

# Eighteenth-Century Genre Painting

...

At the end of the eighteenth century, Diderot identified genre painters indiscriminately as “those who busy themselves with only flowers, fruits, animals, woods, forests, mountains, as well as those who borrow their scenes from common or domestic life”. His definition referred to the diversity of themes treated by genre painters and also to the place occupied by their painting in the eighteenth-century scale of values. Considered inferior to history painting and religious painting, genre painting did nonetheless gain admiration from amateurs who, through their contact with Northern European art, were looking for less grandiloquent subjects. While Chardin held sway over the representation of everyday life with his intimist scenes tinged with a sense of interiority during the first half of the eighteenth century, Greuze (1725-1805) strove to bring fresh life to this genre by giving it a moralizing dimension in which the depiction of childhood, influenced by the philosophical spirit of the Enlightenment, was of supreme importance. Landscape painting, which belonged to the same genre, also enjoyed renewed interest during this period : under the aegis of Vernet and the link with Italy, artists were to reinvent classical landscapes painted on location.

Room  
Greuze

...

Neoclassicism

## Greuze and Moral Painting

Trained under Charles Grandon, a painter from Lyon, Greuze settled in Paris around 1750 ; he bowed to Academy teaching with Natoire (1700-1777) without adhering to the official line and was accepted in 1755, the year that he presented *Lazy Boy*\* to the Salon with its matching piece *Young Knitter Asleep* (fig.1). These works already revealed the particular care he pays to effects of matter – the texture of wood, silky hair – rendered through a limited palette of browns, white and russet inherited from the Dutch artists, Rembrandt in particular. A painter of childhood, he also served as a medium for the interest paid by the thinkers of his day to theories of education and the early stages of life. In the years that followed, he composed scenes of domestic life, allegories of family virtue and vice, of which the *King's Cake*\* is one of the finest examples. In this depiction of the humble joy of a peasant family celebrating Epiphany with a king's cake, he ennoble the scene of daily life making it into a model of universal value. This painting – over which Diderot enthused – also embodies the aspirations of a society seeking an edifying form of art that would break with the Rococo frivolity of Boucher (1703-1770). The narrative he weaves between the different characters in his painting to form a complex web of expression also bears witness to Greuze's ambition to attain the noble realm of grand genre. However, the bitterness he felt when he failed to be accepted as a history painter with his reception piece *Septimius Severus and Caracalla* (1769) was to remain with him throughout his life.

Moreover, while his ever-increasing output of drawn or painted studies indeed served in preparation for the broad and subtle repertory of emotions that he was to use in his painting, it also reflected his real affection for representing the human reality of his models : the *Bust of a Paralytic*\*, a preparatory detail for the painting the *Benefactress* (fig.2) is a piece of singular tragic force in which the bloodless pallor of the dying man mingles with hope rekindled by this young lady of charity. In the same sentimentalist vein, *figures of adolescents* fuel the artist's reputation ; to the charm of childhood they add the murky sensuality of this time of life in which a sense of modesty combines with the arousal of desire.

Greuze's contribution in this area was to have a lasting effect. In England there appeared “fancy pictures”, halfway between the genre scene and portrait, as painted by Reynolds (1723-1792), portraitist to the English aristocracy and founder of the Royal Academy. In the *Infant Samuel*\*, he dispensed with the religious pretext in favour of the intimist everyday image of a little boy's innocent prayer.



fig.1- Jean-Baptiste Greuze  
*Young Knitter Asleep*  
San Marino (Californie),  
The Huntington Library  
All rights reserved



fig.2- Jean-Baptiste Greuze  
*The Benefactress*  
Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts  
All rights reserved

...  
20

In sculpture, Pajou (1730-1809) provided a sensitive and tender vision of childhood still untainted by adulthood in keeping with the theories of Rousseau in his *portraits Of Paulin de Hours Farel\** and his *Sister\**.

While Aved (1702-1766) cannot be classed with the same movement – being part of the previous generation – he shares the same spirit in his painting of the *Portrait of Madame Crozat\**, which marks a break with the ceremonial portraits of the early eighteenth century, favouring the psychological intensity and realism of his model. The depiction of details of lace and embroidery is reminiscent of the artist's taste for the subtle rendering of materials, carried over from his Northern European training in Amsterdam.

In fact, beyond the simple genre scene, this naturalistic tendency was to irrigate artistic creation throughout the century.

