Another Way to Consider Absorption: Anxiety about Domesticity in the Paintings of Chardin and Greuze

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THESIS
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SUMMARY

This thesis investigates the contemporary social issues that contributed to the proliferation of the absorptive theme discussed by Michael Fried in *Absorption and Theatricality*. Fried’s focus upon Diderot’s *Salon* critiques as the central manner in understanding absorption in the works of Greuze and Chardin created between 1730 and 1770 provides a singular viewpoint into the otherwise rich and complicated social history of these paintings. As religion and the monarchy were no longer looked upon to fulfill the needs of a culturally acceptable source of morality in an evolving France, both English and French philosophers, like Locke and Rousseau, sought to create the new social contract. The sentimental family functioned both ideologically and realistically as the new model for social cohesion. In their respective works, Sarah Maza and Carol Duncan propose alternative reasons as to why the theme of the woman or family within a domestic interior existed and proliferated in eighteenth-century French painting. As a majority of the paintings of Greuze and Chardin display absorption in relation to women and the sentimental family within a domestic interior, contemporary social issues and the anxieties attached to them should be considered including: the cultural emphasis on the family; ideologies regarding the necessity of sentimentality and morality in society in relation to women; and the metamorphosis of the domestic interior from a shared, public space to one of privacy and intimacy.
INTRODUCTION

1. ABSORPTION AND THE SOCIAL CONTRACT:
BINDING TOGETHER A CLASSLESS COMMUNITY

In *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Michael Fried identifies a phenomenon that started in the 1730s and extended to the 1770s during which the paintings exhibited at the *Salon* by artists, like Jean-Baptiste Greuze and Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, portrayed their subjects as completely enraptured in their respective scenes. Fried borrows the term “absorption,” originally established by Denis Diderot in his *Salon* writings, in order to classify this theme. He specifically defines absorption in his book in relation to Jean-Baptiste Greuze’s painting, *Father Reading the Bible to His Children* (Figure 1), declaring it to be “the state or condition of rapt attention, of being completely occupied or engrossed or...absorbed in what he or she is doing, hearing, thinking, feeling.”1 Additionally, he states that his methodology in *Absorption and Theatricality* consists of “looking at a well-known picture in the light of a passage of contemporary criticism in which it is described in some detail....”2 While I agree with Michael Fried’s assertion as to the sudden emergence and impact of the absorptive theme in early to mid-eighteenth century genre paintings exhibited at the *Salons*, I reject his suggestion that this was predominantly due to the influence of contemporary art critics on artists. As 72% of the paintings discussed portray women, children and the family in various states and degrees of absorption, I believe that it was a combination of shifts within the “woman’s sphere,” specifically the cultural emphasis on the family; the metamorphosis of the domestic interior from a shared, public space to one of privacy and intimacy; and ideologies.

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2 Ibid., 7.
regarding the necessity of sentimentality and morality in society that promulgated the use of the absorptive theme in the *Salon* paintings of Greuze and Chardin.

“Despite the wide range of everyday subjects available to artists, the majority of genre painters in the early to mid-eighteenth century focused on what would have been termed the “woman’s sphere”: morning toilets, housework, child care, preparations for the ball, intimate rendezvous, and so on.”3 Due to their relative popularity at the *Salons* as well as their portrayal of the aforementioned themes, I will specifically focus on Greuze’s *Father Reading the Bible to His Children, Broken Eggs* (Figure 2), and *A Girl with a Dead Canary* (Figure 3), as well as Chardin’s *The Good Education* (Figure 4).

Additionally, Fried’s conviction in Diderot as the authority figure on paintings exhibited at the *Salons* is unfair to his argument for absorption as Diderot was highly subjective in his criticism.4 George Boas explains that such an art critic, instead of “writing something objectively verifiable, will indulge in autobiography and his art criticism will be more of a revelation of himself than of either artist or work of art.”5 French scholar Virgil Topazio states that impartiality is necessary to art criticism. “The critic fails...if his personal tastes or prejudices are an obstacle to the creative freedom of the artists.”6 In his *Salon* writings, however, Diderot was an ardent admirer of Greuze and Chardin as he found the sentimental themes in their paintings to be much more morally satisfying than those created by Boucher or Fragonard. “To appeal to Diderot, a painting had to arouse his emotions.”7 Additionally, Melissa Hyde states that art criticism in the eighteenth century “was structured by binary conceptions of gender and by

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7 Ibid., 5.
hierarchies of values that were often at odds with the values, aesthetics, and conceptions informing” the painting itself.8 Due to the pastel colors and feminine subject matter of Boucher and Fragonard, Diderot and other art critics were quick to dismiss their paintings. Greuze and Chardin escaped such persecution due to their narrative structure and muted color palette which equated to masculinity.

