

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/open-arts-objects>

Teaching Support Sheet

Presenter: Dr Emma Barker

Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *A Lady Taking Tea*, 1735, oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm, Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/resources/open-arts-objects-chardin-woman-taking-tea-1735-hunterian-art-gallery-glasgow>

A Lady Taking Tea by Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699-17) is considered to be one of the greatest works of this French eighteenth-century artist. Most of Chardin's output consists of still-life paintings, though he did also paint a small number of figure paintings. His work has been greatly admired by many modern painters from Édouard Manet to Lucian Freud. In 2005, *A Lady Taking Tea* was voted Scotland's second favourite painting by readers of *The Herald* newspaper.

Before watching the film

Before watching the film, locate the work online and download an image of the work here that you can use to show to your class: <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/a-lady-taking-tea-138380>

Question to ask your students before watching the film (students to complete on the attached form)

1. What do you know about French art, either of the eighteenth century or the nineteenth? Does this picture remind you of any others you have seen?
2. What do you think this picture depicts or represents? Can you identify any recognisable elements (figures, objects, etc.)? Describe what you see on the screen (you might also consider things like the scale of the work and how a viewer might interact with it).
3. What kind of picture is this? Do you have any sense of the media or materials out of which it was made?
4. What do you think the point or purpose of this picture might have been at the time it was painted?

After watching the film

Questions to ask your students after watching the film.

1. Is there anything unusual or striking about the scene depicted here? What kind of effect was the artist trying to achieve in this painting?

On the contrary, it's a completely ordinary, everyday scene. It centres on an anonymous woman, presumably fairly well off in that she's fashionably dressed, but not anybody grand or famous, and she's engaged in a routine activity, devoid of any drama or obvious significance. The effect that the artist wanted

to make was presumably that of a scene that people could relate to, precisely because it was so familiar and ordinary.

2. How did Chardin use technical and formal means (such as medium, scale, format, line, tone, colour) to achieve this effect?

Oil painting, but no flashy effects, nothing to get in the way of the viewer's engagement with the subject; fairly large scale adds to lifelike effect; diagonal lines forming strong simple composition so easy to read; subdued but clear colours adding to effect of simplicity; horizontal format allows sight of setting as well as the figure, adding to sense we know about her (NB $\frac{3}{4}$ length, not $\frac{1}{2}$ length as incorrectly stated in film) but her averted gaze means that this sense of nearness and immediacy is contradicted by sense of emotional distance, so that it is mysterious as well as ordinary.

3. Does the picture have a recognisable purpose or function? Can you relate it to the period in which it was painted?

No function as such, no religious significance or moral message, simply a collector's piece, but, as such an object of consumption, comparable to the fashionable clothes and other commodities that it depicts. Different features of work serve to convey and even celebrate modernity, the world of the here-and-now in which the artist and the original viewer of the picture both lived. Broadly, it can be related to the eighteenth century as a period of consumerism, origins of modern world.

4. What sense do you now have of French art of this period? Do you feel you understand why Chardin's work has been admired by so many modern painters?

Although the painting might appear remote in time, especially on account of the figure's elaborate clothes and powdered hair, the modernity of the subject-matter links it to tradition of modern art. Emphasis on everyday life, up-to-date fashions and commodities, impression of moment in time, all connect to painting of modern life, as exemplified by the work of Manet, as too does emphasis on inner life, thinking mind.

5. What is its relevance for today?

Legacy of eighteenth-century consumerism in shaping the world of today – British tradition of tea-drinking, continued appeal of blue and white porcelain, and taste for Eastern consumer goods, with the difference, however, that we now associate China with cheap, mass-produced goods. Scope for connecting the painting to question of how much our own identity, our sense of self, is bound up with the consumer goods we spend our money on.

Comparative analysis

Édouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1881. Courtauld Institute of Art, London.

<http://courtauld.ac.uk/gallery/collection/impressionism-post-impressionism/edouard-manet-a-bar-at-the-folies-bergere>

You could use this comparison as a focus for considering modernity of Chardin's painting, reasons for appeal of his work to an artist like to Manet

Online Activity

Read a short article about tea drinking in the eighteenth century

(<https://qmhistoryoftea.wordpress.com/2015/04/28/on-looking-at-tea/>) and think about what the information it provides, adds to your understanding of Chardin's painting.

