



53 GIOVANNI BATTISTA TIEPOLO *Page with crown (fresco detail)*

### High Rococo

The kingdom of the great decorative painters of the mid-eighteenth century is one largely created by Boucher and Tiepolo. Indeed, in 1750 they stood like two still-vigorous rulers with great achievements behind them and, at least in Tiepolo's case, greater ones before them in the twenty years further activity they both had. A style of decorative painting, varied for the two countries as markedly as Ricci and Pellegrini vary from Le Moyné and Detry, had already been created by the artists who preceded them. Boucher and Tiepolo were to make something quite new from the style, heightening its imaginative possibilities, enjoying the sense of being virtuoso craftsmen, dazzling enough to make their predecessors seem clumsy and dull. In their particular, highly personal way they actually put back a tang of realism into the increasingly diluted rococo style; they created their own individual types of people, two galleries together more varied and more vivid than anything the rococo decorators had created before.

It was a peak of achievement that, wisely, was not to be attempted by the apparent continuators of the style: the Guardi brothers and Fragonard. Their contribution is towards a dissolution of the rococo grand manner in which solidity is replaced by airy shapes almost of tinted steam and people once again dwindle to become so many curves and arabesques. What Boucher and Tiepolo achieve is a firmly extravagant baroque in connection with which some words of Reynolds' are apt; he was thinking of Michelangelo but they apply equally to the 'great style' of the eighteenth century: 'It must be remembered, that as this great style itself is artificial in the highest degree, it presupposes in the spectator, a cultivated and prepared artificial state of mind.'

The differences between Boucher and Tiepolo are understandable and perhaps more obvious at first than any similarities. But they share some things too,

not least the ability to please their patrons, themselves monarchs, nobility, people with ideas of aristocracy if not actual aristocrats. Both chose to paint pictures which disseminate myths, which willingly accept the structure of society and which minister to its wildest dreams of glamour or pleasure. Neither artist was in any danger of mistaking fiction for truth – being utterly of their century in their commonsense – and both have left plenty of evidence in drawings and occasional paintings to prove how sharply aware they were of ordinary existence. Their contemporaries Chardin and Piazzetta confirm that there was no necessity for the successful painter to take the path Boucher and Tiepolo took. If their imaginations wandered in a vaguely classical and historical sphere of consciously impossible dimensions and splendour, this was by choice and by the nature of their genius. Both of them embodied the principles not only of *Rubénisme* but of Rubens himself. Boucher continued the tradition represented by such pictures, and subjects, as the *Judgment of Paris*. Tiepolo extended the epic world of the Marie de Médicis series, in which history and allegory cheerfully blend to make great events seem greater, and where every act is a public one involving heaven and earth. It is no accident that both aspects concern women: the whole purpose of Boucher's art and prime movers in much of Tiepolo's most splendid work.

Whereas in Watteau's pictures, where their role was equally dominant, they were natural beings, they have become goddesses to the high rococo – supernaturally beautiful and powerful, sweeping through the heavens as the Madonna or lounging among cushions, impossibly, incandescently, blonde. The cultivated spectator is meant to enjoy the tall-story aspect of such women and to appreciate the skill of the painter in creating around them a completely unnatural structure, whether it is water as blue and hard as glass or a white marble palace of cloud-like insubstantiality. The imagination is there to be exercised; art is there to create; and the triumph of Boucher and Tiepolo is that nothing hindered the exercise of their great gifts simply as creators. And it was perhaps the very sureness of their grasp on reality that allowed them to go off into such firmly-controlled and fully-realized fantasies, spiced with wit: perfect rococo structures of shell-like clarity far removed from the moody, self-doubting, megalomaniac fantasy of Romanticism. In their art it is always daylight: darkness creeps on only with the close of the century.

As the older painter, Tiepolo had to make a journey towards the light for himself, and it is perhaps symptomatic of his basic artistic realism that as a very young man he was more attracted to the style of Piazzetta than to that of

Sebastiano Ricci. Boucher was to have the example of Tiepolo to help him, if one accepts the traditional statement that he admired Tiepolo's work when in Italy (sometime before 1730), and it is true that, like other French people, he owned a few Tiepolo drawings. Tiepolo himself was certainly to seek in earlier Italian painters examples of affinity, culminating in Veronese – the painter with whom he was so often to be compared at the period. In many ways the intended complement had its disadvantages, for they were very different artists.

Tiepolo emerges, erupts rather, into public fame in 1716, when the rococo movement was itself in glittering activity, and Rosalba, Watteau, Le Moyne, Pellegrini, were all demonstrating new possibilities. But Tiepolo was never to become part of Franco-Venetian culture; the Académie showed no wish to enrol him among its members, and the audacity of his compositions was to strike most French connoisseurs as *maîtrisé*. Thus it is unlikely that he would ever have been welcome in Paris, and in his own country Rome remained equally unreceptive. Even in Venice currents of appreciation for the 'new' realism were to display some reserve about Tiepolo and, though he was famous, he was perhaps less warmly appreciated than in the courtly atmosphere of petty German kingdoms. The places where he was urgently sought are revelatory of his art. Milan under the Austrians (and hence his fame in Vienna already by 1736), Stockholm, Madrid. It was particularly fitting that his last years should be passed in Spain and that his late work should be concerned with the Divine Right of kings and visions of the saints – both beliefs which were increasingly under scrutiny, and then positive attack, during the century. Stylistically, he might pass on some hints to the young Goya, but his own art was much more deeply *ancien régime*, anachronistic in its century and to drop out of favour in the nineteenth century. Only painters, and collectors interested in colour and decoration, were by then likely to be interested in Tiepolo: Delacroix, who never reached Italy, shows some awareness of him, and Renour discovered and admired him when he visited Venice.

What Tiepolo was trying to do was, perhaps, against the real grain of his period: keeping out the tide of reason, very much as Venice was politically trying to do. He postulated a world in which there is still room for the grand gesture and the heroic action. Much more than Watteau's, his art is that of the theatre, with a stage that is deliberately elevated above us, and actors who keep their distance. Although this allows very splendid effects, it restricts Tiepolo to rather simplified pageant emotions in which psychology is swamped or barely attempted. At the centre of it all, the chief characters retain an almost discon-

certing imperturbability and *hautecœur*. The artist himself sometimes aids this by a touch of irony or wit, as if pricking the balloon of pretension. He reminds the spectator that the whole panorama is feigned and should never be mistaken for the truth. It is difficult to be moved by such art to any very definite emotion and Tiepolo is possibly at his least convincing when his subject requires tragic emotion, especially in religious subjects. Artistically, he rejects death and blood and terror, even when he has to depict them. There is always a solution, usually a positively happy ending, and his personages are seldom shown stripped of the trappings of allegory; they come before us the more confidently because of the machinery of heaven which is always at hand with an angel or a genius. Their very *disinvolture* is the product of the consciousness of servants behind the scenes. One is reminded of the epigram made when Garrick and Spranger Barry played King Lear and divided London audiences into two camps of praise:

*To Barry they give loud huzzas;  
To Garrick – only tears.*

For the major part of his career, Tiepolo is like Barry, communicating a sense of excitement and exhilaration that first unites us and then makes us want to cheer.

In nothing did he more clearly reveal the traditional, national, basis of his art than in his superb ability to decorate – though the pejorative sense of the word unfairly suggests superficiality – and to do so not merely on a large scale but in harmony with varying architectural settings. Yet what ultimately separates him from Giordano and Pellegrini is the combination of this ability with an intensity of imagination. Tiepolo constructs a spacious, artistically actual, cosmos. He is not true to history or mythology but true to his own genius. The confidence exhuded by his persons, and echoed on the very clouds on which they often recline, is the artist's confidence in his own powers; it is typical that one of his ceilings should include an elephant among the clouds. There is a change in Tiepolo's style in his late years, a lessening of high rococo bravado and an increase in emotionalism, which may be connected with a feeling of age and a loss of confidence. It is possibly more than sentimentalism to see him as finally a Prospero-figure who had become a little weary of his own magic, whose dazzling feats cost him increasingly hard labour, and who was not altogether sorry to break his wand.

The Tiepolo of the middle years of the century, coinciding with the years of his own maturity, seemed inexhaustible in vitality and variety. Whether his



work was for church or palace or villa, he responded with fresh solutions, new visions, which are at the same time always recognizably within his own conventions. At their best, they have been produced to fill, and to create, space. Although he also produced some cabinet pictures, perhaps in emulation of French painting, such reduced dimensions seem to have cramped his imagination. At times one may even feel that to produce straightforward compositions at ordinary eye level was – if not cramping, at least uninteresting, to Tiepolo. They offered none of the challenge of surprising the spectator, which is so essential to the rococo, and seldom allowed those confusions of art and reality which are part of the surprise.

Religious subjects offered the ideal opportunity for Tiepolo to achieve such effects. He is an outstanding artist of the century for many reasons, but unique in being able to accept extravagant religious themes without sophisticated embarrassment and without reducing them to excuses for decoration. Unlike any other painter of the period, he *needed* such commissions on which to exercise his imagination; the more miraculous and visionary the subject the more ardently he responded. The ceiling picture of the *Madonna del Carmelo* (Ill. 54) is one of the most brilliant of his visions, of almost oppressively hallucinatory power as the spectator gazes up at it in the Scuola dei Carmini at Venice. The ceiling has become sky – a great expanse of sky which Tiepolo does not hesitate to leave empty except for the knot of flying angels who come with a sweep of dark cloud, bearing in their centre the imperious white-clad Virgin. The foreground of the composition tilts up as if to meet this vision: the crouched figure of St Simon Stock, a jut of Palladian cornice, a grim pile of skulls, these give a necessary but minimal location, making a right-angled frame towards which the air-borne fabric rushes with such impetus as if it would sweep out of the composition altogether. But it is in the actual assembly of the vision that Tiepolo most wonderfully combines intensity of imagination with brilliant draughtsmanship; nothing is blurred or confused, in fact all is carefully composed and executed, but the effect remains spontaneous and visionary. It does not derive from Giordano, and still less is it related to Veronese.

It is a culmination of all rococo religious visions, the final conjuring out of paint of creatures plastically real and yet divinely insubstantial. A miracle of Catholic doctrine becomes a miracle of art. Just as the Virgin comes to assuage St Simon Stock, transfiguring the grim reality around him, so Tiepolo comes to transfigure the simple room of the Scuola. He does not mirror ordinary experience, but dissolves reality, and instead expands our awareness into a new



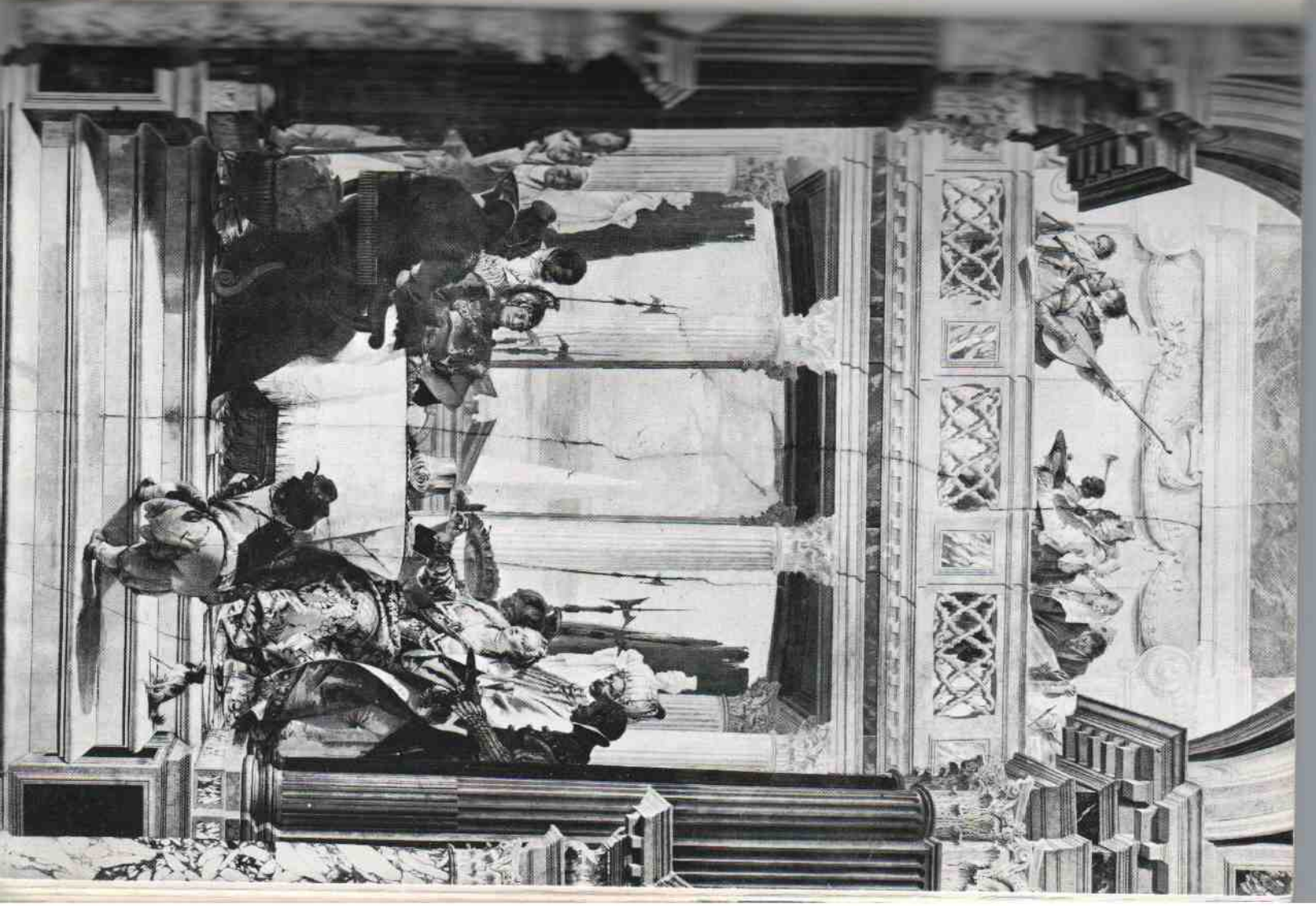
55 GIOVANNI BATTISTA TIEPOLO  
*Beatrice of Burgundy (detail)*

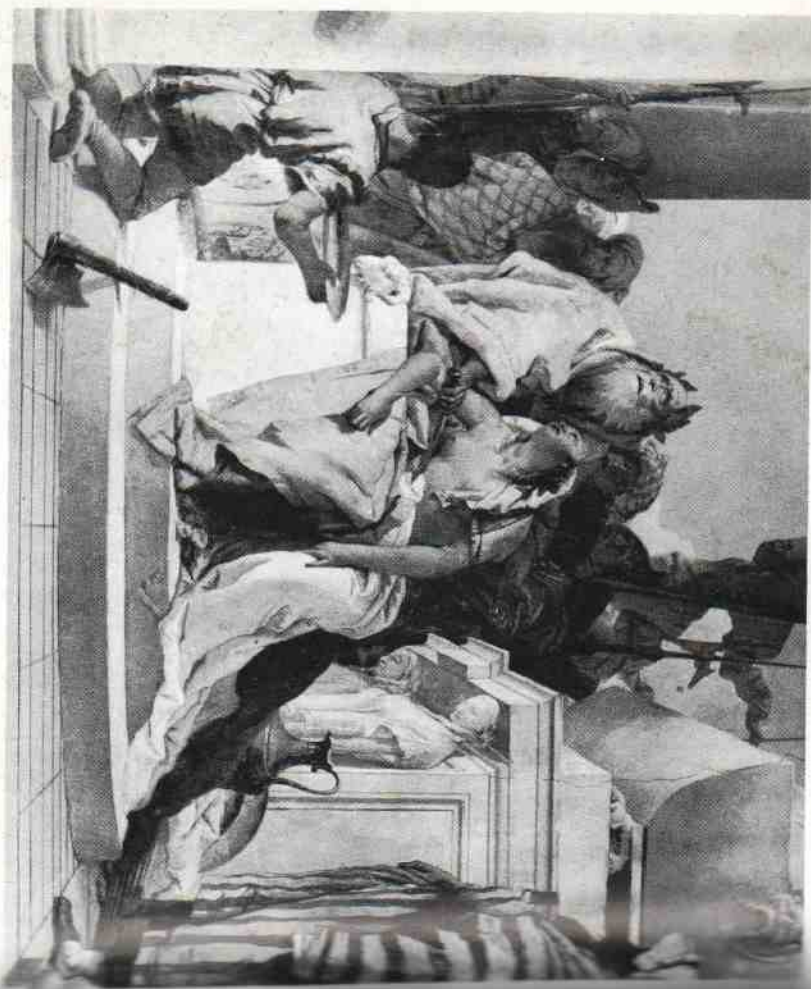
world unguessed at before. Even now it remains hard to analyse how he obtains his effects, but this vision of the Virgin contains a rich sequence of typical motifs. Dazzling draughtsmanship allowed the creation of the structure of flying angels, all foreshortened legs and fluttering folds of drapery, which serves literally to support the Virgin who, with almost insolent grace, places one hand on an angel's head as if steadying herself on the rapid flight – to which greater urgency is lent by the speeding, winged, cherub's head, pressing forward at the extreme right. Borne aloft, tall and calm in the heart of the agitation, the Virgin effortlessly holds high in her disengaged hand the Child – weightless, equally aerial – his head level with her own. There is nothing humble in this vision; it is more splendid than comforting; and the Virgin herself is very much the Queen of Heaven: miracle-working goddess or magician, created to bring consolation but remaining remote, untouched by what she witnesses. It must be enough that she deigns to appear.

