



Viewing Blindness at the Paris Salon

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In 1667, Nicolas Poussin's *Christ Healing the Blind* was the subject of a *conférence* at the Academy led by Sébastien Bourdon.¹ Bourdon began by commenting on the light in the painting, suggesting that Poussin set the scene in the morning because, in his words, “il y a quelque apparence que Dieu choisit cette heure-là comme la plus belle et celle où les objets semblent plus gracieux, afin que ces nouveaux illuminés reçussent davantage de plaisir, en ouvrant les yeux; et que ce miracle fût plus manifeste et plus évident”.² Taking their cue from Bourdon, modern scholars such as Oskar Bätschmann have analysed the use of colour and light in Poussin's painting and the way that it serves to underline the miraculous nature of the healing of the blind men.³ However, as Elizabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey have suggested, the painting can also be seen to thematise vision as such; they make a connection between the blind man's stick, one of which lies abandoned in the shadow on the left, and the comparison that Descartes makes in his essay *La Dioptrique* (1637) between the effect of light on the eyes and the blind man's use of a stick to find his way by touch.⁴ More generally, this *conférence* provides an example of the way that a representation of the blind could stimulate reflection about seeing and about sensory perception more generally. One contributor to the discussion, for example, claimed that, in the expression and gestures of the second blind man, the one waiting to be healed, Poussin demonstrates how loss of sight is (supposedly) compensated for by a more refined sense of hearing and touch.⁵

In the context of the Salon, a representation of the blind might likewise have stimulated reflection about sensory perception. That said, it must be admitted that relatively few such works of art were exhibited at the Salon during the eighteenth century and even fewer

1 This essay draws on material previously published in Emma Barker, “Envisioning Blindness in Eighteenth-Century Paris”, *Oxford Art Journal* 43/1, 2020, pp. 91–116.

2 Sébastien Bourdon, “*La Guérison des Aveugles* de Poussin”, in Jacqueline Lichtenstein and Christian Michel (eds.) *Conférences de l'Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*, vol. 1: *Les Conférences du temps de Henri Testelin 1648–1681*, Paris, 2006, pp. 175–195, here p. 179.

3 Oskar Bätschmann, *Nicolas Poussin: Dialectics of Painting* (trans. Marko Daniel), London, 1990, pp. 32–39.

4 Elizabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin: Friendship and the Love of Painting*, Princeton, 1996, pp. 211–212.

5 Bourdon, 2006 (note 2), p. 193. For a critique of such claims, see Georgina Kleeg, *More than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art*, Oxford, 2018, pp. 14–28.

have left any record of their reception. Visitors to the Salon of 1699, for example, could have compared Antoine Coypel's painting of Tobias curing the blindness of his father with Charles-François Poëerson's depiction of the same subject, but there is no surviving commentary on this exhibition at all (and both pictures are now untraceable).⁶ The paucity of representations of the blind at the Salon can largely be attributed to the decline in religious painting; biblical subjects such as the blindness of Tobit became far less common after 1700. Thus, for example, the Salon of 1699 also featured Nicolas Colombel's *Notre-Seigneur guérissant les aveugles*, but no further paintings of this subject were exhibited at the Salon until 1781, when François-André Vincent exhibited an altarpiece of Christ healing the blind commissioned for the Hôtel-Dieu in Rouen.⁷ By this date, French artists were turning their attention to the blind heroes of classical antiquity, most notably Belisarius; pictures of this type account for the majority of representations of the blind exhibited at the Salon during this period. Nevertheless, the theme of blindness was most directly addressed in two small-scale works with modern-day settings: Jean-Siméon Chardin's *Un Aveugle* and Jean-Baptiste Greuze's *L'Aveugle trompé*, which were exhibited at the Salons of 1753 and 1755 respectively.

