



## ***The Father's Curse: The Ungrateful Son*, Jean-Baptiste Greuze**

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Jean-Baptiste Greuze  
French, about 1778  
Brush and gray wash,  
**squared** in pencil  
19 3/4 x 25 3/16 in.  
83.GG.231



### **Questions for Teaching**

Take time to look closely at the work of art. What do you notice about the people?

How are they dressed differently than people today?

What is each person doing? What do you see that makes you say that? (*The father on the left reaches with outstretched hands to his son, while the female members of the family plead desperately. The baby clings to his brother's coattails. The son stretches out his arm as he advances toward the door.*)

What emotions do you see in their gestures and facial expressions? (*Their gestures and facial expressions communicate two primary emotions, agony and distress.*)

What do the gestures and facial expressions communicate about what is happening? (*Through broad gestures, Greuze tells the story of a son leaving his family as his family pleads with him to stay.*)

What do you think will happen next? What do you think happened before?

What do you notice about the lines formed by the bodies, and clothing of the people in the drawing? How do these lines help create movement? (*The parallel lines created by the limbs and clothing of the figures on the left point toward the tallest figure reaching out with his right arm. The diagonal lines cutting across the composition create a sense of movement.*)

Greuze aimed to use subjects from everyday life as a vehicle for moral lessons, such as the importance of doing good deeds or honoring one's parents. What do you think is the moral depicted in this drawing?

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### **Background Information**

In this dramatic story, a son deserts his family, including an aged father, to join the army. Broad gestures, theatrical poses, and striking facial expressions communicate variations of two primary emotions, agony and distress. The cursing father on the left reaches with outstretched hands to his departing son, while the female members of the family plead desperately. Even the baby clings anxiously to his brother's coattails. The son stretches out his arm as he advances toward the door, where his bemused companion observes the scene.

Although Jean-Baptiste Greuze often made **preparatory drawings** of individual figures for major **narrative** works like this one, he seems to have made this large and highly finished drawing after his own painting of this subject in the Musée du Louvre. The squaring lines for **transfer** indicate that he probably intended to use the drawing for an engraving.

### **About the Artist**

Jean-Baptiste Greuze (French, 1725–1805)

After training in Lyon, Jean-Baptiste Greuze arrived in Paris in 1750, where he sporadically attended the Académie Royale. His 1755 Salon debut was a triumph, but the acclamation turned his head. He antagonized everyone, including fellow artists, which later proved disastrous.

While retaining the clear, bright colors and lighter attitude of eighteenth-century painting, Greuze introduced a Dutch-influenced realism into French depictions of everyday scenes (called genre painting) and portraiture. Through vivid facial expressions and dramatic gestures, Greuze's moralizing paintings exemplified the new idea that painting should relate to life. They captured the details of settings and costumes, "spoke to the heart," educated viewers, and aimed to make them "virtuous."

In 1769 Académie members refused Greuze membership as a history painter, accepting him only in the lower category of genre, perhaps partly from ill will. Humiliated, he withdrew from public exhibitions completely. During the 1770s Greuze was well known, and engravings after his paintings were widely distributed, but his wife embezzled most of the proceeds. By the 1780s, **Neoclassicism** was in vogue, and his popularity declined. After enduring poverty and neglect, he died unnoticed, having outlived his time and his reputation.