



Still Life

THE OBJECT IN AMERICAN ART 1915-1995

STILL LIFE

THE OBJECT IN AMERICAN ART, 1915-1995

SELECTIONS FROM THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Lowery Stokes Sims and Sabine Rewald

With a contribution by William S. Lieberman

The American Federation of Arts

RIZZOLI
NEW YORK

The American Federation of Arts is a nonprofit art museum service organization that provides traveling art exhibitions and educational, professional, and technical support programs developed in collaboration with the museum community. Through these programs, the AFA seeks to strengthen the ability of museums to enrich the public's experience and understanding of art.

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EXHIBITION ITINERARY

Marsh Art Gallery
Richmond, Virginia
January 3–February 28, 1997

The Arkansas Arts Center
Little Rock, Arkansas
March 28–May 23, 1997

Newport Harbor Art Museum
Newport Beach, California
June 20–August 15, 1997

Philbrook Museum of Art
Tulsa, Oklahoma
September 12–November 7, 1997

The Society of the Four Arts
Palm Beach, Florida
January 9–February 8, 1998

Salina Art Center
Salina, Kansas
March 6–May 3, 1998

Metropolitan Life Foundation is pleased to join The American Federation of Arts and The Metropolitan Museum of Art to bring you *Still Life: The Object in American Art, 1915–1995—Selections from The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. The exhibition and its accompanying catalogue highlight the vitality of the still-life paintings produced in this century. The sixty-six works are drawn from the collections of one of the preeminent museums in the world and present, through a variety of subjects, the different painting styles of over fifty artists. We are delighted to be part of this important project, which celebrates the richness of the American still-life tradition.

Harry P. Kamen
Chairman, President, and Chief Executive Officer
Metropolitan Life Insurance Company



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Still Life: The Object in American Art, 1915–1995 is the sixth exhibition in an ongoing collaboration between the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Federation of Arts designed to share the museum's vast resources with other institutions around the country. Its presentation is timely. Just over thirty years ago the American Federation of Arts sponsored the exhibition *A Century of American Still Life Painting, 1813–1913*, organized by William H. Gerdt. At that time still-life painting was an overlooked category, a minor genre in comparison to portraiture, landscape and historical paintings, or religious and mythological subjects. Since then, there has been a steady reevaluation of still life, and the richness of the genre is demonstrated in this selection of sixty-six paintings from the twentieth century art collection at the Metropolitan Museum.

For their contributions to both the exhibition and this publication, we wish to thank the following staff members at the Metropolitan Museum: William S. Lieberman, Jacques and Natasha Gelman, Chairman of 20th Century Art, and his colleagues, Lowery Stokes Sims, curator; Sabine Rewald, associate curator; Lisa Messinger, assistant curator; Ida Balboul, research associate; Alleyne Miller, administrative assistant; and present and former interns and fellows in the department, Brian Boucher, Akiko Hasekawa, Michele Marcantonio, Jessica Murphy, and Susan Rosenberg. We would like to acknowledge as well the contributions of Lucy Belloli of the Paintings Conservation Laboratory; Marceline McKee from the Loans Office; and Nestor Montilla in the Office of the Registrar.

We also thank those members of the AFA staff whose efforts have been important to the realization of this project: Marie-Thérèse Brincard, senior curator of exhibitions; Rachel Granholm, head of education; Alexandra Mairs, former exhibitions/publications assistant; Michaelyn Mitchell, head of publications; María Gabriela Mizes, registrar; Martha Neighbors, former exhibitions coordinator; Thomas Padon, director of exhibitions; and Jillian Slonim, director of public information.

We would like to acknowledge the participation of the presenting museums: the Marsh Art Gallery, Richmond, Virginia; The Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock; the Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California; the Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma; The Society of the Four Arts, Palm Beach, Florida; and the Salina Art Center, Salina, Kansas.

Lastly, we would like to thank the Metropolitan Life Foundation for their very generous support, without which the project would not have been possible, and the National Patrons of the AFA, who have designated this project as the National Patron Exhibition of 1997.

Philippe de Montebello
Director, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Serena Rattazzi
Director, The American Federation of Arts



INTRODUCTION

LOWERY STOKES SIMS
AND SABINE REWALD

As recently as the early 1980s, still life was considered a minor genre. Despite its roots in the wall decorations of antiquity and its dramatic proliferation in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, still-life painting always suffered in comparison to the supposedly loftier genres of portraiture, landscape, history painting, and religious and mythological subjects. In the nascent American school of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, still-life painting was often dismissed for its lack of heroics and distrusted for its promotion of trompe l'oeil illusionism. Even with such influential practitioners as Caravaggio, Chardin, and Cézanne, still life remained for centuries the neglected stepchild of high art.

In the American art of the twentieth century, however, still-life painting has found a new relevance and respect. Within the context of modern art, the very premises and techniques that had governed the development of still life—

spatial and formal illusionism and sumptuous rendering of surface—made it the perfect vehicle for an aggressive deconstruction of the surface, texture, and form of academic painting. And, in America, the spectacular rise of consumer society in the early years of this century only increased the attention that artists began to lavish on objects that had been primed and primped for consumption. As Linda Cathcart has noted,

American concern for objects has always been thought to be both a specific and somewhat native one. There is a love of the way things in this country look, and yet at the same time a resentment that these objects fill and obliterate the landscape. It is this obsession with objects which makes still life a natural, compelling subject for many American artists.¹



FIG. 1 Jacques de Gheyn the Elder, *Vanitas Still Life*, 1603. Oil on wood, 32½ x 21¼ in. Charles B. Curtis, Marquand, Victor Wilbour Memorial, and The Alfred N. Punnett Endowment Funds, 1974 (1974.1)

In the mid-1960s, the American Federation of Arts began an important series of traveling exhibitions focusing on American still-life painting. This series included *A Century of American Still-Life Painting, 1813–1913* (1966) and *American Still-Life Painting, 1913–1967* (1967), both organized by William Gerds, and *Still-Life Painting Today*, organized in 1971 in consultation with Tom L. Freudenheim, Martin L. Friedman, Lloyd McNeill, and Donald L. Weisman. