

## Privacy and the Role of the Door in the Genre Paintings of Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin

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Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin is above all a painter of the interior. With ineffable care, his works unfold the spaces of the home, both the dark downstairs quarters of servants and the light-filled chambers of middle-class families. Rarely crossing the boundary between inside and out, his genre scenes take place in closed worlds: quiet, restrained and separated from the action and movement of the street.<sup>1</sup> Despite their closure against the exterior, Chardin's interiors are riddled with architectural apertures. Doors occur repeatedly in his paintings, opening up rooms and passages and configuring complex spatial relationships. In the pendant paintings *The Washerwoman* of 1733 and *Woman Drawing Water* of 1734, doors are used to open up secondary scenes of women's domestic work, creating a pattern of bodies and spaces that expands the area of the interior. The later *Return from the Market* (1739) uses a series of doors on the right-hand side to reveal an exchange occurring at the door of the house to an eavesdropping maidservant. Doors in this painting become channels of communication with transgressive potential. Elaborating and articulating the space of the home, Chardin's doors produce a perpetual interior, creating multiple layers and levels of domestic space.

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<sup>1</sup> Many scholars have acknowledged this sense of enclosure in Chardin's works, notably Pierre Rosenberg, who claimed: "It is a closed world, a world which has stopped but whose stillness is wholly without surprise." See Pierre Rosenberg and Renaud Temperini, *Chardin* (Munich and New York, 2000), 15. Colin B. Bailey has also noted the "hermeticism" and "sense of enclosure" in Chardin's early genre scene, *The Washerwoman*. See Bailey, *Jean-Baptiste Greuze: The Laundress* (Los Angeles, 2000), 36.

Far above the downstairs world of the serving classes, in paintings of middle-class women and children, doors persist in generating questions of access inside the space of the home. In *Lady Sealing a Letter* (ca.1732), the door is closed, and in *The Diligent Mother* (1740) it is deliberately blocked by a screen. Carefully shut or partly concealed, the doors in *Lady Sealing a Letter* and *The Diligent Mother* engage in a dialogue between openness and closure, access and denial. While they expand the interior, the doors in these two works also reveal its modulated topography, its inner landscape of invitation and resistance.<sup>2</sup> Painted during a period of intense cultural interest in privacy, these genre scenes, I argue, take up issues of access and disclosure and, in their use of the door motif, visualize the growing importance of privacy within the eighteenth-century French home. They engage with privacy, however, in a critical way, through the explication of meaning and the representation of form. This paper examines the role of doors in Chardin's *Lady Sealing a Letter* and *The Diligent Mother* and argues that they contribute to "pictorial privacy": a resistance to the viewer's desire for access to the paintings' spaces and full disclosure of their meanings.<sup>3</sup>

During Chardin's lifetime, changes in architectural form and planning reveal an unprecedented interest in the production of private space.<sup>4</sup> The seventeenth-century patrician interior had been arranged relatively simply, with all rooms opening onto each other without the mediation of corridors or passages. Pierre Le Muet's design for the Hôtel d'Avaux from 1640 is representative of this volumetric approach to the interior.<sup>5</sup> Here, an *enfilade* of rooms borders the central courtyard, with the interior itself constituted by a procession of single units. By the second half of the eighteenth century, however, the distribution of interior space had achieved a remarkable complexity.<sup>6</sup> Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's plan for the Hôtel de Montmorency of 1769 demonstrates an intense application to the form and layout of interior space.<sup>7</sup> The intricate convolutions of this finely wrought plan are produced by smaller rooms of irregular shapes, each detached from one another by multiple

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<sup>2</sup> Few scholars have broached the presence of doors in Chardin's genre scenes. René Démoris has analyzed their role briefly in a wider psychoanalytic study of Chardin's interiors, in which he associates doors with conflict. Démoris interprets Chardin's doors as motifs that emphasize the oppressiveness of the artist's scenes of family life. See Démoris, "Inside/Interiors: Chardin's Images of the Family," *Art History* 28, no. 4 (2005): 457-60. I, however, see the doors in Chardin's paintings as modulated in their effects, and contributing to more nuanced patterns of openness and closure, which find a contemporary analogue in ideas of privacy.

