

National Gallery of Art News Release



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NATIONAL GALLERY EXHIBITION SHEDS NEW LIGHT

ON CHARDIN'S "SOAP BUBBLES," OPENS JUNE 30

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Soap Bubbles of Jean-Siméon Chardin brings together the three known versions of Soap Bubbles -- all original works (or autograph replicas) by eighteenth-century French artist Chardin -- now in the collections of the National Gallery of Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The exhibition will be on view June 30 through September 2, 1991 in the National Gallery's West Building Main Floor Gallery 75.

"This closely focused exhibition of Chardin's famous composition of a boy blowing soap bubbles sheds new light on the innovative aspects of the artist's art and on his practice of self-copying," said J. Carter Brown, director, National Gallery of Art. "Soap Bubbles of Jean-Siméon Chardin is an example of how the Gallery is dedicated to spotlighting works of art from our permanent collection, in this case one of our eighteenth-century French paintings, to expand our knowledge of art history."

Chardin (1699-1779) is most admired today, as he was in his own time, for his sensitive portrayal of the material of everyday life. Although he first established his reputation as a still-life painter, Soap Bubbles is among the artist's earliest attempts at figure painting and reveals the remarkable richness of his art.

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In the early 1730s, probably around 1733-1734, Chardin painted several nearly identical pictures of a youth blowing a large soap bubble at the end of a straw. Behind, a small child fixes his gaze on the quivering bubble about to float away, or burst. Both seem oblivious to any external concerns, or to the viewer's presence. These paintings of Soap Bubbles exemplify Chardin's remarkable ability to create self-contained worlds.

Supporting material for the exhibition include Chardin's painting of a woman playing knucklebones (The Baltimore Museum of Art), which is known to have been a pendant of one version of Soap Bubbles; two engravings made by Pierre Filloeuil after Soap Bubbles (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) and after Knucklebones (The Baltimore Museum of Art); and x-radiographs of all four paintings, as well as other didactic material.

Soap Bubbles of Jean-Siméon Chardin explores why Chardin, like his contemporaries, frequently copied his own compositions. What set Chardin apart is the degree to which he reused his own compositional ideas. A desire to satisfy requests for his pictures, much sought after by the elite, may account in part for his steady output of autograph replicas. Some have suggested that Chardin's laborious method of working -- gradually building up his canvas in layers of paint -- may have encouraged his preference for copying his own finished compositions. Alternatively, Chardin may have also repeated particular compositions in response to a patron's specific demand, to serve as companion pieces, or to create a pictorial record of his work.

Technical investigation provides insight into the relation between the three surviving autograph versions of Soap Bubbles. A combination of procedures performed in the conservation laboratory leads to the belief that all three pictures may be replicas of a now-lost prototype. It was probably the lost prototype of Soap Bubbles, rather than any of the three known versions, that Chardin exhibited in Paris at the Salon of 1739 and that Pierre Filloeuil subsequently reproduced as an engraving. Although the Washington picture most closely reflects the prototype recorded in Filloeuil's print in some respects, it does not necessarily follow that it was painted closest in time. The heavier brushwork in the New York picture would seem to indicate a slightly earlier date, while the Los Angeles and Washington pictures, which betray a greater ease in their execution, may be slightly later versions.

The exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art by Philip Conisbee, curator of European painting and sculpture, and Joseph Fronek, senior conservator of paintings. The coordinating curators for the exhibition at the National Gallery of Art are Peter Lukehart, assistant curator, southern baroque painting, and Marcia Kupfer, associate curator, exhibition programs, education division. Before coming to the Gallery, the exhibition opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and traveled to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Tours will be given by the education division daily at noon, July 8 through 12, beginning in the West Building rotunda. For special appointment tours, call (202) 842-6347.