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# A BOY BLOWING BUBBLES

## BY CHARDIN

BY THEODORE ROUSSEAU, Jr.  
*Curator of Paintings*

In the year 1739 the catalogue of the Paris Salon described a picture by Monsieur Chardin, member of the Academy, in the following manner: "a painting of small dimensions, showing a young man engaged in the frivolous pastime of blowing bubbles." The game may be frivolous, but the painting is far from expressing the gay and artificial spirit commonly associated with the reign of Louis XV in France. There is nothing that is reminiscent of the Regent's parties at the Palais Royal or the court life at the Petit Trianon in Versailles.

In a period devoted to elegance, to the enjoyment of the passing moment, Chardin stood for simplicity and stability. Most of the painters of the time reflect the brilliant but superficial life which ended in the Revolution. Boucher, the favorite painter of Madame de Pompadour, when he painted the same subject, represented a pretty young girl with a low-cut dress, who might have stepped out of one of the fashionable masquerade balls attended by the king's mistress. Chardin shows a boy simply dressed, neither rich nor poor, one of the great middle class of small tradesmen and artisans which has always preserved the French tradition of sober common sense and which has survived wars or revolutions, no matter what changes they brought with them.

The boy is leaning over a window sill or parapet, blowing a bubble, and next to him is a small child, perhaps his younger brother, who watches him in rapt attention. The scene is reduced to its simplest terms. Aside from a glass containing soapy water and some vine leaves to the left there are no other accessories. Our attention is first attracted to the large bubble which the elder boy is carefully blowing, his left hand steadying the right. From this our eyes move to his serious and quiet face and then to that of his small companion, whose

snub nose barely reaches above the parapet in the shadows to the right.

The composition is a triangle the base of which is the broad stone parapet. The light, which comes from the left, gives depth to the picture, passing from bright spots like the glass and the boy's shirt cuffs back to the child's head in transparent shadow. The cool gray background contrasts with the warm brown of the boy's suit and brings out the solidity and roundness of his body. The green feather in the child's cap balances the ivy leaves on the other side. Individual surfaces are enlivened with small touches of bright red or blue, but as a whole the painting is a restrained and subtle harmony of only three colors: gray, brown, and green.

The brushwork and the way the paint is applied are different from the work of other eighteenth-century painters and peculiar to Chardin's own personal style. The effect given by the surface has none of the dry, refined, and somewhat mannered feeling of the painting of such men as Boucher and Nattier. The paint is put on in rich, heavy layers like cream cheese and is sometimes almost three-dimensional, as in the boy's forehead. The brush stroke is broad and very simple. It gives the paint a tactile quality and renders the hardness of the stone and the soft texture of the cloth. Every aspect of the picture, the expression, the composition, the color, the technique, has the simple, straightforward, and painstaking workmanship that is essentially characteristic of Chardin.

The painting of still life was, and is today, the chief reason for Chardin's fame. When he started out as an assistant of the fashionable Noël Nicolas Coypel, he did details such as dead game and hunting equipment in his employer's large compositions. Later, in 1728, when he was elected a member of the Academy, it was as a