Neither painting, however, attracted much attention from the critics, so that any argument about their reception by the public necessarily involves an element of speculation.⁸ To begin with, it is useful to consider the understanding of blindness that would have informed the response of Salon visitors to *Un Aveugle* and *L'Aveugle trompé*. Within the Christian tradition, blindness was associated with sinfulness, such that Christ's healing of the blind men served as a metaphor for forgiveness and redemption. Classical learning only reinforced these negative associations, in so far as blindness most commonly featured in ancient texts as a form of divine punishment.⁹ In more recent times, as already indicated, the figure of the blind man had been a motif used by philosophers such as Descartes and, subsequently, Locke (as will be discussed below) for the purpose of investigating the relationship of the senses of touch and sight. Most directly relevant to Salon visitors, however, was their day-to-day experience of the blind on the streets of Paris, especially in the

6 *Liste des tableaux et des ouvrages de sculpture, exposez dans la grande Galerie du Louvre, par Messieurs les Peintres, & Sculpteurs de l'Académie Royale, en la presente année 1699*, Paris, 1699, pp. 16–17: “M. Coipel fils... Le fils de Tobie appliquant le fiel du poisson aux yeux de son père... M. Person.... Tobie recouvrant la veue après qu'on eut appliqué à ses yeux le fiel du poisson”. See also Nicole Garnier, *Antoine Coypel*, Paris, 1989, cat. no. 60 and p. 258.

7 Karen Chastagnol, *Nicolas Colombel c. 1644-1717*, Paris, 2012, pp. 77–78, pp. 138–40, cat. no. P17; Jean-Pierre Cuzin, *François-André Vincent, 1746-1816: Entre Fragonard et David*, Paris, 2013, pp. 105, 430–431, cat. no. P364.

8 Each was overshadowed by a larger and more ambitious painting by the same artist: Chardin's *Un Philosophe occupé de sa lecture* (Salon of 1753, cat. no. 60) and Greuze's *Un Père de famille qui lit la Bible à ses enfants* (Salon of 1755, cat. no. 146).

9 For a general survey of attitudes to blindness up to the seventeenth century, see Moshe Barasch, *Blindness: The History of a Mental Image in Western Thought*, London and New York, 2001.

vicinity of the Hôpital des Quinze-Vingts, which had been founded by Louis IX in 1260 to house three hundred needy blind people.¹⁰ Since the hospital residents were required to go out and beg for alms, the blind beggar of the Quinze-Vingts was a familiar Parisian figure. Often featuring in contemporary literature as a comic stereotype, the quinze-vingt (as individual residents were known) was also renowned for his refined sensory perception; the writer Poullain de Saint-Foix, for example, tells a bawdy and brutal story about a quinze-vingt who could tell his identical twin daughters apart through his sense of touch alone.¹¹ Furthermore, the Hôpital des Quinze-Vingts was located on the rue St-Honoré, opposite the Palais Royal, a short distance from the Louvre, so that Salon visitors might well have encountered a blind beggar as they made their way to the exhibition.

This geographical proximity provides a context for understanding the use made of the comic figure of the blind beggar both by the academicians who exhibited their work at the Salon and by the critics who reviewed the exhibitions. As is well known, the academicians' resentment of La Font de Saint-Yenne's scathing criticism of their work in his review of the Salon of 1746 prompted the publication in 1750 of a caricature of the critic in the guise of a blind beggar.¹² It shows a somewhat grotesque figure, dressed in the long robe adorned with a fleur-de-lys badge that constituted the uniform of the quinze-vingt and accompanied by the stick and little dog that were the established iconographic signifiers of the blind man.¹³ The caricature must have helped to consolidate an emerging conception of "la critique aveugle", blind criticism, which can be traced in several of the more deferential pamphlet reviews of the Salon over the next few years.¹⁴ In the *Réponse d'un aveugle à Messieurs les critiques des tableaux exposés au Sallon* [sic] of 1755, the blind man of the pamphlet's title turns the idea around by insisting that he can see just as well as the critics whom he addresses and that, in any case, all he needs to do is to report what the voices that he has heard around him at the Salon have to say, which, according to him, consists entirely of respectful

10 On the history of the institution, see Léon Le Grand, *Les Quinze-Vingts depuis leur fondation jusqu'à leur transmission au Faubourg Saint-Antoine, XIII^e-XVII^e siècles*, Paris, 1887; Louis Guillaumat and Jean-Pierre Bailliart, *Les Quinze-vingts de Paris: échos historiques du XIII^e au XX^e siècle*, Paris, 1998.

11 Germain-François Poullain de Saint-Foix, *Essais historiques sur Paris*, Londres [i.e. Paris], 1762, vol. 2, pp. 281-283. The comic stereotype of the crude, violent blind man can be traced back to the medieval period: see Edward Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability*, Ann Arbor, 2010, pp. 90-128.

