

## In the Kitchen with Proust & Chardin



Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin  
*La Pourvoyeuse*, 1739  
Oil on canvas, 47 x 38 cm  
Musée du Louvre, Paris

My book is a painting  
-Marcel Proust to Jean Cocteau

Marcel Proust claimed for himself the position of artist-author, and countless critics have since clamored to join in chorus. Eric Karpeles asserts that “to invert Ruskin’s comment about the Venetians for whom ‘painting is the way they write’, writing was the way Proust painted.”<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin compares the ailing Proust, confined to his cork lined room in which he “consecrates the countless pages covered with his handwriting,” to the prostrate Michelangelo painting the vastness of the Sistine Chapel.<sup>2</sup> Visual art saturated Marcel Proust’s life and writing career. Time spent contemplating art overflows the pages of *In Search of Lost Time* with the names of over 100 artists spanning the history of art from 14th century trecento to 20th century futurism. Proust dissects the “essential signs of art which transform all others”<sup>3</sup> in pursuit of an elusive truth in the same way that an impressionist repeatedly paints a steeple or haystack in differing conditions of light and weather. However, the impressionists sought to capture life in the moment it is lived, painting *en plein air* with visible brushstrokes and open compositions. Proust— like Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin— wished to look deeply at the objects around him and crystallize perception in its entirety. It is no coincidence that Chardin was Proust’s favorite painter, one whose work he revisited repeatedly throughout his career as a writer.

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<sup>1</sup> Karpeles, Eric. *Paintings in Proust: a Visual Companion to 'In Search of Lost Time'*. Thames & Hudson, 2008. P. 20

<sup>2</sup> Lee Susanna and Proust Marcel. *Swanns Way: The Moncrieff Translation, Contexts, Criticism*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2014. P. 433, Walter Benjamin: *The Image of Proust*

<sup>3</sup> Lee Susanna and Proust Marcel. *Swanns Way: The Moncrieff Translation, Contexts, Criticism*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2014. P. 422, Gilles Deleuze: *The Types of Signs*

The surface of a painting, once removed from the artists studio, is relatively static.<sup>4</sup> Masterpieces, and even mediocre works by significant artists, is continually mined by academics and critics. Their discoveries surely affect the *understanding* of the work as discussed in universities and among the bourgeoisie in Proust's salons, but they do not puncture the surface of the work. The art-historical method may derive the element of philosophical truth hidden within Chardin's still-lives, but it cannot externalize it. Thus, Proust disinvests from painting and academia and takes on the role of artist-author.<sup>5</sup> Henry James wrote, "what the verbal artist would like to do would be to find out the secret of the pictorial, to drink at the same fountain."<sup>6</sup> Proust mines his surrounding environment for the element of truth that gushes forth from the painters studio.<sup>7</sup>

He uses the term *amitiés* to describe the relationship between objects and our internal impressions of them.<sup>8</sup> These *amitiés* form in moments when ones external reality and ones impression of it is affected by the "essential signs of art which transform all others." *Amitiés* translates literally as friendships, which implies a generally congenial relationship between the impression, object and aesthetic referent. However, there are

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<sup>4</sup> Obviously conservation issues like paint oxidization and vandalism can change the surface appearance of painting, but I argue this affects the painting as a historical object not the image of the painting as it is conceptualized as a work of art.

<sup>5</sup> Earlier in his career he dabbled in art criticism without much success. We will visit one of his unfinished essays on Chardin and Rembrandt later in this essay.

<sup>6</sup> James, Henry. "Our Artists in Europe." Harper's Magazine, June -November 1889, pp. 50–64.

<sup>7</sup> Due to the scope of this essay as limited to *Swann's Way* we will not visit Elstir's studio where Proust develops this theme more fully.