<sup>3</sup> There is a wealth of literature on interiors in painting, but to my knowledge, no study that deals with the representation of privacy in art and its fascinating implications for a visual medium. On interiors in art, see Jeremy Aynesley and Catherine Grant, eds., *Imagined Interiors: Representing the Domestic Interior Since the Renaissance* (London, 2006), and Christy Anderson, ed., *The Built Surface*, 2 vols. (Aldershot, 2001-2002).

<sup>4</sup> French literature on interior planning, or *distribution*, increased phenomenally during the eighteenth century. Robert Neuman observes that compared to the six or so building manuals dealing with domestic architecture published in the seventeenth century, forty-four were published in the eighteenth, signaling a new obsession with the space of the home. See Neuman, "French Domestic Architecture in the Early Eighteenth Century: The Town Houses of Robert de Cotte," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 39, no. 2 (1980): 130, n.12.

<sup>5</sup> For this and other plans by Le Muet, see his treatise *Manière de bien bastir pour toutes sortes de personnes* (Paris, 1647).

<sup>6</sup> Louis-Sébastien Mercier contrasts the "long rectangular *salles*" of the seventeenth-century interior with the tightly constructed spaces of the eighteenth, which he describes as "put together like round, polished shells." See Mercier, *Tableau de Paris* (Paris, 1994), 1:389.

<sup>7</sup> For Ledoux and the Hôtel de Montmorency, see Michael Dennis, *Court and Garden: From the French Hôtel to the City of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 152-54.

*dégagements*, or passageways within walls. Ledoux's plan both increased the number of rooms and promoted a greater level of room specialization, significantly altering the experience of interior space. Between Le Muet and Ledoux, significant progress toward architectural privacy had occurred. Beds were gradually removed from the main living areas, the *salle à manger*, a specialized dining room, became standard, and the *salon de compagnie* was separated from the formal *salon*, providing a sitting room for guests and acquaintances.<sup>8</sup> The *boudoir* emerged and the *cabinet* was divided to form the *arrière-cabinet*, providing private spaces for intimate conversation or solitary study.<sup>9</sup> In addition, *dégagements* (passageways) allowed undetected movement within the house, and corridors were used to avoid thoroughfare between rooms.<sup>10</sup> Domestic architecture responded to a growing taste for smaller, more intimate and private spaces, fragmenting the interior into multiple specialized rooms.<sup>11</sup> Encompassing the most formal state apartments and the most intimate and secluded retreats, the *hôtel* contained many spaces and levels of sociability. It became a highly modulated network of rooms that classified space and behavior across a continuum of public and private usage.<sup>12</sup>

Further down the hierarchy of wealth and status, middle-class dwellings were similarly affected by a growing desire for privacy. The homes of the third estate were largely diverse and unregulated structures of available spaces arranged over multiple floors.<sup>13</sup> Rooms opened directly onto one another without the mediation of connecting corridors, and specialization was limited.<sup>14</sup> Privacy was appropriated, however, through renovations. According to Annik Pardhailé-Galabrun, various discrepancies between inventories and leases, or between earlier and later inventories, reveal the structural transformations that took place in some eighteenth-century homes.<sup>15</sup> New rooms were fashioned by dividing the space of an existing one with wooden panels and a door. Sometimes a simple wooden or fabric screen was used to

<sup>8</sup> For the distribution of rooms in the eighteenth-century *hôtel* and the increasing specialization of spaces for socializing, see John Whitehead, *The French Interior in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1992), 79-91.