This concept of woman, which can be disconcerting in religious work, found perfect expression in Tiepolo's profane decorations, where every woman becomes a queen, and queens themselves acquire a new aura. It hardly matters whether it is a story from Pliny or from the Dark Ages that needs Tiepolo's illumination; he recreates Cleopatra (Ill. 56) and the twelfth-century Beatrice of Burgundy (Ill. 55) as almost the same woman, dressed in his interpretation

of sixteenth-century Venetian costume, *alla Paolucca*, with huge curve of ruff and loops of great pearls, more radiant and blonde even than the airy settings which surround without enclosing them. It is romantic toecoco when compared with Boucher's more earthly visions; the flight from reality results in a dilution of the erotic, and so dignified is the world inhabited by Tiepolo's people that love is only a vague sentiment, while the overtly sexual would be shocking within that public context. Cleopatra preserves her distance; and though she is not a feat of prestidigitation, she is partly sleight of hand, a bundle of patterned materials and piled curls, barely animated simulacrum of a woman, one less courtesan than virgin queen, who might have been constructed out of fabric and glass. Her artificiality is, of course, intentional; and the story of her swallowing a pearl in wine at her banquet for Mark Antony may have seemed not only artificial but faintly ridiculous to Tiepolo. He includes his own face among the spectators, clad in bizarre costume but vividly shrewd, perhaps even sceptical.

The mood is more solemn in the *Marriage of Frederick Barbarossa and Beatrice of Burgundy*, itself only a part of Tiepolo's decoration of the Kaisersaal in the Würzburg Residenz. Here the genius of Balhazar Neumann provided him with the most sumptuous setting he ever had; and Tiepolo produced equally sumptuous scenes over which polychromed marble curtains are suspended by stucco *putti*. History is quite consciously re-created in a pageant that is not only impossibly gorgeous but with its references to the present – the blessing bishop being a portrait of Tiepolo's patron, the Prince-Bishop, Neumann's real architecture gives way to this huge, vaguely Palladian basilica in which a train of sword-bearers, women, and pages swirls up to the altar steps where the Emperor kneels beside, but slightly below, his bride. The banners, dwarfs, dogs, the crown on its cushion, the fringed gloves and golden armour, are all brilliant, excited details which seem checked where they begin to merge in the long swell of the Empress's blue cloak, itself topped by the icing-white ruff which sets off her pearl-adorned blonde hair and cool profile. This still figure (Ill. 58), a winter queen of cold blue and sheer white and a few touches of frosty yellow, is the effortless heroine of the scene, blown out to these magnificent proportions from the original fact of an obscure woman in German history. Frederick Barbarossa is eclipsed; he becomes merely the partner to accompany the *prima donna*, for whom this whole stage has been created and which she so completely dominates. Never again did Tiepolo transform history into such glittering fairytales, spun out of sheer imagination, recklessly free in concept and yet scrupulously exact in execution. By Tiepolo's standards it is pure history. No allegorical personages





57 GIOVANNI BATTISTA TiePOLO *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia (detail)*

intervene, as they do in Pellegrini's comparable work; there is no early rococo prettification, any more than there is accuracy of costume or setting. Instead, there are created people on a scale, and with the necessary magnificence, to inhabit Neumann's Kaisersaal, to play out their pageant in the atmosphere which begins above the cornice, raised far above the spectator in a brightly-coloured dream, not of what life is, but of what it could be.

Even for Tiepolo there was not to be another Würzburg. His own aims shifted, and he attempted more direct involvement of the spectator – never forgetting that presence – in the rather different drama of moments like the *Sacrifice of Iphigenia* (Ill. 57), that popular subject for painting in the century. This was frescoed in 1757 and three years later Daniel Webb was to speak of the agitation the victim evoked: 'beautiful, innocent, and unhappy...'. Tiepolo responds to that aspect, but he is concerned too with the arrested action, the



58 TiePOLO *The Marriage of Frederick Barbarossa and Beatrice of Burgundy (detail)*

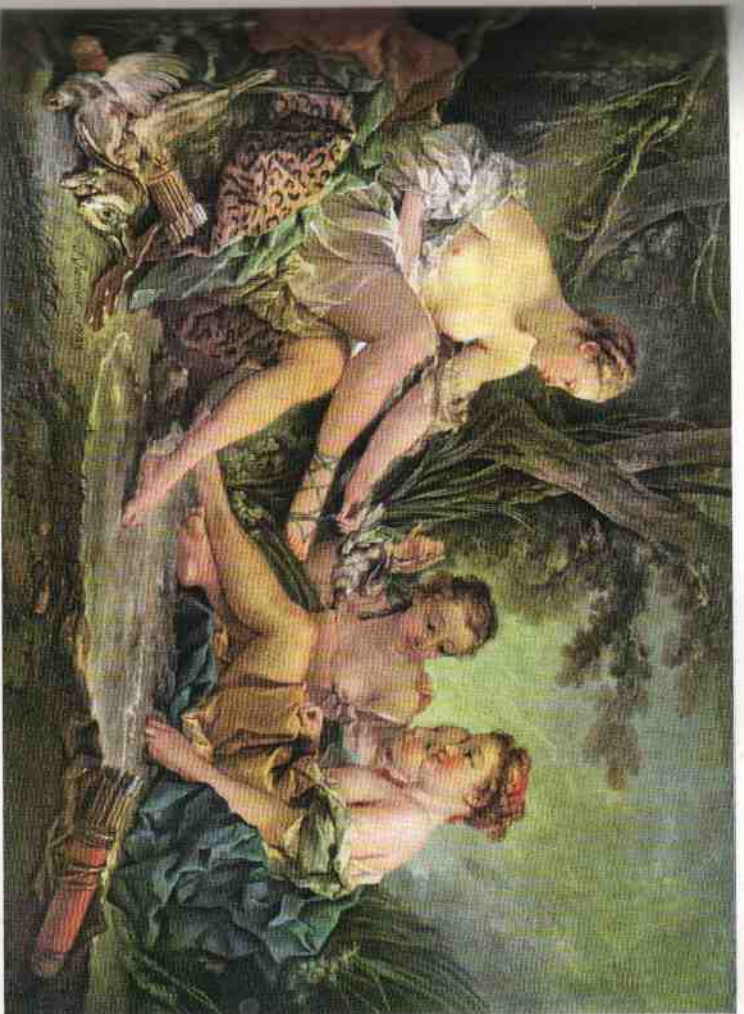
sacrifice not being a sacrifice in the end. It is a miraculous moment that he depicts, when the goddess appears to the woman before the knife plunges into the flesh. We are brought to the edge of tragedy and then, like Iphigenia herself, reprieved. But though Tiepolo's aims have slightly shifted, the elements of his art remain the same. There is still a delight in *trompe-l'œil*, concentration on a heroine, and – above all – the same imaginative atmosphere and characters which had served for his other decorative schemes. Like Egypt and Germany, the Aulis of antiquity has been transmuted to become a Palladian structure animated by oriental figures in striped clothes and with the very banners that had flapped at Würzburg (one even bears the German eagle).

Whereas, however, fantasy might play around Cleopatra, and make what it world of the Teutonic Dark Ages, serious subjects from classical antiquity were increasingly to be treated seriously in art. As the eighteenth century progressed it became necessary to harness painting to serve the new régime of the intellect; and Tiepolo continued to practise *Rubénisme* in a Europe where enlightened circles had returned to the standards of *Poussinisme*. His *Sacrifice of Iphigenia* is an offence against the rising tide of neo-classicism – or, rather, a brave blow of defiance by the retreating style which by 1757 had lost the battle. Only in Italy had it been possible to foster the full-blown tradition of the grand manner that Tiepolo represents; it lived as long as he lived, and was extinguished with him. His last gesture on Italian territory was an anthology of all his finest motifs, in the finest of all his Italian palace ceilings, that of Villa Pisani at Strà (Ill. 59), completed in 1762. The theme of this is that we are all going to heaven – at least the Pisani family are. Their apotheosis is not expressed merely in allegorical-triumphal terms but in literal portrayal of the individual members of the family astride the clouds, mingling in Olympian air with the Virtues and Arts, while at the centre Fame blows a trumpet blast – the final rococo note, rallying one last effort of belief in what is now, almost literally, the height of absurdity.

Boucher had never been such a committed artistic believer. Although he had worked in Italy, the Italian tradition did not tempt him into vast imaginative schemes. Tiepolo's art goes back eventually to Raphael in the Stanza della Segnatura. Boucher never aimed at a heroic vision. He expressed no glorious promises about heaven: either as an Olympian refuge for aristocratic families, or in ordinary Christian terms. Like most French eighteenth-century painters, he could not evolve a satisfactory idiom for religious pictures of any kind; and he was particularly unsuited to the task by the nature of his real abilities. 'Qu'étaite que ses virgées?' Diderot was to ask, at the Salon of 1765, and accurately



59 GIOVANNI BATTISTA TIEPOLO *Apotheosis of the Pisani Family* (detail)



61 FRANÇOIS BOUCHER *Diana after the Hunt*

answer, *'de gentilles petites caillottes.'* Indeed, although Diderot bitterly attacked Boucher, he was remarkably perceptive of Boucher's real powers, and even allured a little by them: *'C'est un vice si agréable.'*

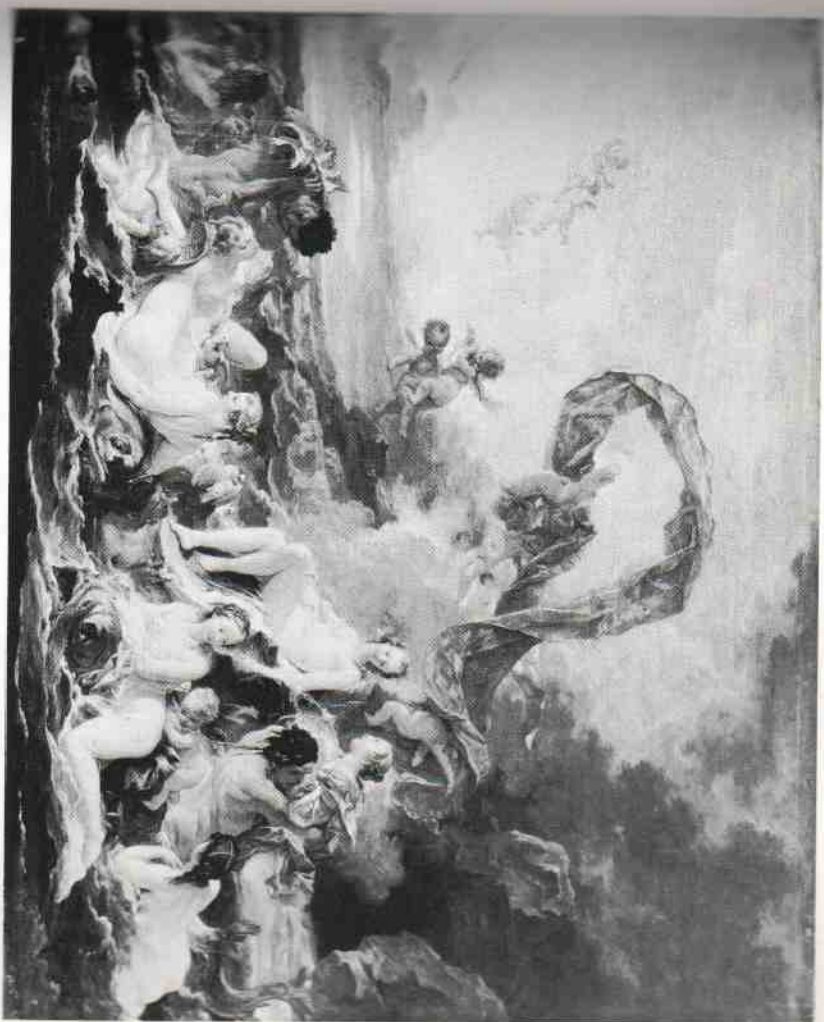
All Diderot's fury about falseness, lack of observation of nature, corruption of morals, loses its relevance before the finest products of Boucher's art. His mythological world was more frankly feminine, and more accessible, than Tiepolo's; it hardly tries to astonish the spectator, and its magic is no exciting spell but a slow beguilement of the senses, a lulling tempo by which it is always afternoon in the gardens of Armida. There is no clash of love and duty, no public audience, and with barely the presence of men (Boucher increasingly could hardly be bothered to delineate them at all). But this does not automatically mean frivolity. Especially in the years up to and about 1750, Boucher's own artistic and actual vigour combined to produce a whole range of mythological pictures which were decorative, superbly competent, and tinged with their own vein of poetry, sometimes muted and wistful as in *Arورا and Cephalus* (Ill. 60).



This is more serious, as well as more competent and much more beautiful, than anything painted by Boucher's master, Le Moyné, who committed suicide in 1737, the year it was painted. The female nude has not yet become the whole pretext for the picture. A mood, as well as tonality, gives its tender dawn light to the whole composition, in which the mortal man yearns for the pensive, even sad, goddess against a sky of pale rinsed yellow, only faintly warmed by the rose of the rising sun. The picture is full of the sense of imminent parting and change, of day replacing night, with the hounds eager for the chase and the immortal horses poised for flight. The solemn-faced, by no means merely playful, *putti*, the nervously creased draperies, and the evanescent mood are all reminders of Watteau's early mythological pictures. Perhaps Boucher could never have sustained this particular poetry – or only by dodging success and its demands. Like Tiepolo, he was the servant of his patrons, but bending his talents in an obsequious bow where Tiepolo preserved a sort of craftsman's independence.

Boucher's imagination was weaker than Tiepolo's. He remained much less sheerly inventive – though demand drove both painters to some duplication of effects and an increasing reliance on assistants. The atmosphere of France, so much more profoundly civilized and sceptical (largely the same thing), inhibited whatever wilder flights of fancy he might have liked to take. It was increasingly difficult for him to make the conventions in which he worked as serious as were Tiepolo's. It is almost a symbol of this lack of firm structure that his pictures attempt no architectural settings and seldom offer any composition beyond the relation of the foreground bodies. Trees like clouds, and clouds like birds, cluster and flutter to fill the spaces left over, with diminishing energy. Since Boucher could not have managed that instinctive rhetoric which was Tiepolo's birth-right, he sensibly expressed himself in a less grandiloquent manner, one disarmingly playful and yet more disarmingly sensuous.

