

Better Still: Looking at Still Life in the Museum Collection, February 6, 2004-May 2, 2004

The “still life” has a long tradition in the history of art. Images of sumptuous containers filled with flowers, fruits, and vegetables reached a high point in the Netherlands in the 17th century, but their origins date back to the wall paintings of ancient Greece and Rome. The types of familiar domestic objects usually presented have changed little over time, permitting a continuity of appreciation over many generations. The viewer feels an immediate connection to basic household interiors, the necessities of eating and drinking, and the artifacts that surround the daily routines of kitchen, dining room, table, and market.

Still-life painting was long considered the lowest category of picture-making, distanced from the momentous events and moral implications of history painting or formal portraiture. Even so, patrons have always enjoyed its ability to convey wealth and social status. Rare tulip blooms, decorative objects, and small exotic animals have been represented with great skill over the years, as have the fur and feathers of the hunt’s bounty. From a salute to class privilege, humbler visions emerged: a simple breakfast of bread and eggs that might grace the rough table of a country home; a coffee cup and newspaper, representing life in an urban apartment. Compositions also may include references to the passage of time and to nature’s cycles of life, death, decay, and transformation.

In the artist’s studio, the usefulness and appeal of the still-life composition has never diminished. In the 20th century its possibilities expanded to include modernist collage, surrealist constructions, and room-size installations. Artists continue to find willing models in the inanimate objects around them. Their configurations suggest domestic dramas, moments of clarity, and memories of the past that provoke and delight.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Florine Stettheimer, American, 1871-1944
Bouquet for Ettie, 1927
Oil on canvas
Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer 58.089



RISD MUSEUM

Paul Cézanne, French, 1839-1906
Still Life with Apples, ca. 1878
Oil on canvas
Gift of Mrs. Murray S. Danforth 41.012

The art of Paul Cézanne marks a turning point in the history of still-life painting. His style of depiction, rather than the objects before him, became the real subject of his works. Cézanne employed multiple viewpoints to construct the forms within the picture space, modeling them with blunt but directional brushstrokes that facet their surfaces. His experiments influenced the Cubist painters, who later attempted to show objects from numerous points of view in a less subtle fashion.



Georges Braque, French, 1882-1963
Still Life, 1918
Oil on canvas
Mary B. Jackson Fund 48.248

Braque's simple, horizontal arrangement of a pear and grapes in a fruit dish beside a newspaper is a classic example of Cubist still life composition. The layered, flat geometric shapes represent an aspect of the style that he pioneered with Pablo Picasso during the decade before the First World War. Of particular interest to them was the process of collage, in which pieces of various materials are glued to the composition. In this *Still Life*, Braque creates a Cubist *trompe l'oeil* composition by mimicking the collage technique with his inclusion of painted images of a cut-up newspaper and patterned fabric or wallpaper.



John Frederick Peto, American, 1854-1907
Pipe and Mug, after 1889
Oil on board
Museum purchase: Gift of the Museum Associates 81.016

Peto entered the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1878 and enrolled in painter/teacher Thomas Eakins's night class. Instruction included a section on still-life composition, which Peto addressed with meditative, almost psychological results. His work may be classified as *trompe l'oeil* painting: a depiction of an object or scene



RISD MUSEUM

so lifelike that it appears to be real, and therefore “tricks the eye.” With great expressive power, Peto represents commonplace, everyday objects of an arguably masculine variety.

Don Eddy, American, b. 1944

Peaches, Tomatoes, Watermelons (Supermarket Window I), 1972

Acrylic and graphite on canvas

The Albert Pilavin Memorial Collection of 20th Century American Art
73.070

Don Eddy’s work may be seen as part of the Photorealist movement, which developed in the United States in the mid-1960s as an offshoot of Pop Art. Photorealism involves the precise reproduction of a photograph in paint, or in this particular instance, a number of shots of the same subject. Eddy himself worked from black-and-white photos, so his palette is totally improvised. In this variant of still-life painting, Eddy presents fruits and vegetables in a spatially complex storefront window. He pairs old-fashioned trompe l’oeil technique (creating an effect that intentionally tricks the eye) with a contemporary subject lacking any social commentary.



Wayne Thiebaud, American, b. 1920

Wimbledon Trophy, 1968

Oil on canvas

The Albert Pilavin Memorial Collection of 20th Century American Art
69.041

Wayne Thiebaud is widely known for his fanciful images of cakes, pastries, and candies in the Pop Art tradition, extending the symbolic role of still life. Here, he offers an iconic representation of one of tennis’s most prestigious prize cups, the Wimbledon Trophy. Earlier images of trophies in still-life painting include kills from the hunt, such as the *Dead Bird* attributed to Oudry. Thiebaud would seem to be presenting a contemporary extension of this tradition.