The analyses of Sarah Maza and Carol Duncan provide alternative explanations regarding the proliferation of the absorptive theme in eighteenth-century painting. In their respective works, Maza and Duncan attribute the emergence and popularity of absorption to the crucial impact of the sentimental family on contemporary social morals; the shift of women’s roles within the family; the alteration of domestic life and living spaces; and, finally, the sustained social pressure imposed by the importance of chastity and morality for women. “With the binding force of church and king on the wane, the sentimental family acquired central importance as the means of making sure that the social contract would hold together.”9 Maza attributes John Locke’s theories regarding familial independence and isolation from traditional authority figures, like a monarchy or religion, as crucial to the development of the sentimental family as “a model and idea of a social cohesion in reaction to the dilemmas posed by individualistic and rationalistic thinking.”10 The idea of the family in eighteenth-century France shifted from one of necessity to one of sentimentalism as sentimentalism was viewed as “the necessary complement of Lockean individualism and contractual thought: the demonstration that

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10 Ibid., 39.
in ‘natural’ feelings, such as those arising among family members, lay the basis of a new social morality. It was not about class, but about binding together a classless community.”\footnote{Ibid., 45.}
As previously stated, Sarah Maza attributes the popularity of the absorptive, sentimental family scene to the dissolution of the traditional model of the social contract which was held together by a conjoined understanding of morality as defined by the church and the monarchy. With such severe changes in traditional values, the longstanding cultural gauges for morality disintegrated, requiring a new definition. Artists, like Greuze and Chardin, established such models by opposing the aesthetic as well as thematic qualities, like soft pastel colors and extramarital sexual encounters, associated with Rococo paintings. The absorption of the family figures in Greuze, and the primarily solitary female figures of Chardin’s middle-class images created a new emphasis on the importance of the family in eighteenth-century life and women’s central role in creating it.

Two key creative strategies implemented by artists of the early to mid-1750s were a turn against the sumptuous and ornate paintings of the Rococo, as well as a reinstallation of styles used in the works of the Old Masters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Such paintings aligned themselves with the “high seriousness and elevated morality” associated with the Old Master style. An exact replication of this style, though, was not entirely possible, causing these artists to develop their own versions and interpretations of Old Master works, establishing a new major phase in the evolution of French painting that focused on creating images of morality through the use of absorption.

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12 Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 35.
13 Ibid., 73.
Additionally, Diderot’s disdain for Boucher and other Rococo artists which emanated from his view regarding the lack of educational or moral substance in their paintings, unlike such qualities he saw portrayed in the paintings of Greuze and Chardin, succeeded in establishing Chardin and Greuze as the painters of morality. Diderot was simultaneously Greuze’s greatest admirer and Boucher’s harshest critic, stating of the latter that, “This man only picks up a brush to show me breasts and buttocks.”\(^{14}\) While it could be argued that Greuze and Boucher both created theatrical paintings, it is the narrative structure, sentimentality and morality that Diderot identified in Greuze that separated the two artists from one another. Through this morality that he repeatedly congratulated the artist on producing, Diderot believed Greuze’s paintings held transformative powers that could transfer the feelings and emotions Greuze experienced at the moment of the painting’s conception. Additionally, Diderot credited the artist with presenting ‘vital moral issues’ and with holding the “power to touch us, to instruct us, to correct us, and to encourage us to virtuous action.”\(^{15}\)

Earning Diderot’s ardent praise, Greuze also achieved success by combining “the everyday realism of Northern genre painting with the moral seriousness of classical history painting” as well as focusing on “religion’s concern with establishing a new basis for morality.”\(^{16}\) French literature scholar Thomas Kavanagh also credits Greuze with opposing the ostentatious nature of Boucher’s paintings through the embrace of humility favored by a middle-class public: “[Greuze’s] moving portrayals of family life are imbued with an altogether original power to serve a higher moral purpose.”\(^{17}\)

