

A Study by Greuze for Broken Eggs

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A RED-CHALK DRAWING, heightened with white, in the collection of the Albertina in Vienna,¹ which has hitherto been attributed to Boucher, is, in fact, a finished study of one of the figures in Greuze's painting *Broken Eggs* in The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figure 1). The drawing (Figure 2) shows the small boy at the right-hand side of the painting who completes the compositional triangle formed by the young maid of fallen virtue and her hapless paramour, himself held fast by the old crone who points to the eggs on the floor—the metaphorical image of lost virginity.²

I cannot but disagree with the most common view of this young fellow's role, which goes back to the original description of the painting in the Salon of 1757: "Une Mere [*sic*] grondant un jeune Homme pour avoir renversé un Panier d'Oeufs que sa Servante apportoit du Marché. Un Enfant tente de raccommoder un Oeuf cassé."³ Louis Hautecoeur wrote "Chacun aussi rit de la naïveté de l'enfant que s'efforce, en réunissant deux coquilles, de réparer un malheur irréparable,"⁴ and Edgar Munhall has said more recently "The boy trying to repair one of the eggs . . . is intended to suggest the uncomprehending innocence of childhood."⁵ This child seems to me far from uncomprehending or innocent. His gaze, which directly engages the viewer (he does not even look at the two halves of the egg he holds together), is darkly clouded with comprehension. The small bow and arrow upon which the boy leans were understood by contemporaries to be a reference to the "danger of playing with Cupid's darts"⁶ (the brazier and flagon alongside subtly adding to the sexual suggestion), and Cupid, even in mortal form, would hardly be naive.

This is no figure of fun but a solemn witness to the impossibility of repairing what is broken, of restoring innocence once lost. The boy's *déshabillé* parallels that of the young woman; and although I am not suggesting that he is about to shed his clothes for nude flight or that he may have been an accomplice in the deed, it seems to me that he demonstrates a greater understanding of its consequences than the oaf in the center who was responsible for it.

The drawing is executed with considerable care, particularly in the parallel hatchings that define the contours of the child's face, similar to those in Greuze's

1. The drawing (inv. no. 12.165, *Knabe mit zerbrochenem Ei*, as by Boucher) came to the museum, whose stamp it bears in the lower left, from the collection of Albert von Sachsen Teschen. I discovered it reproduced in an old French magazine ("Les Belles Sanguines," *Je Sais Tout* [Mar. 15, 1911] p. 153).

2. The same cast of characters (with an extra child added to restrain the barking dog) appears in the pendant painting *The Neapolitan Gesture*, now in the Worcester Art Museum. In this picture a similar golden-haired tot, though without mythological overtones, engages the eye of the viewer (Edgar Munhall, *Jean-Baptiste Greuze*, exh. cat. [Hartford, 1976] no. 14).

3. Paris, Salon catalogue (1757) no. 112, pp. 25–26. J. Martin and Ch. Masson, *Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre peint et dessiné de Jean-Baptiste Greuze . . .*, issued in Camille Mauclair, *Jean-Baptiste Greuze* (Paris, n.d. [1905]) and reissued separately under J. Martin alone (Paris, 1908) no. 181, p. 14, transcribe the Salon entry incorrectly as "*la servante apportait au marché*," a reading followed in the translation by Charles Sterling, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art: A Catalogue of French Paintings, XV–XVIII Centuries* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955) p. 174.

4. Louis Hautecoeur, *Greuze* (Paris, 1913) p. 22.

5. Munhall, *Greuze*, no. 9, p. 40.

6. Sterling, *French Paintings*, p. 174; see also Munhall, *Greuze*, p. 40.



1. Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805), *Broken Eggs*, signed and dated 1756. Oil on canvas, 28¾ × 37 in. (73 × 94 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of William K. Vanderbilt, 20.155.8
2. Greuze, *Boy with a Broken Egg*. Red chalk heightened with white, 13⅜ × 10¾ in. (33.8 × 27.4 cm.). Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina (photo: Albertina)

studies after antique statuary; the face in the painting is softened more in the manner of the artist's portraits. The extremely close kinship between the drawing and the finished picture may indicate that the drawing was done just before the painting, or even after, as a record.⁷

7. Two preparatory drawings were sold in Paris in the late 19th century: Hôtel Drouot, Mar. 19, 1890, no. 43—"Greuze: Etude du maître pour le tableau gravé par Moitte sous le titre les Oeufs cassés"; Hôtel Drouot, May 16–17, 1898, no. 143—"Les oeufs cassés, beau dessin aux trois crayons, rehaussé de pastel. Signé: Greuze, année 1756," measuring 41 × 53 cm. (information from the files of the Department of European Paintings, MMA). See Sterling, *French Paintings*, p. 174; Martin and Masson (*Catalogue raisonné*, p. 14), quoted by Munhall (*Greuze*, p. 40), date the sales slightly differently.