12 See, for example, Charlotte Guichard, *Les Amateurs d'art à Paris au XVIII^e siècle*, Seyssel, 2008, pp. 277-278.

13 Both dog and stick also feature in the illustration of a blind man in Descartes's *La Dioptrique*, Leyden, 1637, pp. 56, 58.

14 See, for example, Gabriel Huquier, *Lettre sur l'exposition des tableaux au Louvre avec des notes historiques*, Paris, 1753, p. 2: "Ne vous attendez pas ici à une Critique aveugle des Chef-d'œuvres que nos habiles Artistes ont exposés à nos yeux". See also *Réponse à une Lettre adressée à un Partisan du bon goût, sur l'exposition des Tableaux faite dans le grand Salon du Louvre, le 28. Août 1755*, Paris, 1755, p. 27: "c'est un avis que prend la liberté de vous donner un Amateur des arts, titre plus précieux sans doute que celui de Critique aveugle".

and admiring comments about the academicians' work.¹⁵ As Bernadette Fort has observed, it is only in two later pamphlets purporting to be written by blind men, reviewing the Salons of 1775 and 1781 respectively, that the notion of the blind critic who simply reports what he hears other people saying about the works in the exhibition is used in a fully satirical fashion in order to challenge the Academy's authority and to legitimise the voice of the public.¹⁶

Given the emergence of this satirical use of the figure of the blind man as the antithesis or even the nemesis of the academic artist during the 1750s, it seems curious that Chardin should have chosen to exhibit his painting, *Un Aveugle*, at the Salon of 1753 (fig. 1).¹⁷ The figure depicted here can be readily identified as a *quinze-vingt*: he wears the familiar uniform, with the fleur-de-lys badge that distinguished this privileged group from other blind beggars clearly visible on the front. As has often been noted, the composition derives ultimately from Abraham Bosse's print of a *quinze-vingt*, which forms part of a series of *Cris de Paris* published in the 1630s.¹⁸ Chardin also had a more immediate precedent in Edme Bouchardon's print series, *Etudes prises dans le bas peuple, ou Les Cris de Paris* (1737–1746), which likewise included a *quinze-vingt* among the figures depicted.¹⁹ In other words, it was not unprecedented for an academician to depict a blind beggar, though Chardin was the first to make one the subject of an independent work of art. An academician of an earlier generation, the engraver Sébastien Le Clerc, had even used this figure in order to engage directly with issues around sight and other forms of sensory perception. Le Clerc featured a blind beggar wearing the uniform of a *quinze-vingt* in his *Divers desseins de figures*, published in 1679, the same year as his treatise *Discours touchant le point de vue*, in which he sought to uphold the monocular theory of vision by discrediting Descartes's binocular account. The book includes Le Clerc's own version of the celebrated image of the blind man 'seeing' with sticks from Descartes' *La Dioptrique*.²⁰

In the case of Chardin, it has recently been suggested that his *Blind Man* should be read in relation to Enlightenment sensationalism, that is to say, the body of thinking around issues of sensory perception derived ultimately from Locke's *Essay Concerning Human*

15 [Du Londell], *Réponse d'un aveugle a Messieurs les critiques des tableaux exposés au Sallon*, Paris, 1755, pp. 3–4, 6, 9.

16 Bernadette Fort, "Voice of the Public: The Carnivalization of Salon Art in Prerevolutionary Pamphlets", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 22/ 3, 1989, pp. 368–394, here pp. 376–377.

17 Salon of 1753, cat. no. 61. The painting (which was probably not the surviving version of the composition illustrated here) is likely to have been painted some time earlier, during the latter part of the 1730s; see Pierre Rosenberg, "The *Blind Man of the Quinze-Vingts* by Chardin and the *Young Girl with a Marmot* by Fragonard at the Fogg", in Cynthia P. Schneider et al. (eds.), *Shop Talk: Essays in Honour of Seymour Slive*, Cambridge, MA, 1995, pp. 211–15, 391–393, here p. 212.

18 See, for example, Ella Snoep-Reitsma, "Chardin and the Bourgeois Ideals of his Time I", *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 24/1, 1973, pp. 147–244, here p. 232.

19 On this series, see Katie Scott, "Edme Bouchardon's *Cris de Paris*: Crying Food in Early Modern Paris", *Word and Image* 29/1, 2013, pp 59–91; Edouard Kopp, *The Learned Draftsman: Edme Bouchardon*, Los Angeles, 2017, pp. 65–111.