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\(^{15}\) Ibid., 243.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 241-242.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 241.
Both Chardin and Greuze succeeded in documenting the dissolution and reemergence of the absorptive theme as pictorial narratives shifted from a religious subject to a study of the individual. Greuze’s moral figure, unlike Chardin’s, derived from the traditional, religious view of humans as having “moved to the height of goodness...only by a sense of love and gratitude by God.”\textsuperscript{18} Chardin’s morality does not seek affirmation from an authority figure. His absorption focuses on the autonomy and self-exploration of the individual. As such, their paintings were celebrated as they showed the symbiotic relationship between morality, chastity, and reason in Enlightenment-era France. While their paintings are similar in certain respects, Greuze’s differ as he creates “the sentimentalism, emotionalism, moralism, exploitation of sexuality, and invention of narrative-dramatic structures” that contrasts “sharply with the concentration and purity of Chardin’s rendering of absorptive motif.”\textsuperscript{19}

In light of all the praise Greuze received for his moral figures, Fried’s discussion regarding the absorption of the young women in Greuze’s \textit{Broken Eggs}, \textit{The Lazy Italian Girl} (Figure 5), and \textit{The Broken Mirror} (Figure 6) could be viewed as unsympathetic. He overlooks what has long been considered the main reason behind these women’s states of absorption by art historians and art critics alike, their loss of virginity and their shame in losing a valuable social commodity.\textsuperscript{20} Virginity was expected of a woman for marriage purposes as “women were considered the sexual property of men, and their value would be diminished if they were used by anyone other than the legal owner.”\textsuperscript{21} These images also have a perverse, voyeuristic quality as

\textsuperscript{19} Fried, \textit{Absorption and Theatricality}, 61.
the beholder is encouraged to enjoy the young women who are entirely absorbed in their contrition. The only discussion by Fried regarding these paintings in *Absorption and Theatricality* is that they “represent not sleep itself but manifestly sleep-related states and activities.” These paintings, however, depict serious, complex social issues that caused anxiety in young women as their state of absorption, vulnerability, and the tension within the entire composition rests upon “the past of a virginity sacrificed to a moment of shared desire and the future of the girl’s anxious uncertainty as to what will follow.”

In *Broken Eggs*, Greuze crafts a scene of traditional French rural values. The young girl is isolated from the drama unfolding over her shoulder by her introspective appearance, from her softly closed eyes to her nervously interlocked fingers. The majority of her apparel is white, signifying her youth and purity, a point also emphasized by her fair complexion and rosy cheeks. Her *bergère* hat, strewn upon the basket alludes to the tension within the painting and serves an erotic function similar to the hats in salacious Rococo paintings, specifically Boucher’s *The Four Seasons, Autumn* (Figure 7). The namesake of the painting, a basket of broken eggs, alludes to her virginity, presumably compromised by the bumbling young man who is held firmly in place by the older woman. The young girl is absorbed in herself as she is encumbered by her family and community as to the importance of her virginity to her future. The little boy in the lower right corner who attempts to fix one of the broken eggs signifies her anxiety, “This is no figure of fun but a solemn witness to the impossibility of repairing what is broken, of restoring innocence once lost.”

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Also pertinent to the importance of morality and chastity to the absorptive theme is the crucial distinction between the lack of privacy awarded to Greuze’s damaged adolescents and the privacy Chardin gives to his women who grapple with the psychology of their sexuality.\textsuperscript{26} Chardin’s young women do not serve an erotic purpose and are provided the opportunity to explore and experience their sexuality through the safety of their absorption. In opposition, the absorption of Greuze’s pretty young women makes them the receptacle of sexual longing by male spectators. The erotic spectacle of a young woman’s loss of innocence in eighteenth-century French art allowed her to be a virtuous and beautiful heroine. Emma Barker notes that the paradox in Greuze’s works endures as “a fundamental tension clearly exists within this construction of femininity between the moral qualities for which the heroine is admired and the way her suffering is staged as an eroticized spectacle.”\textsuperscript{27} Absorption in Chardin’s paintings signifies a safe space in which young women understand and comprehend their bodies alone and on their own terms. The women in Greuze’s paintings are depicted as not being allowed to have (or possibly being incapable of having) any thoughts or emotions outside of those concerning marriage or the family, including shame from pre-marital sex as seen in \textit{Broken Eggs}, or the sheer bliss created solely through marriage or child-rearing as in \textit{The Beloved Mother} (Figure 8).