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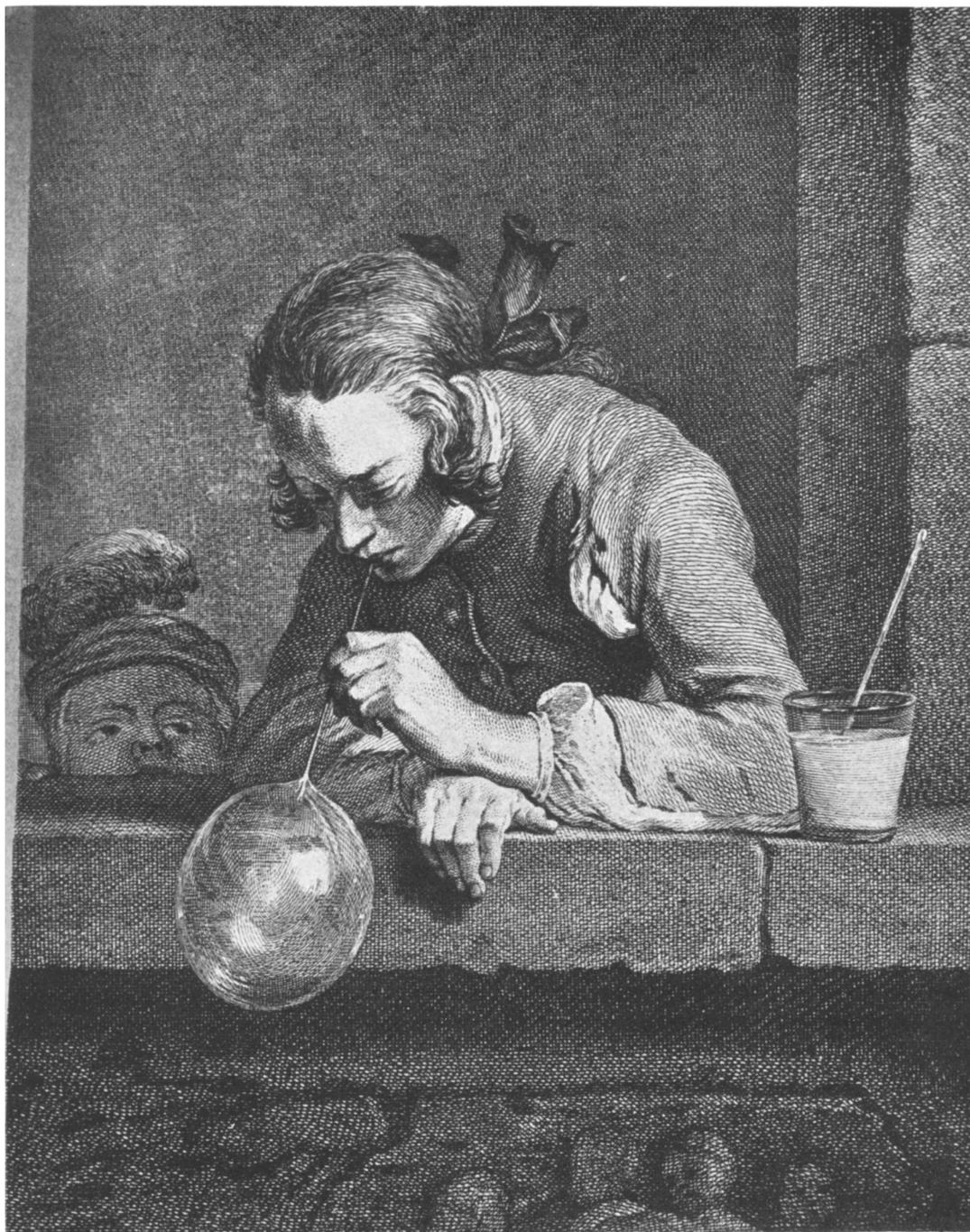


*A Boy Blowing Bubbles*, by Jean Baptiste Siméon Chardin (1699-1779). Wentworth Fund, 1949

painter of animals and fruit. Throughout his life his painting of still life was praised by the critics, who often reproached him for departing from it. However, still life was never regarded as highly as other types of painting, and it was, no doubt, because he wanted to increase his stature in the public eye that Chardin began to paint scenes from everyday life and portraits.

According to his contemporaries, the writer Mariette and the engraver Cochin, he first made the change as the result of a remark by his

friend the painter Aved. One day when he happened to be in the latter's studio Chardin heard him refuse to paint a lady's portrait because she was unwilling to pay enough. When he expressed astonishment at this because the price offered was more than he charged for his still lifes, Aved answered that his prices would be lower "if a head were as easy to paint as a sausage." After this Chardin realized that to become one of the first painters of his day, he would have to broaden his range and undertake more difficult work.



*Barthelemy*

*Filloeul Sculp.*

### LES BOUTEILLES DE SAVON

*Contemple bien jeune Garçon,  
Ces petits globes de Savon:  
Leur mouvement si variable*

*Et leur éclat si peu durable  
Te feront dire avec raison,  
Qu'en cela mainte Iris leur est assez semblable*

Engraving after a lost version of the picture shown on the opposite page, by Pierre Filloeul (active 1730-1750). Photograph courtesy of Georges Wildenstein



*Soap Bubbles, by François Boucher (1703-1770)*

He had made earlier attempts at figure painting. As a beginner, he had painted a shop sign for a neighbor, representing a man wounded in a duel receiving first aid from a surgeon, which had attracted a great deal of attention in the part of Paris where he lived. He had also tried his hand, without success, at the fashionable "scènes de la vie galante" (racy, sometimes indecent, scenes from the lives of the loose society of the period). When, after his conversation with Aved, Chardin took up figure painting seriously, he began a series of small scenes from family life. These were liked by the engravers, who reproduced them in large numbers, so that they were soon popular, not only in France but throughout Europe. He became known as "the French Teniers," and his pictures were bought not only by collectors in Paris but also by Louis

XV, the King of Sweden, Catherine of Russia, and the Prince of Liechtenstein.

Our picture may well have been one of the first of such scenes. We know that he began doing figure subjects in the early thirties. Mariette, in his biography of the artist, states that his first figure painting represented the head of a boy blowing bubbles, "which he did painstakingly from nature, trying to give him a naïve look," but he mentions no date. The same subject in a vertical shape, framed in a window, with the addition of a classical relief below the parapet, was exhibited at the Salon of 1739. There is no way of knowing which was painted first, but Mariette's reference to a head seems to suggest a composition more concentrated on the figure, such as ours.