20 On Le Clerc's use of the figure of the blind man, see Barker, 2020 (note 1), pp. 98–101.



- 1 Jean-Siméon Chardin, *Un Aveugle*, late 1630s (?), oil on canvas, 29.8 × 23 cm, Harvard University Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, 1943.217

Understanding (1697), which is seen as challenging a Cartesian insistence on the primacy of vision. In developing this argument, Georgina Cole and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth both make reference to Diderot's *Lettre sur les aveugles* (1749), which builds on the Lockean tradition by discussing how a blind man of his acquaintance relies on senses other than sight to gain knowledge of the world. Both note the emphasis on the sense of touch in Chardin's painting, in the way that the blind man's hands are placed at the centre of the composition and brightly illuminated, such that (as Cole puts it) they serve as "the organising motif of the

painting”.²¹ Lajer-Burcharth has developed this insight with reference to the artist’s own painterly ‘touch’.²² It should be noted that Chardin’s *L’Aveugle* most likely dates from the late 1730s, a full decade before Diderot’s *Lettre sur les aveugles* was published. Nevertheless, it is possible that the artist had some awareness of the wider climate of sensationalist ideas at the time that he painted it. A mediating role could have been played by his friend, Charles-Nicolas Cochin, who was undoubtedly familiar with these ideas; Cochin later argued for the dependence of sight on touch and movement, with reference to the question of whether or not a congenitally blind person seeing for the first time would recognise by sight objects already familiar to touch, otherwise known as Molyneux’s problem, which was first posed by Locke in 1694.²³

For the purposes of this essay, however, I want to focus on how the viewing of Chardin’s painting at the Salon of 1753 could have been informed by the visitors’ own experiences of encountering blind beggars in the Parisian streets around the Louvre. The only critic to discuss the painting at any length did so explicitly, remarking of the figure: “L’attitude, l’air de tête, la façon de mouvoir le bâton sont d’un véritable Aveugle. L’habillement, et par la forme et par la crasse, exprime un parfait Quinze-Vingts”.²⁴ Further, I suggest that the painting not only thematises touch, as Cole and Lajer-Burcharth have suggested, but also needs to be considered in terms of sound. I draw here on the work of the historian David Garrioch, for whom the blind beggar navigating his way around the city is the exemplary figure of the sensory life of Paris, and, moreover, testifies to the role of sound in the construction of urban identity and community.²⁵ On this point, it is significant that Chardin’s blind beggar stands at a door of a church, the privileged location in which the blind of the Quinze-Vingts had enjoyed an exclusive right to beg since the hospital’s foundation.²⁶ The chair behind him suggests that he has just stood up, perhaps at the prompting of the bells or some other aural cue that tells him that mass has just ended and the faithful are about to exit, offering him the opportunity to ask for alms. The tilt of his head vividly conveys the blind man’s reliance on his hearing, as well as his stick, to negotiate his environment.

Although Salon visitors no doubt referred back to their own experiences of blind beggars in viewing Chardin’s painting, the response that it elicited would also have been shaped by popular belief in the exceptional sensory perception attributed to the blind.

21 Georgina Cole, “Rethinking Vision in Eighteenth-Century Paintings of the Blind”, in Harald Klinken (ed.) *Art Theory as Visual Epistemology*, Newcastle, 2014, pp. 47–64, here p. 57.

22 Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, *The Painter’s Touch: Boucher, Chardin, Fragonard*, Princeton, 2018, pp. 116–121.

23 Charles-Nicolas Cochin, “Du costume dans la peinture” [1765], *Recueil de quelques pièces concernant les arts, extraites de plusieurs Mercure de France*, Paris, 1771, vol. 2, p. 26. For an overview of the issues, see Gabriele Ferretti and Brian Glenney (eds.), *Molyneux’s Question and the History of Philosophy*, Abingdon and New York, 2021.

24 M.A. Laugier, *Jugement d’un amateur sur l’exposition des tableaux de l’an 1753*, Paris, 1753, pp. 43–44.

25 David Garrioch, *The Making of Revolutionary Paris*, Berkeley, 2002, pp. 15–25; David Garrioch, “Sounds of the City: the Soundscape of Early Modern European Towns”, *Urban History* 30/1, 2003, pp. 5–25, here p. 14.

