CHAPTER ONE

The Primacy of Absorption

MY PURPOSE in the first half of this chapter is to demonstrate the controlling importance, in some of the most significant French paintings of the early and mid-1750s, of a single configuration of concerns. That configuration of concerns, or master configuration as it deserves to be called, found expression in and through a wide but quite specific range of subjects whose connection with one another is often not apparent at first glance. Furthermore, as will be seen, a propensity to engage with those concerns (which involve far more than considerations of subject matter) forms an implicit bond between painters who traditionally have been regarded as disparate or unrelated; and in the case of at least one crucial figure, Greuze, we are enabled to grasp for the first time the integrity of his achievement. In these and other respects the pages that follow assert the coherence and what is more the seriousness of French painting in the first phase of the reaction against the Rococo—a body of work frequently characterized as lacking those qualities.

The method pursued is straightforward. I begin by looking at a well-known picture in the light of a passage of contemporary criticism in which it is described in some detail. I then consider other combinations of paintings—plus-commentaries all of which relate significantly to the first and to each other. The immediate object of this procedure is to bring into focus aspects of those paintings that appear to have been of fundamental importance to the artists and their critics but which modern scholarship has tended either to overlook or to interpret in quite other terms. Another virtue of this approach is that my choice of illustrations has the sanction of contemporary judgment. Without exception the principal works treated in the first half of this chapter are reviewed seriously—we might say they are featured—in one or more Salons.
of the period, though naturally I do not hesitate to refer to other paintings which seem to me to relate closely to the former and which are mentioned cursorily or not at all by the critics.

In the second half of the chapter I try to place the state of affairs delineated in the first half in somewhat broader historical context. This involves glancing at earlier developments and briefly examining several paintings of the first half of the 1760s. Nevertheless, the main emphasis of this chapter is on works shown in the Salons of 1755 and 1755, exhibitions whose peculiar importance—and in the case of the Salon of 1755, whose relative brilliancy—have gone largely unacknowledged by modern writers. I do not mean to imply that most of the paintings cited in these pages are masterpieces in the accepted sense of the term. Of the four painters I begin by discussing, only one, Chardin, is an artist of the first rank. The others are lesser figures. But the issues with which their works engage are central to the evolution of painting in France in the second half of the eighteenth century and beyond, and often the works themselves are more compelling than is usually granted.

One more point by way of preambles. The Salons of 1755 and 1755 antedate the emergence of the greatest critic of painting of the second half of the eighteenth century, Denis Diderot. Although I have occasion to quote his criticism in connection with works of the 1760s, most of the critical quotations that follow are from the writings of his immediate predecessors. But in essential respects, which will become clear as we proceed, the first half of this chapter is intended as a contribution to our understanding of the sources of his vision of painting.

The first painting I want to consider is Jean-Baptiste Greuze's Un Père de famille qui lit la Bible à ses enfants (Fig. 1). Greuze (1725–1805) has long been regarded as the most important French painter of his generation, though historians from the Goncourts down to the present have almost unanimously defined his importance in sociological not artistic terms. Born in Tournus, he studied in Lyon before arriving in Paris in the early 1750s. Shortly thereafter he was made ingénieur at the Académie Royale, and in the Salon of 1755 exhibited six canvases, among which was the Père de famille. A leading scholar has called Greuze's début "probably the most brilliant...of the century." At all events, it marked the beginning of his fame, which reached prodigious heights in the 1760s, continued more or less unabated through the 1770s, and went into decline only in the 1780s with the maturing of David's generation of history painters. The Père de famille in particular caused a sensation, and was discussed at length by several critics. By far the fullest and most informative commentary it received is that of the Abbé de La Porte:

Un père de famille lit la Bible à ses enfants; touché de ce qu'il vient d'ôter, il est lui-même pénétré de la morale qu'il leur fait: ses yeux sont presque mouillés de

1 Jean-Baptiste Greuze, Un Père de famille qui lit la Bible à ses enfants, Salon of 1755. Private Collection.

larmes; son épouse assez belle femme & dont la beauté n'est point idéale, mais telle que nous la pouvons rencontrer chez les gens de sa sorte, l'écoute à travers cet air de tranquillité que goûte une honnête femme au milieu d'une famille nombreuse qui fait courir son occupation, ses plaisirs, & sa gloire. Sa fille à côté d'elle est supérieure & n'ayant de ce qu'elle entend; le grand frère a une expression aussi singulière que vraie.

Le petit bonhomme qui fait un effort pour attraper sur la table un bâton, & qui n'a aucune attention pour des choses qu'il ne peut comprendre, est tout-à-fait dans la nature; voyez-vous qu'il ne distrait personne, on est trop sérieusement occupé? Quelle noblesse! & quel sentiment dans cette bonne maman qui, sans sortir de l'attention qu'elle a pour ce qu'elle entend, retient machinalement le petit épigone qui fait grommeler le chien: n'entendez-vous pas comme il l'agace, en lui montrant les cornes? Quel Peintre! Quel Compositeur!'

A father is reading the Bible to his children. Moved by what he has just read, he is himself imbued with the moral he is imparting to them; his eyes are almost moist with tears. His wife, a rather beautiful woman whose beauty is not ideal but of a kind that can be encountered in people of her condition, is listening to him with that air of tranquillity enjoyed by an honest woman surrounded by a large family that constitutes her sole occupation, her pleasures, and her glory. Next to her, her daughter is awakened and grieved by what she hears. The older brother's facial expression is as singular as it is true. The little boy, who is making an effort to grab a stick on the table and who is paying no attention whatsoever to things that he cannot understand, is perfectly true to life. Do you not see how he does not distract anyone, everyone being too seriously occupied? What nobility and what feeling in this grandmother
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who, without turning her attention from what she hears, mechanically restrains the little rogue who is making the dog growl! Can you not hear how he is teasing it by making horns at it? What a painter! What a composer!

This is a fascinating description. Historians who have written about the Père de famille, or about Greuze’s multifiguré genre paintings as a group, have emphasized his preoccupation with subjects of rural piety, familial sentiment, and domestic virtue, and have remarked his presentation of those subjects in a narrative-dramatic mode whose ostensible version of physiognomy, costume, and milieu is accompanied by a psychological and emotional extremism almost without precedent in French painting. Few of those historians have concealed either their discomfort with the paintings themselves or their disapproval of the audience who went into raptures before them. Greuze’s pictures, it has repeatedly been claimed, appealed to the crass and inartistic tastes of a large middle-class public just then emerging as a major force in French cultural life; to that public’s preference for “literary” over “pictorial” qualities and values; to its craving for works that told a story, pointed a moral, and assaulted the tenderest emotions of the viewer. 

On first reading, La Porte’s description of the Père de famille may seem merely to bear this out.

