A Chardin in the Grand Manner

by COLIN EISLER

To those accustomed only to Chardin in his best-known role as painter of eighteenth-century bourgeois domesticity or of quiet, modest still lifes, the Museum’s recently acquired “La Soupière d’argent”—now on display in the Recent Accessions Room—may come as a surprise. Large in scale, dashing in brushwork, this painting is in the artist’s early style, developed before the 1730s when he began to augment his repertoire by turning to domestic subjects. Still baroque in its breadth and spontaneity of technique, our painting is very close to the art of seventeenth-century Flanders so admired by the painter and his contemporaries. Such works as Fyt’s game piece, painted toward the middle of the seventeenth century (one of the first paintings purchased by the Museum), much influenced Chardin’s art. The warm, burnished tones of the Flemish still life, with the visual delight in the contrasting textures of fur and plumage, carried on into Chardin’s painting.

In “La Soupière d’argent” the objects are placed in a stone larder niche which was first popularized as a background in the preceding century. Near the back of the niche, on a ledge, Chardin has placed a partridge, and a brown hare recently killed, with blood still wet at the nostrils, alongside a covered vessel topped by a freshly plucked orange still retaining its leafed stem. The silvery-surfaced pot from which the painting derived its name—“La Soupière d’argent”—The Silver Tureen—may actually have been made of pewter. Circular in form, it belongs to the special category of the pot-à-oïlle, used for stews. The polished, luminous surface serves as a perfect foil for the limp game at its side. The game and the pot in which it might be served are drawn together by a large bunch of celery extended across the background. Some of the freely and very thinly painted celery leaves almost merge with the warm, brownish coloring of the stone wall behind them, while others curve over the hare’s outstretched legs. Crouching at the lower left, a predatory brown and white cat is pictured ready to spring at the dead partridge above.

Near the center of the same lower ledge as the cat is a beautiful, radiantly red apple, with some chestnuts and two pears, one upright and golden yellow, the other lying on its side, jade green. Though the effect of the painting in reproduction is monochromatic, there are areas of bright surprising color in the fruit and in the shining surface of the silvery pot, which provide a quality of vivacity and immediacy seldom associated with Chardin’s art. The recently picked orange, the freshly caught game, and the watchful cat evoke a feeling of instantaneity that characterizes Chardin’s very first major works, the ones he showed while still in his twenties at the Place Dauphine on Corpus Christi day.

Two of those—The Skate and The Buffet, now at the Louvre—Chardin exhibited in 1728. Although plainly under the strong impression of Desportes and Oudry, distinguished still-life painters of the generation before Chardin, the two paintings were equally clearly the work of a gifted and original young artist. While The Buffet, with its formal centerpiece of fruit and other appurtenances of an elaborate meal about to be preyed upon by a dog and a parrot, presents a more elaborate way of life than many of his subsequent works, The Skate, showing a delight in the modest yet rich textures of kitchen utensils, and the quintet of contrasting whites in the fish, the linen, the kitten, the oysters and scallions, anticipates many of his finest works. Both canvases share with the Museum’s “La Soupière
"La Soupière d'argent," by Jean Baptiste Siméon Chardin (1699-1779). Oil on canvas, 30 x 42 1/2 inches. Fletcher Fund, 1959.
The Buffet, by Chardin, 1728. The Louvre

d’argent” an experimental quality in their rather ambitious scale and their combinations of objects. The curved masonry wall of The Buffet, strikingly like that of our painting, is slightly at odds with the curiously formal disarray placed before it. In The Skate the tiny kitten baring its teeth at the surrounding seafood is somewhat discordant with the scale already established by the objects in the foreground. The Museum’s painting presents a far simpler scene. The eye level is lower, the setting much less theatrical, and almost as matter-of-fact as the artist would have us believe. The all-important triangle of brilliant color formed by the bright orange on the silvery vessel and the delicious reds, greens, and golden yellows of the fruits in the foreground suggest that he wanted to achieve movement and articulation through the strong, clearly isolated accents of color that for the most part he abandoned in his later works.

