

Definitions

Beauty

Beauty Is the Perception of Relations

Beauty is a term that we apply to many forms; yet irrespective of the difference that exists between these forms, we must either apply another meaning to the term beauty or it is necessary to identify an element of beauty which is noticeable within each of these forms.

This quality cannot be one of the numbers of those things which constitute its specific difference, since where there would only be one beautiful person, or at least one beautiful type of person.

However, among the mutual qualities of all beings which we call beautiful, what would we choose as the one thing of which beauty is the sign? Which one? It is evident, so it seems, that it cannot be other than the things whose presence makes all of them beautiful. Whose frequency or rarity if it is susceptible to frequency and rarity, would make them more or less beautiful; the absence of which ceases to make them beautiful; which cannot change its nature without changing the type of beauty; and for which the opposite quality would make the most beautiful discomfiting and ugly; that in one word by which beauty begins and increases, which varies to infinity, declines and disappears. However, there is only the notion of relationships capable of these effects.

When it is outside of me, I call beauty, everything that possesses within itself what will awaken within my understanding the idea of relations; and beauty in relation to me, all which awakens that idea.

When I say, everything that possesses, I mean that within it that will awaken within my understanding the idea of relationships or everything that awakens that idea, as it is necessary to distinguish the forms that are within objects and the notion that I have of them. My understanding does not put anything into things and does not take anything away. Whether I think of or do not think of the face of the Louvre, all of the parts which make it up have no less or no more of that form, or this or that arrangement within themselves; that there were men or that there were none, she

would not be any less beautiful, but only for being would it be possible, made of bodies and intellect as we are; since for others, she could possibly be neither beautiful nor ugly, or not even be ugly. From which it follows that even though there is not absolute beauty, there are two types of beauty which relates to us: a real beauty and a perceived beauty.

When I say, everything that awakens within ourselves the idea of relationships, I am not inferring that, in order to call something beautiful, what are the types of relationships that rule; I am not demanding that one who sees a piece of architecture is capable of knowing what even the architect could even miss, but more in the case as one number is to another, or that someone who is listening to a concert and knows more than the musician as to one sound is to another sound in its relations of two is to four or that four is to five. It is sufficient that he perceives and feels that the parts of this architecture and that the sounds of this piece of music have relations, either between themselves or with other objects. It is the indeterminacy of these relationships, the ease with which to take hold of them and the pleasure that accompanies their perception, which makes one imagine that beauty was more an affair of feelings than of the intellect. I can dare say that every time that a principle would be known to us from our earliest childhood and that if we made it a regular and immediate habit to those things outside of ourselves, we would believe to have guessed by feeling; however we would be forced to admit our mistake where on the occasion where the complication of relationships and the novelty of the object would suspend application of the principle: then pleasure will wait to allow itself to be felt when the intellect has declared that the object is beautiful. However the verdict, in this case is almost always relative beauty and not real beauty.

When one considers the relationships in customs and one has moral beauty or they are considered in the works of literature and we have literary beauty; or they are considered within pieces of music and one has musical beauty; or they are considered in nature and we have natural beauty; or they are considered within the mechanical works of man and we have artificial beauty or we consider them as representations of works of art or nature and we consider them as artificial beauty; within whatever context, when one considers the relationships in a same object, beauty will take on various meanings.

Beauty in Nature and Art

... The Abbé was seated beside me and was in his usual rapturous state concerning nature's charm. He had repeated a hundred times a quote concerning beauty and I mentioned that the commonness of this praise addressed itself to many objects.

I said Abbé, you call this rocky escarpment beautiful; the forbidding forest that is all around, you call it beautiful; the torrent that whitens the shore and which makes the gravel shimmer, you call it beautiful; the noun beauty, you attribute it, as to what I have noticed, to man, to animal, to plants, to stones, to fish, to birds, to

metals. However, you would admit to me that there is no physical connection between these things. Where does this common quality come from?

- I do not know, and you are making me think about it for the first time.
- It is a very simple thing. Your general effusiveness comes, dear Abbé, from a few impressions or common feelings excited within your soul by totally different physical connections.
- I understand: admiration
- Add: and pleasure. If you look closely, you will find that the objects which cause astonishment or admiration without providing pleasure are not beautiful and those that do provide pleasure without causing surprise or admiration are no more so. The spectacle of Paris in flames would horrify you; after some time, you would wish to walk through the ashes. You would experience the horrible tortures of seeing your friend die; then after some time your sadness would force you to his grave and you would sit. There are complex feelings and that is the reason why there is no beauty except for objects that can be seen or heard. Separate sound from any ancillary or moral notion and you will take away its beauty. Stop the eye at face value of a picture for which the feeling goes neither to the intellect nor the heart and it will have lost its beauty. There is yet another distinction to be made: it is the object in nature and the same object in art or as a facsimile. The terrible conflagration in the midst of which men, women, children, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, friends, strangers, citizens, all perish, plunges you into a depression; you flee and turn your eyes away and you close your ears to the screams. The desperate onlooker to a tragedy afflicting so many loved ones, perhaps would cause you to risk your own life as you attempt to save or find their fate in the flames. That one should depict the story of this calamity on canvas and your eyes will be joyously transfixed.

Salon of 1767, Vernet article, XI, pp. 115–116

God and the Artist

The space contained between the rocks in the torrent, the rocky path and the mountains to the left formed a lake alongside which we were walking; it was from there that we contemplated the entire marvelous scene; during this time there appeared in that part of the sky that one could see just between the sprig of trees of the rocky shelf and the rock with the two fishermen, a light cloud that the wind carried along in time... then looking towards the Abbé:

In good faith, I asked him, do you think that an intelligent artist might have dispensed with placing that cloud precisely where it is? Can't you see that he establishes for our eyes a new dimension, that he announces a space hither and thither; that he is pushing the sky back and that he is pushing other objects to the forefront? Vernet would have known all of this. The others, by cluttering up their skies with clouds have only thought of breaking the boredom. Vernet wants the one that we see to have motion and magic.