In relation to \textit{Broken Eggs}, \textit{The Lazy Italian Girl}, and \textit{The Broken Mirror}, the woman in \textit{The White Hat} (Figure 9), shows Greuze’s apparent fondness for exploring the sexuality and virginity of young women. The main difference between these two levels of absorption, however, is their public and private nature: \textit{Broken Eggs} was shown publicly at the \textit{Salon} while \textit{The White Hat} was created for private consumption. Greuze placated to socially acceptable


representations of sexual morality in young women by showing *Broken Eggs* at the *Salon*. Images like *Broken Eggs* would elicit feelings of pity from the beholder for the poor child as Diderot proclaimed when looking at *A Girl with a Dead Canary*. The absorption in *Broken Eggs* served as a way of further repressing female sexual autonomy through societal expectations of morality. This woman in *The White Hat*, however, is not the sorrowful victim that appears in Greuze’s *Salon* paintings. Instead, she acknowledges the viewer from a place of strength and autonomy. Her sexual freedom is signified by the exposure of her left breast through her *déshabillé* and rosy complexion. The young woman in *Broken Eggs* is depicted as being overwhelmed by her shame, emphasized by her slouched posture, scolding authority figure who further oppresses her, and the young woman’s complete physical and mental separation from the rest of the action happening on the right side of the composition. Her mental absorption is what keeps her from physically interacting and participating with the other figures depicted. She is reliant upon her family and her community in order to survive. The woman in *The White Hat*, however, feels no shame in her sexual prowess and autonomy as she signifies the new woman of the eighteenth century, a threat perceived by many philosophers of the time, namely Rousseau. According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *Emile, or On Education*, it was a woman’s natural place to be subject to the will of men: “girls should become accustomed from the first to restrictions and constraints...the...woman, who organized her life around her own pleasures rather than around the needs of her husband and children, violated the laws of nature.”

Diderot exhibited a paternal, yet erotic intimacy with the young woman in *A Girl with a Dead Canary* as he wrote how “delicious,” or delightful, he found the young girl’s absorbed sorrow and how he wished to comfort her. He was well aware as to the erotic undertone

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regarding the loss of the girl’s virginity as he was the first to attribute it to this piece in his work, *Salon of 1765.*

Diderot’s interaction with the young girl in this painting is complicated as “the cultural significance of the Greuze girl resides in the implied relationship with a quasi-paternal spectator, who disavows his own desire for the girl while nevertheless enjoying an eroticized intimacy with her.” Additionally, Diderot attributes the loss of the young girl’s virginity to the absence of her mother. This serves to highlight the increased perception of the importance of the family and, specifically, the importance of the mother as the moral compass.

It should also be noted that young women are the subject in the majority of Greuze’s *Salon* paintings. Young adulthood for females was viewed as the “age of grace” which was deemed “a moral as well as an aesthetic category.” Traditionally, children were believed to be annoying pests that did not serve a greater function. This, however, takes a perverse turn here as young girls are fetishized and commodified for their virginity as it relates to their purity, innocence, and morality. “The ambiguous mixture of eroticism and moralism that characterizes the sentimental construction of a youthful and innocent femininity thus engenders a similarly ambivalent response on the part of the viewing subject” which is further encouraged by Diderot’s suggestive commentary regarding the painting.

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29 Barker, “Reading the Greuze Girl,” 87.
30 Ibid., 96.
32 Ibid., 95.
33 Ibid., 96.
In the *Salon* paintings created by Greuze and Chardin, their absorbed female subjects are almost exclusively positioned within a domestic, interior setting. “The emphasis on the specific roles within the family would become a common feature of French portraiture in the second half of the eighteenth century....”34 Greuze’s paintings created between 1755 and 1763, *Father Reading the Bible to His Children, Village Bride* (Figure 10), *Silence* (Figure 11), *Broken Eggs, The Lazy Italian Girl*, and *Filial Piety* (Figure 12), primarily focused on establishing the subjects, mainly images of women in relation to the family, within a shabby, romanticized interior of a rural French home. Through the depiction of a rural farmhouse, values like chastity and morality, typically associated with the smaller, tight-knit communities of rural areas intensified the absorbed states of Greuze’s figures as the young women within these communities were primarily held accountable for their actions as “each person, his family, and connections are known to every body....”35 Through the rustic interior, Greuze’s paintings reinforce “in a memorable way the traditional familial roles that social reformers such as Rousseau saw as essential for the moral health of the nation.”36 Each individual within the family had a specific task and rank, and the individual was defined by such label. For women, these labels were marriage and family-centric: unmarried daughter, mother, wife, or widow.37 Richard