Tiepolo's chilly women are stripped by Boucher to complete nudity, warmed by love or lust, and made always girls before they are goddesses. The trappings of mythology are increasingly only different wrappings for the same offerings, guaranteed not to interfere with contemplation of the woman even if she is supposed to be *Diana after the Hunt* (Ill. 61). Thus, while the stage is equipped with false trees or false doves, truth is present in the observation of naked bodies, draperies that set them off, and – most curiously – in the texture of flesh conveyed by paint. It was in that context that Boucher produced his most sustained work, best when it is not too large, seldom again quite so perfect as in the *Birth of Venus* (Ill. 62). This is the quintessence of his aims, blending the natural and



62 FRANÇOIS BOUCHER *The Birth of Venus*

the artificial to make a completely enchanted scene, exuberant and yet relaxed, an aquatic frolic and yet also an air-borne, sea-borne, vision which has authentic pagan feeling. It is a glimpse to make anyone less forlorn as these creatures rise dripping from the waves. The green water itself becomes an exciting erotic element as it swells and falls, bearing up the pearl-pale bodies that abandon themselves to it and offer their limbs like branches of white coral as perches for Venus's doves. In place of Tiepolo's romantic nobility there is a human simplicity. Despite the snorting dolphins and heaving Tritons, the tumbling *putti* and the tremendous twist of silver and salmon-pink striped awning, the goddess remains a ravishingly pretty, demure girl, half-shy of the commotion of which she is the centre. She, like the nymphs around her, is reality idealized, divinely blonde and slender, touched with a voluptuous vacancy, a lack of animation, which perhaps only increase her charm. The insolent consciousness of Tiepolo's



63 FRANÇOIS BOUCHER *Madame de Pompadour*

people is replaced here by innocence bordering on stupidity; herself so desirable, the goddess seems without desires. Boucher keeps much closer than Tiepolo to the terms of ordinary experience; his idealizing touches are restricted to the refining of ankles and wrists, perfecting of the arc of the eyebrows, tinting a deeper red the lips and nipples. Both artists can be related to the sculpture of their period. Boucher belongs with the naturalistic nude statuettes of Falconet and Clodion; Tiepolo has much more in common with the extremes of gilded and rouged Bavarian rococo sculpture.

Although Boucher served the rococo movement well, it was essentially through the exercise of conscious fancy rather than by any profoundly imaginative impulse. He was capable of painting straightforward genre scenes and portraits as soberly realistic as that of the extremely youthful *Duc de Montpensier* (Ill. 64). All his portraits of Madame de Pompadour (Ill. 63) are characterized by

64 FRANÇOIS BOUCHER  
*Duc de Montpensier*





65 JEAN-MARC NATTIER *Duchesse d'Orléans as Hebe*



66 FRANÇOIS BOUCHER *Landscape with Watermill*

equal directness and emphasis upon spontaneity. He placed her reading, reclining, seizing a hat before going for a walk, and not only in natural poses but in a natural, half-rural setting. Simply dressed and well equipped with books, she pauses in her reading to listen to a bird singing, in a wonderful woodland of velvet moss and silken foliage. This is a portrait artificial only in the way that Watteau and Gainsborough were artificial. It is utterly simple in concept, even anti-rococo, when compared with the high court portraiture of Nattier. His *Duchesse d'Orléans as Hebe* (Ill. 65) shows a rather different encounter with a bird, requiring the sitter to remain ludicrously unperturbed in trying to carry off the charade. To Cochin, the friend of Boucher, it was Nattier's type of portrait that seemed unnatural; he was to make witty play with the idea of ladies whose diversion consisted of taming eagles by offering them white wine in gold cups.



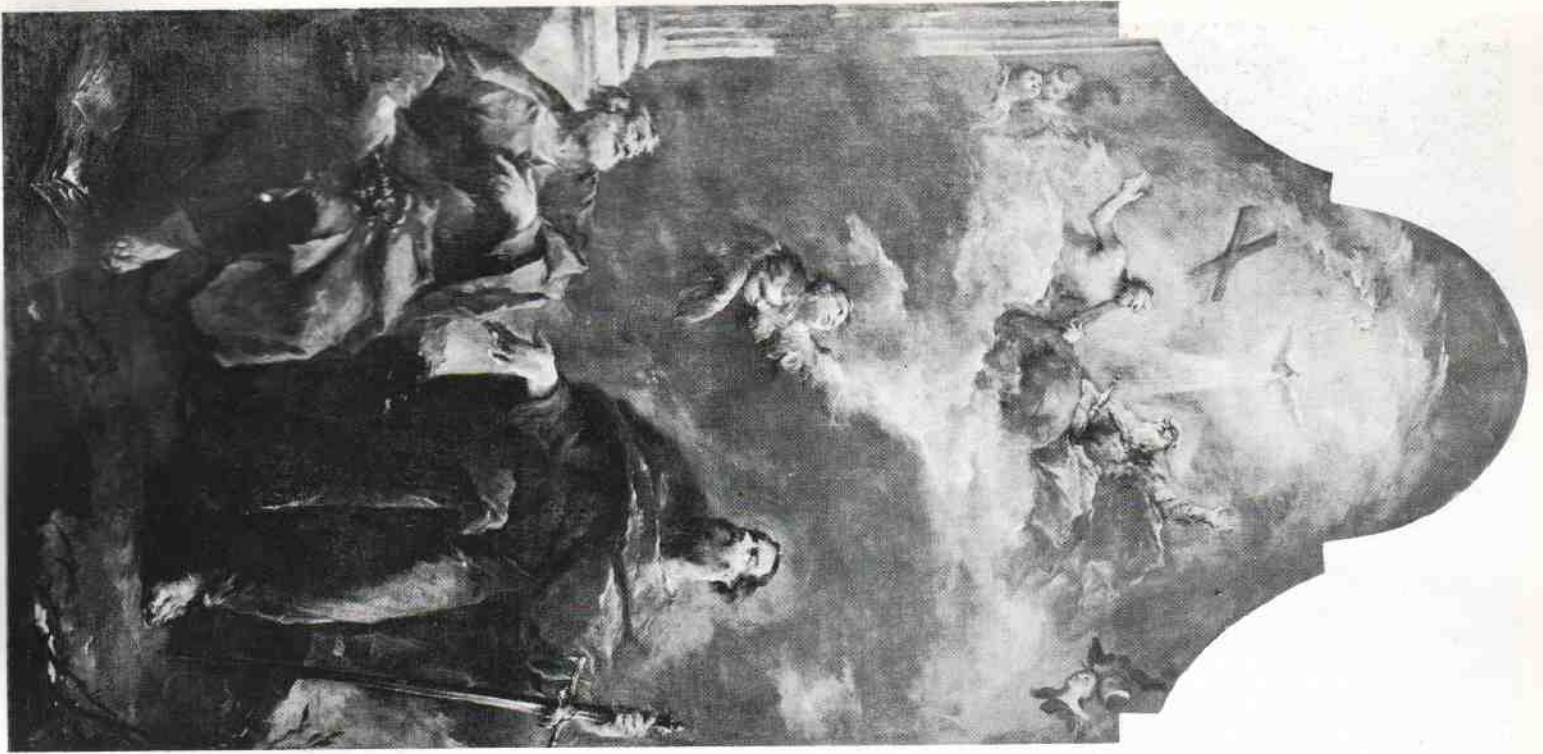
67 NICOLAUS BERCHEM *Ploughing*

Boucher's pastorals and landscape paintings, which are certainly part of his rococo achievement, are willfully artificial on a basis of real observation. They create a new branch of rococo art in which the growing tendency to shake off dynastic and mythological duties has been completely developed; they are stage settings without characters, or with at most some actor-peasants, in which nature is dressed alluringly as Venus had been undressed. Occasionally Boucher had been anticipated by an almost accidental rococo in the work of Dutch seventeenth-century painters; and the fact that he actually owned Berchem's *Ploughing* (Ill. 67) is significant. This contains in nucleus the rolling, foaming cumulus-like foliage which drifts like soap bubbles across the landscapes of Boucher and spurts up more dramatically in Fragonard; and even Berchem's ploughman has something of the same half-elegant, rococo motion. Perhaps Boucher's most enchanted landscapes are those where the stage is set but the characters hardly appear: a rural dream of tranquil nature where man has added only picturesque

water wheels, some cottages and a few inevitable doves, and where the taffeta grass, the blue trees, and the pale stretched silk sky (Ill. 66) create an ingenious, impossible Arcadia more beautiful than any reality. By the mid-1750s Gainsborough in England was achieving similar effects, blending French elegance with native facts and producing idyllic landscapes, often with courting woodcutters and milkmaids. Perhaps better based in observation of nature than Boucher, Gainsborough has no hesitation in refining it into something movingly artificial, scenes of country love which are not recorded but created by the artist. Both painters realized that such pictures give pleasure because they are recognizably not true – any more than is the theatre or a mechanical singing bird. It is by an exercise of sheer reason (in contra-distinction to the emotionism of Diderot) that Boucher accepts that all art is convention and that the actual countryside can never appear in a painting. What obligation is on the painter to depict a green tree if a blue one appeals to him more, and is in fact artistically more beautiful?

This is the real break in the eighteenth century's standards. The dilemma was expressed openly by Cochin when he spoke of artists like Tiepolo: '*Ces peintres sont fort agréables, c'est dommage que la nature qui est fort belle ne soit pas à beaucoup près aussi belle que leurs tableaux.*' Diderot said in effect much the same of Boucher: '*Cet homme a tout, excepté la vérité.*' There was no one to champion the rococo; it had only patrons or enemies, and the latter had increased markedly by the middle years of the century. In 1762 Tiepolo was summoned to Spain; when his first royal commission was completed, he asked to remain there, though he must have realized that he might well die there without returning to Venice. In fact, that happened; and the last eight years of his life are a sort of retreat. In 1764 Boucher's greatest patron Madame de Pompadour died. His own powers were falling and though he continued to exhibit at the Salon he was increasingly attacked by Diderot. Whether he or Tiepolo quite understood, their reign was over; they were virtually deposed before they died.

What further possibilities could be squeezed from the rococo were developed by the Giardi brothers and by Fragonard. Gian Antonio and Francesco Guardi represent the same phenomenon, probably active in the same studio and possibly in some sort of collaboration, until the death of Gian Antonio in 1760. Out of the art particularly, it seems, of Pellegrini they produced a more dazzlingly-coloured, more melting style – but one that had none of Pellegrini's international success, being restricted chiefly to serving a decorative function in obscure churches and villas of the Veneto. In many ways the closest affinities of this style



68  
FRANCESCO GUARDI  
*SS. Peter and Paul*



69 GIAN ANTONIO GUARDI *Erminia among the Shepherds*

are with Manbertsch, and it remains more typical of the Tyrol than of Venice. Their compositions are quite often shamelessly borrowed; when not borrowed they are often shamelessly incoherent. In them objects are splintered by light in a sort of proto-, rainbow, impressionism. Perspective, organized aerial space, the Palladian solidity of Tiepolo, these are exchanged for a personal style of coloured handwriting – now brilliantly calligraphic, and now brilliantly cloudy, which uses reality as a sparking off point.

The most perfect expression of this style remains in the Tobias series for the organ loft of the church of Angelo Raffaele in Venice. In them (Ills 70, 71) it is as if the brush had barely touched the surface of the canvas, so rapidly does it move, obeying its own laws, and leaving the whole surface crackling with vitality. Everything shares the same texture, given by the painter. The compositions, framed by trees, set within deliberately decorative fronds and branches, are as capricious as some fan-design by Watteau. Normal reality has been dissolved and replaced by a new luminous atmosphere in which everything exists only in so far as light defines it. Indeed, the lines run like electric wire broken here and there by flashes of fire which give a glowing softness even to wood or metal or stone. Similarly, the large-scale *Erminia among the Shepherds* (Ill. 69), one of a

whole decorative series illustrating Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, is an essay in transmutation. Where Tiepolo crisply delineated and defined, exposing planes, the Guardi cover everything with the enchanted tar and feathers of their style, dripping paint to run its own personal way, wavering along the hard edge of objects, burning in a mist of bright colour on some folds of drapery, and in a few rapid strokes creating the mirage-like landscape seen in the background.

This almost extravagantly coloured explosive technique is less obvious in pictures established as by Francesco Guardi, such as the altarpiece of *SS. Peter and Paul* (Ill. 68), which dates from the 1770s, the decade after Tiepolo's death. Yet even here the dissolution of the rococo goes on, though with less pyrotechnic display. The setting is reduced to vapour which drifts across the slight suggestions of solitary pillar at the left. The saints seem scarcely more substantial than the vision they witness, and all the forms are delineated with a ragged, windy outline. Francesco was by that date hardly any longer concerned with the pain-

70 GIAN ANTONIO GUARDI *Tobias and the Angel* (detail)



71 GIAN ANTONIO GUARDI *Tobias and the Angel* (detail)

ing of such subjects; he had created a personal style in which to interpret the topography of Venice, making it an insubstantial city washed by light and water, with its inhabitants reduced to tiny points of brilliance. What the Guardi had done to the imaginative world of Tiepolo, Francesco later did to the factual world built up by Canaletto. Living on until 1793, almost to the extinction of the Venetian Republic under Napoleon, he asserts a rococo freedom which is perhaps at its most daring in his very latest paintings and drawings.

It is the same point of no return which is marked in France by Fragonard's style. Like the Guardi, he used light and atmosphere to absorb people and objects until one is left with an airy, empty but still vibrating, surface; it is as if a conjuring trick had been played over some painting by Boucher, from which so much 'reality' has been abstracted. For both Fragonard and the Guardi, this is an escape from the discipline represented by Boucher and Tiepolo, but it is given an additional twist by Fragonard's knowledge and admiration of Tiepolo – the wilder genius anyway, but one become wilder and more romantic in Fragonard's interpretations of his compositions. Just as Veronese had provided Tiepolo

with material out of which to build his own fantasy, so Tiepolo stimulated Fragonard: to caprice interpretations of scenes like the *Banquet of Cleopatra* in which Venice is remembered as if in a dream.

Fragonard is a romantic rococo painter, inspired more perhaps by the picturesque aspects of nature than by people, who are usually dwarfed into insignificance beside the foaming trees which shoot up like great jets in his landscapes. When this Francesco Guardi-like diminution does not take place, Fragonard seems to produce a version of Gian Antonio's style, in which figures become mere arabesques of paint, animated but often faceless, tight balls of energy that shoot about the canvas under the impulse of his brush. In both styles they remain the painter's puppets, and one is always conscious of manipulation. Although capable of doing so, he is really too eager to stop and record natural appearances, actual textures, or facial expressions.

Titles like *The Washerwomen* (Ill. 73) hardly prepare one for the steamy, sketchy composition where the eye has to search to find the washerwomen. In fact, Fragonard's subjects hardly matter, because he has a perennial subject in sheer erotic energy. Where Boucher restricted his to suitable themes for it, and otherwise painted with conscious sobriety, Fragonard is harnessed to this dynamo on all occasions. His landscapes are so many erotic curves where clouds mingle with the trees, foliage becomes frilly underwear, and fountains spurt uncontrollably. When he tackled the history picture – a rare occasion – it too was animated by love. The large *Coréus sacrificing himself to save Callithoë* (Ill. 72), shown at the Salon of 1765, is Fragonard's effort to combine his own tendencies with academic requirements. It is not surprising that he exhibited there only once afterwards; this sort of machine was replaced by brilliant, witty decorations, positive riots of cupids and bathers, kissing lips and torn clothes, which always express love in action. The *Coréus* is negative love, sublime self-sacrifice, and in effect useless passion. Fragonard does his best to excite the composition, sending waves of smoky clouds and excited winged figures to fill the space between the two pillars not occupied by the strangely feminine priest and the swooning heroine – herself almost as if ravished by love. Perhaps hints from Boucher and Tiepolo (the *Sacrifice of Iphigenia*, Ill. 57, offers interesting comparison) worked on Fragonard to emulate the high style for which he was not suited. His genius lay in aiming lower, from an academic standpoint, in being more rational and natural – that is, by being more witty, mischievous, and relaxed.

But in 1765 this was not yet apparent, though perhaps suspected. The whole, high, rococo fabric was toppling. For a moment the painter of the *Coréus*



72 JEAN-HONORÉ FRAGONARD *Coréus sacrificing himself to save Callithoë*

seemed the man who might keep it still upright. The picture itself was thought by Diderot to have attracted attention less by its own merits than by the need in France to find a successor to the established Carle van Loo and the supposedly promising Deshayes, both of whom died that year. Boucher's talent had patently declined. Great painters, Diderot wrote in the same context, 'sont aujourdhui fort rares en Italie', and the only person he could think of comparing with Fragonard was Mengs. At Venice, Gian Antonio Guardi was dead; Tiepolo was self-exiled in Spain; Pittoni, last of the generation of talented practitioners still in the city, was to die in 1768.