- You say Vernet's name so nicely; Vernet, I would not leave nature and run after his picture. Irrespective of how sublime he is, he is not God.
- I agree; however if you had gotten to know the artist a little better, he might have perhaps taught you to see in nature the things that you do not see. How many things you would want to take back! How many things that art would suppress those things that spoil the entirety and trouble the effect, how much it would bring us closer and would so increase our enjoyment.
- Really! Seriously do you think that Vernet has nothing better to do than to be the master copyist of this scene?
- I believe it.
- Then tell me how he would undertake to make it more beautiful.
- I don't know, and if I did I would be a greater poet and a greater painter than him; but if Vernet would have taught you to better see nature, then nature on its behalf, might have taught you to better see Vernet.
- But Vernet will never be any more than Vernet, a man.
- And for that reason, all the more amazing, and his work all the more worthy of admiration; it is without question a great thing this universe; however when I compare it to the energy of creative production and if it were that I had to be in awe, it would be that its work is not more beautiful and yet more perfect. It is the opposite when I think of man's lack of strength, of his lack of means, at the neglect and the shortness of his life, and to the certain things that he has undertaken and accomplished...

Beautiful Nature and the Ideal Model

[In his preamble for the 1767 Salon, Diderot explains to an artist that art is not a copy, but rather an alteration of nature; that he follows an internal model, on which our predecessors had elaborated.]

... All of this is nothing more than metaphysics.

- Ah! You fool, don't you think that your art has some metaphysics? Does this metaphysics, which has as its object nature, beautiful nature, the truth, the original model to which you conform under penalty of being nothing else but a portraitist, is it not the most sublime metaphysics. Leave that reproach that those idiots who do not think, make to those profound men who do think.
- Without putting myself into a bottle, when I want to make a statue of a beautiful woman, I have a number of them undress; all of them offer beautiful parts and deformed parts; I take the most beautiful parts from each.
- And how are you so sure?
- Because of its conformity to antiquity and the fact that I have studied it a great deal.
- And what if antiquity did not exist, how would you do this? Do not answer me. Listen to what I say, because I am going to try to explain to you how our

predecessors, who had no antiquity went ahead; how you have become what you are and the reason why you follow the path, good or bad that without ever having researched its beginning. If what I have told you before is true, the most beautiful model, the most perfect, either man or woman, would be a man or a woman superior in all life's various functions, and would have arrived at the age of perfect development without ever having exercised any of them. But as nature has not shown us this model, neither totally nor partially; as she produces all of her works spoiled; as all the most perfect which come from her workshop have been subjected to conditions, functions, needs which have even deformed them more; as by the savage necessity to preserve and reproduce themselves they distanced themselves more and more from the truth from the first model, from the intellectual image, in such a way that there is none, that there never was, and that there could never be a whole, nor by consequence a single part of a whole which has not suffered; do you know my friend, what your oldest predecessors did? Through extended observation, by a consummate experience, by the comparison of what organs are and what their natural functions are, with an exquisite tact, by taste, an instinct, a kind of inspiration provided to a rare genius, perhaps due to some project, normal to idolatry, to raise man above his condition and by imprinting him with a divine character, a character exclusive of all the subservience of our wretched life, poverty, pettiness and miserable, they began by feeling the great alterations, the most grotesque deformities, great sufferings. Here is the first step which has only reformed in general the animal system, or some of the principal parts. By the passage of time and by a slow and sluggish walk, by a long and difficult attempt, by a deaf notion, secret, by analogy, the result of an infinity of successive observations, from which memory is erased and from which the effects remain, reform has extended itself to the smallest parts and there are those ones which have gone even further, and from those to even smaller ones, nails, eye lids, lashes, hair erasing relentlessly and with an astonishing determination the alteration and deformities of an unforgiving nature either within its beginnings or by the necessities of its conditions, ever distancing itself from the portrait, truly a false line, to elevate from the true and ideal model of beauty to the true path; true line, ideal model of beauty, which did not exist anywhere except in the minds of the Agasias, Raphaëls, Poussins, Pugets, Pigalles, Falconets; ideal model of beauty, the true path, for which underling artists can only gather incorrect ideas, more or less on the mark from antiquity or from the works of nature that are incorrect; ideal model of beauty, true line, what these great masters cannot seem to inspire their students as rigorously as their conception; ideal model of beauty, the true path, above the fray whence they can throw themselves whilst playing in order to produce the chimera, the sphinx, the centaur, the griffon, the faun and a medley of all natures; above which they can come down to produce the different portraits of life, work, the monster, the grotesque, each according to the amount of lies which their composition demands and the effect that they must produce; in such a way that it is a question devoid of meaning to ask whether one must be near or far from the idealized model of beauty, from the true line, ideal model of beauty, true line of

the non-traditional, which nearly entirely disappears with the man of genius; which produces for a moment the intellectual, character, the taste for the works of a people, a century, a school, the ideal model of beauty, the true line, for which the man of genius will have a more or less rigorous notion, according to the climate, the government, the laws, the circumstances and who would have seen its birth; the ideal model of beauty, the true line which is corrupted, which is lost and may not be re-discovered perfectly by a people except through a return to barbarism; since it is the only condition where men, convinced of their ignorance can allow themselves the slowness of the trial and error; the others remain mediocrities, precisely for the reason that they are born, so to say, intellectuals. Servile and nearly stupid, imitators of those who preceded them, they study nature as thought perfect and not as thought it were perfectible, they seek her, not in order to draw nearer to the ideal model and the true line, but so to draw nearer to the facsimile of those who had possessed her. It was the most competent amongst them that le Poussin said that he was an angle in comparison to the Ancients. The scrupulous imitators of antiquity have their eyes constantly affixed onto the phenomenon, but none of them seem to know the reason. They have somewhat been aloof to their model and slowly but surely they have distance themselves further from a fourth degree as portraitists, and as copyists they have tumbled to hundredth.