26 Wheatley, 2010 (note 11), pp. 42–44.

The quinze-vingts were, for example, renowned for their ability to negotiate the streets of Paris better than any sighted person. In Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*, the Persian traveller, Rica, is shown the way to the Marais by a man whom he encounters in an unnamed institution. Rica relates: "Il me mena à merveille, me tira de tous les embarras et me sauva adroitement des carrosses et des voitures". Only on arrival does the guide identify himself as a blind man.²⁷ Looking at Chardin's blind beggar might thus have prompted Salon visitors to reflect on the limitations of their own sensory perception compared to that of the blind beggar. Their viewing of the picture might also have been informed by an anecdote circulating in Paris just before the Salon opened: the story went that the poet Alexis Piron, who was in the habit of stopping to chat to the blind beggar who habitually stood at the entrance to the passage des Feuillants which led from the rue St-Honoré to the Tuileries gardens, had written a poem for him, asking the passer-by for alms, saying that though he won't see the alms-giver, God will.²⁸ What makes this anecdote significant is that it is predicated on the physical resemblance between the blind beggar and Piron, who was himself, by this date, almost blind.²⁹ In other words, it implies precisely the kind of comparison between the sensory perception of the blind beggar and that of the elite beholder that, I suggest, Chardin's painting might have inspired in the Salon visitor.

Such a response is all the more likely in view of the considerable fascination that the figure of the blind beggar held for elite Parisians. So great was the interest generated by the anecdote about the beggar of the Feuillants that an enterprising hack writer published a four-volume work purporting to recount his life story in 1755.³⁰ This work is a greatly expanded version of an earlier memoir novel, *César aveugle et voyageur* (1740), which is believed to have been based on the recollections of a well-known Parisian beggar.³¹ Having been born outside Paris, César is not eligible for the privileged status of a quinze-vingt; unable to beg without risking arrest by the police, he starts making trinkets for children before devising an 'oeuvre' featuring numerous small figures to display as a "curiosité" on the Pont Neuf, alongside all of the other hawkers, showmen and performers who plied their trade there. He later makes another even more elaborate work which he takes to Versailles

27 Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes*, Paris, 1964, p. 67 (letter 32). A later writer similarly observed that it is "les Quinze-Vingts qui connaissent mieux les rues"; see Sébastien-Roch-Nicolas Chamfort, *Maximes, pensées, caractères et anecdotes*, Paris, 1796, p. 20.

28 Jean Balcou, *Le Dossier Fréron: Correspondances et documents*, Geneva, 1975, p. 84 (letter 40, 28 July 1753); Melchior Grimm et al., *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, Maurice Tourneux (ed.), Paris, 1877-1882, vol. 2, p. 269 (1 August 1753).

29 Piron's own blindness was well known; see Grimm, 1887-1882 (note 28), vol. 10, p. 161 (January 1773).

30 Jean-Antoine Guer, *Pinolet ou l'aveugle parvenu*, Amsterdam [i.e. Paris], 1755. For reports on its publication, see *Correspondance littéraire*, vol. 2, p. 466 (1 January 1755); *Année littéraire*, 1755, vol. 4, p. 83.

31 Jacques Rustin, "Mensonge et vérité dans le roman français du XVIII^e siècle", *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 69/1, 1969, pp. 13-38 (here p. 28); Henri Duranton, "Quand le peuple prend la parole: La vie aventureuse de César Epinaï, mendiant forézien, racontée par lui-même", *Etudes Foréziennes* 9, 1978, pp. 149-164.



2 Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *L'Aveugle trompé*, 1755, oil on canvas, 66 × 54 cm, Pushkin Museum, Moscow

in the hopes of showing it to the king; while there, he takes a walk in the park: “J’étois dans une admiration perpétuelle jusques à toucher de mes doigts ces rares Statues qu’on dit être

une imitation parfaite des Originaux de l'ancienne Grèce".³² For present purposes, the interest of this narrative lies in the way that it reflects and reinforces the traditional association between the figure of the blind man and sculpture understood as an art of touch.³³ Conversely, Salon visitors contemplating Chardin's blind beggar might have been prompted to reflect on the exclusively optical nature of painting, particularly if they connected him with the blind beggar of the *Feuillants*. (The picture was in fact later claimed to be a portrayal of that particular beggar).³⁴

