



Petit Palais
Musée des Beaux-Arts
de la Ville de Paris

Jean-Baptiste Greuze

Childhood illuminated

16 September 2025 - 25 January 2026



Greuze, *Young Shepherd Questioning Fate to see if his Shepherdess Loves Him*, between 1760 and 1761. Oil on canvas, 72.5 x 59.5 cm
Petit Palais, musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris.
CC0 Paris Musées / Petit Palais, musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris.

The Petit Palais pays tribute to Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805) on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of his birth. A painter of the human spirit, famous for his portraits and genre scenes, Greuze was one of the most important and daring figures of the 18th century. Although he is less well known today, in his own time, he was acclaimed by the public, courted by collectors, and adored by critics, Diderot in particular. He was, however, also utterly singular. A rebellious spirit, he never ceased to reaffirm his creative freedom and the possibility of rethinking painting outside of conventions.

This exhibition allows visitors to rediscover his work through the prism of the theme of childhood, through approximately one hundred works of art, on loan from some of the most important French and international collections, including the Musée du Louvre (Paris), Musée Fabre (Montpellier), Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam), National Galleries of Scotland (Edinburgh), the Royal Collection (Britain), as well as numerous private collections.

PRESS RELEASE

July 2025

CURATORS

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Curator and Director of the Petit Palais

Yuriko Jackall, Department Head of
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Rarely did a painter depicted children as frequently as Greuze, whether in the form of portraits, expressive head studies, or genre scenes, whether candid or naughty, mischievous or sulking, in love or cruel, focused or pensive, adrift in the world of adults, loved, ignored, punished, embraced, or abandoned. Like a recurring motif, children are everywhere, at times asleep in a mother's arms, at times lost in a melancholic reverie, or occasionally seized by the fear of an event beyond their control. In this exhibition, this particular stage of life is examined over the course of seven different sections, from early childhood to the beginnings of adulthood.

The centrality of the theme of childhood in Greuze's painting can be said to reflect the key issues of the 18th century. Childhood was now considered an age in its own right. The debates over breastfeeding versus the use of wet nurses, a child's place within the family, the importance of education in forging a child's personality, and the responsibility of the parents in his or her development were the concerns of educators and philosophers like Rousseau, Condorcet, and Diderot. These questions were on everyone's lips. Influenced by the ideals of the Enlightenment, Greuze, through his brush and pencil, became their witness, interpreter, and even ardent defender.

Throughout his career, the artist explored the intimacy of the family with empathy, sometimes with humour, often with a critical dimension. He enjoyed depicting the symbolic moments or rituals that punctuate family life, such as *The Giving of the Dowry* (Petit Palais), *The Kings' Cake* (Musée Fabre, Montpellier), and *The Bible Reading* (Musée du Louvre, Paris). But the domestic space was not always just a haven of peace. It was also, and often for Greuze, the scene of family disorder, the place of physical and psychological violence. Like life itself, beginning with that of the painter, which proved to be a succession of domestic misfortunes, complexity reigns in the families depicted by Greuze: the miserly father and the much maligned son, the loving father and the ungrateful son, the strict mother and the beloved child, the protective brother and the jealous sister...

Greuze radically dared to show the tragedy of death, which children also experienced. He questioned the transition into adulthood, the loss of innocence, the awakening to love, without disguising the appetites that the beauty of the flesh could arouse in lustful old men or young predators. Faced with this adult world, often cruel, petty, and mean, we see in Greuze's production a desire to return to the bosom of childhood, a time of purity and candour that is fragile, mysterious, and ephemeral, like the dandelion on which the *Young Shepherd* from the Petit Palais' Collection blows in order to know if his beloved feels the same way about him. To guide visitors through the works by Greuze the "Focus" (eye) symbol allows the public to linger over details, deciphering hidden meanings and allegories.

By drawing on the threads of childhood, in light of the great debates that animated 18th-century Paris, with its political aspirations and dreams of transformation, the exhibition reveals a work of an unexpected originality and audacity.

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The Petit Palais would like to thank Farrow and Ball for providing the colors for the exhibition.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

PETIT PALAIS - MUSÉE DES
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petitpalais.paris.en

Tuesday to Sunday from 10am
to 6pm
Late-night opening Friday and
Saturday until 8pm

Prices

Full rate: 14 €
Reduced rate : 12 €

Booking a time slot for your visit is
recommended on petitpalais.paris.en

Accessible to visitors with
disabilities



Greuze, *The Lazy Boy*, 1755. Oil on canvas,
65 × 54.5 × 3 cm Musée Fabre, Montpellier, France.
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