And, of course, Fragonard was not to develop into a buttress of the style represented by these artists. He was to go his own individual way, supporting neither the old grandiose world of myths nor the chaster, more 'modern', classicism of Vien. As a result, he almost disappears from history, much as he quickly

disappeared from the Salon exhibitions. Like his art, his life was free from restraints. He seems to have been indifferent about patronage, readily serving the dealers, private boudoirs, the Crown. Clearly he could have no attitude to, or use for, the historical subject. His mythology is flippantly unlearned – or learnt rather at the Opéra-Comique, where his nymphs have served their amorous apprenticeships. In many ways Fragonard is much closer to Watteau than to Boucher. His amused response to natural behaviour, and his piquant combination of topical genre with decoration, make him at the same time anticipatory of the Goya of the tapestry cartoons.

The real Fragonard is revealed not by the *Corésus* but by a masterpiece of some ten years later, the large *Fête at Saint-Cloud* (Ill. 74) where nature dominates the figures, and the huge trees are dominated by the spacious expanse of cloudy sky. Mankind may gesticulate and lounge, watching the theatre of

73 JEAN-HONORÉ FRAGONARD *The Washerwomen*

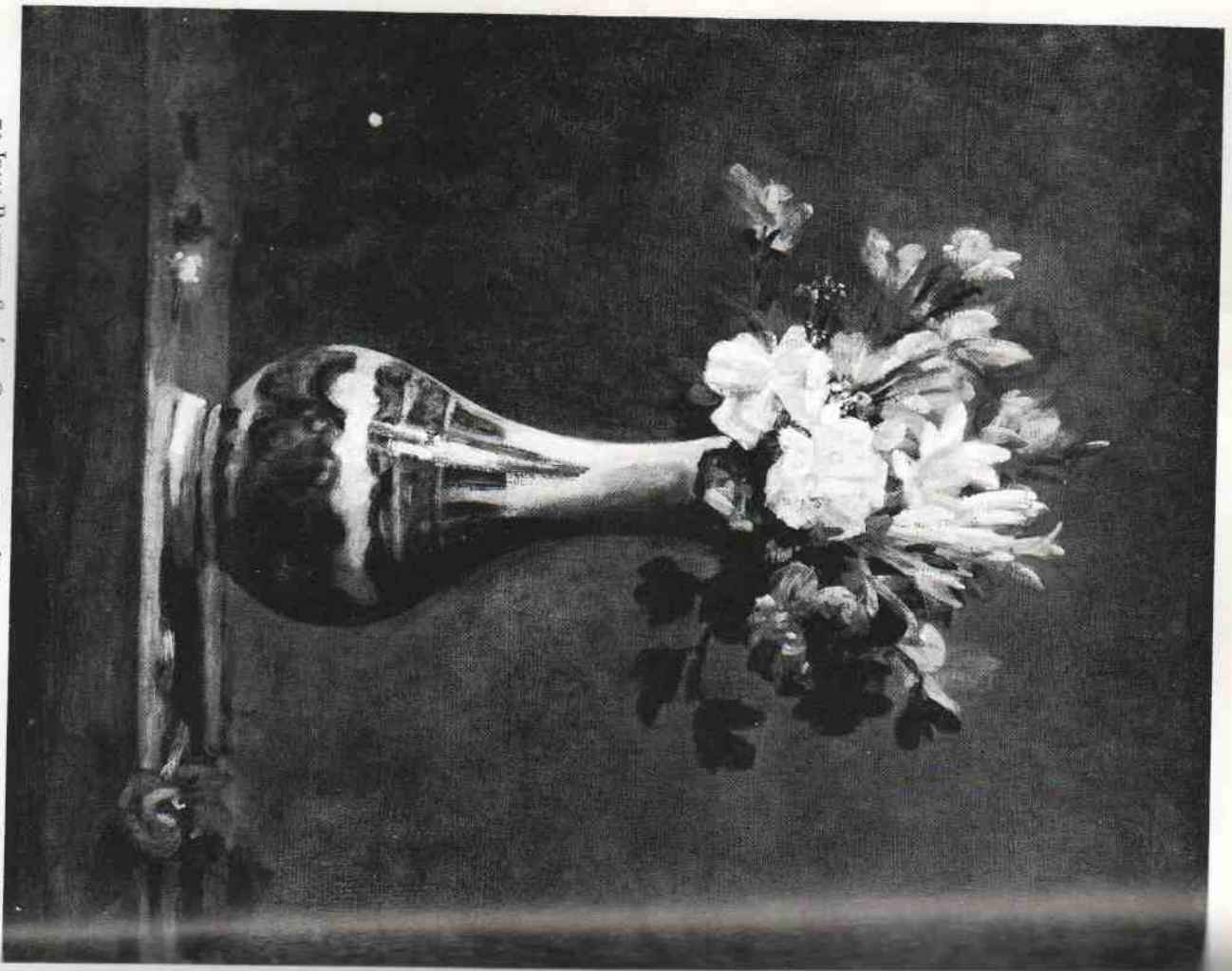


74 JEAN-HONORÉ FRAGONARD *Fête at Saint-Cloud (detail)*

marionettes; but nature is growing all the while, assuming the giant proportions of these beautiful green and lemon-yellow trees, beside which mankind shrinks to marionette proportions. What set out to be a topical scene (as topical as some charlatan's booth in Piazza San Marco painted by Francesco Guardi) has become a wild poem about the strength of natural forces and puny man which is ready to take its place in the Romantic Movement. The same could be said of Guardi's late ruin pieces, with their Shelleyan-like response to the poetry of the lapsed wall or fragment of palace archway which 'Topples o'er the abandoned sea'.

That might serve as a metaphor for the rococo style itself: a palace of art which rising natural forces destroyed, and which was long to remain neglected and unvisited. It took more than a hundred years to reinstate Tiepolo and Boucher in the face of the reaction against them which their own century had produced. Like other monarchs of the period, they were overthrown by revolution.



75 JEAN-BAPTISTE-SIMÉON CHARDIN *Vase of Flowers*

### Natural Reactions

So far, the art of the eighteenth century has appeared as quite frankly eager to please. The rococo movement and Watteau equally seem concerned to carry out the dictum of Madame du Châtelet: 'We must begin by saying to ourselves that we have nothing else to do in the world but seek pleasant sensations and feelings.' Yet, from its earliest years, the century had other aims for art, whereby it could be harnessed to moral and educational purposes. Though some manifestations of this are apparent only in mid-century – in France with Diderot and Greuze, for example – the strong tendency had already shown itself long before in England, the country least sympathetic to rococo concepts, the least autocratic in its government but probably the most puritan, as well as protestant, in its attitude to art. As early as 1713 Shaftesbury, the pupil of Locke, had condemned, in painting and the other arts 'this *false Relish* which is govern'd rather by what immediately strikes the sense, than by what consequently and by reflection pleases the Mind, and satisfies the Thought and Reason'. The visual puritan streak in Shaftesbury was not content with expressing condemnation in those terms but seems to anticipate the feminine bias of the rococo as he goes on in reproof: 'So that whilst we look on Paintings with the same eye, as we view commonly the rich Stuffs and colour'd Silks worn by our Ladies, and admir'd in Dress, Equipage, or Furniture, we must of necessity be effeminate in our Taste, and utterly set wrong as to all Judgment and Knowledge in the kind.'

For Shaftesbury, the right type of painting was of an elevated masculine kind in subject as well as treatment. It was based on nature and true to human passions, but it obeyed truths of art, propriety and morality, and in its highest manifestations was historical rather than 'merely natural'. Just while the rococo is getting under way, Shaftesbury seems to call for, in effect, neo-classical art. That is the dignified alternative to the rococo. At the same time there existed an



76 WILLIAM HOGARTH  
*Marriage à la Mode:*  
*The Comtesse's Morning Levée*

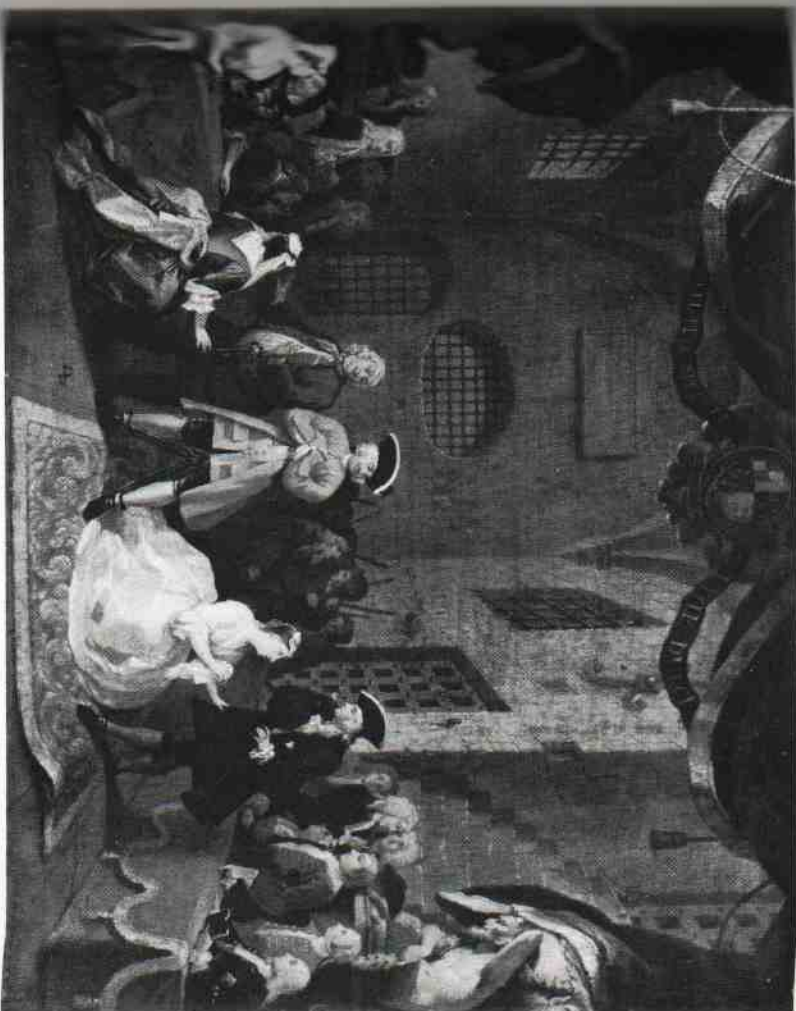
art that is content with being natural and which, whether sentimental or satiric, is patently less aristocratic. Perhaps inevitably this art was fostered in England, the country which had had its political revolution before the eighteenth century began. It was connected with the rising middle classes who provided a new reading public, one that looked for literature and art to deal with the world it

knew. It produced the journalism of *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, and it conditioned Hogarth. Not necessarily consciously anti-rococo, it was certainly opposed to the fictions of the high rococo painters. It is an art that is not easily summed up by a generalization but it was concerned with reflecting modern life, sometimes commenting upon it and always relating what is depicted to

what is known – ultimately as scientifically as in the work of Stubbs and Wright of Derby. Whether the truths it depicts are physical facts or the psychological facts of the human heart, it concentrates upon truth. The artist takes his place in society therefore not as ministering to its dreams of pleasure but as an educator. Art recovers a definite purpose, attaching itself to morality and science as it had earlier served religion.

Hogarth remains the most familiar painter in what became virtually a new category of picture. He was quite explicit about his aims and was tinged with a literary quality that strongly anticipates Greuze. Unlike Greuze, he did not attempt to write a novel but the narrative urge is quite clear in his concept of series of compositions; and in his friend Fielding he might be said to have vicarious existence as a novelist. Hogarth stated that he wanted to depict 'modern moral subjects' which were, he believed, writing about 1730, 'a field not broken up in any country or any age'. And even when every precedent in narrative series of engravings about the dangers of courtesans, or whatever, has been examined, Hogarth has a just claim to priority in his elaborate and often bitter topicality and the moral preoccupations of his drama. Just as much as any rococo painter, he thought of his picture as a miniature stage – but one on which should appear the ridiculousness of real men and women. In the actual theatre this revolution is associated with Gay's *Beggar's Opera* (first produced in 1729) which set out to satirize the conventions and high-flown heroics of that musical version of the rococo style, Italian opera. It was exactly by the standards of natural behaviour that the *castrati* and *prima donne* who so beautifully stormed and wept, and loved in vain, seemed increasingly ludicrous to a hard-headed age. The apology in the Prologue to Gay's opera is significant in its satire: 'I hope I may be forgiven that I have not made my Opera throughout unnatural.' It is convenient that Hogarth should have painted Machbeth confronted by his two wives in a scene from *The Beggar's Opera* (Ill. 77) which includes the audience as well as the actors. Between them, Hogarth and Gay – with the addition of the utterly sober Richardson – created a climate which gradually extended all over literate Europe, touching the France of Diderot and Rousseau, Goldoni (and possibly Pietro Longhi) at Venice, Lessing and the whole *bürgerliche* movement of literature and art in Germany. Just at the mid-century comes Goldoni's *Pamela*; in 1755 Greuze first appeared at the Salon and Lessing published *Miss Sara Sampson*.

Well before this, Hogarth had moved from the contemporary theatrical life of *The Beggar's Opera* scene – among the first of his topical pictures in a career



77 WILLIAM HOGARTH *The Beggar's Opera*

that had begun with portraits and conversation pieces – to complete series of pictures of his own devising in subject, with an earnestness foreign to Gay. At least, it is presumably in earnest that he painted his famous series like *The Rake's Progress* and *Marriage à la mode* which have a cruel power of observation and a perhaps rather simple belief in humour as a method of reforming abuses. It is the optimistic programme of Fielding ('to laugh mankind out of their favourite follies and vices') but it remains resolutely unpsychological, inevitably confusing folly with foibles and seeming to discover the root of all evil in money. Even though the Rake ends in insanity and the married couple end prematurely dead, their lives have been shown as possessing an awful glamour. Object lessons in the dangers of hedonism, they have actually supplied Hogarth with the material he most enjoys.



(Above) 79 GIOVANNI BATTISTA PIAZZETTA *Boy holding a Banner*

(Left) 78 JEAN-JACQUES DURAMEAU *The Saltpetre Factory*



There is more gusto than disgust in Hogarth's depiction of the absurdities, vanities and roaydings of society (*Ills 76 and 80*); and his delight in elaborating detail, until each picture is a treasure-trove of minute allusions, reveals a Dickens-like fascination with what he set out to condemn.

Despite the modern dress of his stories, the moral they contain is both bourgeois and old-fashioned. Hogarth is against all extremes, those of riches and poverty, those of refinement and grossness; and it is not always easy to see which in his eyes is the more serious crime. The lessons he teaches are strangely negatively; he was not even as successful as Greuze when he appealed to virtue. Effortlessly lively in depicting abuses, he became positively dull when showing good behaviour. He produced the companion series of the *Industrious Apprentice* to rival the *Idle Apprentice*, but neither his own age nor posterity has paid much attention to the platitudes of the former. Hogarth remains, perhaps too consciously, the spectator-cum-creator of a theatre of puppets. Destined for dreadful ends, to serve as moral examples, his people have none of that free play of irrationality – the licence just to be – which Goya gives to people. Hogarth is with those conservatives, of every period, who really believe that people can be better if they try, that it is only a matter of will-power.

Indeed, satire like his supposes a state of full rationality: on seeing how absurd our behaviour is, we will check it. In that sense Goya is not only liberal but pessimistic.

Hogarth's difficulty in devising anything attractively good to replace the abuses of society was the century's difficulty. Thus, far from being blind to the impending storm, pre-Revolutionary France was constantly applying and rejecting solutions to what was seen to be a dangerous situation. Hogarth proposes ridicule as the method of bringing people to their senses, but his own sense of the ridiculous extends far beyond any moral preoccupation. In his art foreigners are funny, and so are fashionable ladies and dancing-masters; and such targets have remained butts of middle-class English wit on the stage down to our own day. Ultimately, it is nature that Hogarth finds funny. To some extent, his moral purpose is a pinch of salt put into an art that claims the right to depict and comment on ordinary life.