Certainly there is nothing in his text that suggests that these sorts of considerations did not have their part in the painting’s success. But La Porte’s commentary makes clear that what he himself found most compelling about the Père de famille was what he saw as its persuasive representation of a particular state or condition, which each figure in the painting appeared to exemplify in his or her own way, i.e., the state or condition of rapt attention, of being completely occupied or engrossed or (as I prefer to say) absorbed in what he or she is doing, hearing, thinking, feeling. From this point of view the father’s activity of reading the Bible aloud and the family’s more nearly passive occupation of listening to him read may be characterized as essentially absorptive in nature. And the mastery of expression which the critics of the time found in the Père de famille may be seen to have consisted not simply in the “realistic” depiction of individual psychological and emotional responses to the biblical text, which is how contemporary praise of Greuze’s expressive powers is invariably understood, but also, and in my judgment more importantly, in the persuasiveness with which the responses made themselves felt as those of persons wholly absorbed in the reading itself and the thoughts and feelings it engendered.

Two of La Porte’s observations deserve emphasis. First, he calls attention to the implicit contrast between the perfect absorption of the older figures and potentially disruptive activities of the two youngest children. He remarks of the young boy reaching for the stick: “Voyez-vous qu’il ne distrait personne, on est trop sérieusement occupé?” and describes the way in which the child in the right foreground teases the dog. Similarly, another critic, Baille de Saint-Julien, observes of the older girl and boy: “L’attention de ces deux

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figures forme un contraste naturel avec un enfant qui cherche à jouer avec un chien” (the attention of these two figures forms a natural contrast with a child who is trying to play with a dog). For both La Porte and Baille de Saint-Julien, the actions of the two children, conveying as they do complete indifference to the Bible reading, serve to heighten the beholder’s awareness of—to make more perspicuous—the intense absorption of the other figures.

Second, La Porte singles out for special praise the action of the grandmother who “sans sortir de l’attention qu’elle a pour ce qu’elle entend, reçient machinalement le petit espiègle qui fait gronder le chien...” That is, he admires what he sees as Greuze’s depiction of the old woman restraining the child automatically, as if unconscious of what she is doing. Here too La Porte seems to feel that the almost somnambulistic character of her action underlines the intensity of her absorption in thoughts and feelings stirred by the reading.

It is a commonplace of studies of mid-eighteenth-century art that Greuze’s genre paintings are compared and contrasted, much to his disadvantage, with those of the foremost painter of genre subjects of an earlier generation, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699–1779). The trouble with such comparisons is not that those who make them assert Chardin’s superiority—no one doubts that he was the greatest French painter of his time—but that they accept from the outset the pejorative interpretation of Greuze’s art summarized above and so fail to understand the true significance of the differences they note. Further discussion of the meaning of those differences must be deferred until later in this chapter. But something of the closeness of the relationship between Chardin’s and Greuze’s achievements is suggested by another combination of painting and critical commentary, Chardin’s Un Philosophe occupé de sa lecture (Fig. 2) as seen by the Abbé Laugier. Chardin’s canvas was exhibited in the Salon of 1753; Laugier’s commentary is taken from his account of that Salon, a small volume that ranks as one of the two or three finest pieces of sustained criticism before Diderot.

Ce caractère [the philosopher] est rendu avec beaucoup de vérité. On voit un homme en habit & en bonnet fourré appuyé sur une table, & lisant très-attentivement un gros volume relié en parchemin. Le Peintre lui a donné un air d’esprit, de réverie & de negligence qui plait infiniment. C’est un Lector vraiment Philosophe qui ne se contente point de lire, qui médite & apprécie, & qui paraît si bien absorbé dans sa méditation qu’il semble qu’on aurait peine à le distraire.

This character is rendered with much truth. A man wearing a robe and a fur-lined cap is seen leaning on a table and reading very attentively a large volume bound in parchment. The painter has given him an air of intelligence, reverie, and obliviousness that is infinitely pleasing. This is a truly philosophical reader who is not content merely to read, but who meditates and ponders, and who appears so deeply absorbed in his meditation that it seems one would have a hard time distracting him.

Like La Porte’s remarks on the Père de famille, Laugier’s description of Chardin’s Philosophe occupé de sa lecture praises most of all its persuasive representa-
tion of intense absorption in reading and meditation—in this instance the silent reading and meditation of a single figure alone in his study who evinces no emotion. (In the words of another critic, Huquier: “Il y a dans la tête du philosophe une attention autant bien exprimée qu’il est possible...” [There is in the head of the philosopher a quality of attention expressed as well as possible...]) Laugier refers specifically to the philosopher’s air of negligence, which I understand in the sense of obli of self-forgetting, an obliviousness to his appearance and surroundings consequent upon and expressive of his absorption in his book. And Laugier refers too to the philosopher’s air of rêverie, a condition that plays an increasingly important role in French painting and criticism in the decades that follow.

Even more striking in the light of La Porte’s commentary on the Père de famille is Laugier’s statement that Chardin’s philosopher appears so deeply absorbed in his meditation “qu’il semble qu’on auroit peine à le distraire.” For it is precisely this idea that La Porte and Baillet de Saint-Julien find dramatized two years later in Greuze’s canvas, in the actions of the youngest children whose failure to distract their elders proves the depth of the latter’s absorption. I do not suggest that Greuze was influenced by Laugier’s text. We may be sure, however, that he was familiar with Chardin’s painting if only from engravings; and Laugier’s remarks show beyond a doubt that the persuasive representation of absorption was an issue, or positive desideratum, at least two years before Greuze exhibited the Père de famille, and that related themes of attention, obliviousness, and resistance to distraction were in the air as well.

Here it is instructive to consider the Abbé Garrigues de Froment’s commentary on another work by Chardin exhibited in the Salon of 1753.11 Un Dessinateur d’après le Mercure de M. Pigalle (Fig. 3). The painting, a repetition of one originally shown in the Salon of 1748, depicts a seated draughtsman drawing from a cast of Pigalle’s statue of Mercury while another draughtsman standing immediately behind him watches his work. The relevant passage reads:

Comment peut-on ne pas être vivement affecté de la vérité, de la naïveté des tableaux de M. Chardin? Ses figures, dit-on, n’ont jamais d’esprit: à la bonne heure, elles ne sont pas graceuses: à la bonne heure, mais en revanche n’ont-elles pas toute leur action? N’y sont-elles pas toutes entières? Prenons par exemple la répétition qu’il a exposée de son dessinateur: on prétend que les têtes en sont louches et peu décidées. A travers cette indécision perce pourtant l’attention de l’une et l’autre figure: on doit, ce me semble, devenir attentif avec elles.12

How can one not be strongly moved by the truth, by the naïveté of M. Chardin’s paintings? His figures are said not to be clever people—fine. They are not graceful—fine. But on the other hand, do they not all have their own action? Are they not completely caught up in it? Take for example the replica of his draughtsman that he has exhibited: people maintain that the heads are vague and lack precision. And yet, through this lack of precision, the attention of both figures is apparent; one must, it seems to me, become attentive with them.
The two representations of *Un Dessinateur d’après le Mercure de M. Pigalle* are not the only representations of draughtsmen in Chardin’s oeuvre. Several versions of *Le Dessinateur*, in which a single figure seated on the floor is portrayed from the rear, were painted ca. 1738; Chardin twice repeated the composition around 1757–1758; and one of the latter panels was exhibited with success in the Salon of 1759 (Fig. 4). The description of that work by the anonymous critic for the *Journal Encyclopédique* is relevant to the present discussion even if it cannot be used as evidence for the terms in which Chardin’s art was seen several years earlier.

[The painting] représente un jeune homme occupé à copier un dessin. . . . On ne voit que le dos du jeune Dessinateur. L’Auteur, malgré cela, a si bien saisi la vérité et la nature de la situation du jeune homme, qu’il est impossible de ne pas sentir à la première inspection du tableau, que ce Dessinateur met à ce qu’il fait la plus grande attention.14

[The painting] represents a young man engaged in copying a drawing. . . . One sees only the young draughtsman’s back. In spite of this, the author has captured so well the truth and the nature of the young man’s situation that it is impossible not to feel, on first viewing the painting, that this draughtsman pays the greatest attention to what he is doing.

Both critics praise Chardin’s paintings for being true to nature. But the nature each evokes is that of human beings wholly engaged in quintessentially absorptive activities, and altogether the primacy of considerations of absorption in each passage could not be more explicit.

A third painting exhibited by Chardin in the Salon of 175915 that anticipated the *Père de famille* in important respects is *Une Jeune Fille qui récite son Évangile* (Fig. 5), the latest in a series of scenes of domestic instruction going back to the early 1730s. The *Jeune Fille* is described by Laugier as follows:

[O]n voit une jeune Fille les yeux baissés dont la mémoire travaille, & qui récite devant sa mère. Celle-ci est assise, & écoute de cet air un peu pédant que l’on a en faisant répéter une leçon. Ces deux expressions sont d’un naïf charmant.16

One sees a young girl with her eyes lowered whose memory is at work, and who is reciting in front of her mother. The latter is seated, and listens with the rather pedantic air that one has when making someone repeat a lesson. These two expressions are charmingly naive.

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5 After Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *Un Dessinateur d’après le Mercure de M. Pigalle*, Salon of 1753, engraved by Le Bas. Whereabouts of painting unknown.

The Abbé Le Blanc in his account of the Salon of 1753 writes:

[Chardin] a l'art de saisir ce qui échapperait à tout autre: il y a dans ce Tableau, qui n'est que de deux figures, un feu & une action qui étonnent; il y a tante d'expression dans la tête de la jeune fille, qu'on croit presque l'entendre parler: on lit sur son visage le chagrin intérieur qu'elle éprouve de ce qu'elle ne sait pas bien sa leçon. 17

[Chardin] has the art of capturing what would escape anyone else. There is in this painting, which contains only two figures, an ardor and an action that are astonishing. There is so much expression in the young girl's head that one almost believes one hears her speak. On her face can be read the inner distress that she feels at not knowing her lesson well.

No mention is made in these passages of absorption or attention. But both concepts are implicit in Laugier's description of the young girl, eyes lowered, straining to recall her lesson, and of the mother listening to her and as it were comparing her recitation with the original; while the essential inwardness of the girl's condition is further emphasized by Le Blanc's reference to her chagrin intérieur at finding that her memory of the lesson is imperfect.

These are just a few of the connections that can be drawn between specific works by Chardin and Greuze. One other example might be cited. The theme of an effort of memory is found in singularly concentrated form in Greuze's fine, restrained Un Écolier qui étudie sa leçon (Fig. 6), a painting exhibited in the Salon of 1757 18 whose filiation to the Phédon occupé de sa lecture is at once apparent. The student in Greuze's picture has partly covered with his hands the page of his book and seems inwardly to rehearse its contents; his downward gaze conveys an impression of unseeing abstraction; and although the salons of the year do not discuss the Écolier in detail, we may surmise that its authority as an image of absorption was incontestable. 19

At this juncture I want to introduce a third figure, not usually seen in relation to Greuze or Chardin—Carle Van Loo (1705–1765). In his lifetime Van Loo was widely regarded as the greatest French painter of his day. In the 1780s and 1790s, however, his reputation plummeted, and only very recently has it begun to recover. As regards the artistic level of much of his oeuvre, this is only somewhat unjust. But it has meant that his work has received little scholarly attention, and that almost no effort has been made to understand what his contemporaries saw in his art. 20 In the next several pages I shall make selective use of the rather large body of criticism of Van Loo's paintings of the early and mid-1750s to demonstrate that he too was admired for the persua-
siveness of his representations of absorptive states and activities, and that the
preoccupation with absorption that I have begun to delineate was not confined
to genre paintings but was central as well to works that were then regarded as
among the most ambitious of the age.
This becomes clear if we consider Van Loo’s St. Augustine disputant contre les
Donatistes (Fig. 7), the sensation of the Salon of 1753 and one of six large-
scale history paintings based on events in the life of Augustine executed by the
artist between 1748 and 1755. Its subject is the momentous debate of A.D.
411 in which the Catholic party led by Augustine refuted once and for all the
claims of the Donatist bishops. The debate took place in Carthage, in the great
hall of a Roman bath, before the Tribuna Flavius Marcellinus (the official
arbitrator) and in the presence of hundreds of bishops of both persuasions.
Augustine, holding an open book, is depicted speaking, to the apparent consterna-
tion of the Donatist champion. In the right foreground, standing apart from
the assembled bishops, Marcellinus watches and listens. Toward the middle of
the canvas, seated at a table, are several secretaries charged with transcribing
the proceedings, one of whom has broken off writing and instead gazed at the
saint. Catholic and Donatist bishops bend over the secretaries’ shoulders to
ensure that what is said is accurately recorded.
For Van Loo’s contemporaries the greatness of the painting consisted essen-
tially in what they regarded as its masterful evocation of Augustine’s elo-
quence, his all but irresistible power to compel belief in the souls of those who
saw and heard him. In Laugier’s words:
Saint Augustin paroit avec cette noble confiance qu’inspire la vérité. Il parle avec
force, mais sans empertement. Son visage plein de physionomie est également
spirituel & ingénieux. On y remarque des traits d’une modestie gravité et d’une sagesse
imposante. On voit que c’est un Savant & un Saint. Son attitude, son genre, tous
ses mouvements se ressentent d’un homme qui connoit la bonté de sa cause, qui pour-
suit son adversaire par la seule voye de la conviction, sans lui opposer ni dureté ni
mépris.
St. Augustine appears with the noble confidence that truth inspires. He speaks force-
fully but without being carried away. His face, full of character, is at the same time
spiritual and ingenious. One distinguishes in it traits of modest gravity and impos-
ing wisdom. One sees that he is a scholar and a saint. His stance, his gesture, all his
movements reveal a man who knows the goodness of his cause, who pursues his
adversary by the sole means of conviction, opposing him with neither harshness nor
contempt.
Even more crucial than Van Loo’s representation of Augustine’s facial expres-
sion or bodily gestures, however, was his depiction of the effects of the saint’s
discourse on his audience. Le Blanc observes: “L’attention la plus forte est si
heureusement rendue dans les yeux de la plupart de ceux qui l’écouteront, &
spécialement dans ceux du Secrétair de la Conférence [i.e., the one who has
stopped writing], qu’on ne peut s’empêcher de chercher à y deviner les réflexions
dont leur esprit paraît occupé” (The strongest attention is so successfully
rendered in the eyes of those listening to him, and especially in those of the secretary [i.e., the one who has stopped writing], that one cannot help trying to guess the thoughts with which their minds appear occupied].24 The secretaries attracted the notice of other critics as well. Laugier for example describes them as follows:

Dans le milieu & sur une estrade élevée, est un grand Bureau couvert d’un tapis. Autour sont assis les Notaires respectifs, la plume à la main & le papier devant eux, paroissant occupés de leur écriture. Celui qui est à leur tête, assis comme eux la plume à la main, & ayant devant lui le papier, se détourne pour écouter. Il semble cependant de ne pas saisir les choses avec assez d’exactitude.25

In the middle and on a raised platform, there is a large desk covered with a cloth. Around it are seated the respective secretaries, pen in hand and with paper in front of them, appearing absorbed in their writing. The one at the head of the table, seated like them with pen in hand and paper in front of him, turns from his work in order to listen. He seems to fear that he will not grasp what is said with sufficient accuracy.

Another critic, Lacombe, praises Van Loo’s decision “d’avoir fait quitter à un Scribe son ouvrage, pour lui porter son attention de celui où la raison & la vérité sont triomphantes” (to have had a scribe abandon his work in order to direct his attention to where reason and truth are triumphant).26 While Melchior Grimm, writing in the Correspondance littéraire, remarks the contrast between the two secretaries “qui écrivent dans la même attitude, et dont l’un surrouit à les oreilles au guet en écrivant avec une grande application,” and the third secretary who “au lieu d’écrire, fixe le saint, et le regarde, comme saisi par la force de son éloquence” (who are writing in the same posture, one of whom in particular is keeping his ears open while writing with great applica-
tation, and the third secretary who instead of writing, stares at the saint and gazes at him as if gripped by the force of his eloquence).27

Clearly, the group of secretaries was instrumental to the impact Van Loo’s painting made on contemporary viewers. As seen by the critics, the first two secretaries are engrossed in their professional responsibilities, a state of mind incompatible with pondering the meaning of specific utterances and certainly with becoming transfixed by the discourse of either speaker. Thus Laugier observes that “les Notaires fort encombrés aux leur travail, ont pour le reste l’indifférence convenable à gens qui ne font que prêter leur ministère” (the secretaries, earnestly applying themselves to their work, show toward everything else the indifference characteristic of people who only lend their services).28 But Augustine’s eloquence is such that the third secretary has found it impossible to remain unmoved; his absorption in his professional task has been suspended by his deeper, more intense absorption in Augustine’s argument; so that seemingly without being aware of what he is doing, he has stopped writing and has turned toward the saint in admiration. Another instance of the use of involuntary, automatic, or unconscious action as a sign of intense absorption is noted by Laugier. After describing the Donarist champion and contrasting his physiognomy with Augustine’s, Laugier says: “A côté de lui, un Evêque de son parti se courbe pour chercher avec précipitation des arguments dans un livre, & se détoure involontairement vers saint Augustin, dont l’éloquence l’emporte” [Next to him, a bishop of the same party bends over a book to search hastily for arguments, and involuntarily turns toward St. Augustine, whose eloquence astonishes him].29

In an obvious sense, St. Augustin disputant contre les Donatistes comprises a much wider range of expression than the other paintings so far discussed. Laugier writes that the bishops of Augustine’s party “ont en l’écouter cette douce tranquillité que donne l’assurance de la victoire. Ceux qui examine [sic] le travail des Notaires le font sans l’inquiétude” (display, while listening to him, that sweet tranquility given by the certainty of victory. Those who examine the secretaries’ work do so without worry).30 The Donatist bishops on the other hand “ont une sorte de crainte qui présage leur défaite; ceux-mêmes qui examinent le travail des Notaires, le font d’un air un peu déconcerté” (show the kind of fear that presages their defeat; those who examine the secretaries’ work do so with a rather disconcerted air).31 Finally, Marcellinus “regarde saint Augustin d’un oeil assuré. Il donne à son discours l’attention d’un Arbitre Impartial. On croit voir cependant qu’il a du plaisir à trouver dans ses raisonnements, une supériorité qui garantit le triomphe de la bonne cause” (gazes at St. Augustine with a confident expression. He gives to the saint’s discourse the attention of an impartial arbiter. One has the impression, however, that he takes pleasure in finding in the saint’s arguments a superiority that guarantees the triumph of the good cause).32 It is striking, however, that the variety of expression Laugier describes involves the participation of individual figures and groups of figures in a few characteristically absorptive activities (e.g., listening, reading, writing, judging), on the persuasiveness of Van Loo’s representation of which the painting’s persuasiveness as expression ultimately depends. Indeed both for Laugier and, it appears, for Van Loo himself, the multiplicity, variety, and particularity of the individual responses to the central fact of Augustine’s eloquence—qualities most English painters of the period would have tended to emphasize—are far less important than the common grounding of those responses in the single fundamental condition I have called absorption. Hence in part the curious mise-en-scène of the painting as a whole, which for example confers unusual significance on the activities of the secretaries, and gives disquieting prominence to the attentive but otherwise inexpressive figure of Marcellinus. To quote Laugier once more: “Tout consiste à bien opposer le zèle & la supériorité de raison du Défenseur de la vérité, à la mauvaise foi & à l’esprit de chicane de son adversaire, & à faire en sorte que tous ceux présens paroissent attentifs & occupés relativement à l’intérêt que chacun prend à la dispute” (Everything consists in successfully opposing the zeal and superior reasoning of the defender of truth to the insincerity and chicane of his adversary, and in seeing to it that all those present appear attentive and engaged according to the interest each takes in the dispute).33

This is not to say that in Van Loo’s picture or Laugier’s commentary con-
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Considerations of absorption simply displace or override considerations of expression. My point is rather that in French painting and criticism of the early and mid-1750s the latter are largely assimilated to the former, so much so that a distinction between them can hardly be said to exist. Thibaud is praised repeatedly for his expressive powers, and a painting as hushed, reposeful, and emotionally neutral as Une Jeune Fille qui récite son Evangile is characterized by Le Blanc as possessing "un feu e une action qui étonnent." More generally, the demand that painting maximize expression, one of the basic tenets of anti-Rococo criticism and a keynote of Laugier's account of the Salon of 1755, finds satisfaction primarily in and through the representation of absorptive states and activities; and analyses of the variety of expression in particular works, such as Laugier's remarks on St. Augustin disputant contre les Donatistes quoted above, characteristically proceed by distinguishing infections and modulations of absorption more than anything else.

The assimilation of expression to absorption during the period is made all the more explicit in Bailler de Saint-Julien's description of Van Loo's St. Augustin prêchant devant Valere, Evêque d'Hippone (Fig. 8), one of the (final) two scenes from the life of the saint exhibited in the Salon of 1755.77

...le Prédicateur qui a l'auditoire le plus brillant & les gestes les plus expressifs ne produisit pas un spectacle aussi intéressant que le tableau dont je veux vous parler. Dans ce Tableau l'éclat des figures n'est pas emprunt de la richesse des vêtements ni de la pompe des dignités; leur beauté intéressante réside principalement dans l'expression des visages. Les diverses passions que l'éloquence inspire animent les personnages de cette scène évangélique. L'Orateur parait profondément pénétré de la grandeur des vérités incommensurables. Il semble chercher dans les yeux de ses auditeurs ce qui peut accomplir la persuasion. On s'aperçoit qu'ils sont déjà ébranlés. Chacun en particulier est affecté selon son caractère. Le Prêtre qui écoute lâche voir une admiration touchante. Les Prêtres qui sont à ses côtés paraissent arrêtés en même temps qu'éclairés. Le peuple est seulement ému. Il témoigne la plus grande susceptibilité. Il n'y a dans ce grand Tableau qu'un seul enfant qui ne prenne pas un intérêt vital au sujet. Il sourit à quelque objet qui l'occupe. Distraction qui caractérise son âge.89

The preacher who has the most brilliant audience and the most expressive gestures does not produce a spectacle as interesting as the painting about which I wish to speak. In this painting the distinction of the figures is derived neither from the richness of their dress nor from the pomp of their high rank; their interesting beauty resides principally in their facial expressions. The various passions inspired by eloquence animate the personages of this evangelical scene. The preacher appears deeply moved by the greatness of immortal truths. He seems to be seeking in the eyes of his listeners the means fully to persuade them of those truths. One can see that they are already shaken. Each is affected according to his character. The prelate who is listening displays a thoughtful admiration. The priests next to him appear touched as well as enlightened. The crowd is simply moved and shows the greatest sensibility. In this great painting, only one child is not keenly interested in the proceedings. He is smiling at something that occupies him. Distraction characteristic of his age.

Several points are worth noting. Augustine himself is described not only as profondement pénétré by the eternal truths of his religion but as engaged in the absorptive activity of seeking in the eyes of his listeners the means by which to persuade them of those truths. Moreover, although Bailler de Saint-Julien states at the outset that Van Loo's painting represents diverse passions, the actual distinctions he makes between the respective responses of bishop, priests, and ordinary people to Augustine's eloquence typify the manner in which concern with modulations of absorption does the work of the analysis of the passions in French criticism of the time. The reference to the small child who alone in the audience is unconcerned with Augustine's sermon and instead smiles at something that occupies him recalls La Porte's description of the boy reaching for the stick "qui n'a aucune attention pour des choses qu'il ne peut comprendre" in Greuze's Père de famille. In Van Loo's painting, too, the behavior of the child—his distraction, to use Bailler de Saint-Julien's word—throws into relief the intense absorption of everyone else. Bailler de Saint-Julien does not mention the secretary who transcribes Augustine's words or the youth who reads over his shoulder. But the evident care lavished upon those figures, and their placement in the extreme foreground, further emphasize the privacy of absorption in the painting as a whole.89

Bailler de Saint-Julien's commentary on Van Loo's second Augustine picture of 1755,80 St. Augustin baptisé à l'âge de 30 ans, avec son fils & Alipe son ami (Fig. 9), is also pertinent:

La vérité d'expression est si bien entendue dans Monsieur Van Loo que voulant reprê
senter S. Augustin who administers the Sacrement de Baptême to a young man [sic], it is necessary that the Prêtres who accompanied the saint. Evêque ne devont pourter aucune attention à cette cérémonie. Ils sont sensés en avoir été trop souvent les témoins pour ressentir quelque curiosité à cet égard. Mais les Laïques que la parenté, l’amitié ou le hasard y amenent doivent être profondément occupés du Mystère de Rédemption qui s’opère en leur présence. Aussi l’admiration, le respect & la joie sont les passions qu’ils éprouvent. Il y a encore dans ce Tableau un humble catechumene qui attend son tour pour être baptisé & que on peut comparer un simple qui craint de se présenter devant un Prieur qu’il a offensé. 43

Truth of expression is so well understood by M. Van Loos that, wishing to represent St. Augustine administering the sacrament of baptism to some young people [sic], he thought that the priests accompanying the saintly bishop should not pay any attention to this religious ceremony. They are conceived as having witnessed it too often to feel any curiosity concerning it. But the laity brought there by kinship, friendship, or chance must be profoundly absorbed in the mystery of redemption being performed in their presence. Thus admiration, respect, and joy are passions that they experience. There is also in this painting a humble catechumen awaiting his turn to be baptized and who might be compared to a schoolboy afraid to appear before a teacher whom he has offended.

The critic cites as primary evidence of Van Loos’s mastery of expression the contrast between the inattention of the priests and the absorption of the laymen in the ceremony taking place before them. The depiction of specific passions or emotions is mentioned almost as an afterthought.


And both exemplify Van Loos’s ability to infuse the sujets galants that remained popular in the Encyclopédie society in which he moved with a seriousness of purpose appropriate to that society, if nearly invisible to modern taste. For the sake of economy I shall discuss only La Lacte e, La Conversation e and La Lecture e (Fig. 11). The commentary that follows is by the anonymous critic for the Journal Encyclopédique on the occasion of the painting’s exhibition in the Salon of 1751.
Mr. Carle Vanloo nous ouvre un jardin où l'on voit une famille occupée d'une lecture. Un jeune homme vêtu à l'Espagnole lit une brochure qu'il sait vivre attention à celle de l'assemblée, on reconnaît pour quelque Roman où il s'agit d'amour. Deux jeunes personnes l'écouter avec un plaisir que tout point en elles. La mère [actually their governess] est de l'autre côté du Lecteur, & derrière lui, suspend son ouvrage pour écouter aussi. Mais son attention est toute différente de celle de ses filles; on y lit les réflexions qu'elle fait, et le mélange du plaisir que lui donne le livre, & de la crainte qu'elle a peut-être de la dangereuse impression qu'il peut faire sur de jeunes coeurs. Pendant ce temps, une enfant à qui tout cela est indifférent, joue avec un oiseau qu'elle a attaché par la patte avec un fil, & s'amuse à le voir voler. La beauté du plan, l'elegance du dessin, la variété & la vivacité de l'expression, et l'espace de magie des couleurs qui règnent dans tout cet ouvrage, le rendent incomparable;

M. Carle Van Loo opens before us a garden in which we see a family engaged in a reading. A young man dressed in Spanish costume is reading aloud from a small book, which, on the evidence of his keen attention and that of the company, can be recognized as a novel dealing with love. Two young girls listen to him with a pleasure expressed by everything about them. Their mother [actually their governess], who is on the other side of the reader and behind him, suspends her needlework in order to listen also. But her attention is altogether different from that of the girls; one reads in it the thoughts that she is having, and the mixture of the pleasure given her by the book and the fear she perhaps entertains of the dangerous impression that that book might make on young hearts. Meanwhile, a young child to whom all this means nothing plays with a bird. She has tied a long string to its leg and is amusing herself watching it fly. The beauty of the arrangement, the elegance of the drawing, the variety and vivacity of expression, and the kind of color-magic that prevail in this work make it infinitely precious.