37 Duncan, “Happy Mothers and Other New Ideas in French Art,” 580.
Steele in an issue of *The Tatler* from 1710, defined women in an unsurprisingly harsh way stating that “A woman is a daughter, a sister, a wife and a mother, a mere appendage of the human race…”\(^\text{38}\) Morality was viewed as a necessary characteristic of society and was to be enforced by women. As such, young women were held by an unavoidable and unsurpassable accountability regarding chastity as virginity served as a necessary component for marriage. The young women in *Broken Eggs, Lazy Italian Girl, and Broken Mirror*, for instance, are absorbed in their moralistic plight as a result of their autonomous excursion into the public sphere where danger lurked in the form of love letters, secret lovers, and, ultimately, compromised virginity. Their future is now jeopardized.

Conversely, Chardin positioned his female subjects within contemporary middle-class interiors, like that of *Good Education* and *Game of Knucklebones* (Figure 13). In contrast to Greuze’s interiors, Chardin’s simple and clean middle-class settings allow the female figure to be wholly and unashamedly absorbed and autonomous. “Chardin’s depleted interiors have to do with a specific stage in the life of an individual that precedes the socializing immersion in the public sphere. They offer a setting for the most basic occupations through which a young person first begins to rehearse his relation to the world, and to himself.”\(^\text{39}\) The interiors created by Chardin suggest a safe, private, and comfortable environment for the young woman to explore herself. Greuze’s absorption, however, serves as an allegory of the dangers of the public sphere for women.

As the idea of the family shifted from a desideratum to a safehouse of sentimentalism through philosophical discussion, the structure of families as well as the literal structure of the

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39 Lajer-Burcharath, “Chardin’s Craft: The Subject,” 142-143.
house also changed at the start of the eighteenth century. The commercial and financial activity of the *ancien régime* expanded throughout the century to change what people experienced and expected from life.\(^{40}\) A new consciousness of private versus public life developed as well as a feeling of necessity to create a secure and tranquil sanctuary in order to seek refuge from the competitive commercial and civic affairs of public life. The home and the family became a sanctuary of intimacy, warmth and personal well-being that opposed the harsher world outside, in stark contrast to the functional nature of a home in previous centuries.\(^{41}\)

Starting in the 1730s, the overall design and layout of the domestic interior changed exponentially. Cramped, multipurpose two-room apartments made way for spacious apartments with rooms dedicated to a single use. Traditionally, members of the extended family were housed along with the immediate family, causing the average number of people under a single roof to include upwards of eight people. As the eighteenth-century began, however, a major shift occurred. “Thanks to economic growth and increased commercialism, modest homes, once mostly utilitarian sources of food, warmth and company, became places of aesthetic pleasure and self-expression.”\(^{42}\) With a better economic situation, the physical structure of living arrangements grew, creating more spacious living areas to accommodate the more acceptable 4-6 immediate family members. This now created more privacy between family members as well as between family members and servants as each person could now be in a separate room doing whatever they wished, creating a part of life now private from the family. As the absorbed individual and family scene became common in eighteenth century painting, the inclusion of

\(^{40}\) Duncan, “Happy Mothers and Other New Ideas in French Art,” 579.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 579.

\(^{42}\) Maza, “The Bourgeois Family Revisited,” 40.
servants within family scenes, popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, sharply declined.

Additionally, doors and windows are rarely featured in Chardin’s Salon paintings, forcing the viewer to focus on the introspective relation between the subject and their thoughts. The window in Good Education, however, is quite purposeful in suggesting the young girl’s absorption in her Enlightenment through her education. In Greuze’s Village Bride and Father Reading the Bible to his Children, the heavy Dutch-style door that is partially open suggests access and denial, invitation and resistance. In the case of Broken Eggs, however, the door could signal the elusiveness of the young girl’s thoughts and anxiety regarding her compromised future. The beholder is simultaneously invited in to discover the girl’s regretful state; however, her specific thoughts regarding her situation are off-limits to the viewer. Therefore, while she is a spectacle in her own right, she resumes a level of autonomy. The inclusion of a door, however, may also signal anxiety regarding the new advent of privacy amongst family members where the door now created a barrier.
FAMILIAL ABSORPTION: CHILDREN WITHIN THE SENTIMENTAL FAMILY