Some observations:

This activity can be used to encourage students to think about the newness, unfamiliarity and fashionability of tea-drinking in this period, and encourage them to think about recent trends and new products in our own society and culture

Bibliography

Juliet Carey, ed., *Taking Time: Chardin's Boy Building a House of Cards and Other Paintings*, Waddesdon Manor, The National Trust in association with Paul Holberton Publishing, London, 2012 (*A Lady Taking Tea* is Cat. No. 5)

Anne Dulau, ed., *Boucher & Chardin : Masters of Modern Manners*, Hunterian Gallery, University of Glasgow in association with Paul Holberton, London, 2008 (exhibition centred on *A Lady Taking Tea* and François Boucher's, *Lady on a Daybed*)

Chardin, London, Royal Academy of Arts and New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000.

Resources online

Short talk by Peter Black, curator at The Hunterian, on Chardin's *Lady Taking Tea*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NIBWJFJwNJQ>

Information about *A Lady Taking Tea* on University of Glasgow Museums website

<http://collections.gla.ac.uk/#details=ecatalogue.36445>. Same information available at

<https://vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=201272>

Information on three paintings by Chardin in the National Gallery, London:

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jean-simeon-chardin-the-house-of-cards>

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jean-simeon-chardin-the-young-schoolmistress>

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jean-simeon-chardin-la-fontaine-the-water-cistern>

Comparative Analysis Table

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| Chardin, <i>A Lady Taking Tea</i>, 1735, oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm, Hunterian Gallery | Édouard Manet, <i>A Bar at the Folies-Bergère</i>, 1882, oil on canvas, 96 x 130 cm, Courtauld Institute of Art |
| Subject – woman seated at a table at home, with items associated with tea drinking. Respectable lady – drinking a solitary cup of tea. Parisian scene – eighteenth century. Fashionability, modernity. | Subject – woman standing at a bar in a place of public entertainment, bottles of alcohol. Barmaid serving customers. Parisian scene – nineteenth century. Fashionability, modernity. |
| Composition – horizontal, single figure dominates composition, forming rough triangular shape, out of line of back and direction of gaze down towards table. Chair and table occupy almost full width of composition. | Composition – horizontal, single figure forming rough triangular shape, positioning of arms. Bar top occupies full width of composition, but much more space on either side of figure. |
| Picture space – shallow, only diagonal of table sense of perspective, depth. Wall behind closes off space – lines of beams or pilasters in wall add to | Picture space – shallow, with line of bar counter forming insistent horizontal, but space complicated by mirror behind figure, giving sense of vast space, |

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| sense of comparative flatness. | blurriness of figures on balcony conveying distance – but still a flat backdrop rather than real space. |
| Viewpoint – close in and relatively low down, so almost looking up at tabletop. | Viewpoint – relatively high up, so look down at bar. |
| Pose, gesture and expression – very limited, face turned away and shadowed so expression hidden. Only gesture is hand holding teaspoon. | Pose, gesture and expression – limited, figure looks directly at us but impassive expression, again can't really tell what she is thinking. Strong gesture of hands on bar and upright pose – yet contrasts with more ingratiating body language of her reflection, which seems to lean towards customer. |
| Colour, light and shade – limited colour range, mostly subdued apart from red table, light from upper left, falling on figure and objects, but leaving large areas of shadow. | Colour, light and shade – limited colour range, almost monochrome, but touches of colour, especially orange of fruit. Multiple light sources – dazzling effect, some areas of shadow, but not very coherent. |
| Handling of paint – quite highly finished, conveys different textures (fabric, china, etc.) but possible to see brushstrokes e.g. on lady's sleeve, white dab of paint creating highlight on teapot. | Handling of paint – more liquid paint, fluid, sketchy handling. |
| Overall effect – interiority – private moment in a domestic interior. Sense of moment in time – cup of tea, rising steam conveying sense of thoughts (or perhaps evanescence of life) | Overall effect – withdrawn, meditative figure surrounded by social whirl. Alienation in modern society. |
| Function – none as such. History - bought by a British collector with an interest in modern French painting (William Hunter), donated collection so now in British public collection. | Function – none as such. History - bought by a British collector with an interest in modern French painting (Samuel Courtauld), donated collection so now in British public collection. |