But will you tell me that it is impossible for our artists to rival our predecessors? I think so, at least by following the road that they follow, by not studying nature, by not seeking it out, in finding its beauty only through antique copies even as sublime as they are irrespective of the fidelity that the image can be of the picture that they have. Reform nature over the old is to take the opposite path of the past that did not have one. Which means to always work off of a copy? And then my friend, do you not think that there is any difference between being part of the primitive school and that of the secret one, to take part of the national body, to be warmed by its heat, and been overcome by its views, its proceedings, the ways of those who have made the thing and simply seen the finished product. Do you not think that there is no difference between Pigalle and Falconet in Paris in front of the *Gladiator*, and Pigalle and Falconet in Athens in front of Agasias? It is an old tale, my friend that to have formed this real or imagined law that the past has called the rule and that I call the ideal model or the true line, that they had searched through nature, borrowing from her form a myriad of individuals the most beautiful parts from which they composed a whole. How would they have recognized the beauty of its parts? From these which are rarely shown to our eyes, as the stomach, the upper back, the motion in the arms and buttocks from which the *poco più* or *poco meno* (a little more or a little less) are felt by such a small group of artists who do not possess the identity of those beauties of popular opinion which the artist finds at birth and which provides for his decision. There is nothing but a hair's breadth that separates beauty of one form and its deformity on the other; how did they acquire that certain something before launching off to seek the most beautiful but rare figures in order to compose a whole? This is what it is about; and when they found these forms by

what incomprehensible way did they manage to bring them all together? What real measurement allowed them to scale the figures to exactly the correct size? Doesn't it make it a little pretentious to propose such a thought that these artists possessed the deepest sense of beauty that they pursued the ideal model faithfully to the fountainhead before creating one beautiful thing? I am going to say that this step is impossible: absurd. I am stating that if they had possessed the ideal model, the true line in their imaginations, they would never have found any part that would have made them happy. I state that they would have been nothing more than portraitists of those that they would have copied. I declare that it is not infinity of lesser isolated portraits that one raises oneself to the original model and neither from the parts, nor the entirety of the whole; that they followed another route and that the one that I have just mentioned is that of the human spirit in all its seeking....

Salon of 1767, X, pp. 11–15

... Our predecessors, once one has gotten to know them well, become the irrefutable judges of our contemporaries. Whatever happens to me and to others, I advise you, my friend, to distance yourself from Raphaël's Virgins and the Guide who surrounds you in your library. What I should like to see on one side of the *Farnese Hercules* between the *Medici Venus* and the *Pythian Apollo*; on the other the *Torso* between the *Gladiator* and *Antinoüs*; here the *Faun* who has found a child and looks at it against the *Laocoon* by itself; the *Laocoon* which Pliny has said and with good reason that: *opus omnibus et picturae et statuariae artis praeferendum*. Here are the apostles of good taste in all countries: here are the masters of Girardon, of Coysevox, of Coustou, of Puget, of Bouchardon; here are the ones that cause the brushes to fall from the hands of those who believe that they are destined and who feel art; this is the company that is good for you. Ah! If only I were rich!

Observations on sculpture and Bouchardon, 1763, XIII, p. 45

[But Diderot's admiration does not lead him to Winklemann's fanaticism].

... Such is Winckelmann, when he compares the older and modern productions. What doesn't he see in this trunk of man that is called the *Torso*! The muscles that inflate on his chest are nothing more than the undulations of waves of the sea; his large curved shoulders, it is a large concave arch, which one does break, but rather becomes strengthened by the loads which we place onto it. What of his sinews? The ropes of the ballistae that hurled boulders to immense distances are a spiders' web in comparison. Ask this wonderful enthusiastic person which way, Glycon, Phidias and the others were able to accomplish such beautiful and perfect works and he will say: "Through a feeling of freedom, which raises the soul and inspires it to such great things by the gratitude of the nation, by public acclamation, sight, study, incessant imitation of beautiful nature, the respect of posterity, the headiness of immortality, hard work, the gentle influence of customs and climate and genius". There is without a doubt no point of his response that can be challenged. But rather ask him a second question and ask him if it is better to study the ancients rather than nature, without knowledge the study and the taste with which the ancient artists

with all the possible advantages which they possessed, would have only left us with mediocre works: “Antiquity, he would say without hesitation, antiquity”; and there all of a sudden the man who has the greatest intellect, passion and taste is annoyed in the middle of the Toboso. One who snubs antiquity for nature risks being petty, weak and stingy with a drawing; with character, with drapery and expression. He that neglects nature for antiquity risks being cold, lifeless, without any of these truths that are hidden and secretive that are only seen in nature alone. It appears to me that antiquity should be studied so that we might better see nature.

Salon of 1765, X, pp. 417–418

False Art

[The artist, as we already know, recreates nature rather than copies it; he is constrained, however by not being able to reproduce natural harmony, of introducing certain artificiality into his work].

There are “connoisseurs” who because of their demanding taste pretend that this type of art is deceptive and without any model which even approaches it in nature. I cannot see to deny it, since I cannot remember ever having seen anything faintly resembling this magic; however it is so sweet, so harmonious, so permanent, so lively that I look, admire and keep quiet. But since nature is one how can you conceive, my friend, that there are so many different ways of imitating it and that we approve of them all? Would it not be that in the knowingly impossible and able to make it absolutely precise, that there is a sufficient clearing to allow for art to wander and that within all poetic production, there is a little deceit for which the limit is not and never will be determined. Allow art the liberty of space which is approved by some yet denied by others. Once we have admitted that the artist’s sun is not that of the universe and will never be haven’t we engaged onto evidence from which follows infinitely many consequences? The first is not to ask of art beyond its resources; the second pass judgment with extreme caution of any scene that appears to have everything just right.

Salon of 1767, Article Casanova, XI, pp. 185–186

Assemble helter skelter all sorts of items and colors, some washing, fruit, liquids, paper, books, cloth and animals and you will see that air and light, these two universal harmonies, will blend them all with, and I do not know how, hardly noticeable reflections. Everything will blend together, the disparate will weaken and your eye will not criticize anything of the whole. The musician’s art which by playing the perfect chord bring to one’s ear the dissonance of *ut, mi, sol, si, re, ut* has come to this, whereas that of the painter will never be so. That is because the musician sends the sounds himself and that that which the painter mixes on his palette is not flesh, blood, wool, sunlight or air from the atmosphere but earth, sap from plants, burnt bones and metallic lime. Based on this is the impossibility of rendering the imperceptible reflections of some onto others; for him there are

contrasting colors which will never reconcile. From this develops the individual palette, a thing, a technique particular to each painter. What is this technique? It is the art of preserving a certain amount of dissonance, of brushing aside art's truly highbrow obstacles. I challenge the most talented among them to hang the sun or the moon in the middle of his composition without blotting out those two stars with fog or clouds; I challenge him to choose his sky as it truly is, sprinkled with starry brilliance as one finds in the calmest night. From there the necessity of selecting a certain number of colorful objects; even after this choice, no matter how much good they can do, the best canvas, the most evenly composed, is it not just a collection of counterfeit which mask one another. There are some objects which win out and others that lose and the great magic consists of coming very close to nature and to allow that everything loses or gains proportionally; but then it isn't the real scene that one sees, it is so to say a translation.