It is the morality that is revolutionary, for the depiction of ordinary life had occupied sufficient painters during the previous century. And the tradition of such straightforward genre painting continued in the eighteenth century, sometimes tinged with a faint humour or pathos, but at its best when it held a completely dignified mirror up to nature as in the work of Piazzetta (*Ill. 79*) and



80 WILLIAM HOGARTH *The Heir's Progress: The Heir*

Chardin (*Ill. 89*). In them ordinary life is treated with all the seriousness previously reserved for history pictures, but it is significant that an artist like Piazzetta continued to paint altarpieces. There is no clear-cut opposition. Hogarth, Traversi, Pietro Longhi, all found themselves commissioned to execute the traditional type of religious picture, though it is hardly by such pictures that they are remembered. Greuze notoriously aspired to be a history painter, and it was a snub that the Académie inflicted in accepting him only as a painter of genre. Official hierarchies, and even unofficial ones, continued to rank the genre painter, like the topographical painter, on a low plane. The brilliant genre of Domenico Tiepolo seems to have brought him no fame at the time; and it is noticeable that his most inspired fresco decorations were reserved for the guest house, rather



81 GASPARE TRAVERSI *The Wounded Man*

than the villa, at Valmarana, and for the privacy of the Tiepolo family's own villa.

As a result of the 'official' attitude, which was prevalent throughout Europe, there remain subterranean aspects of the natural artistic reaction. It sometimes pushed up mysteriously, leaving little trace of who patronized it, and without anybody appearing to comment on it. This is particularly true of the Italian manifestations. Hogarth would probably have been surprised to learn that even there, in a country he doubtless thought of as the home of baroque history pictures, lurked an undercurrent of realistic painting – concerned not so much with our equals as with our inferiors. This tendency found little encouragement in Rome, but was present and partly traditional in Naples and in North Italy. Working in Naples and also in Rome, was Gaspare Traversi (c. 1732–69) whose

painting of *The Wounded Man* (Ill. 81) subordinates anecdote to a forceful actuality enhanced by the scale of the figures. As usual with him, they fill the composition to the exclusion of any setting; space not utilized for the central incident is occupied by other heads, set against a dark background, sometimes with the ironic disconcerting effect of the man's head at the extreme left here – so ostentatiously indifferent to what is happening centrally. Traversi points the whole picture with a flavour of irony: the incident is faintly absurd and undignified, the expressions on the faces hover on the caricatured, and there remains some ambiguity about the total effect.

The solid handling of the paint, which very carefully records not only details of costumes but also textures, and which has its own sense of weight, is typical too of genre in Northern Italy, where soberness of attitude replaces, however, Traversi's ironic attitude. The realism of Giacomo Ceruti (active 1720–30) is

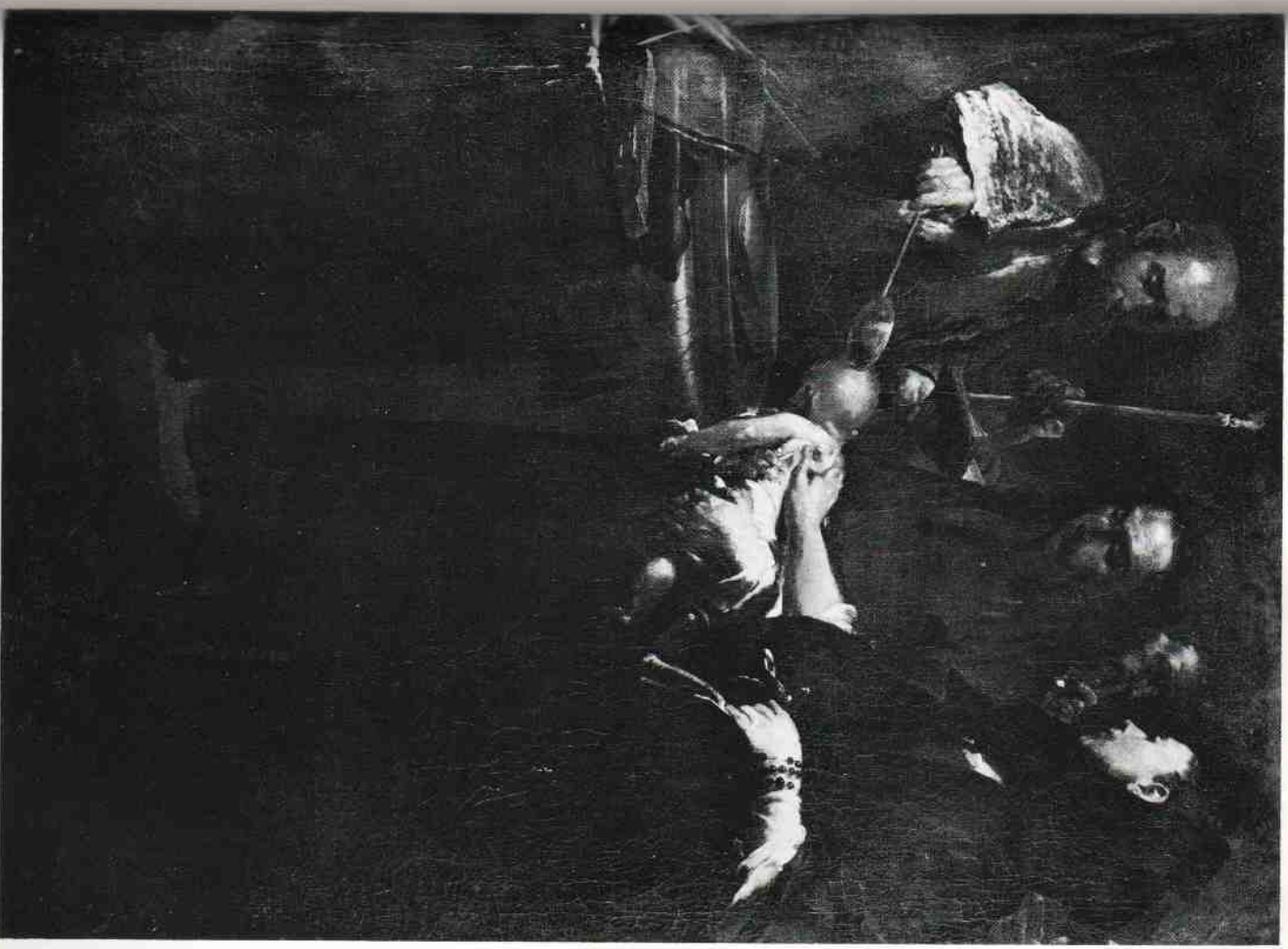
82 GIACOMO CERUTI *The Peasant Family*



sometimes pungent to a displeasing extent: muddily coloured pictures of dwarfs and grotesques being a peculiar aspect of taste in Italy, resulting at its lowest in the horrible pictures of another Brescian artist, Bocchi, in which all the figures are rioting, diseased, amorous dwarfs. Ceruti is quite free from any tendency to make humorous capital out of the very humble subjects he depicts – as free as he is from sentimentality. The *Peasant Family* (Ill. 82) simply exist, barely composed into making a picture or a family unit. There is no suggestion of peasant life being anything but toil – toil that has imprinted itself in permanent fatigue upon these people so that they are hardly any longer personalities. They have become as listless as their clothes, with minds as empty as the interior they inhabit, dull with the dullness of exhaustion. Society has placed them in this environment and nothing hints that it will ever change. Ceruti depicts them without pleading for them, but the steadiness of eye which records this aspect of *la condition humaine* could not fail to make the owners of such pictures think – even if only of the dubious picturesqueness of being poor and tired.

Ceruti, though still inexplicable in many ways, was certainly not working against one current of the period, as becomes obvious in considering a much greater and always more famous painter, Giuseppe Maria Crespi (1665–1747). It was probably only at the beginning of the new century that Crespi broke away from the more dignified aspects of the Bolognese tradition and turned to painting the genre subjects which are his finest achievement. He was encouraged in his tacit rejection of the history picture by the patronage of the Grand Prince Ferdinand de' Medici at Florence, to whom his genre pictures apparently seemed amusing. Often they were indeed lively and unconventional enough, an effect increased by the fluent and lively handling of paint, but their sympathy for the humble lives they depict makes them in retrospect profoundly moving.

Crespi painted an interesting-sounding (but lost) narrative series concerning an opera-singer – perhaps significantly, for an English patron; and also a series of the Seven Sacraments, conceived not as part of Christ's ministry but as scenes of contemporary life, with the emphasis upon the humble condition of ministers and those ministered to. Though the pictures were designed for a Cardinal, their religious feeling seems much slihter than their humanity. None of the figures is splendid or awe-inspiring: there is the same simplicity of character, and as far as possible of vestments, in the bishop as in the plain priest. It is as if a sacrament were part of man's natural charity to man. The cycle of the human pilgrimage which Crespi traces has its inherent solemnity: from the proffered naked baby of *Baptism* (Ill. 83) to the expiring man of *Extreme Unction* (Ill. 84). No further



83 GIUSEPPE MARIA CRESPI *The Baptism*



84 GIUSEPPE MARIA CRISPI *Extreme Unction*

moral lesson is preached and no satiric point is made. Crespi's people are honest, clay-coloured, dressed in browns or black and cream, with the instinctive dignity of being involved in an important rite; there is no distraction from the main incident, no ogling of the spectator – instead, a tremendous sense simply of existence, and a tenderness in the painter's response to it. The result has a rare poetry. Far more concerned with catching the essence of life than with recording trivial details of costume, or setting or manners, and apparently indifferent to social rank, Crespi is constantly transcending genre to create a soberly enchanted world.

At its most picaresque it is seen in his group of *Musicians* (Ill. 85) which has a mysterious cloudy beauty that is found again only in his greatest pupil, Piazzetta. The musicians are like gypsies, exotic in their simplicity, having paused only temporarily, with a vague background of roaming and an uncertain future. In such a picture Crespi is much closer to Watteau than to Hogarth; it has a delicacy of mood which borders on the melancholy, suggesting a private climate far removed from ordinary life and a personal vision beyond influences and trends. It is not ultimately typical of anything except the nature that created it.

The same subdued nonconformism is apparent in Piazzetta – as unexpected a contemporary of Tiepolo's in some ways as Chardin is of Boucher. Just as much as Crespi, perhaps more, Piazzetta became an established figure; he was virtually the leading painter of Venice while he lived, respected, widely-commissioned but known to be a slow worker. His powerfully sculptural art is a rebuke to ro-coco characteristics, as is the restraint of his colour schemes. All the individualizing tendency of his altarpieces and religious pictures emerges quite openly in his genre paintings. They continue where Crespi left off, increasing the sense of mystery and detachment and effortlessly transcending the everyday aspect of things.

The *Boy holding a Banner* (Ill. 79) remains locked in a private dream, half dressed up, only playing at being a standard-bearer with a sheet wrapped round a pole, but absorbed in the pretence. Far from presenting an easily-recognized aspect of reality, Piazzetta has woven a romantic atmosphere, and a memorable one, about the quite simple subject; it is as if he had taken some acolyte from Crespi's *Seven Sacraments*, or even some peasant boy out of a Certini, and concentrated on portraying his mood in isolation. The picture is lonely but self-contained; it seems to require no spectator; it tells no story; and it may even claim, under the guise of genre, new freedom for the artist to indulge his own mood, oblivious of any client or patron.





85 GIUSEPPE  
MARIA CRESPI  
*Musicians*



86 GIOVANNI BATTISTA PIAZZETTA *Idyll on the Seashore*

Several mysteries surround Piazzetta's so-called *Idyll on the Seashore* (Ill. 86) where the subject is even more elusive. Perhaps there is some story, even satire, in it; yet it probably appeared merely naturalistic to its original owner, Marshal Schlenburg, who also owned several paintings by Cerna. Piazzetta is naturalistic in his preference for people over types, and in his sympathy with plain,

countified people – themselves somewhat uncouth, *'un peu berger'*. His people retain their feet on the ground; reserved, sullen almost, bovine – a point made apt by the unexpected cow's head poking into the picture – they are intensely real. But they do not correspond to any recognizable section of society; they are patently not at work, and far from being circumscribed by their environment, they exist in a bizarre, private realm of the imagination. All is timeless and untopical, because of their vaguely fancy-dress clothes and the deliberate obscurity of their surroundings.

Much more comprehensible to his contemporaries, and truly typical of the century's interests, was Crespi's other Venetian pupil, Pietro Longhi. Without Lancret's charm or Hogarth's satiric bite, Longhi was closer to a tattling journalist, observing life in Venice with mild, rather respectful, humour. Local patricians commissioned his little pictures which hold up to nature no more than a small handmirror, none too steadily, in which the more amiable surfaces of life are prettily reflected back. So many pages from an almanach. Longhi's pictures dutifully report the daily round of visits and coffee-drinking in patrician circles, and sewing and serving food in humbler milieus, and move out of doors to record carnival novelties – like the presence of a rhinoceros in Venice (Ill. 87). Manners are painted with a decorousness that becomes insipid; in most of the pictures nothing is happening and the figures are sometimes barely composed into any coherent relationship. Longhi's justification is not really by any artistic standard but through a comparatively new claim: that what he depicts is true. His pictures were not collected internationally as souvenirs of Venice, but must have hung on the walls of actual rooms similar to those he depicts: reassuring in their reflection and yet something of a revolution, at least in that city, by their simple realism. Goldoni was to hail him politely as a man 'looking for the truth', and Gasparo Gozzi, writing in the nearest equivalent of a newspaper in Venice, seems to have preferred Longhi to Tiepolo since the former painted 'what he sees with his own eyes'.

Yet this was welcome from advanced, somewhat isolated figures, more 'engaged' than Longhi himself. Goldoni left Venice for France and never returned. Neither Venice nor the rest of Italy was generally in sympathy with the revolutionary naturalism that was bound up in part with social revolution. England had successfully absorbed a revolution in the seventeenth century; Italy was to wait until the *Risorgimento* for its entry into the modern world, from which it was rapidly retreating during the eighteenth century. Goldoni's departure is a symbol. And it is symbolic that he chose Paris as his goal, though he was not



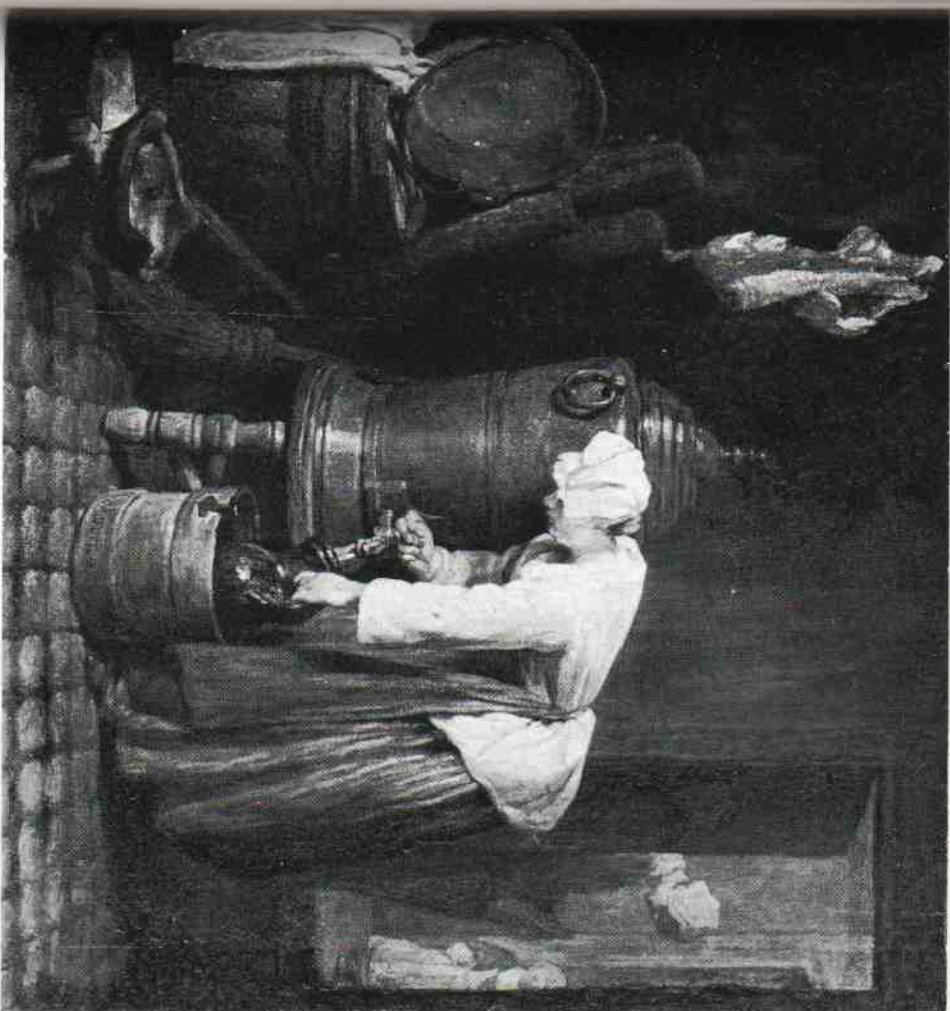
87 PIETRO LONGHI *The Rhinoceros*

to be particularly contented there. Here was a society in more ferment even than it seemed, but highly literate, sophisticated, and increasingly *bourgeois*. It was a climate that encouraged a public response to all the arts, and with the new phenomenon of Salon exhibitions, painting found itself confronted not only by an audience but by critics. One says critics but means Diderot. For in him there was fully expressed all the pent-up obsession with nature in art which others had only stumbingly formulated; and he had two artists to make his heroes in Chardin and Greuze.

