

The Frick Collection: Detail Report



Lady with a Bird-Organ

Jean-Siméon Chardin (French, 1699–1779)

Date 1753 (?)

Medium Oil on canvas

Dimensions 20 × 17 in. (50.8 × 43.2 cm)

Credit Line Purchased by The Frick Collection, 1926

Accession Number 1926.1.22

Currently On View

Second Floor, Room 27, Boucher Anteroom

Commentary It is curious that the artist's first royal commission — in 1751 — should also have been his last figural composition. In fact, Chardin would afterward paint nothing but still lifes or an occasional portrait, not even completing the companion picture to the *Lady with a Bird-Organ* that had been ordered for Louis XV. In the Frick canvas, which may well be a replica Chardin made in 1753 of the original painting delivered to the King two years earlier and now in the Louvre, the artist has depicted a middle-class lady — perhaps his second wife — training a caged canary to sing by playing an eighteenth-century precursor of the phonograph known as a bird-organ. The title of the picture when exhibited at the Salon of 1751 — *A Lady Varying Her Amusements* — refers to the subject's having put aside her embroidery to play with the bird. As the final example of Chardin's depictions of figures in interiors, the *Lady with a Bird-Organ* contrasts markedly with his earlier images of robust servants whose simple forms dominate their picture space. Different too are the porcelain-like finish of this picture (albeit abraded) and its muted, silvery coloration. One might almost assume that the artist felt obliged to be on his best behavior in presenting his work to his monarch, but these qualities are actually deliberate echoes of seventeenth-century Dutch masters then much in vogue. Source: *Art in The Frick Collection: Paintings, Sculpture, Decorative Arts*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996.

Collection History Louis XV. Marquis de Marigny et de Ménars. His sale, March, 1782, Paris, Lot 29, sold for 631 livres to de Tolozan. Richard de Ledan. His sale, December 3–18, 1816, Paris, Lot 41, sold to Didot. Baron D. Vivant-Denon. His sale, May 1, 1826, Paris, Lot 144, as *Portrait présumé celui de Mme. Geoffrin*, sold for 600 francs to Constantin. Comte de Houdetot. His sale, December 12–14, 1859, Paris, Lot 19, sold for 4,510 francs to Meffre. Duc de Morny. His sale, May 31–June 3, 1865, Paris, Lot 93, sold for 7,100 francs to Gabriel du Tillet. Wildenstein. Frick, 1926. Source: *Paintings in The Frick Collection: French, Italian and Spanish. Volume II*. New York: The Frick Collection, 1968.