Salon of 1763, article Deshayes, X, pp. 187–188

Art and Pantomime

Diderot as dramatic author conceived of the theater as a series of “living panels”; as an art critic he attached extraordinary importance to historical painting which allowed him to appreciate, within the content of a canvas, the choice of the dramatic “moment” and expressive attitudes.

... If the spectator is at the theater as though he were in front of a picture or if various paintings were to succeed one another as though by magic why should there not be as much pathos from the scene of the philosopher who is seated at the foot of Socrates' bed and who fears to see him die than the wife and daughter of Eudamidas in Poussin's painting? Apply the laws of pictorial composition to pantomime and you will see that there are the same.

In real action when there are a number of people participating, all of them will be disposed in the most natural fashion; but this way is not always the most advantageous for the painter, not the most striking for the person who is viewing. From which it becomes necessary for the painter to alter the natural state and to reduce it to an artificial state: and why should it be any different on stage? If it is, then theater is a declamatory art! When everyone is master of his role, there is almost nothing done. One must place the figures together, to draw them closer or spread them apart, to isolate or group them together and to produce a succession of paintings, all composed in such a way that it is great and true.

In which way would the painter not be of service to the actor and the actor to the painter? ...

Concerning dramatic poetry, VII, p. 385

... He, who walks through a gallery of paintings, creates without realizing the role of a deaf person who would be amused watching mutes who are communicating

on subjects that they know. This is one of the points under which I have sought to view paintings that were presented to me, and I found that it was a sure way to know the amphibological actions and the motional miscues which are immediately affected by the coldness or the action of something poorly organized, and to seize, in a scene freshly painted all the mistakes of a boring game.

A technique, which is appropriate to the theater and that I use here helps this idea remind me of an experience from which I gained more insight concerning motion and gestures than all the lectures in the world. In the past I went to a great many performances and I knew by heart most of the important plays. The days that I had decided to study the movements and gestures, I sat in the third tier, since the further I was from the actors the better I was seated. As soon as the curtain was raised and when the moment arrived when all the others spectators were prepared to listen, I put my fingers in my ears, not without surprising most of the people who were around me, and who not understanding what I was doing, stared at me as though I was insane, who came to a comedy not wanting to hear it? I was not embarrassed by these opinions and I held my ground with my ears firmly plugged as far as the action and the actor's playing appeared in accordance with the play as I remembered. I only listened when I was drawn off-track by the gestures or that I thought I was. Ah! Sir, that there are few actors who can accomplish such a test and that the details into which I can delve would be humiliating for most of them. However I more enjoy of speaking to you about the trap into which everyone around me fell when they saw my tears fall at the sad parts continuing to keep my ears plugged. Then they all gave up and the less curious struck up a question to which I answered "that everyone should have their way of listening and that mine was to plug my ears to better listen"; laughing to myself concerning the bizarreness that my apparent or real behavior caused and when more so of the foolishness of some of the younger crowd who also placed their fingers in their ears to listen in my way, and who were astounded that it did not have any success. Irrespective of what you think of my way, I ask you to consider that if, to honestly judge the intonation, that one must listen to the speech without seeing the actor and that it is natural to believe that to judge the gestures and the movements, one must consider the actor without hearing the speech.

Letter concerning the Deaf and Dumb, I, pp. 358–359

The Sublime

[At the time of the Salon of 1767, bored with the fearful tastes of a rationally extreme and policed period, Diderot sets sail towards a type of primitive and wild beauty. Burke's essay on the Sublime helps him to define the criteria of this emotion which "astonishes the soul" and which will be dear to the Romantics].

All which astonishes the soul, everything that invites a feeling of terror, leads to the sublime. A vast plain does not cause astonishment as does the ocean, as a calm one less than the stormy one.

Darkness adds to terror. Shadowy scenes are rare in tragic compositions. Technical difficulties arise to make them even rarer in painting where, furthermore they are ungrateful and of effects that can only be judged by the masters. Go to the Academy and make a proposal only to paint this subject as simple as it is; ask that they show you Love floating above the globe during the night, holding and shaking its torch causing sheets of fiery drops entwined with arrows to come through the cloud which supports her.

Night steals forms, gives horror to noises; even if it is nothing more than a leaf in the depth of the forest, it places the imagination in gear, the imagination knots the guts; everything is exaggerated. The wary person enters cautiously, the coward stops, shivers or bolts; the brave heart places his hand onto the hilt of his sword.

The temples are faintly visible. Tyrants do not show themselves and we cannot see them and their atrocities are judged greater than those of nature. The sanctuary of the civilized and savage is filled with shadows. It is truly an art when one is able to self impose and thus say:

Quod latet arcane non enarrabile fibra

A. Persii Flacci, sat. V, v. 29

Priests place your altars and put up your buildings in the depth of the forest. The screams of your victims should pierce through the shadows. Your mysterious, ritualistic and bloody scenes should only be lit by the glow of funeral torches. Clarity is a good thing for convincing, but it is useless to feeling. Clarity, irrespective of the way that we understand it, blocks enthusiasm. Poets, speak ceaselessly of eternity, of infinity, of immensity, of time, of space, of divinity, of tombs, of our ancestors, of hell, of darkened skies, of deep seas, of thunder, of lightening that exposes the naked. Be dark. The great sounds heard from afar, the cascading waters that one hears without seeing, the silence, the solitude, the desert, the ruins, the caverns, the muffled sounds of drums, the whack of the cane at intervals, the wait of an interrupted bell, the shriek of birds at night, those of the ferocious animals in winter during the night especially when they are mixed with the murmur of the winds, the moaning of a woman in labor, all screaming that stops and starts, which starts up again with a burst and which ends snuffed out; there is in all of this, something horrible, great and hidden.

Salon of 1767, XI, pp. 146–147

Style

[This piece was written at the end of 1768, in anticipation of serving as an appendix to the Salon of 1767. Diderot rejects all attempts to separate art from its primitive model].

The word style can be taken both in a good and bad way; but almost always in a bad way if it is alone. One says: to have style, to be affected and that is a vice; but

one also says: he has a great style; it is in Poussin's style, of Le Sueur, of Guide, of Raphaël, of Carraches.

I am only mentioning painters, but style takes place in all genres, in sculpture, in music, in literature.