RISD MUSEUM

Jean-Baptiste Oudry, French, 1686-1755

Dead Bird, ca. 1740-1750

Oil on canvas

Jesse Metcalf Fund, Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund, Mary B. Jackson Fund, and Edgar J. Lownes Fund 54.176

Oudry was an important animal painter during the first half of the reign of Louis XV. He excelled at a form of still-life painting that focused on dead game. Depictions ranged from the simplest to the most lavish compositions. They might include a single bird, as here, or an arrangement of hunting “trophy animals” that represented wealth, power, and aristocratic privilege.



Georgia O'Keeffe, American, 1887-1986

Pink Spirea, ca. 1922

Oil on canvas

Gift of the Robert R. Young Foundation in honor of The Robert R. Young Family 1987.078.1

Over the centuries, still-life painting was dismissed as a purely decorative artistic pursuit. It was considered appropriate for female artists, who often pursued and excelled at depicting flowers. Georgia O'Keeffe, who studied at the Art Students' League in 1907 and 1908, won a scholarship for still life. O'Keeffe's flowers abandon domestic space and close in on sensual forms of individual blossoms. Her simplified shapes and aggressively bright palette create a bridge from realism to abstraction.



RISD MUSEUM

André Derain, French, 1880-1954
Two Roses in a Glass Vase, ca. 1927-1928
Oil on canvas
Gift of Mrs. Murray S. Danforth 42.216

The simplicity of Derain's painting in both composition and technique contrasts with more experimental approaches to floral still life in the early 20th century. Derain uses traditional means of representation rather than the unconventional perspectives of the Cubists or the imaginative color of modernists like Matisse and O'Keeffe. In this atmospheric arrangement, he delights in demonstrating the transparency of the glass vase and the fragility of the blooms.



Jane Ogden, British, 1849-1901
Bluebells and Primroses, 1866
Watercolor and gouache
Gift of in memory of Susan Gotti from her family and friends
1993.028

Containers are essential elements in the vocabulary of still-life painting. Infinite in variety, they often serve as man-made foils to nature's perfection. Ogden's meticulously drawn bluebells and primroses appear in a setting untouched by human hands. The nest of unhatched eggs, created by absent birds, transforms this subject from a nature study into a still life.



Willem Claesz. Heda, Dutch, 1594-ca. 1680
Still Life, 1600s
Oil on canvas
Museum Appropriation Fund 34.778

Elements of an unfinished meal represent a subject commonly found in Dutch still-life painting of the 17th century. The dark tabletop and background serve to highlight the bright lemon and the polished reflective surfaces of knife and olive dish. This simple, casual composition contains elements of a world beyond itself in the multiple reflections that appear in the glass goblet.



Grace Hartigan, American, 1922-2008
Homage to Matisse, 1955
Oil on canvas
Anonymous gift 56.120

Hartigan's painting is three times removed from the objects it represents. She pays homage to Matisse through visual references to his *Variation on a Still life by de Heem*, 1915, now in the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Lemons, platters, and a lute were raided from his picture and inserted into her composition with thick, slashing brushstrokes.

Matisse's *Variation* had reinterpreted a painting entitled *Dessert*, 1640, by Jan Davidsz. de Heem, a renowned Dutch still-life artist. His version freely reconstructed de Heem's lavish and meticulously represented view of a dessert table, which Matisse had studied at the Louvre Museum in Paris.



Michele Pace del Campidoglio, Italian, ca. 1610-ca. 1670
Abraham Brueghel, Flemish, 1631-1690
Still Life with Figure, ca. 1660
Oil on canvas
Mary B. Jackson Fund 60.107

Italian still-life painting developed its own characteristics in the 17th century. This glorious work celebrates abundance – a veritable feast for the eyes. It was most likely painted by Michele Pace del Campidoglio, a Roman artist who was influenced by Netherlandish painters in Italy at the time. The composition shows a cornucopia of ripe fruit and vegetables depicted with generous application of paint against a landscape background. The woman's fullness and availability mirror that of the produce.