<sup>8</sup> Proust Marcel. *Chardin and Rembrandt*. David Zwirner Books, 2016. P. 7, Jennie Feldman: *Translator's Note*

many moment in the text in which these *amitiés* are fraught by the dialectic between the “ideal” of art and the realities of the corporeal. For instance, Marcel recalls visiting the kitchen before a meal to observe

[Francoise] finishing over the fire those culinary masterpieces which had been first got ready in some of the great array of vessels ... which ranged from tubs and boilers and cauldrons and fish kettles . . . and included an entire collection of pots and pans of every shape and size.<sup>9</sup>

The hidden character in this miscellany of vessels recaptured in passing, detached from the moment, deepened and eternalized could have been transposed directly from a Chardin still life.

Years earlier, Proust composed a short unpublished essay on the works of Chardin and Rembrandt in which an aesthete narrator introduces an un-educated boy to Chardin’s still-lifes at the Louvre and afterwards accompanies him to his kitchen. He says, “now come into the kitchen, where the entrance is strictly guarded by a feudality of crocks of all sizes, faithful hardworking servants, a handsome industrious race.”<sup>10</sup> The un-educated boy, now enlightened, has gained a new appreciation for the beauty within the once ordinary scene.

The similarity in description between this kitchen and the one at Combray is significant. The “crocks of all sizes” in Proust’s description of Chardin’s painting mirrors Combray’s “great array of vessels ... which ranged from tubs and boilers and cauldrons and fish kettles . . . and included an entire collection of pots and pans of every shape

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<sup>9</sup> Lee Susanna and Proust Marcel. *Swanns Way: The Moncrieff Translation, Contexts, Criticism*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2014. P. 112

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 8

and size.” To look at Chardin’s *Still Life of Cooking Utensils, Cauldron, Casserole and Eggs*, 1734 (Figure 1) is to see into Françoise’s kitchen. The luminosity of the vessels in the painting emerge from the tonal background, summoned as Proust puts it, “out of the everlasting darkness in which they have been interred.”<sup>11</sup> Just so, the vessels at Combray burst out of the background as protagonists, overflowing the kitchen with their quantity and dissimilarity. On the subject of Chardin, Denis Diderot wrote, “To look at pictures by other artists it seems that I need to borrow a different pair of eyes. To look at those of Chardin, I only have to keep the eyes that nature gave me and make good use of them.”<sup>12</sup> This could just as well be referring to Proust’s *amitiés*. These friendships are formed through careful observation of “la vie silencieuse” and draws from a quotidian collection of pots all the “essential signs of art which transform all others.”<sup>13</sup>

However, there is also a certain sense of fickleness to *amitiés*. Another element of Proust’s review of Chardin describes “faithful hardworking servants, a handsome industrious race” within the kitchen. Nothing could be farther from this idyllic description than Françoise, Combray’s inconsistent and contradictory kitchen maid. She displays surprising cruelty; in a particularly disturbing episode she lacks any empathy for a scullery maid writhing in pain so she is sent upstairs for a medical text and never returns. Instead, Françoise sobs over the medical description of the symptoms of the scullery maid’s affliction, those same symptoms which she showed no pity for when experiencing directly.

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<sup>11</sup> Proust Marcel. *Chardin and Rembrandt*. David Zwirner Books, 2016. P. 14

<sup>12</sup> Philipp Fehl, *Denis Diderot: Salons*, *College Art Journal*, 1959, 18:4, 362-364.

<sup>13</sup> Lee Susanna and Proust Marcel. *Swanns Way: The Moncrieff Translation, Contexts, Criticism*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2014. P. 422, Gilles Deleuze: *The Types of Signs*

It is the marked difference between the faceless “faithful hardworking servants, a handsome industrious race” and the complex character of Françoise that breaks down this “friendship” between Chardin’s still-lives and the Combray kitchen. The decisive moment occurs when Marcel finds Françoise in the back-kitchen screaming “Filthy creature! Filthy creature!”<sup>14</sup> while beating a chicken to death. Seeing the chicken as a distressed living creature struggling for survival rather than as a succulent finished dish served at the dinner table is shocking for Marcel. The chicken’s struggle for life inverts the “aroma of that cooked flesh, which she knew how to make so unctuous and so tender, seeming to me no more than the proper perfume of one of her many virtues.”<sup>15</sup> Although the aesthetic pleasure of eating the perfectly cooked flesh was always accompanied by a shadow of cruelty, only now have the chicken’s death throes removed the scales from Marcel’s eyes.