The structure of the family, as well as the role and relative importance of children within this structure was extensively discussed and debated throughout the eighteenth century. Influenced by John Locke and other English philosophers, French authors argued that the early events of a child’s life would manifest in their moral and psychological character as they matured into adulthood. Additionally, the new use of contraceptive practices amongst middle and upper-class women, caused a stir amongst men of letters who proclaimed these women to be immoral and selfish in not helping to increase the population of France. One writer in 1772 ignorantly declared that “A woman is almost always annoyed at being pregnant, this state should be regarded by women as the most beautiful moment in their lives.” As childbirth was a dangerous and agonizing process for women, the thought of discussing it in these terms is preposterous. Carol Duncan notes, however, that associating motherhood with sexual satisfaction was a common theme in eighteenth-century art. Greuze’s *The Beloved Mother* depicts this type of imagined bliss that women were to receive from their families. The woman’s husband looks lovingly upon his wife who is smothered under a barrage of their children. The look on her face is not pain or exhaustion, but one of absorbed bliss similar to that of Bernini’s *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (Figure 14).

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43 Duncan, “Happy Mothers and Other New Ideas in French Art,” 577.
44 Ibid., 582.
The paintings of the Le Nain brothers, namely Louis Le Nain’s *Happy Family* (Figure 15), are predecessors to Greuze’s rural family scenes; however, Le Nain’s paintings do not portray the same absorbed intimacy and expression of Greuze’s families. *Happy Family*, instead, shows a traditional model of familial order and discipline. The man, who raises his glass to the viewer, is given pride of place and is surrounded by his wife and children who do not meet the beholder’s gaze. In opposition, Greuze succeeds in magnifying and examining family relationships through a more sympathetic lens, preferring to show “simple motherhood and fatherhood in blissful conjugal union.”

His paintings “portray marriage as a state that satisfies both sexual instincts and social demands for stability and order.”

Up until this point, marriage had rarely been considered a grand, romantic gesture, serving instead as a contract for gain between two families, whether for land or financial purposes. Greuze, however, creates the image of marriage as being one of the most sexually and spiritually fulfilling things in the world through the absorbed women in *Village Bride* and *The Beloved Mother*. The new model of the married woman mandated she be “coquettish for her husband, whose physical and emotional needs she fulfills and to whose will she gladly submits; she is thrifty, skilled in the domestic arts, and a good mother and nurse to her children. She is the traditional bourgeois wife, but with a difference: she has been educated to find personal and emotional fulfilment in the execution of her duties.”

Starting in the seventeenth and continuing through the eighteenth century, a majority of literature concerning the education and development of children claimed that youth and adulthood were unrelated stages in life. These texts provided conflicting information as some

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46 Ibid., 582.
47 Ibid., 582.
48 Ibid., 582.
claimed that children were innocent beings while others claimed that they were wickedness personified. Questions regarding the administration of education and whether it should be harsh or tender were also in discussion. Regardless, the general feeling about children in seventeenth-century France was that they were “small, imbecilic creatures who need to be amused with frivolous pastimes.” Additionally, the restraint of children through items like swaddling clothes and corsets were also viewed as necessary. Dorothy Johnson states that this “constraint of the child’s body affirmed the power of the adult and functioned as a sign of reason” and authority that was imposed on the child.

Prior to Chardin, children were rarely the intended subjects of paintings. If they were included, they typically served an objective function to accompany the narrative unfolding between the adults in the painting. Images of parents and children, however, shifted in the eighteenth century so that the child served a greater purpose as their parents were engaged in “separate, gender-specific activities, with a child or children providing the affective bond between them,” like that in François-Hubert Drouais’s *Family Portrait (April Fool’s Day, 1756)* (Figure 16). The child in Drouais’ painting provides the affective bond between the seated mother and the father standing behind her chair. Both parents look off into the distance while the child meets the gaze of the viewer. This type of painting signaled to the viewer a type of innocence and sentimentality achieved through the depiction of family love.