<sup>9</sup> On the development of the *boudoir*, see Ed Lilley, "The Name of the Boudoir," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 53, no. 2 (1994): 193-98. For the *cabinet*, see Mark Girouard, *Life in the French Country House* (London, 2000), 147-61.

<sup>10</sup> On *dégagements*, see Reed Benhamou, "Parallel Walls, Parallel Worlds: The Places of Masters and Servants in the 'Maisons de plaisance' of Jacques-François Blondel," *Journal of Design History* 7, no. 1 (1994): 1-11.

<sup>11</sup> Architectural theorist Le Camus de Mézières commented in 1780 on the contemporary preference for smaller rooms "in which one feels better enclosed and in which one can be oneself." See Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières, *The Genius of Architecture; or, the Analogy of that Art with Our Sensations*, trans. David Britt (Santa Monica, 1992), 113.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Etlin argues that the French interior is determined by a dynamic of "display and retreat," a spectrum of sociability moving from the most public and formal sites to the most intimate and isolated places of respite. See Etlin, "Les dedans": Jacques-François Blondel and the System of the Home, c. 1740," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, no. 91 (1978): 142.

<sup>13</sup> The narrowness of buildings and plots of land largely produced these fragmented interiors. On the layout of the middle-class home, see Michel Gallet, *Paris Domestic Architecture of the Eighteenth Century*, trans. James C. Palmes (London, 1972), 64-65.

<sup>14</sup> Arlette Farge emphasizes the lack of privacy among the poor in her narrative of Parisian communal life in *Fragile Lives: Violence, Power and Solidarity in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, trans. Carol Shelton (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 11, 19-20. Daniel Roche's account of the lives of the poor also describes the unspecialized spaces of modest Paris homes. See Roche, *The People of Paris: An Essay in Popular Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, trans. Marie Evans (Leamington Spa, 1987), 97-126.

<sup>15</sup> Annik Pardhailé-Galabrun's observations are based on inventories and other documents from the Archives nationales. See her excellent study of French private life, *The Birth of Intimacy: Privacy and Domestic Life in Early Modern Paris*, trans. Jocelyn Phelps (Philadelphia, 1991), 67-69.

mark out this division. Containing the objects needed for dressing, reading or attending to one's bodily ablutions, these additional spaces were often named in inventories as *garderobes*, *cabinets* and *antechambres*.<sup>16</sup> As such, they indicate a new attention to the spaces of the interior and constitute modest ways of constructing more private and isolated spaces within the home. Chardin's own inventory of 1737 reveals a middle class interior inclining toward privacy. Though beds occur in the kitchen, two dedicated bedrooms are recorded, one with a close-stool.<sup>17</sup> On the third floor, a specialized *atelier* was set aside for Chardin, providing a room for his own exclusive use.<sup>18</sup>

These developments in the space and structure of the interior are determined by two dimensions of what we now define as privacy: selective disclosure and exclusive access.<sup>19</sup> Selective disclosure concerns the information that we deem fit to reveal about ourselves to another person. It includes verbal, written and visual kinds of communication and incorporates the use of personal objects such as letters, diaries and wills.<sup>20</sup> Exclusive access refers to issues of space and determines the ability of an individual or group to enter into the physical domain of another or to watch and listen.<sup>21</sup> Architectural changes in the eighteenth century are characterized by a twin desire for exclusive access and selective disclosure. The eighteenth-century interior constrained access by creating smaller and more enclosed spaces. It also limited disclosure by restricting the visibility of its occupants and providing secret storage for personal belongings.<sup>22</sup> These impulses of exclusive access and selective disclosure, characteristic of the eighteenth-century interior, can also be traced in the paintings of Chardin. Access and disclosure provide a paradigm for addressing his genre scenes, offering a means to investigate the impact of privacy on his representations of the interior through their relationship to the viewer and their communication of narrative meaning.

