

Teachers' notes

Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin – *Jar of Apricots*

History of the artist

- Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin was born in 1699 in Paris and spent his entire life there. He never felt the need to travel, and took all his inspiration from his own household. At the time, very different French paintings were all the fashion – if you compare Chardin's work with that of Boucher or Fragonard, you will see why Chardin was viewed as the odd one out.
- When he was 24, Chardin met Marguerite Saintard at a local dance and wanted to marry her, but her father said he must earn a better living before he would allow it. As Chardin always worked very slowly on his paintings, they

did not marry until he was 32. He exhibited a painting at an open-air exhibition in 1728. It was seen by a famous painter who urged him to apply for membership of the Academy.

- Sadly, Marguerite died after only four years of marriage. Chardin was married again, to Françoise Pouget in 1744. He enjoyed success and popularity in the 1750s, when the king bought his work and gave him lodgings in the Louvre. But he grew old and ill, his eyesight failed and he died in 1779. His still-life paintings are among the most wonderful in the world. He painted the *Jar of Apricots* in 1758.

Objects and meanings

- The shape of the painting is unusual. Chardin painted another oval still life, so perhaps they were intended as a pair. The oval is a softer alternative to the usual rectangle.
- Chardin is famous for his wonderful use of light and darkness. Notice how he uses pure white on the cup and jar lid in contrast to the dark background. Look, also, at the tiny white points of light on the knife, spoon, glasses and the apricots. If you cover the white up, the apricots no longer glisten. His paintings contain many different textures.
- Chardin was also well-known for his plain backgrounds. Unusually, he always started his paintings by covering his canvas with a dark shade. But if you look more closely, his

backgrounds contain many tones, which are very carefully mixed to show up the objects in the picture.

- Chardin was a master of composition. His paintings are beautifully balanced. Notice how the knife handle balances the angle of the long loaf, and look at the number of circles, ovals and ellipses in the picture, which echo the painting's oval frame. This, and his choice of kitchen objects, give his work a calm, comforting, homely feeling.
- Very few artists at the time of Chardin painted such ordinary objects. We are lucky to have these paintings as they teach us about the food and utensils of 18th-century France, so they are very interesting historically.