Diderot could have no higher praise of a Chardin still-life than to say: '*C'est la nature même*.' And for him Chardin remained the great magician-painter whose canvases deceived the eye by their tremendous realism, down to the very textures of the objects painted. Such pictures kept the spectator completely within his own experience, and to some extent that is true of all the pictures painted by Chardin – including those genre scenes which were executed chiefly in the years before Diderot wrote of the Salons, but which are also in their way still-lives. Neither category of picture was novel, and Chardin might seem merely to be practising what had been among the most typical products of Dutch seventeenth-century painting. And yet there is an ideal aspect of Chardin's art, so selective and elevated is it, and by no means as preoccupied by natural appearances as Diderot believed. Compared with Hogarth and Longhi, Chardin is less anecdotal and more dignified, and utterly free from any wish to be satiric about the scenes he depicts. Indeed, his view of society is perhaps the most seriously optimistic produced by eighteenth-century art; he is typical in putting emphasis on the powers of education, but he has done this so discreetly that the point is sometimes missed. It was not missed, however, at the period. We should temporarily forget Diderot, and turn instead to the verses which the engraver, Lépicie, put under his engraving of *La Mère laborieuse* in 1740 and which the *Mercure de France* found expressive of the whole picture. They address themselves to the girl being trained by her mother:

*Ei goûtés cette vérité  
Que le travail et la sagesse  
Valent les biens et la beauté.*

Chardin's work contains, in every sense of the word, a moral: the importance of truth, the necessity for strict guidance of children, the dignity of labour. He never weakens his art by explicit statement of such things; they are the essential fibre out of which it grows, and everything we know suggests that they were



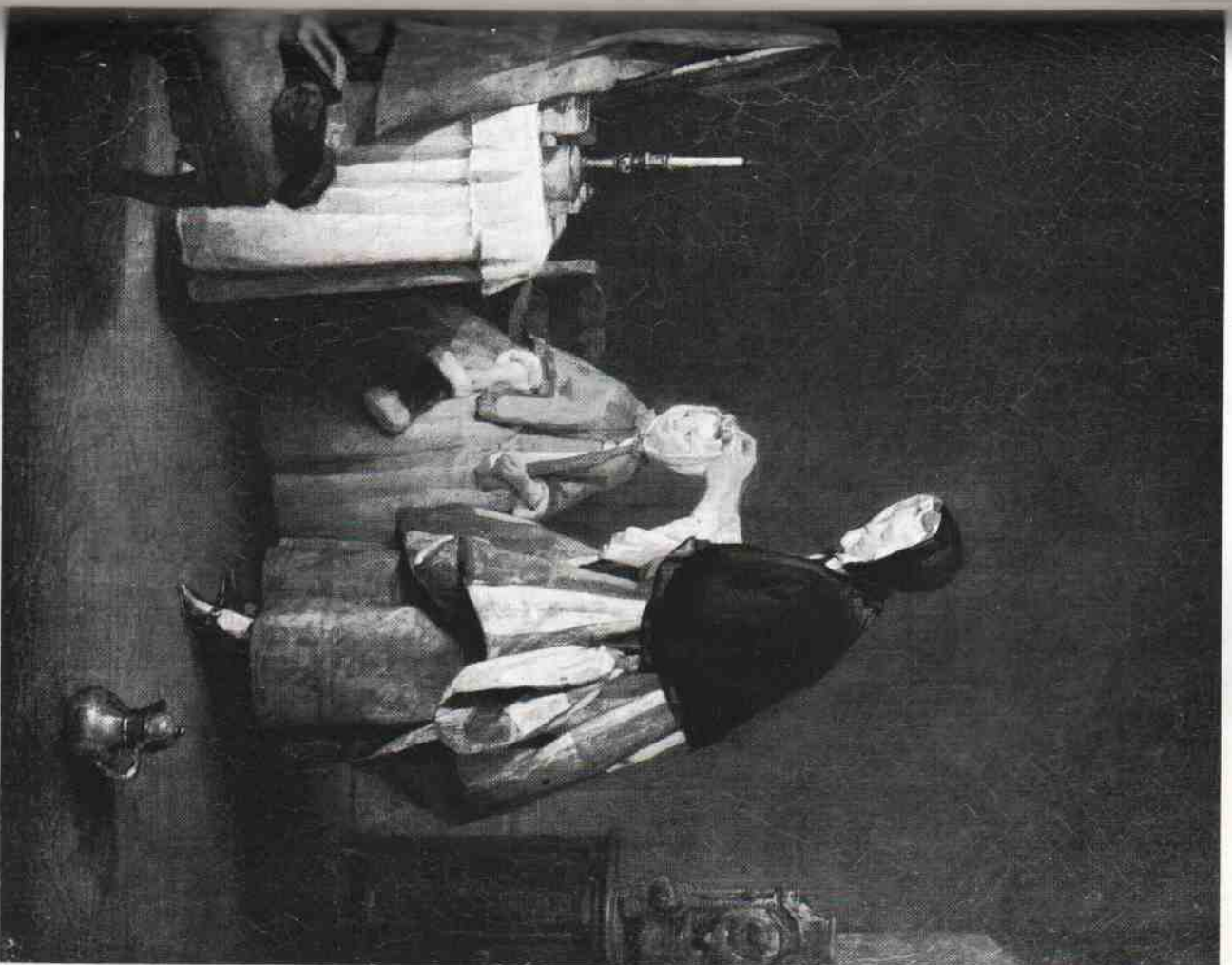
88 JEAN-BAPTISTE-SIMÉON CHARDIN *La Fontaine*

his own beliefs. The public understood him instinctively and probably always preferred his genre scenes to his still-lives. His Salon appearances were – especially in the years before Greuze arrived – outstandingly successful. Mariette, a little sour from the realization that Italy and the high style of art were dropping from favour, might speak of the appeal to '*le gros public*' with its preference for pictures of daily life as it could be in their own homes; but Chardin cut across any class. The actual purchasers of his pictures were bankers or great foreign ambassadors like the Prince of Liechtenstein, and two of his finest genre scenes were owned by Louis XV. At the same time, through the medium of engraving,

his work could pass into the hands of 'le gros public' itself. In apparently mirroring the simplest aspects of the most ordinary lives, Chardin appealed to everybody. The emphasis was not on humour, nor on anything even faintly erotic. For all the bandying about of comparisons with Teniers, there were no inn scenes, no feasts, nor drunken peasants. Absolute decorum, an almost intellectual as well as emotional decorum, controls the subjects. The emphasis is on humanity – yet despite the realism, it is less humanity as it is and more as it would like to be.

Chardin's career started with a large and untypical, dramatic, genre scene – known to the Goncourt brothers but destroyed at the Commune – which showed a barber-surgeon aiding a man wounded in a duel. It had been painted for a barber-surgeon, to serve as a signboard outside his premises, and it is thus comparable to the *enseigne* which Watteau had painted for Gersaint. There Watteau had at last brought his people in from country-fied open-air settings and collected them in an urban environment. Chardin began with a Parisian street scene, but his later genre pictures carry us indoors into much more intimate, and less animated, scenes. Already in *La Fontaine* (Ill. 88), exhibited in one version or another at Chardin's first Salon of 1733, all the recognizable aspects of his world are present. The moment depicted is utterly commonplace: a woman drawing water from a copper cistern. Although other figures are visible in the background, the first impression is of a single figure, on which the eye concentrates even while she concentrates on her task. Such concentration is typical of Chardin; even when the subject is a boy idly building a card house, or blowing bubbles, there is an intencess that lifts the trivial pastime into an occupation. Unlike Greuze, Chardin never allows his people to ogle the spectator, to *act* the housemaid or village girl; they are absorbed, absorbed almost literally in the wonderful paint surface which seems to express integrity by the very oil medium.

There never was such a perfect world as Chardin's; and in its way it is as enchanted, and as delimited, as Piazzetta's. It is a puritan, perhaps almost more truly Quaker, life that is depicted in simple, windowless rooms, dark and sheltered domestic interiors in which nothing more is happening than the preparing or serving of frugal meals, the education or amusement of children. The appeal is in the restriction: an emphasis on plain living and clean linen – linen, not silk. There is humbleness without poverty. Above all, everything indicates industry. The few possessions are polished and harmoniously arranged; the plain-coloured clothes are cared for, neatly worn. Gravity is present not only in the mood, but in the sense of each object finding its own place in the scheme of things. And



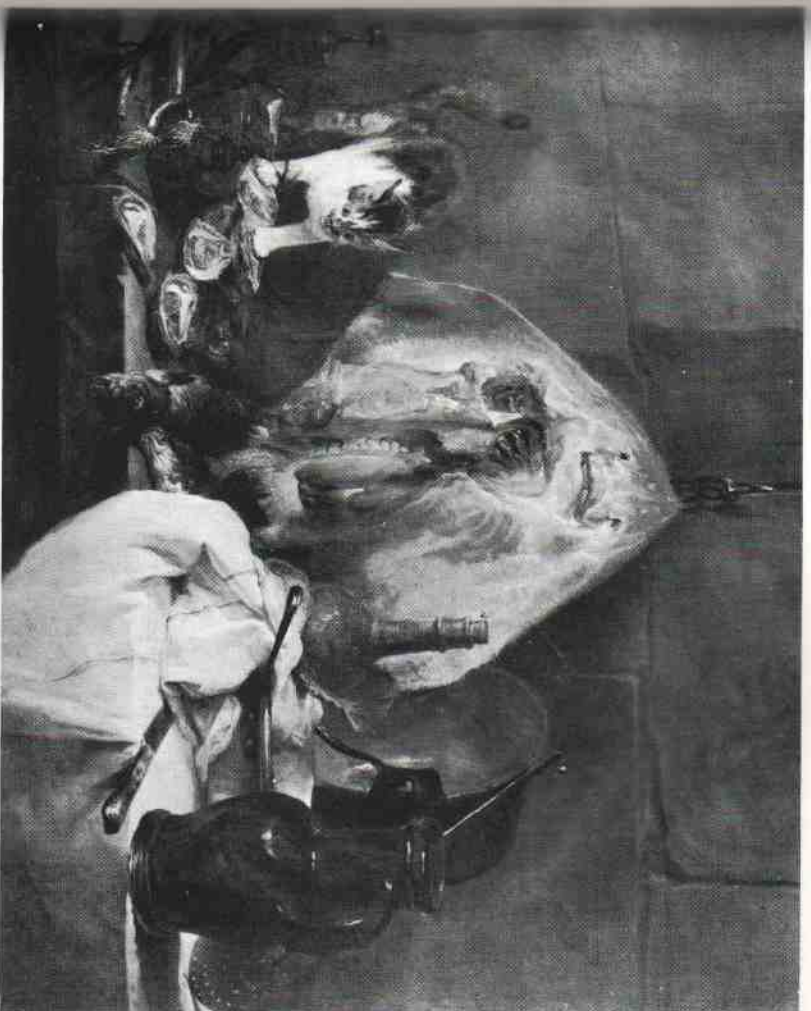
89 JEAN-BAPTISTE-SIMÉON CHARDIN *La Toilette du Matin*

objects are as important as people: they coexist, so that the copper cistern is no mere prop but is as fully realized, as measured and plotted, as the girl who bends at it.

In all this there is rebuke, if no more than a tacit one, to rococo sensations. A cold bath of purity replaces the heady hot-house languor of Boucher. Those tendencies for everything to shimmer, melt, dissolve – for art to hover on the point of orgasm – are counteracted by chastity: chase draughtsmanship and chaste activity. Women remain the chief subject, but treated as household managers and mothers; girls are firmly put back into a domestic environment, often shown assuming maternal responsibilities. Chardin's technique is equally in opposition to rococo fluidity. Like Piazzetta again, he was a slow worker. His father had been a carpenter and there is something almost of joinery in Chardin's tiny slabs and slices of saturated paint which are, as it were, assembled and slotted into place in the composition.

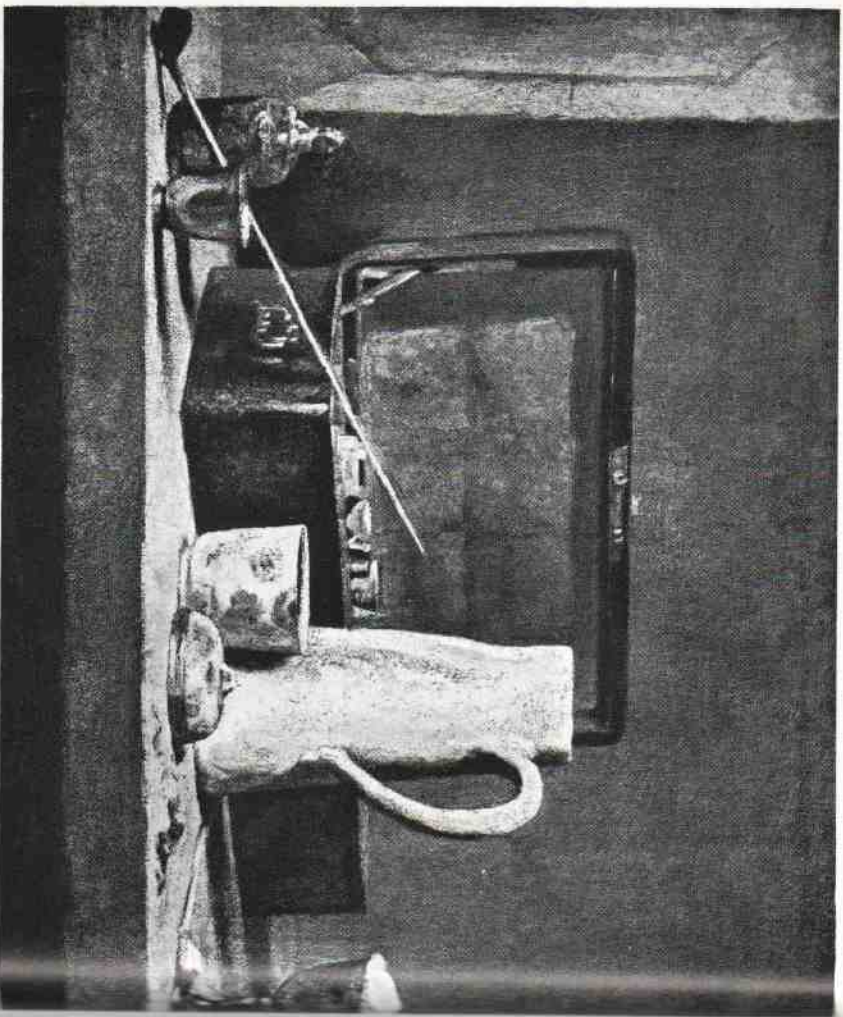
All Chardin's achievement as a genre painter is concentrated in *La Toilette du Matin* (Ill. 89), of which the title taken in isolation would suggest some gallant if not erotic treatment of a popular boudoir theme. But Chardin's is maternal once more, the preparation for attendance at church, with the faintest hint of coquetry (seized on by contemporary critics) in the child's glance into the mirror while her mother adjusts her cap. It may be charming, but it is also much more than charming. There is austerity in the air: from the cold early morning light to the austere plotted design with its firm triangle of the two figures giving a sense of permanence which the clotted, viscous, paint enhances. The mother's striped skirt might be marquetry work, so inlaid do its colours seem; in the original a small area, perhaps no more than half an inch, is occupied by the muff lying on the chair – and Chardin has found a quite unexpected, elusive tone for it, pigeon-blue, slate-blue, set off by a minute edging of grey fur. This picture was bought by the Swedish courtier, Tessin, who also owned, with no sense of discrepancy, Boucher's marvellous *Birth of Venus* (Ill. 62). The two pictures perhaps symbolize less different tastes than different aims. Chardin refers us back to ordinary experience, concentrating it with almost microscopic intensity, tinging it with the hint of the moral and educative, yet still not telling any specific story. There is almost nothing left to say of the picture than that significant praise addressed to its creator after it had been exhibited in 1741 at the Salon: *'à main en fait une réalité'*.