Only two years later, in 1755, Greuze made his debut at the Salon, exhibiting a group of works that included a painting of a blind man, presumably taking his cue from Chardin in so doing. In the case of *L'Aveugle trompé*, however, no obvious pictorial precedent exists for the composition, which, for once, characterises the blind man not as a beggar but as the head of a household (fig. 2).³⁵ The title figure is generally assumed to be the husband of the young woman, whose hand he grasps, unaware that her other arm is draped around the shoulder of her lover, though some viewers took him to be her father.³⁶ The scenario is reminiscent of *L'Aveugle clairvoyant* (1716), a well-known comedy, still regularly performed in the 1750s, in which a middle-aged man pretends to have lost his sight in order to test the fidelity of his young fiancée, who, in one scene, declares her love for the supposed blind man while giving her hand to his nephew with whom she is in love.³⁷ More generally, the scenario of Greuze's painting recalls the kind of smutty jokes typically told about *quinze-vingts* and other blind men at the time; even Diderot's *Lettre sur les aveugles*, which is generally hailed as a monument of an enlightened and sympathetic attitude to blindness, contains passages in this spirit, such as his observation that the blind man's touch is so sensitive that he would never confuse his wife with another woman, "à moins

32 Jean-Antoine Guer, *César aveugle et voyageur*, Paris, 1740, pp. 337–338, 371.

33 Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The Blind Spot: An Essay on the Relations between Painting and Sculpture in the Modern Age* (trans. Chris Miller), Los Angeles, 2008, pp. 64–70; Thierry Drumm, "Toucher et voir : Remarques sur le rôle de l'aveugle dans la théorie et la pratique artistiques à l'âge classique", in Marion Chottin (ed.), *L'Aveugle et le philosophe, ou comment la cécité donne à penser*, Paris, 2009, pp. 27–42; Anne Betty Weinshenker, *A God or a Bench: Sculpture as a Problematic Art during the Ancien Régime*, Oxford, 2008, pp. 170–171.

34 A version of Chardin's composition was exhibited during the nineteenth century as *L'Aveugle des Feuillants*, with the text of Piron's verse in the catalogue entry; see Philippe Burty, *Catalogue de tableaux et dessins de l'école française, principalement du XVIII^e siècle... : deuxième supplément*, Paris, 1860, p. 68, cat. no. 356. The problem of course is that the blind beggar of the *Feuillants* was not a *quinze-vingt*, though this statement in turn rests on the assumption that this figure really can be identified with César.

35 Salon of 1755, cat. no. 145.

36 See, for example, "Estampes nouvelles", *Année littéraire*, 1758, vol. 1, p. 71; Alexandre-Joseph Paillet, *Catalogue des tableaux précieux des écoles d'Italie, de Flandres, de Hollande et de France, ... le tout provenant du cabinet de feu M. Choiseul-Praslin*, Paris, 1792, p. 85, cat. no. 174.

37 Marc-Antoine Legrand, *L'Aveugle clairvoyant*, Paris, 1718, pp. 34–37 (scene 16). Greuze's composition is actually referred to as *L'Aveugle clairvoyant* in an eighteenth-century sale catalogue: *Vente d'estampes, montées et en feuilles qui se fera le 19 Juin 1779*, Paris, 1779, p. 2 (no. 13).

qu'il ne gagnât au change"; Diderot also remarks that, in the case of a blind man married to a sighted woman, "il serait si facile aux femmes de tromper leurs maris, en convenant d'un signe avec leurs amants".³⁸

However, Greuze's *Aveugle trompé* does not wholly accord with this type of comedic scenario, not least because it does not depict the moment of confrontation when infidelity is exposed, such as can be seen in comic, 'low-life' scenes by artists like Adriaen Brouwer and David Teniers.³⁹ It is striking that the only detailed analysis of the composition offered in a review of the Salon of 1755 downplayed the bawdy humour of the scenario even as the critic took for granted that the blind man was married to the young woman; justifying the behaviour of all three figures, the critic suggests that the young man lets fall the jug that he is carrying because he is abashed by the presence of the old man whom he is deceiving.⁴⁰ On the basis of this text, Cole contends that Greuze prioritises the senses of touch and hearing with the result that what initially appears to be "a comic image that lampoons the blind for their lack of sight" serves ultimately to expose the limitations of vision, such that the real dupe is the young man who now realises the error he has made in relying on this sense alone.⁴¹ However, the characterisation of the blind man is by no means entirely sympathetic; he seems at once pathetic and oppressive as he sits, hunched and impassive, eyes obscured by dark shadow, his tight grasp no match for the young couple's gestures and glances. In this respect, the composition seems closer in spirit to a passage in the *Lettre sur les aveugles*, in which Diderot recasts the comic stereotype of the selfish, amoral blind man in terms that recall sensationalist theory: "Comme de toutes les démonstrations extérieures qui réveillent en nous la commisération et les idées de la douleur, les aveugles ne sont affectés que par la plainte, je les soupçonne, en général, d'inhumanité".⁴²