The children in Greuze’s *Father Reading the Bible to his Children* show a different type of familial absorption to Drouais’ painting. The patriarch, an elderly man who is surrounded by his wife and children as he reads from a dense, dog-eared bible, serves as the uniting force for

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50 Ibid., 50.
the family. The family’s rural attire when combined with the drab, rustic interior of their home, signals their humble economic situation. The boys, except the youngest whose attention is directed at a puppy, stand with their eyes open. Their thoughts, however, are not in the present moment. They appear to be thinking of something else. The young girls, however, sit with their eyes closed, intensely absorbed in their current atmosphere. They appear to be resigned to accepting the Biblical passages, rather than having some level of autonomy like the young boys.

In Absorption and Theatricality, Fried’s definition of absorption, which draws on a short passage by the Abbé de La Porte, is discussed in relation to Father Reading the Bible to His Children. Fried includes La Porte’s passage specifically because he describes the dichotomy between rapt attention and disruption. His passage, however, also enforces societal gender restrictions as well as morality and virtue upon women by ignoring how the absorption of the young girls differs from that of the boys. The antiquated notion of group reading, like that in Father Reading, was a remnant from Medieval practices as men were often the only family members who were literate. In the first half of the eighteenth-century, literacy rates were estimated at roughly 48% for men and 27% for women. This data suggests that among the females pictured, it is highly unlikely that any of them could read. Even if they were literate, reading for leisure was largely disapproved of for women to partake in at the start of the century and, if they were literate, women were not typically provided with access to the same reading materials as their male counterparts. Instead of showing a scene where the young girls are absorbed in their own reading choice, or even in a position of authority reading the Bible, Greuze creates the perfect image of absorbed females who obey the patriarch.

Additionally significant is Greuze’s handling of the older woman. Well past the “age of grace,” or the age of youth and beauty, she serves as an authority figure as she is too busy reprimanding the small boy who is also enraptured by another activity to listen to the passage.\textsuperscript{54} Her authority, however, is still below that of the patriarch due to the family hierarchy. The woman’s morality no longer concerns her as she has done her duty of raising a family. Therefore, her absorption lies in engaging in the type of restraint discussed by Dorothy Johnson. The young women who are rapt with unabated absorption, however, are just entering young adulthood. As they become more and more absorbed in the text, they are becoming increasingly virtuous through their absorption. Instead of focusing on these themes, however, Fried reduces the patriarchal undertone of this image to focus solely on the Abbé’s characterization of Greuze’s figures, even going so far as to shower his commentary with words like “special praise” and “admiration.”

In \textit{The Good Education}, however, Chardin handles themes of absorption, youth, and authority in a different way. The young girl stands in front of her mother who holds the recited text, believed to be a Bible, open in her lap. This scene draws upon themes of morality and virtue as well as the young girl’s Enlightenment through educational pursuits, signified by the intense light beaming through the window onto her face. The young girl is also a figure of imposed restraint through absorption, though hers is a sympathetic rendering of this theme as evidenced through the tender facial expression and tranquil nature of her mother. The girl’s impeccably straight posture, enforced by a stiff corset and her downcast eyes that suggest unsureness, however, still affirms the authority of the mother and also serves to exemplify her importance as moral compass in relation to her daughter.

\textsuperscript{54} Barker, “Reading the Greuze Girl,” 95.
For the most part, Chardin’s images of children, like *The Good Education* or *The Soap Bubbles* (Figure 17), adhere to Lockean ideas regarding morality as the child is frequently depicted by him as “a developing individual with distinct needs, desires, capacities and with intrinsic value as a human being.”\(^{55}\) Through his representation of the engaged child, Chardin constructs an image of “subjective self-sufficiency.”\(^{56}\) Unlike Greuze, Chardin takes a sympathetic attitude to the absorbed child who through their self-sufficiency gains autonomy. When pictured, Chardin’s authority figures are not depicted as imposing cruel restraint on the child or being caught up in an emotional uproar. Instead, they are seen as encouraging individuals who support the child in their educational awakening and pursuits. While Greuze holds onto traditional concepts of children as having little to no value until they reach young adulthood, Chardin injects paintings of children with a quiet curiosity and sensitivity. As Eva Lajer-Burcharcth states, the key difference between Greuze and Chardin’s children is that Chardin’s figures are afforded with the choice between work and leisure time while Greuze’s children are subject to the “disciplinary net of pedagogy.”\(^{57}\) Chardin’s depictions of absorption in relation to male and female children differs, however. The boy in *The Soap Bubbles* and the girl in *The Good Education* are both absorbed in their education. The girl’s education, however, is enforced and encouraged through the instruction of her mother. The boy, however, is allowed to be autonomous as he discovers the world through his own scientific methods. The young girl, though, is forced to memorize Biblical passages within the safety of the domestic interior.