Chardin's still-lives, perhaps nowadays more in vogue than his genre pictures, are equally a part of natural reactions. They themselves moved from the early



90 JEAN-BAPTISTE-SIMÉON CHARDIN *The Skate*

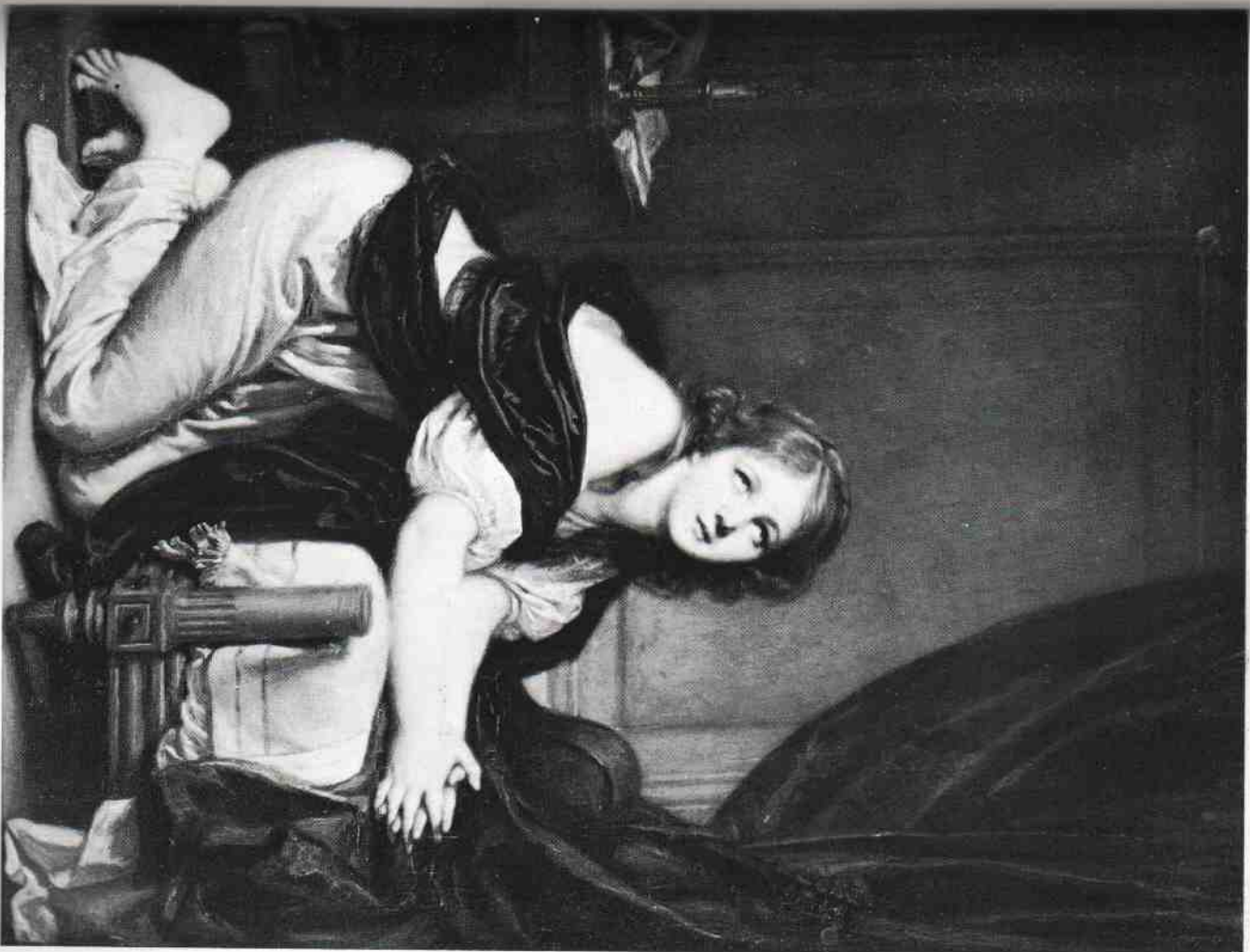
*Skate* (Ill. 90), a drama and an anecdote (as well as shockingly raw reality, which is almost the equivalent of the lost barber-surgeon's sign) towards a much more austere and less littered type of composition. Absolute timelessness is achieved in the *Vase of Flowers* (Ill. 75), with a simplicity of arrangement, combined with intensity, that makes Van Haysum quite rococo in his elaborations. Indeed, it is natural enough to make Fanin-Latour seem artificial. Beautiful though it is, it remains a unique picture even for Chardin; his still-lives preferred to suggest, though no more than suggest, the not distant presence of humanity. Perhaps it could be claimed that the flowers adumbrate their arranger, but much more strongly and consciously evocative of people is a still-life like the *Pipe*



91 JEAN-BAPTISTE-SIMÉON CHARDIN *Pipe and Jug*

*and Jug* (Ill. 91). Here it is the very essence of the objects that matters. For all Diderot's praise, Chardin is not obsessed with surface appearances but with what lies beneath. Yet the objects themselves are deliberately homely; they are possible possessions for anyone and, like Chardin's people, they suggest use. At their richest they are comparatively poor; the utensils are more often those of kitchen than dining-room; and they form in fact a logical extension of the lives that Chardin's genre pictures depict.

Diderot seems never to have made any specific comment on those Parisian domestic interiors that should, one might suppose, have embodied for him art at its finest. Perhaps they were too austere, too elevated, too self-contained, to appeal to him. They resolutely refuse to appeal. It was in Greuze that Diderot



92 JEAN-BAPTISTE GREUZE *The Morning Prayer*



93 JEAN-BAPTISTE GREUZE *L'Accordée de Village*

found the appealing painter of genre, one who increased his popularity by taking his scenes out into villages and emphasizing the humble rank of his actors. The rustic fallacy was only one chord of falseness played on by Greuze. Anything that might have been a hint in Chardin – such as the church-going of *La Toilette* – becomes in Greuze an over-stated illustration: we must now witness *The Morning Prayer* (Ill. 92), and those countless anecdotes with doves and broken mirrors in all of which there is a confused appeal to sentimentality and a lack of confidence in art that is unsupported by narrative. Greuze made the naïve mistake, from which no amount of special pleading will excuse him, of supposing that a moving anecdote will make a moving work of art. He begot a fearful progeny of nineteenth-century academic work throughout Europe from which came nothing except the problem picture. That he was quite capable of appe-

hending and conveying reality is shown by his often excellent portraits, but he wished to make some more striking contribution to art. He did indeed succeed in expressing something of the spirit of his age; he spoke the new language, as foreign to Chardin as to Boucher, of the heart.

Greuze is a perfectly convenient phenomenon, with his own life as a lesson in moral retribution. Arrived on the artistic scene in 1755, he perhaps reached his greatest popularity with *L'Accordée de Village* (Ill. 93), shown at the Salon of 1761, the year that Rousseau published *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. He went on to make, instinctively, the connection between *la peinture morale* in genre scenes and in history pictures, producing an essential fusion of the two in 1769 with *Septimius Severus and Caracalla* (Ill. 94) – a picture whose chief fault was its prematurity. Had d'Angiviller been at the head of the Bâtiments in 1766, he would probably have made the Académie accept Greuze as a history painter. Though the Revolution ruined Greuze, he lived through it. Perhaps the last person to record seeing

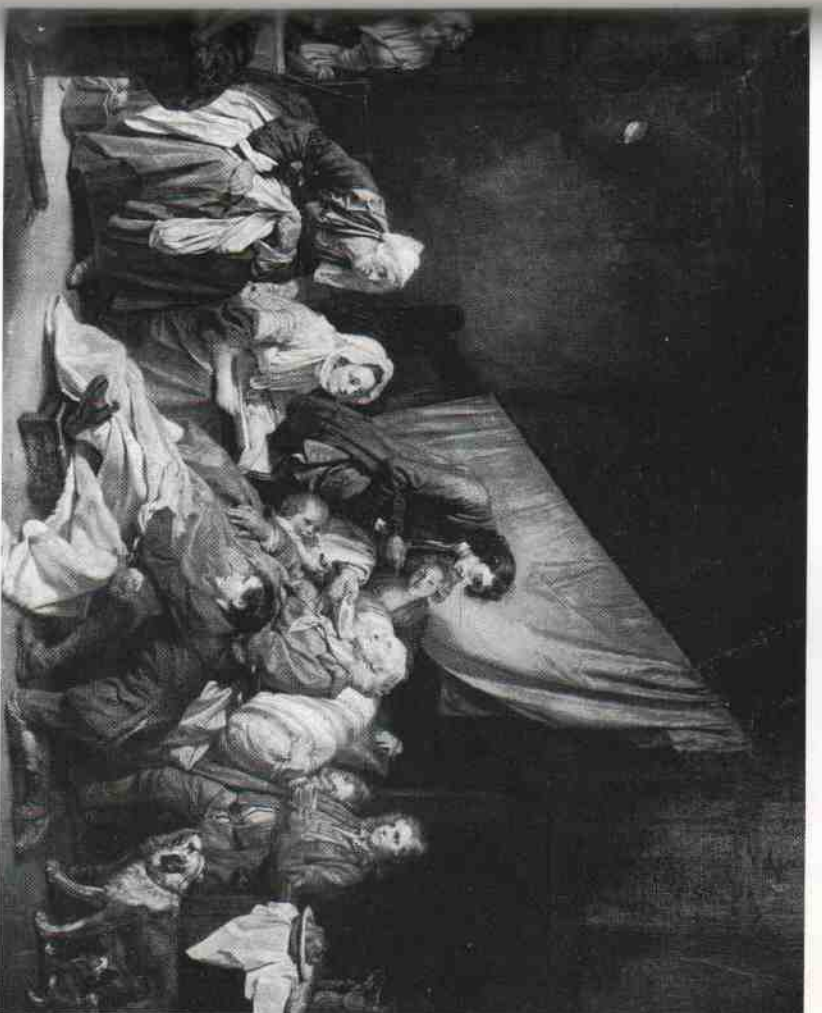
94 JEAN-BAPTISTE GREUZE *Septimius Severus and Caracalla*



him was Farington in 1802, confronted by an old man who seemed no more than a piece of *ancien régime* flotsam: '... saw Greuze [sic], formerly an Artist of very great reputation'.

The importance of Greuze is historical rather than artistic. He is one of those painters whose impetus seems public, not private; he can almost be compared with a best-selling novelist, so literary were his interests and so conscious his angling for an audience, even to the point, for instance, of paying written tribute to the parish priests of France for having inspired his composition of *La Veuve et son curé*. Such activity is tribute to the revolution Greuze represented: the urge for painting to affect people, to tell a psychological story in a deliberately narrative way (Greuze conceived a series which should number more than twenty pictures with a Balzacian plot of two entwined lives). It had long been apparent that the painting of falsehoods must be destroyed; pictures which simply depicted truth might not be sufficiently affecting and elevating. Boucher was doomed; Teniers was inclined to be coarse. There remained nature as seen by Greuze: seen and re-arranged, preserving women as the central theme, not omitting to titillate even while posing as virtuous. When Diderot compared Teniers with Greuze, it was inevitably in the latter that he found '*plus d'élégance, plus de grâce, une nature plus agréable...*'

This is some way towards admitting that the truths of Greuze have been softened and sweetened. The resulting art might have been defended, should it even have needed defence, because it mixed sentiment with virtue, flattered the spectator by depicting scenes like *L'Accordée de Village*, where emotion runs riot through the composition – leaving no one untouched. If Greuze had been asked why he concentrated on rustic life, he could have answered in the words of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: 'because in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity'. The picture is sensibility's revenge upon so much sense in the first fifty years of the century. It sobbs of the natural goodness of peasants, no longer needing to have virtue inculcated because they enshrine it; it not only assembles a whole family to make its emotional point but also enlists the natural illustration of a hen and her chicks. There is deliberate flight from reason and intellect; it is now sufficient that we should *feel*. And Greuze was soon aware of further ways to set the emotions stirring. Rousseau had made splendid use of the deathbed in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*; Greuze's *Pitié filiale* (Ill. 95) ingeniously adds a last twist by the addition of paralysis to death, and at the Salon of 1769 managed to reduce spectators to tears. Diderot remarked, with admiration, the varying nuances of grief on



95 JEAN-BAPTISTE GREUZE *La Pitié filiale*

each face in the picture, worked out the various relationships of the characters to the stricken man, and was so enthusiastic that it is not very surprising that a reaction followed. Something of the grey monotony of Greuze's technique had perhaps secretly always worried him. Greuze's adept acceptance of all morality, the Church's as well as natural man's, probably offended him – and he, like others of their contemporaries, came to detect some licentiousness even in the midst of Greuze's most virtuous-seeming subjects. There is a wide application to the remark of Rousseau's Julie on her deathbed: '*On m'a fait boire jusqu'à la lie la coupe amère et douce de la sensibilité?*'

Greuze's pictures offered a comforting solution to some of the century's problems. They assured everyone that cottages contained the cleanest of peasants, untroubled by toil or poverty, transparent vessels for the most tender of emotions, and with no thought of revolution, being occupied weeping at deathbeds,



explaining the Bible to their children, or tearfully becoming engaged. *L'Accordée de Village* could perhaps hardly have appealed to Louis XV, who was to reject Cochin's scheme for surrounding him with instructive examples of antique morality, but it was to be acquired for the Crown under Louis XVI. Life too almost caught up with Greuze when, the year before coming to the throne, Marie-Antoinette performed her 'generous deed' of comforting the family of a peasant wounded by a royal stag – and artists hurried to record the unusual moment of condescension and sensibility.

It was perhaps a miscalculation by the normally shrewd Greuze to take for his antique historical essay such an obscure subject as Septimius Severus rebuking his son Caracalla for an attempt in Scotland on his life. The appeal to the heart was less obvious than usual; certainly the subject is moral and the picture might well have been entitled *La Malédiction paternelle*, but it is almost violently severe, masculine and unyielding after Greuze's sweetened, rural genre. Few people, even in an age of strong emotional outbursts, could have been moved by the incident. The public were not yet prepared for such high dramas of imperial Roman history and could make no application of it to their own lives. Although often enough criticized since its first poor reception, the picture is certainly as good as many other more applauded paintings by Greuze and probably better than many neo-classical canvases that were soon to follow it. Greuze recognized the importance of the history picture, but he painted his within Boucher's lifetime and before David had emerged. Had he taken as subject some distressed classical heroine, he might have succeeded in pleasing the world pleased by the women of Vien. It is significant that when he was attacked – and replied – it was the standards of Poussin that were evoked. To the criticism that Poussin would have produced a sublime picture of Septimius Severus, Greuze humbly replied that he had made careful study of Poussin's style. *Poussinisme* was returning. Five years later, with Louis XVI on the throne and d'Angiviller Directeur des Bâtimens, official commissions were to concentrate on ancient and modern history pictures, 'suitable', in d'Angiviller's own words, 'to re-awake virtue and patriotic sentiment'. What Cochin had vainly urged on the ageing Louis XV thus became royal policy.

