hobbes' influential *Leviathan* of the century prior. As an egalitarian, Diderot was particularly interested in the public good, and the moralists introduced him to a system by which he could repurpose aesthetics for the sake of the public's instruction. As one largely self-directed in his education, it excited him to think,

²⁴ Cru, 338.

²⁵ Ibid., 189.

²⁶ Ibid., 402.

as friend and influence David Hume propounded, that right judgment could be fostered via critical reflection.

Diderot was forty-six at the time of his first review of a Salon for the *Correspondance* in 1759, and was at that time a rationalist utilitarian. For example, the *Skeptic's Walk* – an invented dialog, critical of religion, that puts forward a proto-evolutionist argument – whether considered in the context of works from the period of its writing in 1747, or its eventual publication after eighty-three years of suppression in 1830, was unique for being so prescient while hinging so much upon intuition. Diderot, for all his appreciation for Francis Bacon, was himself a fervent decrier of Baconian empirical system-building.²⁷ Despite his faith in his ability to make objective determinations regarding the merits of individual artworks, he does not craft from his case-by-case judgments a greater framework of right aesthetic thought that will enable a scientific approach to art criticism. His constant reading of aesthetic philosophy and his growing first-hand experience with art only deepens his desire to put his knowledge and intuition to use in the Salons. If there is an empirical message in Diderot's *Salons*, it is the idea that the audience could be taught if they were receptive to *learning by reading about doing*. Today's readers, no doubt, will observe a conflict between the wordly and rational Diderot, and the emotional Diderot who saw Greuze's little girl crying over her dead dove as a truly insightful commentary on the human condition. In the same vein, he attempted to distinguish himself from his forebears like La Font de Saint-Yenne by practicing a more holistic approach to art

²⁷ Dedeyan, 215.

criticism. Superficially, he does emulate his forebear's writing style, but endeavors to improve upon La Font's work by moralizing and acquiring a technical knowledge of artistic production.²⁸

Unlike La Font de Saint-Yenne and the writers of the *livrets*, Diderot's exposure to English thought is behind his attempt to transform the Salons into instructive experiences in his *Salons*.²⁹ He is compelled by a visual impulse to reproduce gesture and physiognomy in writing, which was stimulated by the English bourgeois dramas whose performances in the 1740s and 1750s in Paris had so profoundly affected him.³⁰ Diderot wants paintings to come to life for the readers of the *Correspondance littéraire*, and, as he documented in his private letters, he thought this could be better achieved by gaining a technical knowledge of artistic production. In order to gain this knowledge, Diderot, using the little clout he had accrued as a public intellectual figure, haunted the *ateliers* of the preeminent painters of his Paris.

Chardin...takes the moment to point out with his finger the beautiful spots and the weak ones. It is Falconet before his departure for Russia. Diderot saw La Tour paint, he questioned Pigalle, and he visited Boucher, Cochin, Le Moyne, Vernet, and Lagrenée. To his artist friends, he not only borrowed a vocabulary, but according to his expression 'even their eyes.' He received 'the light from these art people, amongst whom there are many who find him valuable and who tell him the truth.'³¹

Diderot's insistence that art should be placed in the service of national tastes was behind his obsession with what he called "improving" the paintings before him.³² As the

²⁸ Crow, 98.

²⁹ Dedeyan, 218.

³⁰ Alexandra K. Wettlaufer, *In the Mind's Eye: The Visual Impulse in Diderot, Baudelaire, and Ruskin* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 80.

³¹ Denis Diderot et al., *On art and artists: an anthology of Diderot's aesthetic thought* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 78.

³² *Ibid.*, 20.

above quote continues, “He took great advantage of their lessons to the point of being able to return the favor against his masters.”³³

The nine reviews of the Royal Academy’s exhibitions in the Louvre penned by Diderot are of vastly different lengths, focuses, and quality. Because of the immense size of the work and the general lack of continuity, there are a few considerations the reader should have in mind before reading the *extraits* which will appear in this particular document. First and foremost, whether reading them in translation or in the original, one is confronted immediately by the beauty and force of Diderot’s language. The tone is spontaneous and conversational, yet of extraordinary directness, and this is necessary to the creation of the desired didactic and Socratic tone intended to impress upon the audience of the *Correspondance* Diderot’s role as an arbiter of taste. The forcefulness of his language is a stylistic affectation, having much in common with the acerbic tone of Voltaire’s satirical writings, yet employed by Diderot in the *Salons* in order to make his points “stick” and enable correction. All the *Salons*, addressed to the likes of Catherine the Great, Leopold II, Holy Roman Emperor, and Gustav III of Sweden, so far removed from the bustle of Paris, were written by Diderot in such a way as to make these monarchs feel that he had turned his subjective experiences into an objective reality for those who were merely readers. Wishing to be kept current on the scandals, successes, and failures at the Parisian Salons, they had unknowingly signed up to have their tastes corrected and senses guided into an appreciation of beauty that was both pleasing to the eye and beneficial to the soul, and Diderot hoped that any change he effected would spread from court to the lower levels of society. Diderot hits his stride in the *Salon* of 1765, which is regarded as the finest

³³ Ibid., 383.

Salon for both the quality of Diderot's writing and the quality of the paintings which happened to be on display in that year, and to quote again from its introduction:

I can almost hear you declaiming sadly: All is lost: my friend is arranging, ordering and levelling everything!...When I point out flaws in a composition, assume, if it's bad, that it would remain bad even if its flaws were corrected; and if it's good, that it would be perfect if its flaws were corrected.³⁴

In the above quote, notice that Diderot is addressing a single reader – that is Grimm, to whom all the *Salons* are addressed. The dialog is a favorite format of Diderot's, owing no doubt to his study of Greek philosophy, an appreciation for Socrates and his method, and the general Neo-Platonic fashion emanating out of England and observable in the work of the aforementioned Shaftesbury.