The freely brushed, almost Manet-like technique of “La Soupière d’argent” is repeated in a large, decorative panel, The Poodle, dated 1730, in which a poodle, then used as a hunting dog, appreciatively eyes and sniffs his master’s quarry. A nasturtium vine encircling the gray masonry urn near the top of the painting provides much the same contrast of red-orange with silvery tones as that afforded by the orange on the covered pot in our painting. Two other paintings, the Two Rabbits with a Game Bag at Karlsruhe, which is dated 1728, and the Return from the Chase, with its grouping of hare, partridge, and orange that recalls our painting, seem especially related to “La Soupière d’argent.”

Our painting, like The Skate and The Buffet and several other early Chardins, is animated by the contrast between the quick and the dead. The term “still life” appears to have originated as a description of paintings in which no object moved, so that the inclusion of the living with the motionless supplies the work of art with an additional element of meaning and interest. An early northern still life with no explicit religious connotations is a fine small table scene by Georg Flegel, painted in the first years of the seventeenth century. A small, plump bird, alighted on a crisp roll on a well-furnished table, is shown near a very dead little bird—far less happily located, for it is ready to be eaten from a pewter plate.

The use of game as a subject for still-life paintings, first seen in such important early examples as Jacopo de’ Barbari’s Partridge and Gauntlets of 1504, did not become really popular until the middle of the seventeenth century, when northern painters of the so-called “monochrome school” welcomed the restricted tonal range of fur and feathers to create coloristic tours de force in which the artist could display his illusionistic powers to the fullest extent, as in Jan Fyt’s game piece. Like so many examples of genre painting, the game piece was at first a detail within a depiction of a religious subject, like the representation of the contrast between the Rich Man and the Poor Man in the Gospel according to Saint Luke. Here the painting of game, traditionally the fruit of aristocratic sport, helped to contrast the opulence and the frugality of the Biblical parable.

Chardin was born near Saint Sulpice in 1699,
the son of a master cabinetmaker who constructed the elaborate billiard tables on which Louis XIV played at Versailles. Anxious for his eldest son to continue in the family's secure tradition of craftsmanship, his father enrolled Chardin in the Academy of Saint Luke, meant primarily for painter-decorators and craftsmen, and a considerable step below the Royal Academy. Reluctant from the first to follow his father's profession, Chardin studied instead with an artist, but with one who could not afford to provide the student with models. His talents caught the eye of Van Loo, who assigned him work on the restoration of the sixteenth-century frescoes at Fontainebleau. Young Chardin also worked in the studio of Noël Nicolas Coypel, where he was very much surprised by the customary pains-taking and constant reference to the model, even for such details as the gun that Coypel asked him to help paint as a prop in a large formal portrait. It must have been at about this time that Chardin painted his first still-life studies of a rabbit, recorded in descriptions by Cochin and Haillet de Couronne. Their discussion of this earlier game piece, painted a few years before "La Soupière d'argent," is of great value as a definition of Chardin's early style. Their words, like the style of painting that inspired them, foretell the art of the following century.

"The first lessons that M. Chardin received in the necessity of studying from life stirred his young heart with the most fervent desire to continue this impulse [to paint from the model]. The first thing that he painted was a rabbit. This object seems of slight importance, yet in his striving to paint it with the greatest possible truth... he avoided a cold effect and the dryness of servile imitation. He did not bother to treat the fur in

*The Skate, by Chardin, first exhibited in 1728. The Louvre*
great detail... He must have said to himself, 'Here is my model, in order not to be occupied with anything but the truth I must forget what I have seen, I must also forget the manner in which others may have seen the same object; let us then place it at a distance where the details, having lost themselves in the masses, strike the eye as a whole, giving an impression—at once pleasing and truthful—of all its color, its sense of form, and the effect of light and shade which are its own.' He succeeded, bringing about the advent of his own style and magical technique which have ever since distinguished his work in so decided a manner."

Chardin's friend Cochin recalled that after The Skate and The Buffet and several other works had been much admired at the Place Dauphine exhibition, Chardin, "encouraged by the praise he had received from many artists, decided to present himself to the Academy in 1728. Wanting to discover the views of major officers of the Academy, he resorted to a slight ruse to assure their favorable disposition. He put in the first room, as if by chance, the paintings that he wanted to present, while he remained in the second room. M. de Largillière, an excellent painter, one of the best colorists and most knowing theorists on the effects of light, came to him. He stopped to look at the paintings before entering the room where Chardin was. Upon entering, he said to him, 'You have some very good paintings there. They are surely by some good Flemish painter. The Flemish school is an excellent one in which to study color. Now let us see your own paintings.'

