

Chardin: The Ray-Fish, c.1728 (35-57)

I: Context

Biography: outline life & career

- Born Paris, 1699, son of billiard-table maker.
- Unconventional training, tho' did study under two leading history painters (Cazes & NN Coypel): which suggests initially aimed to become one.
- Failure to become history painter, may have led to entry (1724) to lowly Academy of St Luke: essentially a guild organisation, without prestige of AF.
- 1728: admitted in to AF; attends regularly; becomes Treasurer; quarters in Louvre (1757) & royal pension, etc: believed in system - his art may have broken new ground, but not a political or social revolutionary.
- Seeks & attracts wealthy clients.
- Successful career, but in minor genre.
- Wealthy wife, but himself never well-off.



Context: Dutch-French Still-Life tradition

- In own day called the 'French Teniers', with whom compared both favourably & unfavourably.
- Also influenced by Rembrandt, Pieter Boel & Jan Fyt (& Kalf for kitchens), all well-represented in French collections at time.
- Le Nains (genre), Largilliere, Oudry, Desportes.

Hierarchy of Genres

Chardin accepted hierarchy (history - portrait - genre - landscape - still life), but tried to adapt rules to ennoble his humbler subjects, by 'giving objects their due'.

1728: Academy

- NB very few works survive from youth.
- In Spring of 1728, exhibited 10/12 paintings at the 'Youth Fair', in Paris. Probably included Ray-Fish (Louvre) - & perhaps BC-Kansas pair (or versions).
- Led to much attention & four months later approved & received into AF, partly via Largilliere (also a SL painter) [aged 29].
- Ray-Fish [supposedly 'finished in a day'] & Buffet were his reception pieces. Former especially hugely successful - Diderot urging every young painter to copy it even in 1760s.
- NB: no regular Salon exhibitions till 1737.
- Career began immediately after end of Watteau's (d. 1721), & in some ways continued Flemish-oriented Northern tradition (that favoured colour over design, Rubens over Poussin).
- But: no overnight success - struggled in early 1730s.

II: The Painting: La Raie

Description

Ray-Fish [a thornback - the most common in Northern waters] on hook; tabby cat stretching out to pile of open oysters; faience lidded-pot to right; circular pewter dish against wall; glass cruet in centre.

Subject: still & active life cat included because:

- active, so more elevated a subject, more interesting to viewer, & more challenging to paint;
- rivalry with Oudry & Desportes cf Proust quote (of the Ray-Fish): 'a strange monster hangs above your head, a skate, still fresh as the sea it rippled in.. oysters.. cat...'). Cats: important place in Chardin's work.

Composition: geometry

- Repetition of right-angled triangles (whole composition: fish);
- contrast of circular dish with triangles and cones;
- 'live' cat contrasts with still objects;
- nb trompe-l'oeil knife

Technique: optics

- Newton & Locke: colour (& shape) not part of object, but cerebral sensation - we learn essence of objects from touching real ones, and then recreate them in head when see depictions of them.
- Reds advance, blues retract.
- Dark, neutral background helps objects stand out.
- Variety of effects: cold, clammy flesh of ray, blood & gore of guts. Fur of cat. Dull sheen of pewter. Sparkle of glass. Vitreous nature of pot. Sharp edges of oyster shells.

Pendant

Kansas (Nelson-Atkins Museum): SL with Cat & Fish (two mackerel on hook, salmon steaks on pot-lid; spring-onion; white onion; cat; pestle & mortar)

Replicas

Thyssen, Madrid

NB variations: bread not faience pot; earthenware jug not glass cruet.

One of these is dated (1728), from which we can date its pendant & the other versions.

Significance

- Documented as very slow, careful & methodical painter. So once found winning formula, repeated it (with slight variations) to maximise income.
- Accepted into AF as a painter 'skilled in animals and fruit'. Usually animals were dead (i.e. game, fish). Live animals rare, because slow painter & not one of movement.
- Also, Desportes & Oudry already specialised painting live animals.