Yet there is a primitive model which is not in nature, and which is only vaguely and confusedly part of the artist's understanding. There is between nature's most perfect being and this primitive and somewhat vague model latitude to which artists diverge. From there the different styles of the various schools and to some of the masters of these same schools: style of drawing, of lighting, of draping, of organizing, of expressing; all are good and all are more or less near to the ideal model. The Médici *Venus* is beautiful. Falconet's statue of *Pygmalion* is beautiful. It appears only that these are two various types of beautiful women.

I prefer the beautiful woman of our predecessors than the woman by our modern painters, because she is more woman. Furthermore what is a woman? Man's first home. So make sure that I can appreciate this characteristic in the heaviness of the hips and small of the back. If you seek elegance, the slim at the expense of this point of form, your elegance will fail and you will be seen as affected.

There is a national style which is difficult to abandon. One is tempted to take as beautiful nature that which we have always seen: however the primitive model does not belong to any century, from any country. The closer that the national style draws towards that style the less deprived it will appear. Instead of displaying man's first residence, you have shown that of pleasure.

What is it that ruins nearly all of Rubens' compositions, if it is not that nasty and material Flemish nature that he imitates? Perhaps it is less offensive in Flemish subjects; perhaps the lecherous, flabby and stretched is alright in a Silesian, or of a Bacchante and other disgusting creatures; it would succeed very well in an orgy.

It is that all mistakes are not wrong; since there are changes of age and condition. A child is a mass of undeveloped flesh; the old man is gaunt, dried out and bent. There are inherent improprieties. The Chinese man has his little slit eyes; the Flemish woman has a large rear and heavy breasts; the Negro with his broad nose, big lips and kinked hair. It would be by being subjected to these differences that one avoids style from slipping away. If style is an affectation, which part of painting cannot sin because of this default!

Drawing? There are those who draw in a round way, and those who draw in a square way. Some make their figures long and slim; others make them short and stout; or those that stand out too much or those that just are not at all. The one who has studied skinned cadavers always reveals the underside of the skin. Certain artists lacking imagination have only one position for the body, a foot, a hand, a back, a leg, and a head that one finds everywhere. Here I recognize the natural slave and there I see the slave from old.

Chiaroscuro? How affected to collect all of the light onto one object and to throw the rest of the painting into the shadows? It appears that these painters have never seen anything except through a hole. Others will have expanded their light and darkness; but they always ceaselessly fall back always into their ways, their sun is immobile. If you have never seen the small circles of reflected light of a prism from a gallery ceiling, you have just the right idea of the fluttering.

Color? But the sun of art is not the same as the sun of nature; the light of the painter is that of the sky; the palettes flesh the same as mine; the eye of the artist the artist's eye, someone else's eye; how could there not be style in color? How can there not be one that is too bright, another too gray, a third altogether too dull or somber? How can there not be a technical vice resulting in mismatches; the vice created by the school or the master; an organizational vice if the colors do not mix proportionally?

Expression? This is the one that is principally accused of being affected. In effect expression is affected in a hundred various ways. There is in art as there is in society, the insincere manners, mincing, studied mannerisms, preciousness, disgraceful, undignified, arrogance, a false demeanor or pedantic, mimicked pain, false piety, all of the vices are passed through, all the virtues, all the passions; sometimes these faces appear in nature, but they are always unpleasant when imitated; we demand that a man is a man even during the most violent torture.

Appendix to the Salon of 1767, XI, pp. 370–372

Genius and Inspiration

What Is Genius?

There is within men of genius, poets, philosophers, painters, orators, musicians, I do not know what particular quality is in their soul; secret, indefinable without which nothing of greatness or of beauty is created. Is it the imagination? No. I have known impressive and fertile imaginations which promised much and contained nothing or little at all. Is it judgement? No. There is nothing more ordinary than sensible men whose works are cowardly, insubstantial and cold. Is it intellect? Intellect says pretty things but does only small ones. Is it warmth, vivacity, ardor? No. Overly passionate people get lost too often to do anything that is of value. Is it sensitivity? No. I have seen those whose soul was immediately and profoundly affected who could not listen to an enlightened tale without jumping out of themselves, transported, drunk, crazed; a pathetic characteristic, without shedding a tear and who stuttered like children, either they spoke or they wrote. Is it taste? No. Taste erases defects rather than produces any beauty; it is something that we more or less acquire, it is not something that springs from nature. Is it due to certain conformity of head and guts, a certain way that moods are made? I will agree, insofar as neither I nor anyone else will admit to any precise notion and that we join in the spirit of observation. When I say as in the spirit of an observer, I am not talking about the little daily exchange of words, of actions and moods, this ploy so familiar to women who possess it to a degree so much superior to the hardest heads, to the greatest souls, to the most vigorous genius. This is the subtlety that I compare to the art of passing kernels of corn through the eye of a needle; it is a miserable little daily task for which all utility is domesticated and driven by minutiae in which a servant cheats his master and his master cheats those whom

he is a servant by escaping from them. The intellectual viewer of which I am speaking does so effortlessly without complaint; he does not look; he sees; he learns, he extends himself without studying; there is no phenomenon present but they have all assumed to be like him and what he keeps is a type of knowledge that the others do not have; it is indeed a rare person who says: this will be successful... and it succeeds... this will not be successful.. and it does not succeed; this is true or this is false... and it happens that it is as he says. He is remarkable in the important things as in the trivial. This type of prophetic spirit is not the same in all facets of life; each state has its own. It does not always guarantee a failure, but the failure that it occasions does not entail distain and it is always preceded by uncertainty. The man of genius knows that he casts all to the wind and he knows it without having calculated the chances for or against; the outcome has all been done in his head.

Concerning genius, IV, pp. 26–27

Before grasping his brush, he should have trembled from fright at least twenty times over his subject, lost sleep and will have gotten out of bed during the night and have run in a bed shirt and barefoot and thrown onto paper his drawings in the glow of a night lamp.

Salon of 1761, X, p. 145

...Beware of those people whose pockets are full of wit and who give it away at all occasions. They are not possessed, they are not unhappy, somber, melancholic and speechless; they are neither awkward, nor stupid. The finch, the swallow, the linnet and the canary chatter and twitter all day long. When the sun sets, they furrow their heads under the wing and there they sleep. It is then that the genius lights his lamp and that the lonely bird, wild and untamable, whose feathers are earthy and dull opens his beak, begins his song fills the swamp and melodiously breaks the silence and night's darkness.