This was only one expression of the now quite patent determination to make art connect with life. While ambitious projects were everywhere being conceived to reproduce the truths of especially classical antiquity, there still remained the truths of the period itself – and not merely in the peasant genre aspect exemplified by Greuze. The century's achievements deserved their place in art: the

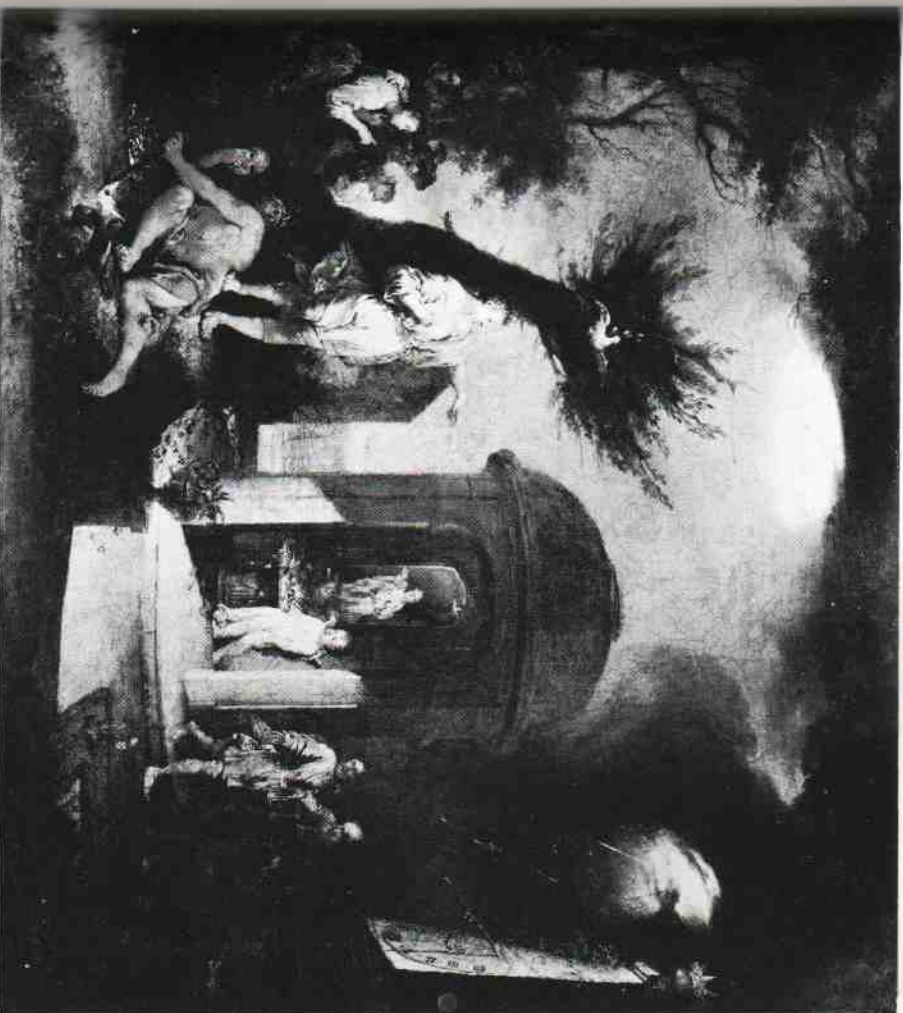


96 MARIE-LOUISE-ELIZABETH VIGÉE-LEBRUN *Princesse de Polignac*

philosophical, scientific, industrial advances which had been made through fresh study of nature. Naturalness, which was not at all a discovery of Rousseau's but which he had made into a doctrine, was really the century's last burst of optimism. At the emotional extreme it found Madame Vigée-Lebrun, who gave it *chic*, and confused simplicity in dress with goodness of heart. Ravished by the charm of her own appearance, and hardly able to paint a male sitter, Vigée-Lebrun continued the century's cult of women. By removing any suggestions of intelligence (naturally) as if it had been rouge, she created the limpid, fashionably artless portrait, of which the *Princesse de Polignac* (Ill. 66) is a brilliant example. The Princess, close friend of Marie-Antoinette, naively rehearses a song, in contrast to Nature's women who were already competent – themselves sometimes Muses – before they were portrayed, and Boucher's *Madame de Pompadour* (Ill. 63) who had left singing to the bird. The Princess de Polignac claims to be just like us – an amiable but unconvincing claim. In Vigée-Lebrun we have the last view of eighteenth-century woman – who had begun as a goddess, became a courtesan, and now ended all heart – before Napoleon and War banish her from the centre of events.

More interesting is the intellectual extreme, represented by several painters for whom Erasmus Darwin spoke to some extent when he claimed to '*inlist the Imagination under the banner of Science*' (his italics). This was the intention of his *Botanic Garden* as proclaimed in the preface of 1791. Nature by itself was not sufficient for him, because he aimed at artistic novelty. He might have applauded, had he ever known, the allegorical expression by Januarius Zick (1730–97) of the century's indebtedness to Newton (Ill. 97). Though the means whereby this is conveyed are traditional pictorial rhetoric, the person celebrated is one of the eighteenth century's most cherished lawgivers, who had replaced fantasy by new and exciting facts. Newton's theories were true and relevant, especially to painters. And Zick, trained first in Paris and then under Mengs, pays his family confused tribute to intellectual and scientific truth. In a more direct way, tribute was to be paid to the revolution achieved by science when applied to industry, and for the first time industry – in contradistinction to rural labour – provided the subject-matter for painters all over Europe.

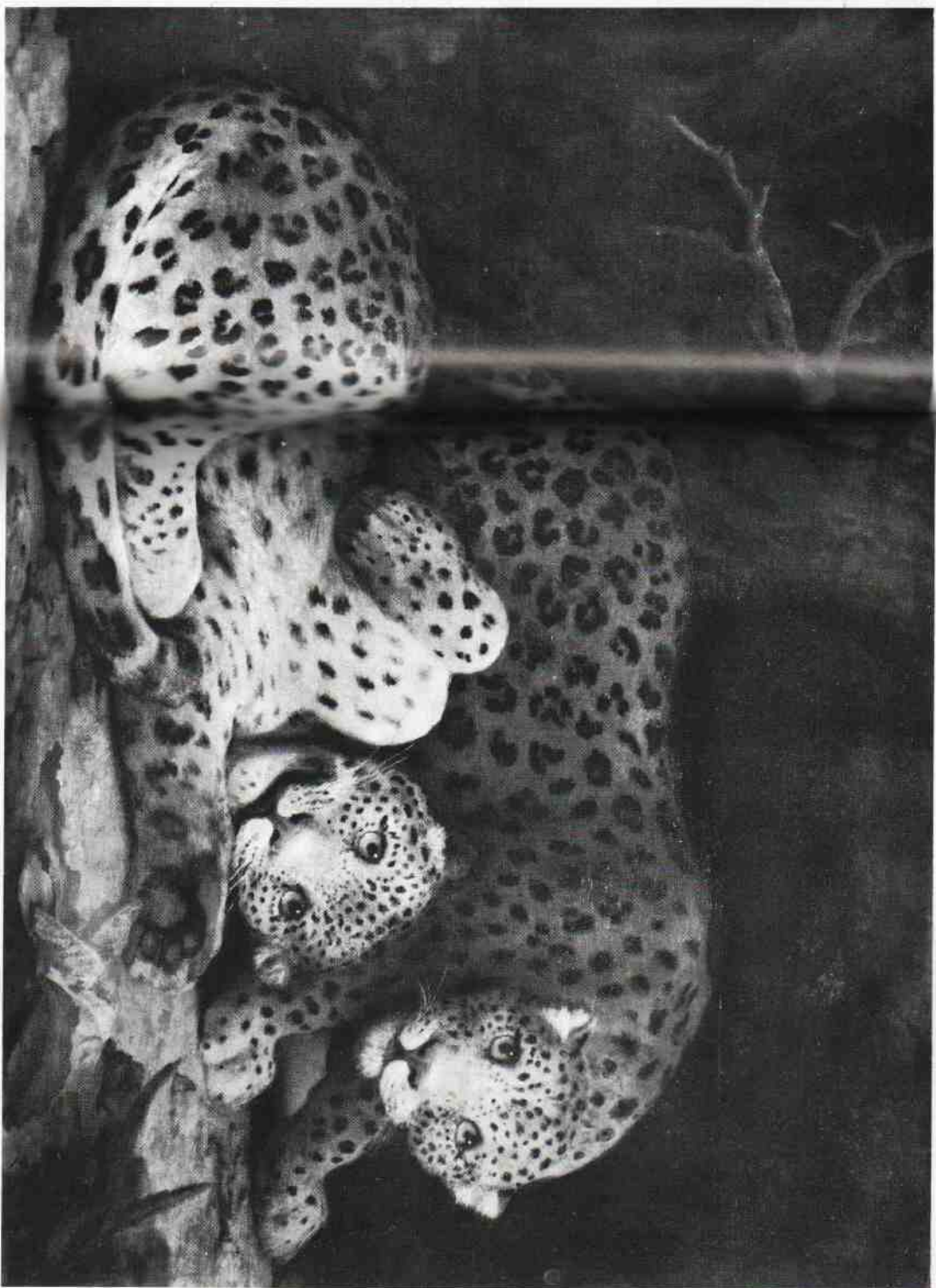
Long before Ford Madox Brown devised *Works*, and with much less contrivance, painters like the Swedish Pehr Hilleström (1732–1816) and the Belgian Léonard Défrance (1735–1805) had seized on the industrial, working, aspects of modern society. The *Salpêtre Factory* (Ill. 78) by Jean-Jacques Durameau (1733–96) was exhibited as early as 1767 at the Salon, where unsurprisingly it



97 JANUARIUS ZICK *Newton's Service to Optics (?)*

appeared to Diderot. Here man is dwarfed by the machinery he has made; and it is in a great smoky cauldron of atmosphere that small figures stir and heave the tubs of burning, nitrous substance. The romantic tendency to reduce the role of mankind can be detected here, just as in the very different work of Guardi and Fragonard.

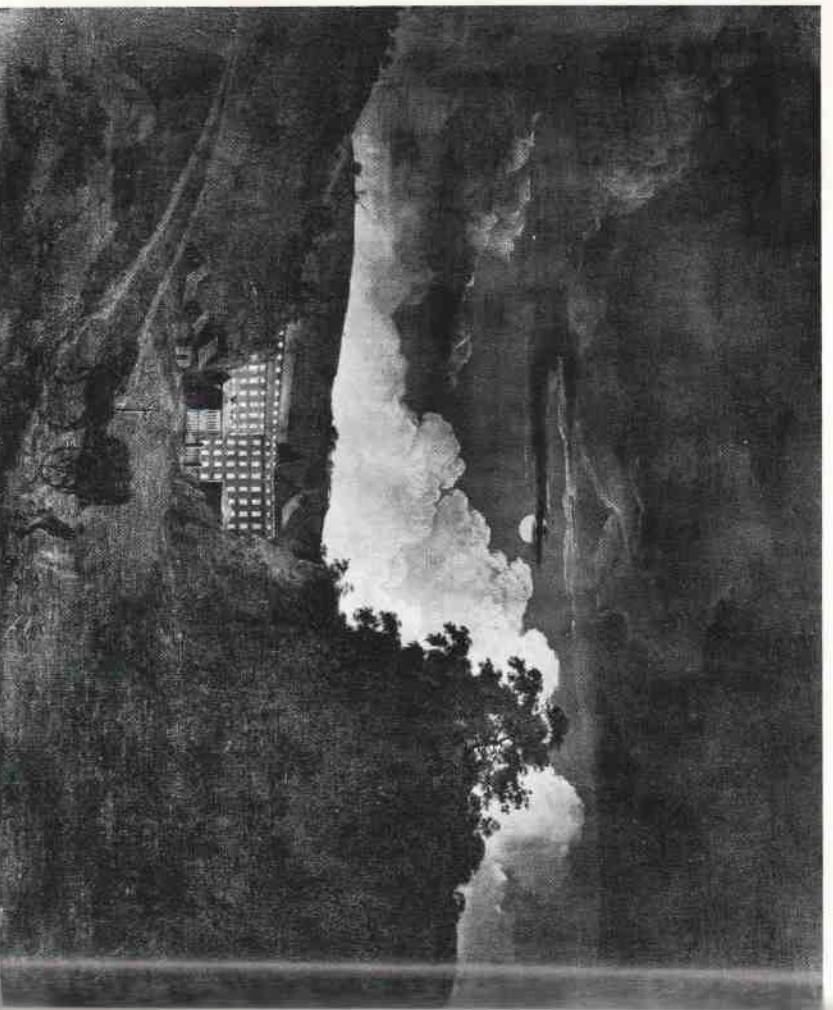
Nature is more than man and his environment; there is a universe unshaped by him but all the more attractive to him for this reason – not only its appearance but its creatures. It was not the animal piece as such which was new, but the conviction and scientific passion given to it by Stubbs. The views of Stubbs are exactly what we might deduce from his pictures. He travelled to Italy in 1754, not with any Winckelmann-like anxiety to experience the marvels of antiquity,



100 GEORGE STUBBS *Leopards*

dispassionate observation and innate dignity – no frolicking pet with collar and chain but alone in a strange, dark wood lit by nothing more than the orange globes of fruit. Though inevitably one thinks of horses in connection with Stubbs, he was equally attracted to the exotic animal, shown not merely unfanned but often positively, ferociously, wild. Wordsworth and Coleridge may be content with simple passions in ordinary rustic surroundings, but Stubbs responds to an animal kingdom which exults in a wider freedom, adumbrating

life without mankind. If the feeling is romantic, the vision yet remains utterly truthful and natural (*Ill.* 100), and the actual paint is applied with Chardin-esque sobriety. Leopards and monkeys are more relevant than anything produced by Greece or Rome: they are real, and thus worthy subjects for art as much as for scientific study. In Stubbs the two are blended – most obviously in his work on the anatomy of the horse – and art has come back to its Renaissance purpose of instructing us about the world in which we live.



101 JOSEPH WRIGHT *Arkwright's Mill*

Like Stubbs, Joseph Wright went to Italy; and like him, he was more interested in its natural effects than its art. It is apt that he should be known as Wright of Derby, for it was there that he was to find pioneers of science and industry – men like Priestley and Wedgwood – who provided him with subject-matter and with patrons. His is a provincial milieu, with serious rather than sophisticated interests, more doggedly bourgeois than the capital, and still optimistic about the benefits of progress. As Hogarth had been the initiator of *la peinture morale*, so Wright was the initiator, and the finest exponent, of the century's final contribution to genre: the industrial picture, where the mills are not yet dark and satanic but blaze out hopefully in the night (Ill. 101). Magic effects of light – artificial and natural – and darkness, combined with a sense of nature rustling, never

still, increase the powerful effect of the *Earth-stopper* (Ill. 102), eerie committed genre which is more pungent than Rousseau and anticipates some sinister nineteenth-century story. The lonely digging figure in the moonlight, with a gamine tree near by, might well be engaged on a nastier job, even, than stopping a fox's earth.

In one picture Wright united science and sensibility: the *Experiment with an Air-pump* (Ill. 103), painted in 1768. This picture was exhibited in London at the time, but could have been exhibited anywhere in Europe, representing what advanced opinion looked for in art. Voltaire and Diderot and Goethe would have found much to praise in this dramatic night scene of a family watching – with a variety of reactions – an experiment perhaps necessary but cruel. The litter of scientific apparatus is carefully recorded; an air-pump itself was to

102 JOSEPH WRIGHT *The Earth-stopper*





103 Joseph Wright *The Experiment with an Air-pump*

remain a piece of amateur equipment which any curious student might own and, typically, Shelley had one in his Oxford rooms. At the centre is the glass globe containing the dove that must die as the air is sucked out and a vacuum formed; and this knowledge makes the two girls cling sadly together, with exaggerated sensibility that is yet in contrast to the boy's cheerful indifference. Extremes of youth and age are collected about the shadowy table. The picture is a *tableau* of life and, perhaps also, education. It is a hard picture, hard in its paint surface and in its moral. Only the pensive seated man at the right, who has taken off his glasses and has his eyes turned from the experiment, seems to reflect on the whole incident. Though some ambiguity is present, the picture ultimately subsumes a rich number of the century's favourite themes. It is 'modern' and scientific, even while grouping people around an anecdote; it shows us neither rococo superiors nor rustic inferiors but prosperous *bourgeois* in a handsome

room – the very mirror of Wright's friends and patrons. It is fully natural, touching the emotions as well as the intellect. Not only is it scientific in its central incident, but light is painted scientifically in it – and the picture is a virtuoso display of glass and brass, polished wood, and cloudy moonlit sky through the window, which makes a palpatingly real atmosphere within which the figures express each a different, psychologically subtle, response.

The work of Wright and Stubbs was not known out of England. It contributed directly to no new movement, but it expresses the triumphant breakthrough of nature into art which had so long been the century's aim. Perhaps it points also to a less social aim than had been Hogarth's, or Chardin's – or even Greuze's; it hints at the artist fleeing from society into moonlit landscapes and dark jungles. But its chief obsession is with truth and knowledge. These standards could also guide the history picture. Not many painters went to Italy in the cavalier spirit of Stubbs and Wright. Truth and knowledge seemed overpoweringly present in Rome, and there an international movement, comparable to the artistic events of the seventeenth century, created a 'natural' view of antiquity which became neo-classicism.