When reading the complete *Salons*, one encounters a general trend towards disillusionment and detached apathy that characterizes the *Salons* published after 1767. Diderot's lessened enthusiasm in these years is part of the reason why this paper will focus primarily on the *Salons* of the 1760s, and the *Salons* of 1765 and 1767 in particular. These are regarded as the masterpieces in the series from a literary standpoint, as well as the most progressive philosophically with the most explicit and obvious references to the matters of Anglophilia which this paper is interested in covering. Much of the blame for the short, technical descriptions of paintings and Diderot's curtiness in the later *Salons* can be laid at the feet of Grimm, who told Diderot that after his 379-page *Salon of 1767* he would never again publish a letter of that length. The *Salon of 1769* is fewer than eighty pages in length, and the voice is altogether different, although the last *Salon*, the *Salon de 1781*, merits our interest because it covers the debut of Neoclassical painter Jacques-Louis David.

³⁴ Ibid., 67.

CHAPTER II: RICHADSON AND GREUZE, AND THE INHERENT RELATABILITY OF BOURGEOIS FAMILY VALUES

C'est vraiment mon homme là que ce Greuze!³⁵

–*Salon de 1763*

J'avais entendu les vrais discours des passions; j'avais vu les ressorts de l'interêt et de l'amour-propre jouer en cent façons diverses; j'étais devenu spectateur d'une multitude d'incidents, je sentais que j'avais acquis de l'expérience.³⁶

–Diderot on the novels of Samuel Richardson.

Diderot's half-hearted grasping at a "field theory" of art composition and appreciation did finally lead him to give a succinct definition for taste, which, if nothing else, was representative of his own experience. In 1776, he wrote, "[Taste is] a facility, acquired by repeated experimentation, of seizing hold of the true or the good, with the attendant circumstances that make it beautiful, and of being promptly and vividly touched by it."³⁷ Reconciling the preferences of a man who dares to define the word "taste" with his own tastes has been difficult for nearly all readers of Diderot even before the time of the Goncourt brothers. In their defense of the Rococo, titled *L'Art du XVIIIe siècle*, the brothers were forced to respond to the period's leading critic, and derided Diderot's preference for moralizing painting. Present-day critical opinion of Greuze does not deviate too far from theirs, and his sentimentality is little understood in the twenty-first century. To understand Diderot, however, we must pretend to be among the *Correspondance littéraire*'s royal subscribers who are being warned about the seductive technique of Boucher, Baudoin, and the like, that masked a serious lack of moral substance in their subject matter. Unlike the frivolous Rococo paintings popular

³⁵ Seznec, 219.

³⁶ See Wettlaufer, 82.

³⁷ Diderot, 383.

with the aristocracy, the bourgeois sentimentality of Greuze is substantive and relatable, and this makes it better suited for aristocratic patronage. Diderot came to a deeper understanding about the value of placing art in the service of morality by reading Shaftesbury, and he considered contemporary English drama to have been the art form which best put the moral sense doctrine into practice.

Understanding Jean-Baptiste Greuze, painter of bourgeois family scenes, and his importance to Diderot requires a deeper understanding of Diderot's career as a playwright, and the immense influence of English drama and fiction on his sensibilities. Diderot himself was the author of two influential plays that belonged to a genre that only emerged in the middle of the eighteenth century. The bourgeois tragedy, *tragédie bourgeois*, or *Bürgerliches Trauerspiel* as it was called in Germany where it was also immensely popular, was a further development by English dramatists of a genre whose origin lay in the seventeenth century and which portrayed the middle-classes as having noble, serious concerns worth exploring on the stage with the same gravity as traditional subjects. Tragedy, by definition, requires that a person of high status experiences a dramatic and pitiful fall, typically as a consequence of his or her own actions. The bourgeois tragedy, by contrast, violated this most important principle, and English playwright George Lillo was the first to do so on any European stage when his *The London Merchant* premiered in 1731. Diderot was captivated by this radical divergence from tradition, and within two years of *The London Merchant's* French premier, Diderot staged the first of his two *tragédies bourgeoises*, *Le Fils naturels*.³⁸

³⁸ Because of Diderot's excitable nature and the rapid staging of *Le Fils naturels* after Lillo's debut in France, it is thought that Diderot's first exposure to Lillo was in French translation, and not the original. See Cru, 306.

The impact of the bourgeois tragedy on Diderot's approach to art was of a quality extremely similar to that of the work of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, because Diderot saw bourgeois tragedies as an application of those philosophers' moral aesthetics. They were "art" in the service of promoting ethical (egalitarian) principles. Diderot has been criticized for his overeager acceptance of these untested English approaches to drama for the same reason he is for his admiration of Greuze. Being so caught up in the radical work of elevating the noble qualities he believed to exist in the mundane, he failed to see he was paving the way for unabashed sentimentality to take a seat beside serious art. The example of England, however, proved irresistible, and the opportunity to strike out at French theater, still so wrapped up in the highly formal classicism of Corneille and Racine, could not be passed over for any reason. The relatability of English theater and fiction so admired by Diderot was precisely the quality that made them subversive.

With art in the service of the public good as his aim, he penned an addendum to *Le Fils naturel* immediately after its 1757 performance entitled *Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel*, in which he called for France to emulate England and to elevate the bourgeois drama to a more respectable status. This effort was to be accomplished by staging several such plays each year for the sake of the common good. However, the distillation of the principles of sentimental drama comprises only one of the two formative experiences birthed out of his admiration of English literature. The other and inarguably greater influence on Diderot's appraisal of Greuze is the work of the English novelist Samuel Richardson, author of *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*. *Pamela*, along with *Clarissa* and *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, were the three epistolary novels for which Richardson gained international recognition in the 1740s and 1750s. *Pamela* is

the tale of a virtuous maidservant and her “noble” resistance to a gentleman who pressures her to give herself to him. An epistolary novel, the story gradually unfolds in a series of letters the titular heroine sends to her friend. This format is later adopted by Diderot in the aforementioned *La Religieuse*, which is in many ways another telling of the same story. Jean-Baptiste Greuze likewise excelled in portraying the trials and sorrows of virginal youths. His virgins, like his domestic scenes, had a very strong impact on Diderot the critic. The most infamous example is the invented dialog Diderot records in the 1765 Salon between himself and the young subject of Greuze’s *Young Girl Crying over her Dead Bird* (Figure 1). Based on the language he uses, he makes it clear that the “exchange” is born from a desire to communicate to the reader the exact experience that Diderot believes someone of cultivated tastes would be having at the Salon. As he writes in the *Salon of 1765*, “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.” To understand why it was that Diderot the Anglophile presented the work of Greuze as a solid alternative to Rococo frivolity, it is best to elaborate on what is precisely meant by relatability, and what Diderot found alienating about Boucher. Consider the following excerpt from Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* of 1759:

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is on the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case. It is the

impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. By the imagination, we place ourselves in his situation.³⁹

Although Smith breaks with his tutor at the University of Glasgow, Francis Hutcheson, on some of the foundational principles of the moral sense doctrine, Diderot admired Smith's esteem for the power of the imagination – the thing which he is so desperately trying to stimulate in the *Correspondance litteraire's* subscribers.⁴⁰

According to Diderot, Greuze perfectly presents two sentimental themes in accordance with the aesthetic morality of English philosophers. The first of these are the settings seen in his morality paintings, and in his tableaux we find scenes that have all the appearances of the bourgeois family homes in the dramas currently in the theaters – “Ah, if only a sacrifice, a battle, a triumph, a public scene could be told with the same veracity in all its details as a domestic scene of Greuze or Chardin!”⁴¹ Diderot argues for a kind of thematic unity of the arts in order to maximize the effect of this relatability.

This second category, however, is different in that it satisfies a unique urge in the *philosophe* he finds he possesses only after his exposure to the work of Richardson. As the quote by Diderot at the start of this chapter makes clear, Richardson's novels have an incredible effect on the reader. The reading of the most affecting scenes is accompanied by an irrepressible and immersive realization of them in the reader's imagination. Diderot does not just passively watch the scene play out in the theater of his imagination, but hears, sees, and feels his way through the novel. Likewise, when he sees a Greuze, he hears the sweet, innocent voice of the young girl in *Young Girl Crying over her Dead Bird* as she tells him how it was her

³⁹ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Edinburgh: J. Hay for W. Creech, 1813), 47-8.

⁴⁰ Diderot, 444.

⁴¹ Diderot, 28.

bird died, and feels on his arm the gentle pressure of the bride in *The Village Bride* (Figure 2).⁴²

For this reason, Alexadra K. Wettlaufer refers to Diderot in her book *In the Mind's Eye* as the first synesthete for his insistence that disorientation of the senses could lead to a better appreciation of an aesthetic event.⁴³ An apt diagnosis, as years prior to the first *Salon*, Diderot writes about attending plays with his fingers plugged in his ears in order to “hear” the dialogue of the play by observing gestures alone.⁴⁴ Diderot, like all good playwrights, advocated for showing, not telling, a story. The better one understands the importance of dramatic and ethical conventions impressed upon him by his exposure to English authors, the easier it is to understand the admiration Diderot holds for Greuze, whose reputation did not escape the century intact, and has certainly not survived to this day.

As has been established, Greuze’s bourgeois scenes take hold of Diderot’s imagination by virtue of their raw, thematic appeal, but the precise nature of their impact on Diderot as instructive, moral paintings can also be explained. The first bourgeois painting unveiled by Greuze was at the 1761 Salon, and Diderot was fascinated by what he saw. *The Village Bride* told no definite story and was based on nothing but the artist’s own imagination. Diderot, however, was so moved by the scene and so inclined to moralize because of his own experience in the theater that he impressed upon the scene his own values. Approaching the painting “with some difficulty” because of the tremendous crowds surrounding it, Diderot spends several pages analyzing its details.⁴⁵ By his appraisal of the body language of the mother, it is clear that Greuze has satisfied Diderot’s deep desire to see the platonic ideal of a bourgeois

⁴² Diderot imagines himself to be standing in the place of the groom.

⁴³ Wettlaufer, 90.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Seznec, 70.

drama given expression. The painter's skill in rendering his subject has made it easy for a spectator to make definite judgments regarding the subject's character. A comparison should be drawn between Diderot's description of the mother's bearing,

The mother is of good peasant stock who is approaching sixty but who looks very healthy; she is dressed comfortably and marvelously. With one hand she is holding her daughter's upper arm; with the other she grasps just above the wrist; she is seated, she is looking at her daughter from top to bottom; she is having difficulty letting go, but it is a good match. Jean is good boy, an honest worker; she has no doubts that her daughter will be happy with him. Happiness and tenderness are mixed into the goodness of this wholesome mother.

and the value judgment he feels he is able to make about Lady Macbeth by the way Shakespeare describes the way she wrings her hands after cleaning them of blood.

There are some sublime gestures which all the resources of oratory shall never express. Such is the gesture of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's tragedy. Walking in her sleep, she comes forward in silence on the stage, her eyes closed, imitating the action of a person who washes her hands, as if hers were still stained with the blood of her king, whom she had murdered twenty years before. I know of nothing in discourse more pathetic than the silence of that woman and the motion of her hands. What a picture of remorse!⁴⁶

Diderot would have seen little difference between the *Village Bride* and a perfectly-timed photograph of live actors taken in the middle of a climactic moment.

Greuze consistently satisfies dramatist Diderot's desire to see the point of highest action, which is often also the moment of greatest sentiment, given shape. Richardson, likewise, provides the reader with the perfect food for his imagination, which facilitates the mental recreation of the scene described. Greuze's showing at the 1763 Salon is met with similar praise from Diderot, who, upon seeing seeing *Filial Piety*, or *The Paralytic*, declared

⁴⁶ Wettlaufer, 77.

Greuze “his kind of guy.”⁴⁷ The *tableau* portrays a family attending its patriarch on his deathbed, and is merely a more refined version of his six paintings from 1763. The composition is similarly arranged, and belongs to the genre of moral painting, which is a term coined by Diderot for Greuze’s bourgeois family drama paintings.⁴⁸ Diderot calls the painting by an alternate title of *The Benefits of a Good Education*. This retitling is of course possible because Greuze has, once again, not taken his subject from literature, but fashioned an emotional climax of his own design. Nevertheless, Diderot’s pet title is equally permissible. The father has benefited by educating his son on proper morality. *Filial Piety* is a painting that serves to advertise the particular style of education Diderot felt would be necessary to incorporate into art so that it could be placed in the service of the nation. What will observers learn from this Greuze? That a threat to the head of the household is a threat to each individual as well. That while equally affected by the loss, the son is more equal than the rest because he must fill role left him. Diderot’s hopes for Greuze and the whole of the genre of moral painting are expressed in the paragraph that prefaces his review of this *The Paralytic*: “Should we not be satisfied to see it finally compete with dramatic poetry to touch us, to instruct us and to invite us to virtue?”⁴⁹ Diderot is so taken by *Filial Piety* that he acts briefly as Greuze’s personal agent in order to convince Catherine the Great to buy the work. Diderot is successful, and *Filial Piety* has been on public display in the Hermitage for the past 251 years.

Moving beyond philosophical contemplations of Greuze’s sentiment and into Diderot’s sentimental outbursts, we encounter in the *Salon of 1765* that moment of sentimentality so

⁴⁷ Seznec, 170.

⁴⁸ Diderot, 291.

⁴⁹ Diderot, 291.

disastrous for the later reception of Diderot that the *dix-huitièmiste* and advocate of the *Salons* Jean Seznec singles it out as Diderot's most ridiculous and least appealing passage in the entire *Salons*. This passage ("Delicious!, Delicious! Soon...") and the painting have already been mentioned. *A Girl with a Dead Canary* is characterized by Diderot as a painting representing the epitome of relatability. Relatability, which Diderot considers as necessary to good painting as good drama, is in this instance contradictorily portrayed as a secondary function that stems only from the possession of a cultivated sense of taste. In his opinion, anyone fortunate enough to have such refined senses passing through the Salon that year would find himself engaged in a weepy dialogue with this child, and as no backstory is provided by the painter, Diderot interprets the dead bird to symbolize the child's lost innocence, or virginity. He writes to Grimm:

What! My friend, you are laughing at me! You are making fun of a serious person who presently is consoling the child in a painting who has lost her bird, or the loss of anything that you wish? Can you see how beautiful she is! How interesting she is! I hate to trouble her. In spite of that, it will not displease me to be the cause of her pain...The subject of this poem is so refined, that many have not heard it; they thought that this young girl was crying because of the canary...I am telling you that this child is crying over a different cause.⁵⁰

Greuze was far from the only painter whose work inspired Diderot's literary digressions, and Diderot endeavored to bring to his audience a number of diverse emotional experiences. His harsh opinion of the "decadent" artists of the Rococo – often called collectively the "followers of Watteau" – is well-known. Among these, and second only to Boucher in his reputation for frivolity, was Jean-Honoré Fragonard. However, upon their first meeting, Diderot was deeply impressed by Fragonard's *Coresus Sacrificing himself to Save Callirhoe*, or *Corésus et*

⁵⁰ Goodman, 141.

Callirhoé (Figure 4). Fragonard had chosen this painting to serve as his reception piece at the 1765 Salon, and it indeed won him acceptance into the *Académie* as a fully-fledged history painter. Despite Fragonard's Rococo brushwork, the subject and composition of *Corésus et Callirhoé* inspired one of Diderot's boldest literary experiments and one of the most memorable moments in the entirety of the *Salons*. Diderot, ever striving to transport the audience to the Louvre, breaks new ground in making the sense experience that is *Corésus* relatable. Instead of communicating to Grimm his precise thoughts on the young painter's 1765 reception piece, Diderot related the content of the painting as if it were actually a dream of his. At no point does he make clear that what he is describing is based in reality. The dream itself resembles a more obscure retelling of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" (an episode in the *Republic*) in which Diderot sees the moment represented on the canvas revealed in all its terror just before he wakes up. This entire sequence owes its setting to Diderot's exposure to Shaftesbury's Neo-Platonic philosophy and the obsession with identifying climaxes his reading of Richardson had stimulated in him. Reading this passage, the setting seems at first a simple homage to Plato's famous story. The cave's inhabitants are this time chained up and forced to watch the events of the painting play out again and again, but in shadow puppet form. The moment when Diderot, this version's main character, breaks free of the chains and sees that the source of the shadows being cast on the wall is Fragonard's painting serves as more than just the perfunctory ending – it is a more complex way of praising the painter for choosing as his subject the precise moment of the greatest dramatic impact. His use of a Platonic method of delivery should be interpreted, says Diderot, as an explicit indicator that points to the moment depicted as representing a kind of Platonic ideal of sacrifice, and is a reminder that what is on display is didactic in nature.

Corésus et Callirhoé is a laudable effort, and in making the experience of standing before it relatable to the *Correspondance litteraire*'s subscribers, Diderot introduces devices he had learned from his Anglophilia. Although Fragonard will eventually lose Diderot's favor, this artist is not alone. When Diderot denounces Greuze's disastrous reception piece of 1769, *Septimius Severus and Caracalla* (Figure 5), he expressed an opinion he needed no assistance from English philosophers to put into words: "Je n'aime plus Greuze."⁵¹ He relates to Grimm only his disappointment in the painter; Greuze has chosen a canvas far too small, and his treatment of anatomy is laughable. To make relatable the experience of standing before the failed history painting which won Greuze admittance to the *Académie* as a painter of genre scenes, Diderot needed only rely on his "sardonic" wit.⁵²

⁵¹ Emilia F S. Dilke and B. Strong, *French Painters of the 18th Century* (London, 1899). 12.

⁵² Greuze's *Septimius* was intended to serve as a reception piece for entry into the Academy as a history painter, making his placement among the genre painters all the more humiliating. Anita Brookner, *Greuze: the Rise and Fall of an 18th-Century Phenomenon*. (London: Elek, 1972). 90.

CHAPTER III: THE EXPLICIT, AND HOW CHARDIN COMMUNICATES USING DEAD OBJECTS WHILE BOUCHER FAILS TO COMMUNICATE WITH FEMALE NUDES

It's always nature and truth; you feel like taking the bottles by their nozzles if you are thirsty; the fish and grapes whet the appetite and invite the hand... This Chardin is a smart man; he understands the theory behind his art.⁵³

– *Salon de 1761*

What colors! What variety! What wealth of objects and ideas...[Boucher] has everything except truth. There is no part of his compositions which, if separated from the others, doesn't please; even the whole seduces you.⁵⁴

–*Salon de 1761*

As mentioned above, the hierarchy of genres was one of the cornerstones of the French academic tradition. It dictated that not all genres of painting were equal, and that the difference between them was determined by the number of human beings present on the canvas and what it was these figures were engaged in doing. Thus, it followed that a painting taken from history or myth would be more worthy than a peasant scene, and that paintings of animals or inanimate objects would follow these in importance respectively. The hierarchy of genres' strict classical bias was a by-product of Louis XIV's reign, and the rationale behind it was best put into words by seventeenth-century historian and art historian André Félibien.

He who produces perfect landscapes is above another who only produces fruit, flowers or seashells. He who paints living animals is more estimable than those who only represent dead things without movement, and as man is the most perfect work of God on the earth, it is also certain that he who becomes an imitator of God in representing human figures, is much more excellent than all the others ... a painter who only does portraits still does not have the highest perfection of his art, and cannot expect the honour due to the most skilled. For that he must pass from representing a single figure to several together; history and myth must be depicted; great events must be represented as by historians, or like the poets, subjects that will please, and climbing still higher, he must have

⁵³ Seznec, 120.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 115.

the skill to cover under the veil of myth the virtues of great men in allegories, and the mysteries they reveal.⁵⁵

Diderot, progressive *philosophe* that he was, never rejected the hierarchy of genres. As he himself said, “If equally perfect, a portrait of La Tour has more merit than a Chardin.”⁵⁶ Yet, among those artists who won his praise in the *Salons*, only Greuze can be said to have impressed Diderot to the same degree as Chardin – a painter whose entire reputation was built upon still-life painting.⁵⁷

Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, born in 1699, was by the 1750s an established artist who had enjoyed critical and public success long before Diderot became the *Correspondance littéraire*’s art critic. By that time (1759), Chardin had been a member of the Royal Academy for over thirty years, and had won that honor with his still-life *The Ray* (Figure 6). He was also the Academy’s *tapissier*, or the person in charge of deciding how the *Salons* would be hung. Naturally, he was one of the first artists Diderot sought out for guidance in his rush to become acquainted with the technical aspects of art during his fledgling years as a critic. Whatever favorable bias towards the artist that might have developed during that time, Diderot’s praise of Chardin’s offerings in the *Salons* reads as something far more substantial than the paintings’ subjects would seem to allow. Indeed, his appreciation of Chardin is thought to represent Diderot at his most progressive and has long-been a point of great interest for students of the *Salons*. The Goncourt brothers, nineteenth-century writers who recreated the canon of eighteenth-century art and who were instrumental in the revival of appreciation for the Rococo

⁵⁵ Catherine Fricheau, *Félibien: la beauté classique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009) 46.

⁵⁶ Diderot, 53.

⁵⁷ In French, a still-life is called a *nature morte*, hence the title of this chapter.

period, were harshly critical of Diderot's praise of Greuze's bourgeois scenes, but all the same recognized his foresight in his commendation of Chardin.

The quality of Chardin's that Diderot so admired was his ability to convey profound meaning in the details of an otherwise humble still-life. Everything being equal, says Diderot, a portrait is of greater merit than a *nature morte* – but what if the skill of the painter of still-lives has no equal? The favor Diderot shows towards Chardin comes from a place that is equal parts philosophical and nationalistic, as he believes Chardin to have captured the sublime and the “ideal model” better than any still-life painter (French or Dutch) before him. Diderot feels strongly that the artist is woefully under-appreciated by those outside of France, and much of the following discussion will highlight the strange way in which certain English aesthetic writers who dismissed Chardin simultaneously provided Diderot with precisely the language he needed in order to better articulate his admiration for the painter. Specifically, the qualities to be discussed are the sublime and the ideal model.

The first philosophical study of the sublime begins in Roman Greece, when the pseudo-legendary author Longinus published his *On the Sublime*. In it, he defined the word in a strictly literary context as a device capable of inspiring awe.⁵⁸ Longinus' treatise was a staple Neo-Platonic text, and in Diderot's time, the word was used eagerly by aesthetic philosophers. First among them was Shaftesbury himself, who employed the word to refer to sense experiences, and said the quality lay especially in rough, irregular, and colossal natural forms. Diderot, though well-aware of Shaftesbury's own usage of the word, in his article “*Génie*” for the *Encyclopédie*, applies the word *sublime* to Shaftesbury's penetrating intellect as it contrasted

⁵⁸ Ward W. Briggs, *Ancient Greek Authors* (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1997), 66.

with Locke's. Diderot also used the word in the previously-quoted analysis of Lady Macbeth and the kinds of "sublime gestures" which can only be imagined when reading their description. His application of the term, then, was by and large less exact, unlike the case of friend and idol Edmund Burke. His *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* of 1756 was an incredibly important milestone in the history of defining the word because Burke so emphatically expressed what the sublime was not: namely, the beautiful.

The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature . . . is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other.⁵⁹

Diderot, being intimately familiar with the writings of both the Englishman and the Scotsman mentioned above, was no doubt aware of the "most correct" way in which the word should be employed, but for most of his life opted to use it quite liberally to describe all manner of things. Diderot does provide a kind of practical definition of the word in his *Salon de 1767* for the benefit of his readers, but it is so heavily inspired by Burke's own as to be merely a kind of applied translation.⁶⁰ Four years prior, in the *Salon de 1763*, he clearly recognized in Chardin's *The Ray* (Figure 6) that there was a quality the painter was able to capture that could not be called beautiful, but was nevertheless worthy of appreciation and his critical attention.⁶¹

The object is disgusting, but it is really the ray's flesh, it is its skin, it is its blood; any other aspect of this painting would have no effect on it whatsoever...
Monsieur Pierre, look very carefully at this work when you go to the Academy, and learn if you can unearth the secret of capturing by talent alone the disgusting nature of certain things. It was told to me that Greuze was walking up the stairs at the Salon and seeing Chardin's work that I have just described,

⁵⁹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Wentworth Press, 2016), 58.

⁶⁰ Diderot, 243.

⁶¹ *The Ray*, which had secured Chardin's place in the *Académie* in 1728, was hung again in the Salon of 1763 in a place of prominence in order to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of his reception.

looked and passed by giving a large sigh. This praise is shorter and better said than mine...⁶²

When Diderot offers up his thoughts on the sublime in the *Salon de 1767*, he borrows whole phrases from Burke, and “agrees” with Burke that perhaps the most sublime element a painter can experiment with is light. Chardin’s treatment of light is mentioned in every *Salon* from the 1760s, and this interest is further evidence that Diderot recognizes the way Chardin’s mastery over a technical aspect of painting has granted him insight into the inner dimension of his subjects. Again, it is possible for a painter of still-lives to exceed a history painter, but his success is entirely dependent on his vision. Diderot says of Chardin’s 1765 *Les attributs des arts* (Figure 7) that even “[t]he sun’s rays are no better at saving disparate entities than the beings that she lightens. He is the one who is not aware of amicable or unfriendly colors.”⁶³

“He who is a painter is he who is a colorist,” reads the first line of the review of Chardin’s *Le bocal d’olives* from 1761 (Figure 8).⁶⁴ Diderot recognizes the intimate relationship between painting light and painting color, no doubt thanks in part to his time spent at Chardin’s studio. Being a colorist, however, is not enough to earn Diderot’s admiration. Boucher himself is a masterful colorist, “but he has no truth in him.” Chardin, by contrast, uses his mastery of color to better access the interior character of his subjects, and thus finds the truth even in “dead” things. When Chardin paints a vase, he does not intend to merely place before us an interesting vase, but he instead wishes to represent the Platonic ideal of the vase. This mode of operation is based on Chardin’s perception of what Diderot calls the “ideal model.”

⁶² Seznec, 219.

⁶³ Goodman, 44.

⁶⁴ Pierre Rosenberg, *Diderot et l’art de Boucher à David* (Paris: Hôtel de la Monnaie 1986), 212.

The ideal model figures prominently in the *Salon de 1767*, wherein he discusses it at length in the introduction and throughout the rest of the text. Introduced in another of his invented dialogues, he explains the ideal model as a quality all objects possess, and says that the ability to be able to identify it is rooted in the enlightened study of nature. Those who came closest to finding it were the ancients, yet studying the ancients in an attempt to understand the ideal model is like studying shadows on the wall in Plato's cave. However, like the discussion of the sublime that is also included in the *Salon de 1767*, Diderot's concept of the ideal model was also heavily based on a theory put forward by English artist William Hogarth in the previous decade.

Published in 1753, the *Analysis of Beauty, written with a view of fixing the fluctuating Ideas of Taste*, was to serve as Hogarth's response to the English art critics he felt were completely unqualified to comment on painting. Largely ignored in his own country, Hogarth's book is introduced to Diderot by the actor David Garrick, who visited France in the 1760s. The ideas within it are absorbed by Diderot, ruminated on for years, and reproduced with no mention of the author's name first in the *Salon de 1765*, then in the *Essais sur la peinture* which soon followed, and again in the *Salon de 1767*. The essence of Hogarth was extracted, but his methods, which were highly experiential and too formal for a rationalist such as Diderot, were discarded. For example, Diderot makes mention of a *ligne de liaison* that is the source of compositional unity in Old Master paintings in the introduction to the *Salon de 1767*. His idea of a unifying line is clearly a reference to Hogarth's line of beauty or serpentine line, which he describes as a secret tool accessible only to the most highly trained and perceptive artists. In Hogarth's book, the serpentine line is actually pictured beneath a glass pyramid in the plates

that accompany the text as a humorous way of emphasizing its preciousness. Diderot also presents Hogarth's idea that a copyist, no matter how skilled, will only ever present a flawed version of his perception of nature, as the object itself can never be truly recreated, only imitated.

Aside from the given reason as to why Diderot did not acknowledge Hogarth's influence on his mature aesthetic philosophy, there is also a question of national pride that must be considered. Having visited France in 1743, Hogarth wrote that there was "not even one mediocre colorist." Chardin would have been forty-four that year, and Diderot, who had possibly admired Hogarth despite being unfamiliar with his art, defended Chardin as if the man were his child:

There you lied, Mr. Hogarth! It is either ignorance or platitude on your part. I know full well that your nation has a trick of disdaining an impartial writer who dares to speak of us with praise; but must you basely court your countrymen at the expense of the truth? Paint better, paint better, if you can. Learn how to sketch, and do not write. We and the English have two opposite manias. Ours is to overpraise English productions; theirs is to underrate our own. Hogarth was still living two years ago. He had sojourned in France; and for the last thirty years Chardin has been a great colorist "⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Cru, 414.

CHAPTER IV: JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID AND THE REDISCOVERY OF PERFECT UTILITY, AND SOME CLOSING THOUGHTS

Remove the wonder from art and the Flemish and Dutch paintings are nothing else but horrid stuff. Le Poussin might lose all its balance but *Le Testament d'Eudamidas* would still be sublime.⁶⁶

—*Salon de 1765*

This young man displays great mannerisms which drive his work... His attitudes are noble and natural; he draws, he knows how to throw a drape and how a fold falls...He has a soul.⁶⁷

—*Salon de 1781*

The *Salons* of the 1770s and 1781 are marked by a malaise Diderot can no longer conceal. France's finest artists cannot compel him to produce another invented dialogue or excursive, whimsical analysis of the kind so abundant in the *Salons* of the 1760s. His descriptions are exceedingly short, and limit themselves to the superficial. He still affixes a kind of "yes-or-no rating" to the individual entries, but these are not at all delivered with the same force as before. Unsurprisingly, reading the late *Salons* can become extremely tedious; it seems at times as if every other entry begins with "*c'est un*" (or "*c'est une*.") The fact that Diderot was absent for the *Salons* of 1773 and 1777 leaves us with only three works which, taken together, are not even half the size of the *Salon de 1767*. Presumably, the chance to influence state policy in Russia as a visiting philosopher in Catherine the Great's court proved an irresistible draw, but Diderot would slowly come to realize that despite his inattention, the groundwork for a new style of painting was being laid in France.

Gay France suffered two ominous losses in the 1770s. The death of François Boucher in early 1770 came only months after Diderot called him the "old gladiator who did not wish to

⁶⁶ Diderot, 37.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 395.

find death, but sought it regardless” for showing new paintings at the age of sixty-six in the 1769 Salon.⁶⁸ The other loss was the Rococo style’s patron saint, Louis XV himself, who died in 1774. Though admiration for the Rococo had been in decline for years at that point, it was still the *de facto* national style, and with the loss of these two, France was for a time adrift. Though Paris was home to hundreds of competent history painters, it was not until Diderot became acquainted with David in 1781 that he would sense history painting had taken on a new importance.

While still co-editor of the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot had asked Voltaire to contribute an article on the concept of taste. In defining it, Voltaire made note of a particular pattern he had observed: “The taste of a nation can become debased. Such a misfortune usually happens after a century in which perfection was reached.”⁶⁹ Diderot was in full agreement with Voltaire in this matter, having on several occasions offered in the *Salons* painters of the seventeenth century as *exemples*. Though he is well-acquainted with the canon of French Baroque art, the work of Nicolas Poussin is mentioned more frequently and with greater enthusiasm than any other.⁷⁰ In Poussin, he finds not only balance, but emotion. Poussin’s pictures are no doubt well-composed and the surfaces masterfully treated, but the painter’s subjects and goals (as seen in his favorite example, *Le testament d’Eudamidas*) are “sublime” (Figure 9). Diderot’s perception of a painter’s intent has played a major role in the judgments he made at the Salon.

⁶⁸ Seznec, 1769-1781. 67.

⁶⁹ "Goût," *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 7:761–770

⁷⁰ Walter E. Rex. "The Landscape Demythologized: From Poussin's Serpents to Fénelon's "Shades," and Diderot's Ghost." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30, no. 4 (1997) 404.

He is as certain that Poussin strived to capture the “ideal model” as he is that Boucher set out to lie every time he picked up a paintbrush.⁷¹

Diderot was unfortunately not destined to see the ascendance of Neoclassicism, which eventually ousts the decadent painted ladies and gay courtiers of the “followers of Watteau,” and replaces it with “sterner stuff” drawn from Greco-Roman history.⁷² By Diderot’s reasoning, however, bad paintings do not deserve to be replaced only because they are frivolous or licentious. Although he was so often portrayed as virulently anti-Christian, Diderot was not inherently opposed to spirituality or the possible existence of the divine. Indeed, in his own words, “*je souffre mortellement de ne pouvoir croire en Dieu.*”⁷³ What he was opposed to was France’s Catholic Christian political establishment as it then existed. What he and the other Enlightenment philosophers popularly portrayed as atheists were truly after was a system “less hostile to the things of this world.”⁷⁴ He sensed such a system in Poussin’s *Testament*, and though he agreed that Poussin was a devoted student of antiquity, he insisted there was less obvious influence at work.⁷⁵

David’s Neoclassicism rests on two pillars: the appreciation of antiquity, and the imitation of “nature.” For more than one hundred years after Poussin’s death, the Royal Academy languished “not for a lack of talent, but genius.”⁷⁶ As with every messianic figure, there were “signs and wonders” that preceded the arrival of David, and the prophet who made straight the path and prepared the way was German classicist Johann Joachim Winckelmann.

⁷¹ See 58.

⁷² Cru, 435.

⁷³ Brookner, 22.

⁷⁴ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism*. (London: Norton 1995), 11.

⁷⁵ Diderot, 74.

⁷⁶ Diderot, 37.

Winckelmann was the first to draw solid boundaries between the many distinct periods of Classical art, and his most famous work, *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (the *History of Ancient Art*, published in 1764) was responsible for the highly sanitized view of Greek art popular to this day.⁷⁷ Winckelmann praised the refinement of white marble at length, and held up pre-Hellenistic Greek sculpture as the model for all time.

Learning from classical models was nothing new to artists in the academic tradition; the French Academy had had its satellite site in Rome where winners of the *Prix de Rome* had been trained since 1666. Nonetheless, an important external influence in the resurgence of interest in antiquity was the birth of the discipline of archaeology. For the first time, it was being practiced as a science in southern Italy, and thus it was that Pompeii became a major attraction for intellectuals on the Grand Tour. Diderot was an eager reader of travelogues, and, as a lifelong classicist, was undoubtedly one of the first Frenchmen to read Winckelmann's *Geschichte* thanks to his knowledge of German and his friendship with Grimm. Diderot's love of Poussin, however, prevented him from fully embracing Winckelmann's idea that all art since antiquity was of an inferior quality. Winckelmann's "slavishness" is rebuked in the *Salon 1765*, where Diderot mentions him by name and tells Grimm that his countryman's admiration of the art of Greece is only natural, but his recommendation that artists study antiquity only is indefensible.⁷⁸ Winckelmann's logic breaks down entirely, says Diderot, when called to account for the fact that the Ancients themselves had no antiquity to copy.

Such a one is Winckelmann, when he compares the work of ancient and modern productions. What [natural form] doesn't he see in this trunk of man that is called the Torso!...[A]sk him a second question and ask him if it is better to study

⁷⁷ Gay, 11.

⁷⁸ Goodman, 68.

the ancients rather than nature...? The ancients!, he would say without hesitation, the ancients!; and there all of a sudden the man who has the greatest intellect, passion, and taste is halted in the middle of the Toboso. One who snubs antiquity for nature risks being petty, weak, and stingy when producing a drawing, with characterization, with drapery, and with expression. He that neglects nature for antiquity risks being cold, lifeless, and without any of these truths that are hidden and secretive and seen in nature alone. It appears to me that antiquity should be studied so that we might better see nature.⁷⁹

Diderot's argument, then, is that the Greeks, having a finer society that better served human needs, were closer to nature, and were thus better disposed to appreciating it. This sentiment is analogous to a point of Shaftesbury's he paraphrased in the *Essai sur la mérite et la vertu* about the way in which a bad society is one that does not encourage self-examination.⁸⁰

There is no denying, though, that Diderot is pleased with antiquity having come into vogue, and his tone is cheerier in 1781 when he notes that that year's Salon is full of paintings having Greek and Roman themes. David was permitted to show six paintings that year, and all pleased Diderot. Even an equestrian portrait evokes the comparatively strong compliment "superbe tableau" (Figure 10).⁸¹ David's treatment of the blind general Belisarius triggers a response that, while typical of the later *Salons* in its brevity and attention to correcting what Diderot perceived to be technical flaws, is in part metaphysical (Figure 11).⁸² Its sentiments are expressed gesturally, the subject is sympathetic, and the painter has as his aim the ennobling of the viewer. An aesthetic has been established by which public morality can be served.

Although the *Bélisaire* was the finest David that Diderot would ever see, Diderot scholars are in agreement that this man once moved to tears by Greuze would have known a

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Denis Diderot. *Essai sur la mérite et la vertu* (Paris: 1745) II, ii.

⁸¹ Seznec IV, 377.

⁸² See 71.

new and more sincere astonishment had he lived to see David's offerings at the 1785 and 1787 Salons. Diderot no doubt would have seen the *Oath of the Horatii* as the ultimate combination of a painter's study of antiquity and nature (Figure 12). The subject, taken from early Roman history, is excellent, but set in a stage-like setting, and the sharp contrast drawn by David between the masculine and the feminine, would have made David appear to be a dramatist-turned-painter. *The Death of Socrates*, from 1787, would have seemed like a personal tribute. Diderot strongly identified with the "gadfly of Athens," and this touching reimagining of his final moments, with its Poussinesque colors and composition, and subtle sublimation of religious iconography in a painting that promotes civic duty, would have satisfied his lifelong desire to see art in society's service. How much more touching would it have been for Diderot to know that David read Richardson's *Clarissa* to prepare himself emotionally for painting this sentimental tableau! The *philosophe* would have no doubt felt that he had been personally recognized for advancing art towards what he believed was its ultimate aim: "To make virtue attractive, vice odious, and ridicule hard-hitting, such is the intention of every honest man who picks up the pen, brush, or chisel."⁸³

The discovery of Diderot by men of letters, like this imagined recognition of Diderot by painter David, happens posthumously. Both appreciation for the *Salons* and art criticism itself are nineteenth-century phenomena, and the circulation of his art writings inarguably served to inspire those critics writing in the century after his death. The Goncourts, as previously mentioned, looked to him as an important primary source and forebear. They called into

⁸³ Diderot, 411.

question his tastes, but respected his preparation for the role of critic and dedication to the part. Other nineteenth-century authors, like Stendhal, Baudelaire, and Zola, owed to their reading of Diderot the certainty of judgment and confidence when discussing technical aspects of painting which had characterized the *Salons*. These two qualities, so important to a critic and the core of what separates art criticism from aesthetics, can be readily observed in today's art critical writing, though the social concern seen in the *Salons* is largely absent. The artists discussed in this thesis are a mere handful chosen from a vast pool, but the qualities that their work embodied, at least in the opinion of the *philosophe*, were my reason for including them. As the founder of a discipline (that is, art criticism), the *philosophe*'s opinions are deserving of scrutiny, and my sincerest hope is that this thesis has served to further an understanding of the way in which Anglophilia played an incredibly important part in defining the tastes and the style of the first literary art critic.

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FIGURES



Figure 1: Jean-Baptiste Greuze. *A Girl with a Dead Canary*. c. 1765. Oil on Canvas. 460 x 533 cm (oval). National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh, United Kingdom.



Figure 2: Jean-Baptiste Greuze. *The Village Bride*. c. 1761. Oil on Canvas. 91.4 x 118.1 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France.



Figure 3: Jean-Baptiste Greuze. *Filial Piety*. c. 1763. Oil on Canvas. 115 x 146 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.



Figure 4: Jean-Honoré Fragonard. *Coresus Sacrificing himself to Save Callirhoe*. c. 1765. Oil on Canvas. 309 x 400 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France.



Figure 5: Jean-Baptiste Greuze. *Septimius Severus and Caracalla*. c. 1769. Oil on Canvas. 124 x 160 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France.



Figure 6: Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. *The Ray*. c. 1728. Oil on Canvas. 114 x 146 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France.



Figure 7: Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. *The Attributes of Art*. c. 1766. Oil on Canvas. 145 x 113 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France.



Figure 8: Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. *Le Bocal D'olives*. c. 1760. Oil on Canvas. 98 x 71 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France.



Figure 9: Nicholas Poussin. *The Testament of Eudamidas*. c. 1644-48. Oil on Canvas. 139 x 111 cm. National Gallery of Denmark (Statens Museum for Kunst), Copenhagen, Denmark.



Figure 10: Jacques-Louis David. *Portrait of Count Stanislas Potocki*. c. 1781. Oil on Canvas. 304 x 218 cm. Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów, Warsaw, Poland.



Figure 11: Jacques-Louis David. *Belisarius*. c. 1781. Oil on Canvas. 288 x 312 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts at Lille, Lille, France.



Figure 12: Jacques-Louis David. *Oath of the Horatii*. c. 1784. Oil on Canvas. 329.8 x 424.8 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France.



Figure 13: Jacques-Louis David. *The Death of Socrates*. c. 1787. Oil on Canvas. 129.5 x 196.2 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, New York.

VITA

William Judson was born in 1990 in New Orleans, Louisiana. In 2009, he matriculated at Louisiana State University and graduated from there in 2013 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Anthropology. After working in an administrative capacity for two years with a New Orleans-based non-profit which provided underprivileged communities in the region with musical instruments and live performances of classical music, he returned to Louisiana State University to pursue a graduate degree in art history, where he is now a research and teaching assistant under Dr. Darius Spieth. He is also deeply involved with the Louisiana State University Museum of Art, where he has spent a great deal of time volunteering in different departments and working as a graduate assistant to the museum's registrar. He currently serves on the museum's board of directors. His research interests are French painting and aesthetic philosophy from the *grand siècle* up to the revolution, the history of the *Académie*, the Salon, and Academicism into the 20th century, and France's colonial and missionary history as it pertains to the history of art and architecture in French territories, with a particular interest in works engendered by the spread of Christianity in East Asia and Africa. He intends to pursue a Ph.D. in art history in the near future. Currently, he is a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in art history, which will be awarded in 2017.