While Chardin also created paintings of absorbed women at this time, his paintings of children “are endowed with a subjective presence that stands in contrast to the effect of

\[55\] Johnson, “Picturing Pedagogy,” 55-56.
\[56\] Lajer-Burcharth, “Chardin’s Craft,” 142.
\[57\] Ibid., 142.
evacuation that characterizes his paintings of women shown momentarily detached or distracted from their tasks." Portraying children as entirely absorbed in their current state symbolizes his hope for a new generation that would be self-sufficient and autonomous from religious, political or monarchical authority.

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58 Ibid., 140.
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CONCLUSION

When looking at the *Salon* paintings of Greuze and Chardin, Michael Fried’s preference for attributing the absorptive theme to the influence of art critics, like Diderot, overlooks the predominant cultural ideologies at play in their paintings. His focus on passages from Diderot’s *Salons* as the means of understanding this theme in French art provides a singular viewpoint into the more complicated social history of these paintings. Through their alternate examinations, Sarah Maza and Carol Duncan propose alternative reasons to the existence and proliferation of the absorptive family theme in French painting between 1730 and 1770. As religion and the monarchy were no longer looked upon to fulfill the needs of a culturally acceptable source of morality in an evolving France, both English and French philosophers, like Locke and Rousseau, sought to create the new social contract. The sentimental family functioned both ideologically and realistically as the model for social cohesion. Philosophers, like Rousseau, urged the importance of women looking after their husbands or families, thus making her the moralistic glue that held the sentimental family together.

As a majority of the paintings by Greuze and Chardin that Fried discusses portray absorbed women and families within the domestic interior, these paintings document the social anxieties of pre-Revolutionary France including: the shift of women’s roles within this family to be one of loyal wife and attentive mother; the change in domestic life as a refuge from the outside world; the view of the necessity of morality and chastity among women as they, in terms of the sentimental family, became the central source of morality. By viewing the absorbed
woman or family theme through this lens, these paintings take on a crucial role in understanding the significance of this theme.

Through Chardin and Greuze’s implementation of the absorbed woman and sentimental family themes, images like *Broken Eggs*, *Good Education*, and *Father Reading the Bible to His Children*, serve to document the anxiety felt by the aforementioned changes to familial life. In their *Salon* paintings, Greuze and Chardin focused on such issues, ranging from compromised virginity to motherhood, and used the absorbed woman to serve as the reminder of the anxieties regarding new societal norms.
FIGURES

Figure 1. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *Father Reading the Bible to His Children*, oil on canvas, 1755, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Figure 2. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *Broken Eggs*, oil on canvas, 1756, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Figure 3. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *A Girl with a Dead Canary*, oil on canvas, 1765, National Gallery of Scotland.

Figure 4. Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *The Good Education*, oil on canvas, c. 1753, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.
Figure 5. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *The Lazy Italian Girl*, oil on canvas, 1756, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art.

Figure 6. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *The Broken Mirror*, oil on canvas, c. 1760, Wallace Collection, London.
Figure 7. François Boucher, *The Four Seasons, Autumn*, oil on canvas, 1755, The Frick Collection.

Figure 8. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *The Beloved Mother*, oil on canvas, 1765, The Frick Collection.
Figure 9. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *The White Hat*, oil on canvas, 1780, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Figure 10. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *Village Bride*, oil on canvas, 1761, Musée du Louvre, Paris.
Figure 11. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *Silence*, oil on canvas, 1759, Royal Collection Trust.

Figure 12. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *Filial Piety*, oil on canvas, 1763, Hermitage Museum, Russia.
Figure 13. Jean-Siméon-Baptiste Chardin, *Game of Knucklebones*, oil on canvas, 1734, Baltimore Museum of Art.

Figure 14. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Close-up of the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, marble, 1647-1652, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome.
Figure 15. Louis Le Nain, *Happy Family*, oil on canvas, 1642, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Figure 16. François-Hubert Drouais, *Family Portrait (April Fool’s Day, 1756)*, oil on canvas, 1756, Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Figure 17. Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin *The Soap Bubbles*, oil on canvas, ca. 1733-1734, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
CITED LITERATURE


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