'Monsieur, you have already seen them,' said Chardin.

'What, these are the paintings that—.'

'Yes, Monsieur.'

'Oh my friend,' said M. de Largillière, embracing him, 'present yourself at once.'"

The calculated showmanship that Chardin is said to have exercised in his Academy debut seems as out of key with his later, mature personality as the rather flamboyant qualities of his first exhibited still lifes. As Largillière himself had studied painting in Antwerp and made still lifes far more conservatively Flemish than Chardin's, the tale may not be devoid of some rococo bravado. Cazes, Chardin's very first teacher, also supposedly taken in by his student's ruse, agreed to present him to the Academy, where on September 25, 1728 he enjoyed the unusual distinction of being accepted and received on the same day, the Academy also according him the honor of retaining both The Skate and The Buffet.

The same pronouncedly Flemish quality in Chardin's early art that is supposed to have deceived Largillière was commented upon in the following century by the brilliant art critic W. Bürger (Thoré). As the author who revealed Vermeer's artistic identity, Bürger was especially sensitive to the art of still-life painting; he owned the Museum's game piece by Fyt, which illustrates so many of the stylistic sources of our newly acquired Chardin. Bürger made the first known comment on "La Soupière d'argent" when it appeared at an artist's benefit exhibition held in Paris in 1860. Our painting was then in the Laperlier collection, an important group of French eighteenth-century works collected at a time when the art of that period was neither sufficiently contemporary nor sufficiently antique to be in vogue. Writing for the Gazette des Beaux-
Arts, Bürger noted that the Museum’s painting was “stronger in tone than the seventeenth-century Flemish still lifes of Snyders, that the only real analogy to Chardin’s vigorous painting is to be found in that of Aelbert Cuyp.”

Although an artist of great talent, Chardin was less varied and productive than most of his less inspired contemporaries. Critics lamented his almost painfully slow output and complained of his habit of repeating compositions of the past, for he sometimes presented the same titles year after year at the Salon. His genre subjects, like our Blowing Bubbles, were eagerly bought by distinguished collectors, and prints after them were purchased in countless numbers. Meeting with instant acclamation, Chardin’s genre subjects were also widely sought after by the most important of the northern European art collectors, Prince Liechtenstein, Count Tessin for the Queen of Sweden, Count Rothenbourg for Frederick II. Bought up by eager foreign collectors almost as soon as they were painted, Chardin’s successes abroad prompted a critic for the Mercure de France to lament that “so many different paintings by M. Chardin, going to foreign lands, are lost to us.” The still lifes rarely met with such a rewarding reception. Although never reproduced in print form they appear to have been purchased throughout his lifetime. Only the large, decorative overdoors for the royal châteaux of Choisy and Belleville testify to the royal liking for his still-life subjects. These were commissioned in 1765 and 1766 by the Marquis de Marigny, the sympathetic Minister of Fine Arts and brother of Madame de Pompadour. Showing the attributes of the arts and sciences, these
pieces, proposed by Chardin’s good friend the engraver Cochin, in their handsome, free execution recall the similar subjects Chardin painted for the Exposition de la Jeunesse of 1732. His return to an early style may be seen in other still lifes such as The Lucky Thief. This picture of a cat in a larder was painted in 1758, but goes back in composition and technique to a work of the same title executed thirty years earlier. While the very early date assigned to our painting—in

the last years of the 1720s—is certainly correct if one judges by style, the possibility remains that Chardin may have executed it considerably later, when he is known to have returned to still lifes more elaborately anecdotal than those of the immediately preceding years.

Chardin’s art was often compared with that of Oudry, his elder by fifteen years. Before entering the more exalted Royal Academy, both painters had begun their careers at the Academy of Saint Luke, for a long time an important center for still-life and other decorative painting. Renowned for his activities as tapestry designer and book illustrator as well as painter, Oudry was held up to Chardin in 1752 as an example of industry, by a critic who regretted the retiring painter’s almost painfully slow production. A typical Oudry—the Museum’s Dog Guarding Dead Game—was originally in the collection of La Live de Jull, who also owned several Chardins. In the same year that our Oudry was exhibited at the Salon of 1753, the author of Sentiments d’un amateur compared Oudry’s manner of painting animals to Chardin’s; he felt that while the latter’s was more noble and painterly, the former’s was more informal but more studied and more carefully brushed.