*Lady Sealing a Letter* (fig. 1) is Chardin's first genre painting, made after he abandoned still-life painting in about 1732. It is also his first painting in which a door appears, and though that door is only just glimpsed at the right hand side of the composition, it has important symbolic ramifications for the representation of privacy.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>17</sup> Chardin's second home, where he lived with his first wife, Marguerite Saintard, was at the corner of 21, rue du Four, and 1, rue Princesse. On Chardin's biographical and geographical history, see Félix Herbert, "Les demeures de Jean Siméon Chardin," *Bulletin de la société historique du VI<sup>e</sup> arrondissement de Paris*, no. 2 (1899), 143. On the layout of his home, see the inventory of 1737, partly reproduced in André Pascal and Roger Gaucheron, *Documents sur la vie et l'œuvre de Chardin* (Paris, 1931), 66.

<sup>18</sup> In the inventory of 1737, Chardin's studio is described as "une chambre sur le palier, ayant vue sur la rue du Four, servant d'atelier." This part of the inventory is quoted in Georges Wildenstein, *Chardin, biographie et catalogue critiques* (Paris, 1933), 65.

<sup>19</sup> These terms are introduced and analyzed in H.J. McCloskey, "Privacy and the Right to Privacy," *Philosophy* 55, no. 211 (1980): 20, 24-25.

<sup>20</sup> On "selective disclosure" and its application to privacy in legal and sociological contexts, see Elizabeth Beardsley, "Privacy: Autonomy and Selective Disclosure," in J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman, eds., *Privacy* (New York, 1971), 56-57.

<sup>21</sup> "Exclusive access" is a term coined by Ernest van der Haag, who sees it as a necessary condition of privacy in its twentieth-century conceptualization. See van der Haag, "On Privacy," in Pennock and Chapman, eds., *Privacy*, 149.

<sup>22</sup> For furniture's contribution to privacy, see Carolyn Sargentson's study of secret storage spaces in eighteenth-century French *secrétaires*, "Looking at Furniture Inside Out: Strategies of Secrecy and Security in Eighteenth-Century French Furniture," in Dena Goodman and Kathryn Norberg, eds., *Furnishing the Eighteenth Century: What Furniture Can Tell Us About the European and American Past* (New York and London, 2007), 205-32.



**Figure 1** *Lady Sealing a Letter*, Jean Baptiste Siméon Chardin, Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin. Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg/Wolfgang Pfauder.

Set in a comfortable interior, this painting depicts one of the century's favorite private amusements—the writing of personal correspondence.<sup>23</sup> Images of letter writing were popular in the eighteenth century. Contemporaneous with Chardin's painting, *The Surprise* by Charles-Antoine Coypel (1733) is a good example of the genre. It portrays a young lady discovered in the act of writing a love letter, her outward look and open posture forming an appeal to the viewer against the interference of the old woman peering over her shoulder. In contrast to Coypel's painting, Chardin's work depicts the action of sealing a letter after it has been written. Chardin's work is unusual because it shifts the scenario forward in time, emphasizing the privacy of correspondence rather than the act of producing it. At a thematic level, *Lady Sealing a Letter* deals with the creation of privacy. Its subject is furthermore reinforced spatially as the sealing of the letter corresponds with the closing of a door.

On either side of a carpet-covered table, the lady and her valet communicate through the collision of a series of interrelated objects. The valet, lighting a candle, is

<sup>23</sup> On letter writing in eighteenth-century France, see Roger Chartier, "The Practical Impact of Writing," in Roger Chartier, ed. *Passions of the Renaissance*, vol. 3 of Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, eds., *A History of Private Life*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 125.

preparing to melt the red stick of wax held in the lady's hand, so that she may seal her recently written letter. Sealing a letter in eighteenth-century France was a way of both authenticating its contents and protecting it from being read without evidence. It functioned like a signature, proclaiming the origin and authorship of an epistle and marking it as private.<sup>24</sup> In Chardin's painting, the letter is about to be sealed and appears as a little white square, neatly folded but still pinched between the fingers of the seated woman.<sup>25</sup> Placing her thumb over the exposed edge of paper, she guards against its violation and, with the wax stick in the other hand, takes into her domain of intention both the private object and the means of rendering it impermeable to all but the recipient's gaze. Sealing the letter activates privacy through the practice of selective disclosure, marking the communication of information as restricted to its intended recipient, who is neither the valet nor the spectator.

