

Emma Barker - Chardin, Woman taking tea

EMMA BARKER: Hello, my name's Emma Barker. I'm senior lecturer in art history at the Open University. And I'd like you to talk to you today about a painting by a French artist who lived and worked in Paris in the 18th century. His name is Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin. And the painting is called Lady Taking Tea. It was painted in 1735. We know this because it was signed and dated by the artist on the far right near the teapot.

So we're looking at a picture, but it's also a material object. It's painted on a flat surface, known as a support. In this case, the support is made of canvas. It's a kind of coarse fabric which has been spread over and attached to a wooden frame known as a stretcher. The paint used is oil paint, which nowadays you can buy ready made in a tube but would then have been made by the artist himself out of pigment - that's colours in dried powder form, which he would have then mixed with some kind of vegetable oil. An oil painting on canvas was the standard type of painting technique in Europe between the Renaissance and the 20th century.

Another thing that's hard to tell about this picture from a reproduction is that it's really quite big. It's about 80 centimetres by 100 centimetres. So that if you stand close to it, it fills your field of vision. And what you see is a seated woman half length, that is, from the waist up. But is not actually a portrait of a particular person. You can tell this because the picture isn't the standard upright portrait format, but horizontal so that you see not only the woman, but also the space around her.

You can also tell that it's not a portrait because she's not looking at us. She doesn't meet our gaze full face. All we see of her is her profile, and that's in shadow. So we hardly see her face at all. So what's the point of this picture? It's not a portrait of anyone in particular, and nor does it tell a story. Nothing much is going on. It's just a woman having a cup of tea.

And there's also not a great deal of obvious visual interest. The picture seems quite plain and simple. The colour scheme is quite limited. There's just grey, white, blue, and some touches of red. And the design of the picture seems quite simple too. You see the inclined line of the woman's back. And then, the downward direction of her gaze creates a subliminal triangle so that the whole picture almost has the clarity of a diagram.

But what's important about the picture and what makes it relevant to us today is that it shows a scene of modern life. This is probably quite hard to take on board. Nothing perhaps could seem less modern to our eyes than this woman with her elaborate gown and her fussy little cap. And particularly strange, I think, to our eyes is the fact that her hair is powdered white, which is the strangest of styles - the whole idea that you would make your hair look white when nowadays people tend to dye their hair to stop it looking white. But the thing you need to realise is what she's wearing, the way her hair is styled are absolutely up-to-the-minute fashion in Paris at the time the picture was painted.

But there's one rather fascinating detail, as well, which is that some of the hair powder has fallen onto her shoulders. You can see the white standing out against the black of her shawl so that the elegant formality of her appearance is offset by a sense of the down to earth routine of ordinary,

everyday life. And really, everyday life is what this picture shows. Obviously, having a cup of tea is just part of her daily routine.

And even more, there's the sense that she's caught at a particular moment in time. She's stirring her tea before she drinks it. And you can tell that she's only just poured the tea, because if you look carefully, you'll see plumes of steam rising up from the cup. All of these elements - the woman who's nobody in particular, the fashionable, up to date dress, the sense of everyday life, and the impression of a moment caught in time - all these contribute to the modernity of the picture.

This picture could hardly be more different to the types of painting that artists had painted in previous centuries, before the 18th century. They were mostly religious pictures of the Virgin Mary, of saints, of divine beings existing in a kind of timeless spiritual world. But what we have here is an ordinary person living in the endlessly shifting world of the here and now.

But there's one object in the picture that seems to me particularly revealing of the modernity of the scene. And that's the ordinary brown teapot on the table. It's a kind of teapot you might have at home yourself. It's certainly a kind of teapot that is very easy still to buy nowadays. At the time, tea drinking was actually quite a new activity. Tea had only been introduced into Europe from China in the 17th century.

But it had very rapidly become extremely fashionable, particularly as a drink for women. Tea was only one of many new commodities available in Europe at the time, for those who had the money. Many of these commodities, like tea, had come from other parts of the world, particularly Asia. And you can see some of those other commodities in the painting as well.

The tea cup from which the woman is drinking is blue and white Chinese porcelain. And the table at which she sits is red Chinese lacquer. Although, in fact, both the cup and the table might have been produced in Europe, because European craftsmen had become very good at imitating Chinese products by this time.

In France, however, the popularity of tea was overtaken by coffee, which became, really, the standard drink people had there. It was in Britain that tea really caught on and became the drink that people had at home at all levels of society. So it seems fitting that quite soon after it was painted, Chardin's *Lady Taking Tea* was brought to England. And in 1765, it was bought by Dr. William Hunter, a leading London obstetrician of Scottish origin. And Hunter left his pictures to the University of Glasgow. So today, *Lady Taking Tea* is one of the greatest treasures of Glasgow's Hunterian Art Gallery.

For us today, the picture reminds us that the 18th century was a period in which a recognisably modern world emerged. For those who could afford it, it was a world of consumerism, comfort, and convenience, a world that in many ways prefigures our own. But more than that, I think that the enduring fascination of this picture lies in the fact that Chardin doesn't just depict a lady taking tea, but a lady taking tea on her own.

She's alone with her cup of tea and her thoughts. It almost seems to me as if the wisps of steam rising from the cup are her thoughts, fleeting and insubstantial. Her shadowed meditative face invites us to speculate about what those thoughts might be. So, what do you suppose she might be thinking about?