Salon of 1765, article Carle Van Loo, X, p. 251

A Composed Genius

I have seen La Tour paint; he is calm and cool; he does not torture himself; he doesn't suffer, he is never breathless; he doesn't contort himself as would the modeling enthusiast on whose face one can see the succession of works that he proposes to offer and which appear to come from his soul into his head and from his head onto the clay or his canvas. He does not imitate the gesticulations of the possessed; he is not like the man who disdainfully raises his eyebrow when his wife looks wistfully at him, neither does he become ecstatic; he does not smile when working; he remains collected, furthermore his imitations are warm. Would we obtain from a long and opinionated study a better understanding of La Tour? This

painter never produced anything inspired; he has the genius of technique; he is a marvelous machinist...

Salon of 1767, XI, p. 151

Inequalities of Inspiration

What is inspiration? It is the art of raising a part of the veil and showing men an ignored corner or moreover a forgotten part of the world in which they live. The inspired one himself is sometimes uncertain if the thing that he is speaking about is real or a fictitious, if in fact it existed outside of himself. At that point he is at man's limit and at the extremity of art's resources. But how is it that the most common minds feel these bursts of genius and can suddenly conceive that which I have so much difficulty in capturing? The man the most subject to the access of inspiration could himself not understand what I write concerning the work of his mind and the effort of his soul if he were cold-blooded; I could understand, for if his demon came and suddenly seized him, perhaps he would find the same thoughts as I and perhaps the same expressions; he would say that he never knew, and that it was from that moment only that he would begin to understand me. Despite the impulse which is pressing, I do not dare follow any further for fear of becoming of at state of mind and falling into those unintelligible things. If you should still hold dear to the reputation of your friend, and that you do not wish for them to take him as insane, I would ask you so kindly as to not let everyone see this page. It is one of those pages written at the moment, which belongs to a certain frame of mind that only comes once.

Salon of 1767, XI, p. 208

...You will tell me how is it that there can be such inequality between the poet, the orator, the painter, the sculptor and how they are so different from one another? Perhaps it is the thing of a moment; the state of the body, the state of the soul, a small domestic dispute, a touch from his wife in the morning before going to the studio: two drops of fluid lost which held all the fire, all the heat, all the genius a child who said or did a mistake; a friend who was unkind, a mistress who might have welcomed a stranger a little too warmly; what do I know? A bed that was too cold or too warm, a blanket that falls off the bed during the night a pillow badly placed under the head, a half glass of wine too much, an upset stomach, disheveled hair under the hat; and goodbye to inspiration. There is chance involved in chess and to all other intellectual games. And why shouldn't there be? The sublime idea that presents itself, where was it the moment before? Why it is that it comes or doesn't come. What I do know is that it is so much part of fate in the life of the poet or artist that it could not have arrived any sooner or any later and that it is absurd to suppose that it is precisely the same in another, in another life, in another order of things...

Salon of 1767, XI, p. 142

The Drawing and the Finished Work

...How is it possible that a young pupil, incapable of painting a poor work, can produce a marvelous drawing? It is that the drawing is the outcome of warmth and genius and the painting the outcome of work, patience, extended studies and the consummate experience of art. Who knows that which nature herself appears to ignore; in introducing the different stage of advanced age and to preserve the life of youth? A story will make you better understand what I think of drawings than a long tale of the metaphysical subtleties. If you should send these pages to women who are perhaps unaware of what they are, warn them to stop, or only to read what follows when they are alone.

M. de Buffon and M. Président de Brosses are no longer young, but they were once; when they were young they sat down to table early and they stayed for a long time. They loved good wine, and they drank a good deal. They loved women and when they were drunk they went to see the girls and when they were in their pleasure palace and undressed, the little president, who was no taller than a Lilliputian uncovered to their eyes an award so astonishing, so prodigious, so unexpected that all shrieked in admiration. However, after we have been greatly admired, one should be thoughtful. One girl amongst them, after having silently reviewed the little president, told him: "Monsieur, here is something very handsome one must agree, however where is the power that is going to push this?" My friend, if one presents you a canvas with a comic or tragic scene, take a few steps around the painter and ask him as did the *la fille de joie* to Président des Brosses: it is very beautiful, without a doubt, but where is the power? If it is a finance project always ask where the power is. For the outline of a novel, a speech, where is the power? Where is the power in the sketch for a painting? The sketch does not commit as strongly since it is undefined, it allows for more freedom without imagination which sees all that it pleases. It is the story of children who look at clouds which is what we all are more or less. It is the case for vocal and instrumental music. We hear what this one says and we say to the other what we want...

Salon of 1767, XI, pp. 245–246

Views on Sculpture

Difficulties of Sculpture

It appears to me that the judgement brought to bear on sculpture is much more severe than that which brought onto painting. A painting is valuable even if by lack of a good sketch it excels in color, even if deprived of strength and coloring or by a better design it can become through an expression or by the beauty of its composition: one cannot forgive the sculptor: should the piece sin in the smallest way.

It is nothing more; the smallest tap of the chisel poorly done will reduce the greatest work to a mediocrity without being able to save it: on the other hand the painter goes back to his work and corrects it as much as he likes.

But there is one condition, without which one would not deign stopping in front of a statue, those are the purity of the proportions and the design: no bending on this point. One day we spoke to the sculptor Falconet of the difficulty of the two arts: "Sculpture, he said, was once more difficult than painting, today that has changed". However today there is a great number of excellent paintings and soon we will have counted all the excellent statues; it is true that there are more painters than there are sculptors and that the painter can cover his canvas with figures before the sculpture can thin out his block of marble.

There is another thing on which I am sure that you will agree, my friend, that is that the affected, which is always insipid is much more so in marble or in bronze than in color. Oh! What a ridiculous thing an affected statue can be! Is the sculptor thus condemned to a more rigorous imitation of nature than is the painter?

Add to that he only provides us with one or two figures of the same color and eyeless, onto which all of our attention and all of the criticism of ours is focused. We walk around his work and we seek out the weak point.

The material that he uses appears due to its solidity and because of its durability seems to exclude any fine or delicate ideas; the thought must be simple, noble, strong and great. I look at a painting, but I must communicate with a statue. The *Venus of Lemnos* was the only work that Phidias dared to sign his name.