Comparing the Dog Guarding Dead Game with “La Soupière d’argent,” one can see how Oudry utilizes all the pictorial devices of the rococo: the crisp, vivacious profiles, the vignette-like grouping of the game (Chardin himself tried to imitate these qualities of Oudry in his own The Poodle), while “La Soupière d’argent” is more serious and direct in its effect of confrontation and solidity. Oudry has provided a decorative backdrop that might well be adapted for use in one of his tapestries or prints; Chardin’s painting is an end in itself, which cannot serve other purposes, representing as it does the most intense and single-minded thought and art.

Oudry produced many delightful drawings; Chardin left none that may be reliably identified today. Mariette, a contemporary of Chardin and a great connoisseur of drawings, explaining the curious absence of sketches from the artist’s oeuvre, wrote that “M. Chardin is obliged always to have the object that he proposes to paint before him,” finding it impossible to paint from drawings. Just as the nacreous, monumental stillness of Chardin’s late work points to the artist’s constant reference to the model for each brush stroke, so does the far freer, more spontaneous brushwork of our earlier painting indicate an equally direct communication between hand and eye.

Both Chardin and Oudry were given royal commissions and lodgings in the palace of the Louvre, which was largely devoted to housing

Partridge and Gauntlets, by Jacopo de’ Barbari, 1504. Munich, Alte Pinakothek

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artists who were in favor at court. In 1752 Chardin received a pension from the King and the wearisome post of Treasurer to the Academy. With the aid of his second wife he acquitted himself of this charge with characteristic honesty and modesty for the next twenty-one years. He also held during these years the equally responsible appointment of Tapissier to the Academy, and bore the responsibility of hanging exhibitions. Chardin's genius for the arrangement of objects as still life served him admirably in directing the display of pictures in the annual Salons. In general he was praised for his skill and diplomacy as Tapissier; one of the few known protests of his placing of a picture was made by Oudry, who objected so strenuously to the location of his own works in the Salon of 1761 that the Academy ordered him to remove them from the exhibition.

In his later years Chardin was honored by membership in the Academy of Rouen, and received a medal from the Queen of Sweden, to whom he had dedicated one of his works. In 1771, eight years before he died at the age of eighty, he astounded the French world of art by suddenly turning to the production of pastel portraits whose freshness and beauty brought him new fame and royal purchase. Despite his position of very considerable esteem, Chardin lived quietly in modest bourgeois fashion. During most of his life he enjoyed the constant support of the influential engraver Cochin, a close friend of Diderot's, who contributed to the illustration of the Encyclopédie. The philosophe himself was an admiring critic of Chardin, and it is to Diderot's many Salon reviews that one must turn for some of the most perceptive tributes to his art. Defining the primary appeal of such works as the Mu-

Hare and Birds, by Jan Fyt (1611-1661) Purchase, 1871
Diderot wrote for the Salon of 1763: “Looking at the pictures of others, it seems to me that I have to create artificial eyes for myself, but in order to see those of Chardin I need only keep the eyes which nature has given me, and make good use of them.”

“La Soupière d’argent” reminds one of the perfect interpretation of Chardin that Proust gave in an early notebook. He advises an acquaintance who is dissatisfied with his humdrum environment to reappraise it in terms of Chardin’s painting, to identify himself with the artist, becoming “like him, a person for whom metal and stoneware will come to life and to whom fruit will speak. . . . [Then] still life will really

**PROVENANCE AND LITERATURE**

In his Chardin biography of 1901, Charles Normand relates how the engraver Le Bas, upon seeing his friend Chardin working on a painting showing a dead hare preyed upon by a cat, and

*Dog Guarding Dead Game, by Jean Baptiste Oudry (1686-1755), dated 1753* Purchase, 1871
knowing his poverty, offered to buy it and was given the picture in exchange for his vest. Later Chardin studies suggest that the painting in the Le Bas sale of 1783 (catalogue No. 11), “A cat preying on a dead hare placed on a lintel together with fruit,” might be identical with our picture. However, the measurements of the work do not correspond with those of our painting, and in Georges Wildenstein’s Chardin catalogue Le Bas’s painting is regarded as a replica or variant of ours. Jean Guiffrey, who first associated our painting with the Le Bas sale, stated that it then went to the collection of Aignan-Thomas Desfriches. An amateur artist and collector living at Orléans, Desfriches was a friend of Chardin and his wife and acquired prints and paintings from them. However, none of the titles of the six works by Chardin listed in his inventory of 1774 or in the catalogue of the collection which was sold by his daughter in 1834 corresponds closely with our painting. It was probably the reference in his inventory to the most valuable of his Chardins—“A Hare and a Pheasant”—that Guiffrey identified with the Museum’s picture.