Defending against our desire to know its contents, the woman herself acts out a secondary resistance to disclosure. Initially, the proximity of the heavily curtained bed and the anxiety of her greyhound, a traditional symbol of fidelity, appears to indicate the potentially sexual or illicit nature of her correspondence.<sup>26</sup> The woman's body, however, gives little away about the letter's meaning. With her face slightly blurred, and hidden in shadow, her expression is difficult to read. In addition, the precision of her hand movements and the high detail of her fingers draw attention away from her face. Chardin seems to have deferred signification from the expressive capacity of the body to the innocuous objects in her hands. As a result, Chardin keeps the letter's significance ambiguous, refusing to disclose its potential sexual or social implications.

In terms of access, the spatial structures of the painting also emphasize the letter's privacy. X-rays and conservational studies performed recently at the Schloss Charlottenburg in Berlin have revealed that the composition underwent several changes as it was made.<sup>27</sup> The x-rays show that Chardin removed a small round table stacked with books and papers from the right foreground and closed a drawer that had protruded from the table between the lady and the valet. He also repositioned the letter, the quill and the wax stick to focus attention on the activity of sealing the letter. Another change was made, however, that affected significantly the production of space. On the right-hand side of the finished image, a sliver of a door is partly visible,

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<sup>24</sup> Dena Goodman discusses the role of seals in the context of privacy in "The Secrétaire and the Integration of the Eighteenth-Century Self," in Goodman and Norberg, eds., *Furnishing the Eighteenth Century*, 194. The seal, as an authenticating device, could also be abused. In Choderlos de Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, the Vicomte de Valmont requests Madame de Merteuil to seal and send a letter he has written to Madame de Tourvel, so as to communicate his correspondence to a third party and falsify the postmark. See *Dangerous Liaisons*, trans. P.W.K. Stone (Harmondsworth, 2001), letter 47.

<sup>25</sup> According to Marie-Laure de Rochebrune, Chardin's lady has folded the piece of paper three times. The letter is not inserted into an envelope, but is to be sealed instead. The seal itself is a pocket seal, a portable device to be carried on one's person and made of silver. It is located between the quill and the letter on the table in the painting. See Rochebrune, "Zu einigen Gegenständen im Gemälde 'Die Briefsieglerin' von Jean-Siméon Chardin," in Mechthild Most and Christoph Martin Vogtherr, eds., *Die "Briefsieglerin" von Jean-Siméon Chardin: Neue Einsichten in ein restauriertes Meisterwerk* (Potsdam, 2003), 50-51.

<sup>26</sup> Christoph Martin Vogtherr sees the dog as a sign of fidelity and, in addition, interprets the flame of the candle as a symbol of love. See "Jean-Siméon Chardins 'Briefsieglerin.' Ein Schlüsselwerk der französischen Genremalerei im 18. Jahrhundert," in Most and Vogtherr, eds., *Die "Briefsieglerin"*, 24.

<sup>27</sup> For an inventory of the changes made to the painting, see Mechthild Most, "'Un excellent tableau de M. Chardin, dont le mérite est assés connu.' Bildmaterialien und Maltechnik Chardins am Beispiel der 'Briefsieglerin,'" in Most and Vogtherr, *Die "Briefsieglerin"*, 61-63.

cut off by the frame of the picture. Though it is difficult to make out, the door is closed, contributing to the painting's sense of enclosure. X-rays, however, suggest that this was not always the case. In fact recent studies have found that Chardin closed the door during the course of painting.<sup>28</sup> At earlier stages, as the x-ray shows, the whole of the inside of the doorjamb was visible, but in the final version, the leaf of the door is brought to a close, halving the amount of visible frame. This change is symbolically important, as in closing the door, Chardin corroborates the idea of sealing, of making space and experience impenetrable to the uninitiated. In its unsealed state, the letter is not yet ready to cross over to the guardianship of the valet, who will take it over the threshold into the world outside. Closing the door, however, effectively seals the unsealed letter within the interior. Chardin's *Lady Sealing a Letter* thus enacts the conditions of both physical and psychological privacy. Sealing the letter gestures to the selective disclosure of meaning in the painting, while the closed door reinforces its privacy by rendering the room fully enclosed and only exclusively accessible, being apparently closed to other members of the household.

Although the door is only strategically indicated in this early painting, it has strong implications for privacy that develop in subsequent works. In Chardin's later genre paintings, the role of the door increases, as does the theme of privacy. *The Diligent Mother* of 1740 (fig. 2) combines an open door with a blocking screen, generating tensions between open and closed spaces, and between the actions of revealing and concealing, that affect our understanding of the painting's narrative. This painting depicts a well-appointed room, equipped with a fireplace and decorated with a large ornamental mirror. Here we are witness to a seemingly trivial exchange between a mother and her daughter. Pulling her daughter's embroidery onto her lap, the mother scrutinizes the work she has done, pointing out a leaf in the floral design. With head and eyes downcast, the child is apparently reluctant to submit to her embroidery lesson and clutches the remainder of her sewing in her fist. Analyzed in connection with the strange spatial relationships of the scene, this interaction between mother and child takes on a complex correlation to issues of access and disclosure.

Crowded by a large yarn-winder, an embroidery box and a pug, the pair is confined within a small interior space. A door behind them, opening away from the viewer at the back of the picture, is blocked by the presence of a large folding screen. The screen, a somber dark green, curves around the bodies of mother and child, pressing them toward the surface of the picture. It renders the room decidedly shallow and cuts off access to the open door and the other spaces of the house. Screens were popular and inexpensive ways of producing private space in middle-class interiors.<sup>29</sup> As mobile pieces of furniture, they could be moved around a room according to the level of privacy desired, concealing the people or objects behind. Easily manipulable, screens could transform the layout of an interior, providing a private corner in which a temporary specialization might occur—space for one's study or toilette.<sup>30</sup> Such a screen is recorded in Chardin's 1737 inventory and may have provided the model for the one in this painting.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> This information was conveyed to me in conversation with the painting's conservator, Mechthild Most, on Oct. 2, 2007. I am grateful for her time and assistance in describing to me the conservation process.

<sup>29</sup> See Pardaillhé-Galabrun, *The Birth of Intimacy*, xiv, 122, 152-53.

<sup>30</sup> On the strata of mobile and immobile furniture in the eighteenth-century interior, see Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley, 1996), 67.

<sup>31</sup> Chardin owned a large wooden screen made of fourteen panels, which was inventoried in his studio. See Pascal and Gaucheron, *Documents*, 65. A screen also appeared in a lost painting by Chardin known by the engraving after it as *L'Instant de la Méditation*.



**Figure 2** *The Diligent Mother*, Jean Baptiste Siméon Chardin, Musée du Louvre, Paris. ©RMN / Hervé Lewandowski

In *The Diligent Mother*, the screen seems positioned to establish a degree of privacy within the scene, separating the space of mother and daughter from the comings and goings of the house. Intervening between the figures in the foreground and the open door behind, it conceals them from the scrutiny of the rest of the household. Indeed, the room seems to be filled with such concealing surfaces. The five panels of the screen emphasize the presence on the right-hand side of a fire screen that protects the mother and daughter from the heat of the fire's blaze. Together, the folding screen and fire screen curl around the mother and child,

fashioning an inner space within the area of the room, an additional level of enclosure that hides and protects them from the eyes of family and servants.