Sculpture cannot imitate all of nature. If the center of gravity moved too much from the base, the weight of the upper parts would break the piece. Without the club that supports the *Farnese Hercules*, its rendition would have been impossible; but for this one time where the support is a happy accessory, how many times is it ridiculous? Look at the enormous trophies that have been placed beneath the horses at the terrasse des Tuileries. What a contradiction between these winged animals which are vaulting as fast as they can and these immobile supports that remain!

Thus the sculpture is deprived of so many positions that are found in nature...

Observations on sculpture and Bouchardon, 1763, XIII, pp. 40–41

Its Limits and Its Merits

It appears to me, my friend, that sculptors are more locked to the past than painters. Is it that our past has only left us some beautiful statues but that their paintings are only known to us through the descriptions and the witness of their writers? There is an entire difference between the most beautiful line of Pliny and the *Gladiator* of Agasias.

I still appears to me that it is more difficult to judge sculpture than painting and if my opinion is true, has to make me even more wary. There are very few men of art who are able to appreciate a beautiful from a common piece. Without a doubt

the *Dying Athlete* will touch you, soften you, and perhaps even strike you so violently that you will neither be able to leave it nor look away; if however you had to choose between this statue and the *Gladiator* whose beautiful lifelike action, but is not meant to strike your soul, and would make both Pigalle and Falconet laugh if you preferred the former over the latter. A great figure, alone and all white; it appears so simple. There are so few of these which could make the comparison of the work against nature so much easier. Painting reminds me, in a hundred different ways, what I see and what I have seen. It is not the same for sculpture. I would dare to buy a painting based on my taste, on the basis of my opinion. If it were a statue, I would rely on the sculptor's recommendation... So you think, you would say to me, that sculpture is more difficult than painting? I am not saying this. To judge is one thing and to do so is another. Here is the block of marble, the figure is in it; one must bring it out. Here is the canvas it is flat and onto it one must create. It is necessary that the image comes out, advances, takes relief; when I turn around it and if it is not me then it is my eye; it must be alive. But you add – painted or modeled... Alright... And the modeled one must be alive, without any of the resources that are on the palette which give it life. However of these resources, is it easy to use them? The sculptor has everything when he has the drawing, his expression and the ease of using the chisel. With these ways, he can succeed with a nude figure. Painting demands other things as well. As for the difficulties to overcome in the more composed subjects, it appears to me that they increase in greater number for the painter than for the sculptor. The art of grouping is the same, the art of draping is the same; but the chiaroscuro, but the planning, but the scenery of the place, but the skies, but the trees, but the currents, but the accessories, but the depths, but the colors and all its incidences? *Sed nostrum non est tantas componere lites*. (But ours is not to bring together such offerings).

Sculpture is made as much for the blind as it is for those who can see. Painting is available only to the eyes. On the other hand, the former certainly has more or less objects and fewer subjects than the latter. One can paint whatever one chooses. The severe, serious and chaste sculpture chooses. Sometime she plays around an urn or a vase; even in the great compositions full of pathos, one can see in bas-relief children who frolic in a font that is about to receive human blood; but it is all played out with a certain dignity. She is serious even when she teases. Undoubtedly, she exaggerates; perhaps even exaggeration suits her better than she does to painting. The painter and the sculptor are two poets, but this one never charges. Sculpture neither suffers the fool, nor the burlesque, neither the pleasant nor rarely the comic. Marble doesn't laugh. She is elated with both fauns and sprites she is very gracious in helping the satyrs to remount old Silenus on to his horse; or to support his disciple's unsteady steps. She is voluptuous, but never trashy. She still maintains within her voluptuousness a something of the sought-after, of rarity, of exquisiteness which tells me that her work is long, trying and difficult; and that, since it is permitted to take one's brush to add to the canvas a frivolous idea that can be created in an instant and erased with a breath, it is not the same with the chisel, which by depositing the artist's thought onto a hard, rebellious material and of eternal duration, must have made a thoughtful choice,

original and out-of-common. The pencil is more at liberty than the brush, and the brush more at liberty than the chisel. Sculpture presupposes a more opinionated and deep enthusiasm, more of the strong inspiration but curbed in its appearance more of the hidden and secret fire which brews inside. It is a violent Muse, but silent and hidden.

Salon of 1765, X, pp. 418–420

The Sculptor's Temperament

One day as Falconet was showing me the pieces of the young student sculptors who had competed for the prize, he was surprised at seeing my astonishment at the strength of expression and character, of the greatness and the nobility of these works coming from under the hands of these children of nineteen and twenty years of age: “Just wait ten years from now, he told me, and I can promise you that they will not know anything more about this.”. It is that sculptors require a longer time with the model than painters and that, either due to laziness, or greed or poverty, the ones or the others no longer call for her after they are forty-five years old. It is that sculpture demands simplicity, an inspired rustic innocence that one cannot maintain after a certain age: and there is the reason why sculptors degenerate quicker than the painters, unless of course this rusticity is natural and from their character. Pigalle is stocky and Falconet is even more so. They will do well until the end of their lives. Le Moyne is polite, sweet, mannered, and honest; he is and will remain mediocre.

Salon of 1765, x, pp. 423–424

Views on Architecture

Architecture, Mother of the Arts

It is not the point here, my friend, to examine the character of the different styles of architecture, even less so to balance the advantages of Greek and Roman architecture against the privileges of Gothic architecture and to show you this by cause of the expansiveness of its space within by the height of the vaults and the lightness of her columns; destroyed outside by the imposition of mass by the many and the poor taste in ornamentation; to allow the analogy of the darkness of the colored glass to have value against the incomprehensible nature of the adored being and the sober ideas of the adulator.; but also in some way to convince you that with architecture, there is neither painting, nor sculpture and that it is art that has no model under the sky to which the two imitator arts of nature owe their origins and their progress.

Take yourself back to Greece, at the time when an enormous beam of wood held up by two trunks of squared off tree formed the magnificent and superb entrance into Agamemnon's tent; or without going so far back into the past, situate yourself between the seven hills when they were covered by thatched cottages and that these cottages were lived in by thieves which were the ancestors of the munificent masters of the world.

Do you think that anywhere in these cottages either a good or bad painting could be found? Certainly you do not believe it.

And the gods, better adored perhaps than when they came from beneath the chisel of the greatest masters, what do you think of them? Greatly inferior and worst hewn, without a doubt than these formless logs of wood which the carpenter has made more or less a nose, some eyes, a mouth, some feet and hands and in front of which the people of our villages say their prayers.