## Landscapes of the Enlightenment

The real golden age of landscapes – the seventeenth century – was to have few repercussions in France in the early years of the following century. While figures like Watteau or Boucher showed individual interest in the genre, neither the classical landscapes developed by Poussin, Claude Lorrain and the Carracci school, nor the Northern manner with its rich luminist effects gained widespread acceptance. Yet in Italy at the same time this painting enjoyed a genuine revival. Artists established in the peninsula made the canons developed in the Seicento their own ; alongside the light, homogeneous compositions of Van Bloemen (1662-1749) and Locatelli (1695-1741), the tradition of the *vedutà* and the architectural caprice met with huge success. Panini (1691-1765), settled in Rome, ruled as the undisputed master of the genre, excelling in the creation of whimsical landscapes that incorporate the main antique vestiges of the Eternal City, as in his *Roman Ruins\**. The darling of a cosmopolitan, international clientele who discovered the sites of Italy during the “Grand tour”, he was close to Nicolas Vleughels, the director of the French Academy in Rome and became a member of the institution through the backing of the cardinal de Polignac, ambassador to the Holy See. These links that bound the Italian artist to the French milieu were to have a lasting influence on the development of landscape painting in France. In this respect, Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714-1789) occupies a privileged place in the history of landscape painting in France. From 1734, he travelled to Italy, drawing inspiration from the great classical models as well as from the tenebrous Romanticism of the Neapolitan artist, Salvatore Rosa (1615-1673). *Seascape, Calm Weather\** and its pendant, the *Shipwreck\**, of 1748 are examples of this double patronage : the peaceful composition of the former is bathed in warm opalescent light, while the latter depicts the unbridled elements beneath a dramatic stormy sky. In Paris in 1753, Vernet was commissioned to paint views of French ports, which secured him a resounding success : in direct descent from Panini and Vanvitelli, he offers a French slant on the great Italian landscapes revisited. *Around a Fair* (Room 22), with its matching piece the *Construction of a Great Road* (fig.3), the fruit of a commission by Abbot Terray, the powerful administrator of the Kingdom's finances, is closer to the architectural caprice bringing together a set of disparate elements : the Charterhouse of Villeneuve and Saint-Cloud Bridge, giving the image of an industrious, modern France.



fig.3- Claude-Joseph Vernet  
*The Construction of the Great Road*  
Paris, Musée du Louvre  
RMN / © Photo Franck Roux

Travels in Italy (1754-65) were also an essential step for Hubert Robert (1733-1808). Alongside Fragonard, he drew unflinchingly on location like Vernet, depicting the grandiose monuments of ancient Rome that were the focus of a real craze with the emergence and development of nascent archaeology. On his return to France he painted both national vestiges of antiquity (the *Principal Monuments of France series*, 1787 (fig.4)) and idealized landscapes of his native land, which he transcends with spectacular effects as in the *Bridge\**. Jean Pillement (1728-1808), a painter and designer of international renown, produced a multitude of pastorals and seascapes throughout Europe ; his meticulous paintings of *three views of the Hérault\** in the pastoral style are also the expression in the final decade of the century of a certain accomplishment in French landscape painting, now liable to vie with the mythical sites of Italy. Caspar Wolf (1735-1783), a Swiss artist trained in Constance, was drawn to seascapes, views of caves and alpine landscapes. Sensitive to the sublime aspect of grandiose nature, as expressed by Vernet or Rosa before him, he produced a pre-Romantic.

### Diderot, Art Critic

At the request of his friend Frédéric Grimm, director of La correspondance littéraire, from 1759 Diderot wrote reviews of the Salons organised by the Academy. Applying himself to the task and convinced of the moral function of art and the development of tastes, he was to cover a total of nine “Salons” from 1759 until 1781. A fervent advocate of Greuze, he enthused over his painting and saw a greatness in his moral scenes akin to that of the history painting of Poussin or Le Brun. The landscape painters Hubert Robert and Vernet would also arouse his admiration for the authenticity of the effects they recreated. In his different texts on art that followed (Writings on Art, articles from the Encyclopaedia), he challenged the hierarchy of genres and developed the idea of aesthetic naturalism in which nature would generate truth and beauty, a notion at odds with the academic line that saw grandeur only in the models of the past. The essence of his contribution was above all to raise the arts to the heart of philosophical debate, considering them as a real creation of the mind and no longer as the mere expression of savoir-faire.