When Greuze's painting was exhibited in 1755, therefore, a Salon visitor might have sympathised with the blind man's plight, his isolation and vulnerability, but the composition would surely have served as much to reinforce as to challenge traditional prejudices against the blind. Moreover, a reading of *L'Aveugle trompé* as depicting the title figure as at once victim and oppressor is likely to have been reinforced by comparison with a later composition by Greuze, *Un Paralytique soigné par sa famille* or *La Piété filiale*.⁴³ When it was exhibited at the Salon of 1763, a critic remarked that the old man's alert head showed that he was conscious of and grateful to his family for their care; as one put it, his body may

38 Diderot, *Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient*, in Herbert Dieckmann, Jacques Proust and Jean Varloot (eds.), *Oeuvres complètes de Diderot*, vol. 4: *Idées II*, Paris, 1978, pp. 24-5. On this aspect of Diderot's *Letter*, see Kate Tunstall, *Blindness and Enlightenment: An Essay*, London, 2011, pp. 73-77.

39 See for example a painting by Teniers and one by Brouwer now in the National Gallery (NG862 and NG6591).

40 *Lettre sur le Salon de 1755, adressée à ceux qui la liront*, Amsterdam, 1755, pp. 42-43.

41 Cole, 2014 (note 21), pp. 60-62.

42 Diderot, 1978 (note 38), p. 27.

43 A preliminary drawing was exhibited under the first title (Salon of 1761, cat. no. 106); the finished painting was exhibited under the latter title (Salon of 1761, cat. no. 140).

be “privé du sentiment”, but his heart is not.⁴⁴ In this respect, this painting stands in contrast to Greuze’s earlier picture of a socially isolated, morally stunted blind man. It would have seemed quite natural for a Salon visitor to call to mind *L’Aveugle trompé* (perhaps via the print after the composition, which was exhibited at the Salon of 1757) when viewing *Un Paralytique*, not least because the figure types were paired together in the well-known fable about the blind man and the crippled man, *L’aveugle et le boiteux*, who collaborate in order to compensate for their respective disabilities, as illustrated by Greuze in a drawing of a blind man carrying a crippled man on his back.⁴⁵ These two figures are also linked in philosophical debates around sensory perception; challenging Locke’s position on Molyneux’s problem, Leibnitz argued that a newly-sighted blind man would be able to tell by sight alone objects familiar to him from touch, remarking in so doing that the blind man and the lame are equally capable of geometry.⁴⁶

During the 1750s, therefore, Salon visitors were confronted by two very different paintings of blind men that each, in their different ways, are likely to have prompted reflection on the viewer’s own reliance on sight and, more generally, on the role of the different senses in perception. Such reflection could have been informed by whatever knowledge of sensationalist theory that the visitor may have had, but, as I have argued, they were just as likely to have drawn on their own experience of – and popular wisdom about – the blind beggars of the *Quinze-Vingts* who were a constant presence on the streets of Paris. It is also possible that the same kind of knowledge could have been applied when considering Belisarius, as he was depicted in a succession of paintings exhibited at the Salon between 1767 and 1789, of which the most famous is the picture by Jacques-Louis David shown in 1781 (fig. 3).⁴⁷ In this work, the focus is on the blind man as a passive object of vision: a soldier and a woman react in very different ways to the sight of the blinded general reduced to begging for his living. Nevertheless, the painting could be read, against the grain, as an antiheroic depiction of the familiar figure of the blind beggar, complete with stick, guide and begging bowl (in the form of an upturned helmet). Indeed, the author of a

44 The print was by Laurent Cars (Salon of 1757, cat. no. 152). Abbé Aubert, “L’Amour filial, conte moral dont l’idée est prise du tableau de M. Greuze”, *Mercure de France*, October 1763, I, 30. See also Emma Barker, *Greuze and the Painting of Sentiment*, Cambridge, 2005, p. 69.

