

**When Art Talks****Background Information*****Still Life with Peaches, a Silver Goblet, Grapes, and Walnuts***

Jean-Siméon Chardin (b.1699, d.1779)
French, about 1760
Oil on canvas
14 7/8 x 18 3/8 in.
86.PA.544

**About the Art**

“It is the air and light you take with the tip of your brush and fix to your canvas . . . [your work] exists between nature and art,” wrote Denis Diderot of Jean-Siméon Chardin in his Salon review of 1765. In still lifes, genre scenes, and the occasional portrait, Chardin’s skill at rendering the visual and tactile qualities of simple objects won him the admiration of critics like Diderot.

In this small still life, Chardin portrayed a modest subject—three walnuts, four peaches, two bunches of grapes, and a pewter mug—but gave the objects monumentality by arranging them in pure geometric groupings and concentrating on their basic forms. He suggested the objects’ various textures and substances through the play of light across surfaces and successive applications of paint. In this way, Chardin conveyed the fuzzy skin of the peaches, the hard, brittle shell of the walnuts, the translucence of the grapes, and the heavy, cold exterior of the pewter mug.

About the Artist

Unlike his fellow French artist, François Boucher, with whom he shared many patrons, Jean-Siméon Chardin was not interested in the superficial; it was the very essence of objects and the underlying humanity of his figures that he evoked with tiny slabs of saturated paint. “We use colors,” said Chardin, “but we paint with our feelings.”

A Parisian carpenter’s son, Chardin learned from a modest artist and began by painting signposts for tradesmen and details in other artists’ works. His work was “discovered” in 1728 by Nicolas de Largillière at an outdoor show, and Chardin was immediately admitted for membership in the Académie Royale. Early in his career, Chardin painted primarily still lifes; he turned to genre painting from 1733 to 1751, and then created still lifes again after 1751. As his sight dimmed, he took up pastels, with which he made beautiful portraits. For most of his life, Chardin’s entries in the Salon exhibitions were outstandingly successful. He helped to elevate still life to a respected category of painting, and his name remains inextricably associated with it. The novelist Marcel Proust wrote, “We have learned from Chardin that a pear is as living as a woman, that an ordinary piece of pottery is as beautiful as a precious stone.”