Well then, my friend, count the temples, the cottages and the gods will stay in this miserable state until there is some great public calamity; a war, a famine, a plague, the public's wish, the consequences of which you will see an *arc de triomphe* raised to the victor, a great stone enterprise consecrated to the gods. Firstly, the arch of triumph and the temple will only be noticed because of their bulk, and I do not believe that the statue that will be erected will have any noticeable difference over the former except that it will be larger. It will certainly be larger since it will be necessary to the host in his new residence.

In all times kings emulated the gods. If the god had a vast residence; the sovereign's estate would be at a higher level; the great emulated their sovereign and would raise theirs; the notable citizens emulate of their great would do the same and within less than a century one would have to leave the confines of the seven hills to find a cottage.

But the walls of the temples, of the master's palace, the mansions of the heads of State, the estates of the rich citizenry will provide everywhere large bare surfaces that need to be covered.

Those worthless homes gods no longer fill the spaces that we have given them; one will have to tailor others.

They will be decorated as best they can; one will cover the walls with paintings that have been badly done.

However, taste increasing with wealth and luxury, soon the architecture of temples, palaces, mansions, houses will improve and sculpture and painting will follow its progress.

I wish to bring some of these ideas to the present.

Name me just one culture that has statues and paintings, painters and sculptors, without palaces not temples, or temples where such worship has banished colored canvas and sculptured stone.

However, if it is architecture which has given birth to painting and sculpture, it is thanks to these two arts that architecture owes its high degrees of perfection and I advise you to be wary of the architect who does not draw well. Where would this man have trained his eye? Where would he have learned the exquisiteness of proportion? From where might he have fathomed the ideals of greatness, simplicity, noble, heavy, light, slim, serious, elegance and serious? Michelangelo

was a great drawer when he conceived of the plan for Saint Peter's façade and dome in Rome and our own Perrault was a superior drawer when he imagined the Louvre's colonnade.

Essay on Painting, X, pp. 510–512

Architecture and Location

I have often asked myself why the open and isolated temples of the past are so beautiful and have such a great effect. It happens that all four sides were decorated without any upset to its simplicity; that they were accessible on all parts, the very image of secure: the kings even close their palaces with doors; their imposing character was insufficient to guarantee them from the evil of men. It is that they were located in isolated places and that the fright caused by a surrounding forest coupled with dark superstitious ideas, moved the soul with a particular feeling. Gods did not speak in the hubbub of the city but chose the silence and solitude. It is that the homage of men was transported in a more free and secretive way. There were no set days when one congregated; or if there was the conversations and the hubbub made less imposing since the silence and solitude were no longer there.

If I had to design Louis XV's place where it is, I would have been sure not to cut down the trees. I would have preferred that one lives within the depth and obscurity between the columns of a great peristyle. Our architects have no imagination; they are only aware of what are accessories which are only brightened by the local and adjoining objects. It is just like our theatrical poets who have never known how to reveal location on the stage.

Essay on Painting, X, pp. 495–496

Architecture and Its Destination

There is an entire body of knowledge neglected by those who are at the head of the administration: it is that of architecture. Furthermore it is they who order public monuments, who select the artists, to whom the plans are submitted and who decide what should be executed. How will they be able to perform this part of their function which touches so closely upon the honor of the nation in the present as well as the future, if they lack principles without foresight and without taste? It will cost immense sums and in the end all we will have are small and shabby buildings. There is no foolishness that last longer and which are more noticeable than those that are done in stone and marble. A poor piece of literature slips by and is forgotten; however a ridiculous monument remains for centuries with the date of the reign when it was constructed. One's sight must be fore-shortened or very extended to neglect this point. Large buildings have multiplied all over France. There is practically no city of prominence where a square is not needed, a statue in bronze of the

monarch, a city hall, a fountain and it has not even occurred that one great and beautiful thing would better honor the nation than a flurry of ordinary and common monuments. Actually we are in the midst of constructing a square in Reims. It was not dependent on M. Soufflot, who is the head of our architects that one would be unable to see Louis XV encapsulated in a niche at the extreme end of the colonnade which would be then be hidden by houses.

Happily this project was rejected; the ideas of the provincial engineer were preferred. He thought that that a marketplace is best suited to a commercial town. Consequently, the ground floor is to have spacious vaulted boutiques; above the vault there will be erected a simple and solid Doric border onto which a balustrade will be placed and which will circle the entire square, and will hide a certain amount of the attics, the view of which is most time unpleasant and where the inhabitants of the town, who are not to occupy the intersections and on others non holidays can see the public ceremonies, those, such as the coronation of our kings and others that happen more frequently. Here I will make two observations: the first is that most of our artists have only general and vague ideas about pediments, capitals, columns, cornices, casements, niches; never any individual ideas. They would never think of asking themselves, what is the principle reason for my building? What will go on there? What are the circumstances under which the contest will occur? From where it follows that the building that they are constructing is beautiful, but that one spot is no more or less convenient than another; certainly much different than the famous architect who built the temple of Minerva on the citadel in Athens. From whatever place one looked at the building one recognized it as a temple, and one could even tell that it was that of Minerva's and that it was the temple of a citadel. Architecture is a limited art, so it is said; yes it is in the minds of architects; but of it I know of none other as extensive. When one brings into the project the consideration of time, place people, locations one will note the infinite variations of filled and empty spaces, forms, ornaments and everything having to do with art. It stands to reason that empty spaces must nearly never have any relations to filled spaces in a building that is designated for grain storage. It is likewise for a store, for a hospital, or an arsenal and for any other type of building. What in the world has happened to those rigorous proportions that those idiotic faint of heart artists are frightened to steer from? In order to destroy them forever, I should require (and it is certainly demanding a sensible thing) of those who must construct a building to ask that the nature of the building be identifiable from as far away as it is noticeable. Architecture is not the same as the other types of imitative arts; there are no existing models in nature after which one can judge its productions. What I must be able to see in a building when I look at it, is not the cavern which acted as a shelter to primitive man, nor the cabin that he made to house himself and family when he started to ... but its solidity and its current needs. If the use for the building is new then the building will probably have been poorly made. Or it will distinguish itself as so totally different as to look like nothing that has been seen anywhere else.

The monument of the Place de Reims, 1760, XIII, pp. 27–29



Fig. 2.1 Jean-Baptiste Siméon CHARDIN (1699–1779), (*Grace before the meal*), Paris, Musée du Louvre © Hermann – Maya Rappaport

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