45 On the fable, see Gustave Cohen, “Le thème de l’aveugle et du paralytique”, *Mélanges offerts à M. Emile Picot*, Paris, 1913, vol. 2, pp. 393–404. The best-known eighteenth-century retelling is by Jean-Pierre Claris de Florian (1784); see also Jean-François Dreux du Radier, “L’Aveugle et le boiteux”, *Fables nouvelles et autres pièces en vers*, Paris, 1744, p. 68. For Greuze’s drawing, as *The Blind Carrying the Crippled*, see *Old Master and British Drawings*, Sotheby’s, London, 8 July 2015, cat. no. 86.

46 See Lichtenstein, 2008 (note 33), pp. 65–66.

47 Salon of 1781, cat no. 311. For the theme, see Albert Boime, “Marmontel’s *Bélisaire* and the Pre-Revolutionary Progressivism of David”, *Art History* 3/1, 1980, pp. 81–101; Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, New Haven and London, 1985, pp. 198–209; Klaus Weschenfelder, “Belisar und sein Begleiter. Die Karriere eines Blinden in der Kunst vom 17. bis zum 19. Jahrhundert”, *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 30, 2003, pp. 245–268.



3 Jacques-Louis David, *Bélisaire demandant l'aumône*, 1781, oil on canvas, 288 × 312 cm. Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille

parodic review of the Salon of 1781 precisely identified David's Belisarius as a quinze-vingt, suggesting that the blind man would be aroused by the proximity of the woman.⁴⁸ In the case of a heroic blind man like Belisarius, therefore, it is only by subverting his exemplary status that sensory (and sensual) experience can be addressed.

48 The verse commentary begins "Si j'étais quinze-vingt,/ Comme l'est Bélisaire" and ends "Je prendrais la bequille / Du Pere Barnabas"; see *La Peinturomanie ou Cassandre au Sallon; comédie-parade en vaudevilles*, Paris, 1781, p. 19. For the obscene connotations of "la bequille du père Barnabas", see Patrick Wald Lasowski, *Dictionnaire libertin: la langue du plaisir au siècle des Lumières*, Paris, 2011, p. 56.

By contrast, Chardin's *Aveugle* and Greuze's *Aveugle trompé* readily lent themselves to reflection about sensory perception precisely because of their quotidian, unheroic subjects which brought them much closer to the viewer's own experience. To underline my point about the way that this kind of representation of blindness could be aligned with reflection on sensory experience, I would like to end by drawing attention to a painting by Constance Charpentier exhibited at the Salon of 1806. The full title of this painting is *Un tableau de famille: Un aveugle entouré de ses enfants est consolé de la perte de la vue par la jouissance des quatre autres sens*.⁴⁹ Each sense is evoked in the painting: the son giving his father an apple represents taste; the daughter sniffing a flower, smell; the older daughter playing the guitar, hearing; and the child kissing the blind man's hand, touch. In other words, here we have a domestic tableau in the tradition of Greuze that is explicitly concerned with issues around sensory perception. What is new, of course, is the way that the blind man is integrated into family life, thereby challenging the ancient association of blindness with the status of an outcast and a beggar. It remains traditional in representing blindness as male, which accords with a tendency, also evident in Diderot's *Lettre sur les aveugles*, to associate blindness with the faculty of abstract reasoning.⁵⁰ Charpentier did, however, counterbalance her scene of a blind father with a pendant depicting children similarly attentive to the needs of a sick mother.⁵¹ Most important, however, is the way that blindness is here made ordinary; the blind man is not compensated for his loss of sight by the gain of any exceptional powers but simply by the love and attention of his family.

49 Salon of 1806 cat no. 94. See Gildas Dacre-Wright, *Constance Charpentier, Peintre (1767-1849)*, 2009, pp. 69, 72, 75 (for illustration), 101, 103-104, URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20150224022230/http://www.constance-charpentier.fr/> (accessed 20.01.2023).

50 On this aspect of Diderot's text, see Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment*, Chicago and London, 2002, pp. 21-22.

51 Salon of 1804, cat. no. 94: *Une mère convalescente soignée par ses enfants*. See also Dacre-Wright, 2009 (note 49), pp. 69, 101, 103-104.