Even without the sanction of these remarks, the primacy of considerations of absorption in La Lecture espagnole would be evident. The young man reading aloud is plainly engrossed in his performance; the young girls seated opposite him are even more intensely absorbed in the narrative, which we are led to feel has reached a crisis; the governess, who has been listening and sewing, studies closely the impression made by the reading on her young charges, and the youngest girl occupies herself with her pet bird. Nor is this all. The governess's suspension of sewing expresses the acute sense of her concern with what is taking place before her; the obliviousness of the girls to being observed dramatizes their raptness in the story; and the indifference of the youngest girl to everything except her bird contrasts naturally but pointedly with the entire participation of the others in the elegant and ingenious structure of absorptive relations that is the painting's action and essence.

It is, I think, unnecessary to spell out the thematic and structural relationships that obtain between La Lecture espagnole and paintings like the Fête de famille, Philosophie occupé de sa lecture, Dessinateur d'après le Mercure de M. Pigalle, Jeune Fille qui récite son Evangelie, St. Augustin disputant contre les Donatistes, and St. Augustin prêchant devant Valère, Evêque d'Hippone. In any case, specific connections among these and other works are less important than the preoccupation with absorption that underlies the connections and in an important sense determined them.
ABSORPTION AND THEATRICALITY

A further range of absorptive concerns is brought into focus by another picture exhibited in the Salon of 1753, Joseph-Marie Vien's *Ermita endormi* (Fig. 12). Vien (1716–1809) spent the years 1744–1750 in Italy, and exhibited more than a half-dozen works in this, his first Salon. Of these the *Ermita endormi* excited much the warmest interest. It portrays a bearded hermit sleeping against a tree with a violin and bow in his hands. Around him are various objects—a human skull, a large tumbler and a quill pen, a few sheets of music, a jug, a wicker basket containing simple vegetables.

Contemporary critics admired the Italianate character, vigorous execution, and coloristic unity of the *Ermita endormi*. But the subject itself—the action of the hermit and the details of the setting—intrigued them as well, and in their commentaries we again find an emphasis on expression we could not have anticipated. Here for example is Laugier:

Le fond du Tableau est l'intérieur d'un pauvre hermitage, où l'on voit d'un côté une tête de mort, objet sans doute de la méditation du Solitaire, de l'autre des racines & des légumes qui sont sa nourriture.... Rien de ce qui peut exprimer le sommeil n'est oublié: la tête est pâchée en arrière nonchalamment, les yeux sont fermés, la bouche un peu entrouverte, les bras tombants; on voit à un des pieds qui ne touche point à terre la sandale qui se détache, & qui ne tient presque plus. On sent que tous les ressorts sont étendus, & que tous les nerfs sont dans le relâchement. Cependant ce n'est point une mort, c'est un vrai sommeil.

The background of the painting is the interior of a poor hermitage in which we see on one side a skull, no doubt the object of the recluse's meditation, and on the other some roots and vegetables that constitute his food.... Nothing that can express sleep has been left out. His head leans back nonchalantly, his eyes are closed, his mouth is slightly open, his arms droop; we see on one of his feet, which is not touching the ground, a sandal that has come loose and is about to fall. One feels that all his sinews are slack and all his nerves relaxed. But this is not death; it is a true sleep.

In the same vein La Font de Saint-Yenne remarks: "Il tient un violon sur ses genoux prêt à lui échapper" (He holds in his lap a violin that is about to slip from his grasp), an observation that parallels Laugier's of the sandal about to fall. A third critic, Husquier, has this to say:

Ce bon Vieux tient un violon dans sa main, & paroit s'être endormi lui-même au son de son instrument; il a bien l'air d'un homme tranquille qui n'a rien à se reprocher: autour de lui sont ses livres de prières ou d'études, & au bas on voit quelques racines dont il compose sans doute ses repas frugales.

This old man holds a violin in his hand and seems to have fallen asleep to the sound of his instrument. His appearance is truly that of a tranquil man who has nothing for which to reproach himself. Around him are his books of prayer or study, and at the bottom one sees a few roots, of which no doubt his frugal meals consisted.

The sentimentalizing tendency evident in these comments is taken further by Estève, who describes the hermit as an "Anachorète... placé dans une sol-
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This interpretation, implying as it does the primacy of considerations of absorption in the painting as a whole, finds support in the inference that the hermit's present condition has been brought about by his engagement in one of those activities, playing the violin. Huquier infers as much when he remarks that the hermit "parait s'être endormi lui-même au son de son instrument." If this strikes us as fanciful or absurd, how are we to understand Vien's depiction of the hermit as asleep with violin and bow still in his hands? At the very least, we are made to feel that the state of sleep represented in the Ermité endormi harmonizes with the absorptive activities of reading, meditation, and playing the violin to which the painting alludes.

I want to go further, however, and propose that the state of sleep, as depicted in the Ermité endormi and as described in the criticism I have quoted, is itself to be understood as another manifestation—an extreme instance or limiting case—of the preoccupations with absorption that has been the focus of this chapter from the start.

This requires clarification. The absorptive activities previously considered involve the faculty of attention, and attention naturally involves consciousness. Throughout this chapter, however, we have seen that automatic, involuntary, and unconscious actions were perceived by critics of the early and mid-1730s as signs of intense absorption and for that matter of rapt attention. More generally, we have inferred that for French painters of those years the persuasive representation of absorption characteristically entailed evoking the obliviousness or unconsciousness of the figure or figures in question to everything other than the specific objects of their absorption. I now suggest that precisely that vital sign or index of absorption is epitomized, given independent existence, in the Ermité endormi—moreover that the power of Vien's painting to captivate the same audience that stood enthralled before Chardin's Philosophe occupé de sa lecture and Van Loo's St. Augustine disputant contre les Donatistes is to be understood to a very considerable degree in this light. I do not deny that there are significant differences between the respective states of mind and body of Chardin's philosopher engrossed in his book or Van Loo's secretary transfixed by Augustine's eloquence on the one hand and of Vien's hermit fast asleep against a tree on the other. But I would insist that those differences cannot be understood simply in terms of an opposition between absorption and unconsciousness: in French painting and criticism of the period absorption and unconsciousness are key to one another, and implied by one another, to an extent that makes any contrast between them largely empty of meaning. Nor do I overlook the fact that the representation of sleep has innumerable precedents in eighteenth-century art. But there is in the Ermité endormi an attempt to evoke, as if from within, the actual experience of sleep in a situation wholly devoid of erotic overtones; and that attempt, although not absolutely without prior example, decidedly strikes a new, nonvoyeuristic, intensely empathetic note in eighteenth-century French painting. This is reflected in Laugier's emphasis on the persuasiveness or expressive truth of
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Vien’s painting, an emphasis which itself signals a new or heightened concern with the internal experience of sleep, with its character as a lived condition or mode of being.  