In shock, Marcel “crept out of the kitchen and upstairs, trembling all over” and “began gradually to realize that Françoise’s kindness, her compunction, the sum total of her virtues concealed many of these back-kitchen tragedies.”<sup>16</sup> The realm of the active “back-kitchen tragedy” is not one within the purview of Chardin’s still-lives.<sup>17</sup> Chardin’s racks of lamb, flopped fishes and sprawling hares serve as evidence of the “back-kitchen tragedy,” but they are just that: evidence. The gesture of the cruelty is present as the corpse of the animal, but only as a record. In *Still Life with Fowl*, c.

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<sup>14</sup> Lee Susanna and Proust Marcel. *Swanns Way: The Moncrieff Translation, Contexts, Criticism*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2014. P. 113

<sup>15</sup> Ibid 15

<sup>16</sup> Ibid 15

<sup>17</sup> Chaim Soutine exemplifies this horror but it is unlikely Proust lived to see his work in Paris.

1728-30 (Figure 2) a small dark feathered chicken's lays recumbent on the counter exposing its throat, its feet limply reaching towards the ceiling. The other chicken hangs from a meat hook, its head drooping towards the counter. These chickens command the same presence as the sensuously rendered vessels that surround them in that they evoke a sense of contingency within the eternalizing gesture of the painting. Therefore, Marcel finds the metaphor between the still-life and the actual work performed within the kitchen to be lacking. The *amitiés* that Marcel shares with the Combray kitchen and Chardin's still-lives is disturbed by Françoise's display of cruelty, but it does not dissolve completely. In both Combray and the Chardin still-life, the kitchen marks the liminal space between nature and civilization. The thickness of the paint in Chardin's still-lives prevents us from appraising his painting solely in terms of composition and design, the paint application is as beguiling as the immaculate menu recited by Françoise to Marcel in which a delectable roast chicken just happens to appear.

When one approaches a work by Chardin too closely, they begin to notice that the colors of the painting have lost something— seen too closely they appear unlike what one recognized at a distance. In this experience, the discovery of idle time is internalized as a form of the painting itself. Just so, when Marcel happens upon Françoise butchering a chicken in the kitchen yard he is viewing the ritual of the kitchen, and that of the “handsome industrious race,” too closely and it no longer resembles the beauty of the still-life which he had recognized within it before. However the *amitiés* is not shattered, it is changed as any friendship does over time.

After this shift, the philosophical moment occurs; “[Marcel] could have prayed, then, for the instant dismissal of Françoise. But who would have baked me such hot

rolls, boiled me such fragrant coffee, and even—roasted me such chickens?” Within these questions he realizes that artistic creation demands sacrifice in the form of terrible suffering. For him to enjoy the “culinary masterpieces” presented to him at meal time a ritual must be performed and a sacrifice must be made for his aesthetic enjoyment. Even if we do not directly see the murder of the fowl painted by Chardin, for us to enjoy his paintings the animals must be sacrificed and arranged before the oil-laden brush can make contact with the canvas and complete the ritual of artistic practice. In this episode, Marcel arrives at a truth of artistic production (one that will be replaced subsequently by other “truths” in the course of *In Search of Lost Time*) which emerges from the *amitiés* between Chardin, a cruel butcher and the crisp skin of Françoise’s roasted chicken. Along the way, Proust drinks from that “fountain of the pictorial” and describes a scene so beautifully that the text itself could rival even the finest Chardin still-life.



**Figure One**



Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin  
*Still Life of Cooking Utensils, Cauldron, Casserole and Eggs*, 1734  
Oil on Panel, 21 x 17 cm  
Musée du Louvre, Paris

**Figure Two**



Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin  
Still Life with Fowl, c. 1728-30  
Oil on canvas, 40.0 x 31.4 cm  
The Norton Simon Foundation