

**JEAN-BAPTISTE-SIMEON CHARDIN: TO THE ACADEMY JURY—from E. and J. de
Goncourt's: *French Eighteenth-Century Painters***

Chardin is, par excellence, the simple good fellow among the artists of his time. Modest in the midst of success, he liked to repeat the phrase: 'Painting is an island whose shores I have skirted' He was quite without jealousy and surrounded himself with pictures and drawings by his fellow-artists. He was fatherly towards young men and judged their youthful efforts with indulgence. Those charities which are an attribute of genuine talent dwelt in his mind and heart. The quality of his goodness has been handed down to us, vivid and vibrating, in the words recorded by Diderot. They must be quoted here as showing us the essence of the man and the spirit of the artist:

Gentlemen, you should be indulgent. Among all the pictures here, seek out the worst ones; and know that a thousand unhappy painters have broken their brushes between their teeth out of despair at never being able to do as well. Parrocel, whom you call a dauber, and who indeed is one, if you compare him to Vernet, is nevertheless also an exceptional man, relatively to the multitude of those who have abandoned the career upon which they entered in his company. Lemoine used to say that the ability to retain in the finished picture the qualities of the preliminary sketch required thirty years of practice, and Lemoine was not a fool. If you will listen to what I have to say, you may learn, perhaps, to be indulgent. At the age of seven or eight, we are set to work with the pencil-holder in our hands. We begin to draw, from copy-books--eyes, mouths, noses, ears, and then feet and hands. And our backs have been bent to the task for a seeming age by the time we are confronted with the Farnese Hercules or the Torso; and you have not witnessed the tears provoked by the Satyr, the Dying Gladiator, the Medici Venus, the Antaeus. Believe me when I tell you that these masterpieces of Greek art would no longer excite the jealousy of artists if they had been exposed to the resentment of students. And when we have exhausted our days and spent waking, lamp-lit nights in the study of inanimate nature, then living nature is placed before us and all at once the work of the preceding years is reduced to nothing: we were not more constrained than on the first occasion on which we took up the pencil. The eye must be taught to look at Nature; and how many have never seen and will never see her! This is the anguish of the artist's life. We work for five or six years from the life and then we are thrown upon the mercy of our genius, if we have any. Talent is not established in a moment. It is not after the first attempt that a man has the honesty to confess his incapacity. And how many attempts are made, sometimes fortunate, sometimes unhappy! Precious years may glide away before the day arrives of weariness, of tedium, of disgust. The student may be nineteen or twenty when, the palette falling from his hands, he finds himself without a calling, without resources, without morals; for it is impossible to be both young and virtuous, if nature, naked and unadorned, is to be an object of constant study. What can he then do, what can he become? He must abandon himself to the inferior occupations that are open to the poor or die of hunger. The first course is adopted; and, with the exception of an odd twenty who come here every two years and exhibit themselves to the foolish and the ignorant, the others, unknown and perhaps less unhappy, carry a musket on their shoulders in some regiment, wear a fencing pad on the chest in some school of arms, or the costume of the stage at some theatre. What I am telling you was in fact the fate of Belcourt, Lekain and Brizard, who became bad actors in despair of becoming mediocre painters.

And he recounted with a smile how one of his colleagues, whose son was a drummer in a regiment, would reply to those who asked for news of him that he had abandoned painting for music; and then, resuming a serious tone, he added:

All the fathers of such strayed and incapable children do not take it so lightly. What you see here is the fruit of the labours of the small number who have struggled more or less successfully. The man who has never felt the difficulty of art achieves nothing of value; and he who, like my son, has felt it too much, does nothing at all; let me assure you that every superior rank or condition in society would be a mockery if admission did not require tests as severe as those to which artists are subjected.... Goodbye, gentlemen, and I beg you to be indulgent, always indulgent.