The picture exhibited in 1739 has disap-

peared, but we know it from an engraving by Filloeuil (see page 223). There are two other versions of the subject in existence, one in the National Gallery in Washington, the other in the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery, Kansas City. The former is a vertical composition similar to the engraving but without the relief and with the addition of foliage. The latter is horizontal, framed in a window, but without foliage. Of the three, the Museum's version is the simplest, and one would suppose it to be the earliest, but the only evidence we have is Mariette's statement.

The representation of children's games in painting was popular during the eighteenth century and is to be found frequently in the work of Chardin and his contemporaries, Greuze, Restout, and Jaurat. They were not only considered amusing in themselves but also, in keeping with the times, they were given a special philosophical meaning. In the case of the *Boy Blowing Bubbles*, this is plainly shown by the poem inscribed on the engraving, which is the eternal warning to the young about the fickleness of women:

Contemple bien, jeune garçon,  
 Ces petits globes de savon;  
 Leur mouvement si variable  
 Et leur éclat si peu durable  
 Te feront dire avec raison,  
 Qu'en cela mainte Iris leur est assez semblable.

This theme has been constant since classical times, when Catullus wrote that a woman's promises to her lover should be written in the wind or on the moving waters.

Chardin no doubt took the subject of bubble-blowing from the seventeenth-century Dutch genre painters, whom he admired. It had been treated in a somewhat similar fashion with children playing on a window sill or parapet by Frans van Mieris (Mauritshuis, The Hague), Caspar Netscher (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), and Pieter Cornelisz. van Slingeland (Uffizi, Florence), and in a different way by Pieter de Hooch (O. Wernher, London) and Nicolaes Maes (private collection, Amsterdam).

The idea of the bubble as a symbol of the impermanence and futility of human life is an ancient one. In Roman times Varro in the

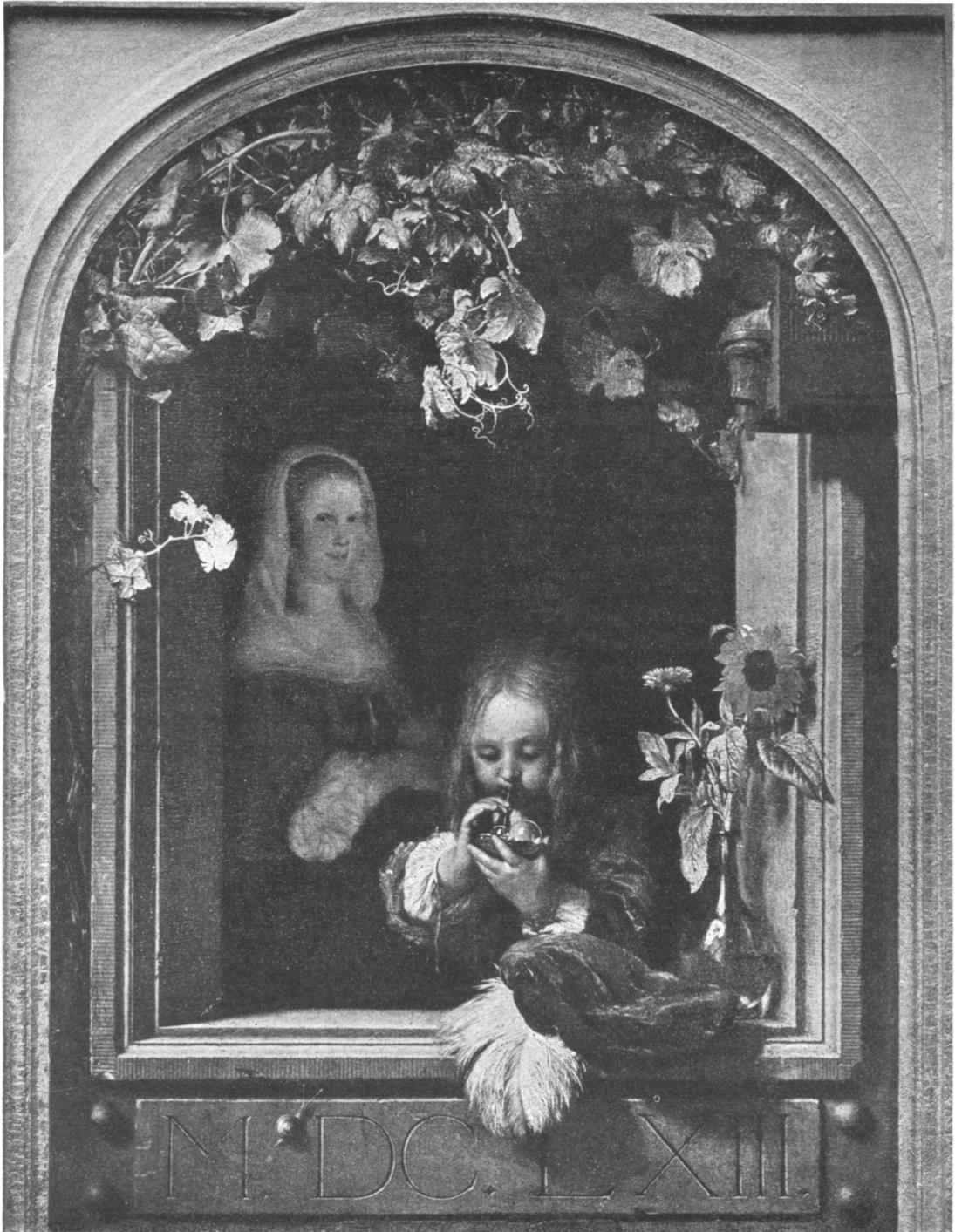
opening sentence of his treatise on agriculture refers to the saying that "man is a bubble," and Petronius describes a man returning from a funeral, who meditates on the meaning of life and compares the human race to bubbles. During the first half of the seventeenth century, William Drummond of Hawthornden wrote:

This Life, which seems so fair,  
 Is like a bubble blown up in the air  
 By sporting children's breath,  
 Who chase it everywhere,  
 And strive who can most motion it bequeath.  
 And though it sometimes seem of its own might  
 Like to an eye of gold to be fix'd there,  
 And firm to hover in that empty height,  
 That only is because it is so light.  
 —But in that pomp it doth not long appear;  
 For when 'tis most admired, in a thought,  
 Because it erst was nought, it turns to nought.

The idea has become a stock metaphor and in our own day is the theme of a well-known popular song.

In several of the Dutch paintings, notably those by Netscher and Slingeland, a bas-relief is shown representing a bacchic scene, either the drunken Bacchus in the arms of his followers or babies playing with a goat. This calls to mind the relief which is in the lower part of Filloeuil's engraving. Although the subject is not quite clear, it seems to represent children's heads similar to those in Chardin's paintings of classical reliefs with bacchic scenes (Tuffier collection, Paris). The combination of bacchanalian scenes with the bubble theme may suggest the fleeting aspect of enjoyment in life. Lorenzo the Magnificent, in one of his carnival songs, uses the triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne to express the philosophy of making merry while you may.

Judging from contemporary accounts, it appears unlikely that Chardin painted under the direct influence of any idea derived from classical or literary sources. His father, a carpenter, who is described as "distinguished by a talent for making good billiard tables," was a poor man and unable to give him any formal education. The painter is often said to have regretted this, since a knowledge of the humanities was a great advantage in those days. But, having found his theme in some Dutch picture,



*Soap Bubbles, by Frans van Mieris the Elder (1635-1681). In the Mauritshuis, The Hague*

he concentrated on the technical aspects of his painting: the straightforward rendering of the models, the solidity and construction of the forms, and the harmony of the colors. He was accustomed to working very slowly and never began a new painting before finishing what he had in hand. No one ever saw him work, and he seems to have taken pains to keep his method a secret—perhaps because he felt that a man with few advantages should do everything to protect them.

His limitations, which led him to concentrate on form, and which give a figure piece such as our picture much of the monumental character of a still life, are perhaps the source of the timeless quality in his work. Each of his pictures has a completeness and a unity that takes it out of its period, making it independent of time and fashion. Boucher, Greuze, even Fragonard, always remain essentially a part of the eighteenth century, but the broad simplicity of Chardin's style has a kinship to the greatest masters of the past, to Rembrandt, to Velazquez, and also to those who are closer to us, Cézanne, for instance, and Manet, whose painting of a boy blowing bubbles is consciously done in Chardin's manner.

#### NOTES ON PROVENANCE

The early history of the painting is difficult to establish accurately because many of the sales catalogues of the eighteenth century do not give enough information to permit identification with any degree of certainty. But judging by the measurements, which correspond almost exactly, our picture and its pendant, the *Boy Playing Cards* (now in the collection of Oskar Reinhart in Winterthur) were sold with the Louis François Trouard collection in 1779 (the year of Chardin's death) for the modest sum of 95 francs. Nothing certain is known about the ownership of the two paintings until they appear in the Jacques Doucet collection. From there, the *Boy Blowing Bubbles* came into the possession of D. David-Weill and later into that of Fritz Mannheimer. During the war it was confiscated by Hitler's agents and put into the collection intended for the Führer Museum in Linz. When it was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum, it still bore the labels of the Einsatzstab Rosenberg, the German looting organization.

With the exception of a small loss in the younger boy's forehead, the painting is in an unusually fine state of preservation.