The first certain reference to “La Soupière d’argent” was made by the famous French art critic W. Bürger (Thoré), who described our painting in detail in a review of a benefit exhibition of French art held for the Caisse de Secours aux Artistes at the Galerie Martinet, to which it was lent by Laperlier in 1860. (Were it not for the Bürger review in the Gazette des Beaux-Arts [Vol. viii, p. 265], it would not have been known that the painting was in the exhibition, as it was not included in either of the two catalogues published in 1860.)

Seven years after its earliest documented appearance, at the Galerie Martinet, “La Soupière d’argent” was singled out for praise by Philippe Burty, a distinguished art reviewer, in an article on the Laperlier collection for La Liberté of March 1867. Burty’s review was reprinted as the introduction to the Laperlier sales catalogue which itemized an important collection of French eighteenth-century art including no less than nineteen Chardins, “La Soupière d’argent” being catalogue No. 19, sold in April 1867.

The Goncourt brothers, in their monumental study L’Art du XVIII Siècle, listed the painting as having appeared in the Laperlier sale. Under the title of “Une Soupière d’argent, du Gibier, et du fruit,” our painting was recorded as having come from the Laperlier collection in the sale of the D.J.W.G. collection (catalogue No. 120) held at the Hôtel Drouot on February 25, 1869. On May 8, 1869 it appeared as catalogue No. 1 in the sale of the art collection formed by Maillot du Boulay, Curator of the Museum of Antiquities at Rouen. The painting was last at auction in the Edwards sale held in Paris on May 25, 1905, as catalogue No. 5. It then entered the collection of Henri de Rothschild, joining the large number of Chardins already acquired by his father, Nathaniel, in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Included in the 1907 Chardin-Fragonard exhibition held at the Galerie Georges Petit, where it was listed as No. 60, our painting was also

Plate 4, from Pierre Ranson’s 6e. Suite de Trophées de Chasse, published in Paris, 1778
Rogers Fund, 1952
published by Dayot and Vaillat as “Le Chat aux Aguets” in their book based on the show, which appeared in the following year. In 1908 it was listed as catalogue No. 201 in Jean Guiffrey’s Catalogue Raisonné of Chardin’s oeuvre, and three years later, as “Retour de Chasse (Perdrix Grise que guette un Chat),” it appeared among the twenty-eight Chardins in the Henri de Rothschild collection, recorded by Herbert L. Furst.

Our painting was among the thirty-three Chardins lent by the same collector to the great Chardin exhibition at the Galerie Pigalle, held in 1929, where it was No. 40. Two years later it appeared under the title of “Lièvre et Soupière d’argent” in Pascal and Gaucheron’s Chardin study. In 1933 it was catalogued in Georges Wildenstein’s Chardin monograph as “La Soupière d’argent, dit aussi Perdrix et Lièvre avec Chat” (No. 688), still in the possession of Henri de Rothschild. The painting was lent anonymously to the important exhibition Four Centuries of French Still Lifes held at the Boymans Museum in 1954 (catalogue No. 52). It was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum by means of the Fletcher Fund in 1959.

The painting will appear in the new edition of the Georges Wildenstein Chardin as No. 33, dated between 1727 and 1728, placed after the completion of the Retour de Chasse at the Musée d’Amiens and just before the Lièvres avec une gibecière et une poire à poudre at the Louvre. Mr. Georges Wildenstein and Miss Grace Hoffman have been most generous in making this information available. Miss Faith Dennis and Mrs. Claire Ames LeCorbeiller have studied the vessel in the painting, identifying it as a pot-à-oille (huile) probably dating from the second quarter of the eighteenth century. The only other painting in which Chardin is known to have included a similar object was shown in the Salon of 1757, where it was exhibited together with a pendant lent by La Live de Jully; this painting was last recorded in the sale of his collection in 1791.

*The Hares’ Revenge, by Israhel van Meckenem (before 1450-1503). Ornamental engraving, first state*  
Gift of Felix M. Warburg and his family, 1941