Proust once wrote an essay in which he set out to restore a smile to the face of a gloomy, envious and dissatisfied young man. He pictured this young man sitting at a table ceter lunch one day in his parents' flat, gazing dejectedly at his surroundings: at a knife left lying on the tablecloth, at the remains of an underdone, tasteless cutlet and a half-turned back tablecloth. He would see his mother at the far end of the dining room doing her knitting and the family cat curling up on top of a cupboard next to a bottle of brandy being kept for a special occasion ... the mundanity of the scene would contrast with the young man's taste for beautiful and costly things, which he lacked the money to acquire. Proust imagined the revulsion ... [the young man] ... would feel at this ... interior, and how he would compare it to the splendours he had seen in museums and cathedrals. He would envy those bankers who had enough money to decorate their houses properly, so that everything in them was beautiful, was a work of art, right down to the coal tongs in the fireplace and the knobs on the doors.

To escape his domestic gloom ... the young man might leave the flat and go to the Louvre, where at least he could feast his eyes on splendid things: grand palaces painted by Veronese, harbour scenes by Claude and princely lives by Van Dyck.

Touched by his predicament, Proust proposed to make a radical change to the young man's life by way of a modest alteration to the museum's itinerary. Rather than let him hurry to galleries hung with paintings by Claude and Veronese, Proust suggested leading him to a quite different part of the museum, to those galleries hung with the works of Jean-Baptiste Chardin.

It might have seemed an odd choice, for Chardin hadn't painted many harbours, princes or palaces. He liked to depict bowls of fruit, jugs, coffee pots, loaves of bread, glasses of wine and slabs of meat. He liked painting kitchen utensils, not just pretty chocolate jars but salt cellars and strainers. When it came to people, Chardin's figures were rarely doing anything heroic; one was reading a book, another was building a house of cards, a woman had just come home from the market with a couple of loaves of bread and a mother was showing her daughter some mistakes she had made in her needlework.

Yet, in spite of the ordinary nature of their subjects, Chardin's paintings succeeded in being extraordinarily beguiling and evocative. After an encounter with Chardin, Proust had high hopes for the spiritual transformation of his sad young man ... Why? Because Chardin had shown him that the kind of environment in which he lived could, for a fraction of the cost, have many of the charms he had previously associated only with the palaces and the princely life. No longer would he feel painfully excluded from the aesthetic realm, no longer would he be so envious of smart bankers with gold-plated coal tongs and diamond-studded door handles. He would learn that metal and earthenware could also be enchanting, and common crockery as beautiful as precious stones. After looking at Chardin's work, even the humblest rooms in his parents' flat would have the power to delight him, Proust promised: When you walk around a kitchen, you will say to yourself, this is interesting, this is grand, this is beautiful like a Chardin.
Having started on his essay, Proust tried to interest Pierre Mainguet, the editor of the arts magazine the Revue Hebdomadaire, in its contents. *I have just written a little study in the philosophy of art, if I may use that slightly pretenious phrase, in which I have tried to show how the great painters initiate us into a knowledge and love of the external world, how they are the ones by whom our eyes are opened*, opened, that is, on the world ... *Do you think this sort of study would interest the readers of the Revue Hebdomadaire?*

Perhaps, but since its editor was sure it wouldn't they had no chance to find out. Turning down the piece was an understandable oversight: this was 1895, and Mainguet didn't know Proust would one day be Proust. What is more, the moral of the essay lay not too far from the ridiculous. It was only a step away from suggesting that everything down to the last lemon was beautiful, that there was no good reason to be envious of any condition beside our own, that a hovel was as nice as a villa, and an emerald no better than a chipped plate.

However, instead of urging us to place the same value on all things, Proust might more interestingly have been encouraging us to ascribe them their correct value, and hence to revise certain notions of the good life, which risked inspiring an unfair neglect of some settings, and a misguided enthusiasm for others. If it hadn't been for Pierre Mainguet's rejection, the readers of the Revue Hebdomadaire would have benefited from a chance to reappraise their conceptions of beauty, and enter into a new and possibly more rewarding relationship with salt cellars, crockery and apples.

Why would they previously have lacked such a relationship? Why wouldn't they have appreciated their tableware and fruit? At one level, such questions seem superfluous; it just appears natural to be struck by the beauty of some things and to be left cold by others, there is no conscious rumination or decision behind our choice of what appeals to us visually, we simply know we are moved by palaces but not by kitchens, by porcelain but not by china, by guavas but not apples.

However, the immediacy with which aesthetic judgements arise should not fool us into assuming that their origins are entirely natural or their verdicts unalterable. Proust's letter to Monsieur Mainguet hinted as much. By saying that great painters were the ones by whom our eyes were opened, Proust was at the same time implying that our sense of beauty was not immobile, and could be sensitised by painters, who would, through their canvases, educate us into an appreciation of once neglected aesthetic qualities. If the dissatisfied young man had failed to consider the family tableware or fruit, it was in part out of a lack of acquaintance with images which would have shown him the key to their attractions.

The happiness which may emerge from taking a second look is central; it reveals the extent to which our dissatisfactions may be the result of failing to look properly at our lives rather than the result of anything inherently deficient about them. The gap between what the dissatisfied youth could see in his flat, and what Chardin noticed in very similar interiors, places the emphasis on a certain way of looking, as opposed to a mere process of acquiring or possessing.

The incident emphasises once more that beauty is something to be found, rather than passively encountered, that it requires us to pick up on certain details, to identify the whiteness of a cotton dress, the reflection of the sea on the hull of a yacht or the contrast between the colour of a jockey's coat and his face. It also emphasises how vulnerable we are to depression when ... the
pre-prepared images run out, when our knowledge of art does not stretch any later than Carpaccio (1450-1525) and Veronese (1528-1588) and we see a two-hundredhorsepower Sunseeker accelerating out of the marine. It may genuinely be an unattractive example of aquatic transport; then again our objection to the speedboat may stem from nothing other than a stubborn adherence to ancient images of beauty, and a resistance to a process of active appreciation which even Veronese and Carpaccio would have undertaken had they been in our place.