RISD MUSEUM

Joseph Cornell, American, 1903-1972
Untitled, 1949-1952
Wood, glass and sand
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 82.107

Like a painter of still life, Joseph Cornell arranges objects in carefully determined relationships. Instead of recreating them on canvas, he encloses them in boxes. This allows the viewer to see them framed, as if through a window. Nostalgic details like the yellowed paper, blue glass, and weathered wood relate this work to trompe l'oeil paintings of the past, such as John Peto's *Pipe and Mug in the other gallery*. A reference to the traditional still-life theme of vanitas (the fragility of man's desires and the inevitability of death) is conveyed by the broken wine glass and the cascading sand. When the box is turned upside-down and back again, the sand rains down from above. The grains from the white sand fountain collect in the glass, suggesting an hourglass and the passage of time.



Jan van Huysum, Dutch, 1682-1749
Still Life with Flowers, ca. 1715-1730
Oil on canvas
Gift of D. Berkeley Updike in memory of Elisabeth Bigelow Updike
36.018

Among the most admired forms of still-life presentation is the luxuriant composition of flowers in a vase, placed on a stone table or ledge. This Dutch tradition includes close attention to the details of individual blooms and often celebrates rare specimens, such as the striped tulip at the top of this image. Holland experienced a phenomenon called "Tulip Mania" in the 17th century. Species of the exotic flower had been introduced into Europe from Turkey shortly after 1550 and eventually resulting in the elevation of the tulip to a pinnacle of consumer admiration and desire.



This painting has sometimes been attributed to Jan van Huysum, among the finest late practitioners of this style; however, there were numerous Dutch and French flower painters who followed his model closely, continuing its popularity through the early 19th century.

RISD MUSEUM

Henri Matisse, French, 1869-1954
The Green Pumpkin, ca. 1916
Oil on canvas
Anonymous gift 57.037

A symbol of fecundity and of nature's autumnal bounty, the pumpkin also appears in earlier still-life compositions, such as Michele Pace di Campidoglio's *Still Life with Figure at the entrance to this exhibition*. For Matisse, primary compositional concerns were color, balance, and light. Unlike Pace, who portrays summer squashes and pomegranates at the bursting point, Matisse refrains from using tricks of the still-life trade and incorporates the intact pumpkin into his scheme of contoured and open shapes.



Henri Matisse, French, 1869-1954
Still Life with Lemons, 1914
Oil on canvas
Gift of Miss Edith Wetmore 39.093



Ann Hamilton, American, b. 1956
malediction, 1991
Wood table and chair, enameled metal bowl, wicker casket, bread-dough mouth molds, recorded voice on compact disc
Mary B. Jackson Fund and Gift of George H. Waterman III 2002.1

Ann Hamilton's installation alludes to the traditions of still-life painting: abandoned or completed meals with a suggestion of the vanity of life and the tragedy of its passage. Its title, *malediction*, means curse. When the work was first presented, the artist sat at the table, filled her mouth with raw bread dough, and impressed upon it the form of her mouth and teeth. Each dough mold was then placed



RISD MUSEUM

in the wicker casket. In Hamilton's own words, this futile act, which implies the sustenance of life (bread) and the production of language (meaningful words, as well as cries and lamentations), cannot alter the inevitability of death, suggested by the wicker casket. Another component of the installation is an audio recording of a woman softly reciting the poem "Song of Myself," a celebration of the living human body from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, 1855.

John La Farge, American, 1835-1910
Japanese Crackle Pottery with Camellias, 1879
Watercolor on paper
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 21.469



Nassos Daphnis, American, b. Greece, 1914 - 2010
Three Feathers, 1938
Oil on canvas
Mary B. Jackson Fund 44.085



RISD MUSEUM

Janet Fish, American, b. 1938
Boone's Farm Apple Wine, 1972

Oil on canvas

The Albert Pilavin Memorial Collection of 20th Century American Art
72.109



Fernand Léger, French, 1881-1955

Flowers, 1926

Oil on canvas

Anonymous gift 81.097



Louise Bourgeois, American, b. France, 1911-2010

Still Life, 1963

Wood, plaster, and paint

Museum Works of Art Fund 66.163

This lavishly framed 18th-century view depicts a fantasy setting of architectural ruins incorporating still-life elements of flowers and urns. It represents the continuation of a tradition that dates back to Roman antiquity, when still-life wall painting was an important element of decorative schemes in dwellings.



RISD MUSEUM

Dennis Congdon, American, b. 1953

Pile, 2000

Oil and acrylic on canvas

Jesse Metcalf Fund 2000.17

Congdon's *Pile* celebrates a mound of painted canvases whose subjects refer to the artist's own work and are also reminiscent of Picasso's early creations. This exuberant arrangement of fine art on a beach, like a cornucopia in an imaginary landscape, resonates with themes and constructions of traditional still-life painting.