Another brief quotation is illuminating here. Garrigues de Froment, in his account of the Salon of 1753, criticizes Carle Van Loo’s Jupiter et Antiope—a small, Watteau-inspired painting that depicts Jupiter in the form of a satyr uncovering the sleeping Antiope—for presenting an image of sleep that is “trop dur, trop universel” (too harsh, too universal). The aptness or inaptness of the criticism is beside the point; the remark evinces the same heightened concern with the experience of sleep that we have found in the writings on the Ermite endormi cited above. In Laugier’s words, Antiope’s condition seems to Garrigues de Froment not so much un vrai sommeil as une mort.

Significantly, the theme of sleep, understood in these terms, plays a major role in Greuze’s paintings of the second half of the 1750s. In the Salon of 1755, where he exhibited the Père de famille, he also exhibited Un Enfant qui s’est endormi sur un livre (Fig. 13), a work that impressed contemporary critics but received no detailed commentary. We see at once, however, that it alludes to the absorptive activities of reading and study as those are exemplified in paintings such as the Philosophe occupé de sa lecture or the Père de famille itself, and that even more forcefully than Vien’s celebrated canvas of the previous Salon it implies a continuity between those activities and sleep.

That continuity is also implied in a painting by Greuze shown in the Salon of 1755, La Tristesse endormie (Fig. 14). Its subject is a young girl who has fallen asleep while knitting. According to La Porte it presents “une image . . . naïve de la paresse & de l’ennui de travail . . .” (a naive image of laziness and boredom with one’s work), a statement that recalls Hauquier’s remark that Vien’s hermit appears to have played himself to sleep. And just as the hermit’s obliviousness and self-abandonment are expressed in his loosened hold on violin and bow, so in Greuze’s picture the condition of the tristesse is
made almost tangible to the beholder by the way in which the knitting needles and wool are slipping from her fingers. "Elle a laissé échapper son ouvrage de sa main," writes the anonymous critic for the Journal Encyclopédiste, "et il pourra tomber à terre si la jeune fille ne se réveille" (She has let her work slip from her hand, and it may fall to the ground if the young girl does not wake up). It may well be that both the Enfant qui s'est endormi sur son livre and the Tricoteuse endormie were influenced by the Ermita endormi. That possibility, however, matters less than the conviction that in all three paintings sleep is present as an absorptive condition, almost an absorptive activity, in its own right.

In Greuze's Le Réveil (Fig. 15), also shown in the Salon of 1759, themes of sleep and absorption are the basis of a half- emblematic, half- anecdotal structure of some complexity; while other paintings by Greuze of the second half of the 1750s, notably Le Oeufs casés (Fig. 16) and La Fausse sœur italienne (Fig. 17), both of which appeared in the Salon of 1757, represent not sleep itself but manifestly sleep-related states and activities. Those states and activities are also to be understood as vehicles of absorption. In fact it is only in the context of the primacy of absorption in the painting and criticism of the period that the latter works become expressively, as opposed to merely iconographically, intelligible—that their peculiar, almost unattainable mood of latitude, reverse, and psychological absence can be seen as other than aberrant.

In the first half of this chapter I have discussed the work of four painters, Chardin, Carle Van Loo, Vien, and Greuze (in order of birth). They are by no means the only figures of the time in whose art absorptive concerns may be found. But they are among the most important painters of their respective generations; and they differ sufficiently among themselves to make their common preoccupation with absorptive themes, structures, and effects particularly striking. In the second half of this chapter I want to sketch at least the rudiments of a historical context in which that preoccupation is to be understood.

To begin with, the primacy of absorption in French painting and criticism of the early and mid-1750s must be seen in connection with the reaction against the Rococo that began several years before (1747 is the date usually given). The basic features of the reaction are well known: a turning away from the exquisite, sensuous, intimately decorative painting that had held the field for roughly thirty years; and an insistence on the need to return to what were perceived as the high seriousness, elevated morality, and timeless aesthetic principles of the great art of the past, by which was meant the sculpture of the ancients and the painting of certain canonical sixteenth- and seventeenth- century masters. In the next chapter I shall examine one of the most conspicuous manifestations of the anti-Rococo reaction, the revival of interest in the sister doctrines of the hierarchy of genres and the supremacy of history painting. For the present, however, two further points are crucial. First, the case against the Rococo was based in part on its apparent neglect of absorptive considerations. Second, a number of the works by previous masters that were regarded as exemplary for ambitious painting were also seen as paradigms of absorption. In other words, both the turning away from the Rococo and the insistence upon the exemplary character of the great art of the past expressed a demand that contemporary painters resume a tradition of absorptive painting that had been allowed to lapse.

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For a succinct illustration of the first point we have only to consider some
to the work of the then foremost living practitioner of the Rococo
style, François Boucher (1703–1770). Boucher achieved prominence in the
1730s, became later on the favorite artist of Mme. de Pompadour, and in 1765
was made premier peintre du roi following the death of his friend and contempo-
rary, Carle Van Loo. Starring in 1747, however, his paintings came under
attack from art critics for being artificial in color, mannered in drawing, and
uncertain in expression. In 1753 his two principal submissions to the Salon
were given a mixed reception; and among the criticisms levelled at those paint-
ings by their detractors was the charge that most of the figures did not appear
to be paying attention to the actions taking place before them. The paintings
in question are Le Lever du Soleil (Fig. 18) and Le Coucher du Soleil (Fig. 19),
large allegorical canvases intended to be executed in tapestry and regarded
today as among the masterpieces of Boucher’s art. In the first of these, Apollo
the sun god rises from the sea to begin his journey across the heavens; in the
second, he returns to Thetis and her court at the end of the day. Estève writes
of the Coucher:

Sur le devant . . . il y a un peu groupe de trois Néréides qu’un Dauphin soutient sur
les eaux. L’expression de ces figures n’a pas para convenable. Abandonnées à leur

nonchalance, elles ne prennent aucun intérêt à l’arrivée d’Apollon. Ne devroient-elles
pas tout au moins imiter leur Souveraine, qui daigne honorer le Dieu du jour d’un
regard de complaisance?17

In the foreground . . . there is a beautiful group of three nereids supported upon the
water by a dolphin. The expression of these figures did not seem suitable. Abandoned
to their nonchalance, they take no interest in the arrival of Apollo. Should they not at
least imitate their sovereign, who condescends to honor the god of light with an
obliging look?

He adds that “les Néréides qui devroient le recevoir avec empressement ne le
regardent pas . . .” (the nereids, who should receive him with fervor, are not
looking at him . . .). The same objection is raised by La Font de Saint-
Yenne, who observes of the Lever:

[37]
[L']indifférence de tout ce Corrège marin, dont presque toutes les figures tournent le dos au dieu du jour, & semblent n'être dans ce tableau que pour remplir les vides, sans prendre aucun intérêt à l'action principale qui est le départ du Soleil, est une faute essentielle, & . . . difficile à excuser. [72]

The indifference of this entire marine cortege, in which almost all the figures turn their backs upon the god of light and seem to be in this painting only to fill empty spaces without taking any interest in the main action, the departure of the sun, is a basic fault and one . . . difficult to excuse.