The privacy established by the spatial arrangement of the room calls attention to underlying tensions in the dialogue between mother and child. Within this enclosed space, the mother is relaxed and calm, suggesting the desirability of this kind of privacy, of the quiet solitude of interior space. Her connection to the interior is further reinforced by a long thread of wool that sweeps in a wide parabola from her waist to the yarn winder in the foreground. Joining her body to the furniture in the room, the thread binds her, as it were, to the space of the interior. By contrast, the young girl, with her downcast expression, seems less inclined to the domestic pleasures of home life. Connected to her mother by their shared attention to the piece of sewing, and enclosed by the screen, she is poignantly set at a distance from the open door, the means of her escape. Her privacy, however, is of a different kind.

Against the mother's desire to inspect her daughter's embroidery, the girl appears to scrunch it in her hand, obscuring it from sight. Seeming to pull the embroidery away from her mother's grasp, she resists her view of the work, and the criticisms that will inevitably follow. Though the mother opens up the fabric to examine its composition and disclose it to the viewer, the girl attempts to conceal it, bunching the remaining fabric into a twisted rope. She obscures the central motif of its design; the pattern of floral motifs is distorted and made visually incoherent in her hands. As a result, the primary object of the painting—that which absorbs the attention of its two figures—is partly concealed from us, appearing as a jumble of colored shapes. Mother and child thus generate a narrative tension between revealing and concealing, reflecting the spatial conditions of privacy at work in the painting. Their relationship activates the practice of selective disclosure: the mother attempts to reveal the child's work, while the latter resolutely conceals it.

This tension between revealing and concealing is equally encoded into the space of the painting through the strange superimposition of the door and the screen. Together, the door and screen establish a dialogue of open and closed motifs that ultimately suggests the painting's ambivalence about the gaze of the viewer. Gesturing to other spaces in the house, or even an exterior beyond, the door invites our look, encouraging us to enquire into the rooms of the painted dwelling. While the door promotes a third dimension of space, the screen in front presents a series of surfaces. Opposing the motif of the open door, the screen's blocking, protecting, obscuring function is contrasted directly with the open door's properties of access and visibility. Behind the screen, the presence of the open door intensifies our exclusion from the spaces of the house, creating the sense that the painting itself is only partially open to our view. Chardin's screen both protects and entraps. It evokes the opposed impulses of revealing and concealing in the interaction between mother and child, while subjecting the viewer to the same resistance that the child shows her mother. In subject and in space, Chardin's *The Diligent Mother* engages with questions of exclusive access and selective disclosure, encoding into the picture a kind of "pictorial privacy" that resists our access to the spaces of the house and withholds full disclosure of the painting's narrative objects.

In both *Lady Sealing a Letter* and *The Diligent Mother*, doors respond to the subjects of the paintings, reconfiguring the spatial dynamics of each scene to heighten the spectator's sense of the play of resistance and exclusion within the composition. Chardin uses doors to activate pictorial privacy, reinforcing the tensions of access and disclosure acted out by his figures. As art historians are beginning to suspect, Chardin's paintings are not straightforward depictions of "everyday life" but, I would

argue, paintings that communicate the changing structure and experience of the eighteenth-century interior.<sup>32</sup> They engage with the growing demand for privacy and turn this contemporary trend into a visual problem. Privacy, as exclusive access and selective disclosure, is not only a condition of interior space in the eighteenth century, but has also been made a factor of Chardin's paintings, where it erects barriers and boundaries against the prying eyes of the viewer.

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<sup>32</sup> For art historical analyses that apprehend the difficulty in discovering the "meanings" of Chardin's genre scenes, see Robin Adèle Greeley, "Chardin, Time and Mastery," *Word and Image* 19, no. 4 (2003), 281-95; Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (London and New Haven, 1983), 74-104; and Mary Sheriff, "Reflecting on Chardin," *The Eighteenth Century* 29, no. 1 (1988): 19-45.