Of the Coucher La Font says: "On remarque les mêmes fautes à l'égard de la cour

de Thétis que dans le précédent tableau. Nulle attention à l'arrivée du Soleil; les Néréides s'entretoisent en particulier, & ne prennent aucune part à ce qui se passe sur la scène" (One notices the same faults with respect to Thetis's court as in the preceding painting. No attention is paid to the arrival of the sun; the nereids converse among themselves and take no part in what is happening in the scene). [72] For both critics, the structure of action and expression in Boucher's pictures was antithetical to the absorbive structures they and their colleagues admired in the art of Chardin, Van Loo, and Vien, and were soon to admire in that of Greuze.
In the later 1750s and 1760s criticism of Boucher grew increasingly harsh, though he continued to have his supporters, as his appointment as premier peintre suggests. Two passages in Diderot's largely devastating discussion of Boucher's work in his Salons de 1765 are of particular interest. The first deals with Boucher's characteristic mode of depicting children, which seemed to Diderot to epitomize the unreality of his art:

Quand il fait des enfans, ils les groupe bien; mais qu'ils restent à solâter sur des visages. Dans toute cette innumerable famille, vous n'en trouverez pas un à employer aux actions réelles de la vie, à étudier sa leçon, à lire, à écrire, à riler du chaume. Ce sont des natures romanesques, idéales, de petits bâtards de Bacchus et de Silène. 72

When he depicts children, he groups them well, but they stay up there frolicking on clouds. In all that innumerable family, you will not find one to employ in real actions of life, studying a lesson, reading, writing, stripping hemp. They are ideal, imaginary natures, young bastards of Bacchus and Silenus.

It hardly needs to be pointed out that Diderot's examples of the real actions of life are essentially absorptive, or that such actions abound in the work of Chardin and Greuze (and to a much lesser extent Van Loo). 73

The second passage mentions Boucher only in conclusion. When Carle Van Loo died in 1765 he had recently finished seven oil sketches of scenes from the life of St. Gregory. 74 One of them, St. Grégoire distrait ses homélies (Fig. 20), 75 depicted the saint seated in his study, inspired by the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove at his ear and dictating to a secretary seated opposite him. Diderot considered it the most beautiful of the sketches and described it in the following terms:

Il n'y a cependant que deux figures; le saint qui dicte ses homélies, et son secrétaire qui les écrit. Le saint est assis, le coude appuyé sur la table... La belle tête on ne la se trouve ailleurs que sur la table. 76

There are, however, only two figures—the saint who dictates his homilies and his secretary who writes them down. The saint is seated with his elbow resting on the table... What a beautiful head! One does not know whether to fix one's eyes upon the saint's attitude, so simple, natural, and true. One looks from one truth, the solitude, the silence of this study, the sweet and tender light that pervades the scene, the action, and the characters—there, my admired.

The theme of dictation—and here it is as if not just the secretary but the saint himself is being dictated to—recalls Van Loo's St. Augustin disputant contre les Donatistes; and in general it seems clear that Diderot regarded St. Grégoire...
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significance for French artists and critics in the decades that followed, is described in these words:

Eudamidas est sur son lit, dans l’attitude d’un homme épuisé par la maladie.... Le Médecin est à côté de lui, de bon matin, la tête inclinée (pour marquer son attention); de la main droite il calcule, par les mouvements appréciables de ses doigts, le peu d’instants
qui lui restent: on lui lit le crime arrêté dans ses traits. Le Notaire écrit ses dernières volontés, & par son étonnement fait sentir le sublime qu’elles renferment. 86

Eudamidas lies on his bed in the attitude of a man exhausted by illness.... The doctor stands at his side with head bent (to show his attentiveness); with his right
hand he calculates, from Eudamidas’s slowing heartbeat, what little time the latter
has left. One reads the cruel sentence in the doctor’s expression. The notary records
Eudamidas’s last wishes, and by his astonishment conveys their sublimity.

The absorptive character of the notary’s occupation does not call for comment.
That of the doctor’s activity of taking the dying man’s pulse—a kind of
listening—is acknowledged between parentheses in the passage itself.

Other works by seventeenth-century masters that appear to have been admired
at least partly on absorptive grounds include Eustache Le Sueur’s paintings
of the life of St. Bruno at the Charterhouse of Paris (Figs. 22 and 23), 83
Domenico Fetti’s Melancholy (Fig. 24), 84 the painting of the blind Belisarius
receiving alms then thought to be by Van Dyck (Fig. 63), 85 and various paintings
and etchings by Rembrandt. Among these last we may note in particular
A Scholar in a Room with a Winding Stair, engraved by Surnique in 1755 as Le
Philosophe en contemplation (Fig. 75) 86 the Tobias Healing His Father’s Blindness,
engraved by Marcenay de Ghuy the same year as Tobie restaurant la vue (Fig.
26), 87 and the etching of Jan Six reading (Fig. 27), a work adapted by Greuze
around 1763 or 1764 in a portrait of Watteau which the latter subsequently
etched (Fig. 28). 88

The concept of absorption is not one that we are accustomed to apply
systematically to the art of the past. But on examination it turns out that
subjects involving absorptive states and activities are present in abundance in
earlier painting, and that in the work of some of the greatest seventeenth-
century masters in particular—Caravaggio, Domenichino (in the Last Communion of St. Jerome), Poussin, Le Sueur, Georges de La Tour, Velázquez, Zurbarán, Vermeer, and, supremely, Rembrandt—come at once to mind—those
states and activities are rendered with an intensity and a persuasiveness never
subsequently surpassed. In this sense there had been a tradition of absorptive
painting, one whose almost universal efflorescence in the seventeenth century
was everywhere followed by its relative decline. Obviously we need to know a
great deal more about that tradition—about its sources, internal development,
spiritual and other affinities, characteristic manifestations in different coun-
tries, and so on. 88
Even at this early stage in our inquiry, however, it is clear that the representation of absorption did not wholly disappear from French painting with the rise of the Rococo. Watteau himself is on occasion an absorptive painter of an inimitable and idiosyncratic sort. In the course of the 1720s, 1730s, and 1740s, a few artists, notably Jean-François De Troy and Maurice-Quentin de La Tour, now and then produced work whose absorptive character is undeniable. The expatriate artist Pierre Subleyras, who worked mostly in Rome, should also be mentioned in this connection. And starting in the early 1730s, a major figure with whom we are already familiar, Chardin, made painting after painting in which engrossment, reflection, reverie, obliviousness, and related states are represented with a persuasiveness equal to that achieved by the greatest masters of the past, and by so doing perpetuated as much of what I shall call the absorptive tradition as it was in one man's power to keep alive. Indeed Chardin did more than simply perpetuate that tradition. He concentrated or "purified" it by separating the representation of absorption from other objects and concerns with which previously it had been mixed. In particular he secularized the absorptive tradition—more accurately, it is in his genre paintings that the process of secularization begun in the previous century (chiefly in the Low Countries) and continued by Watteau and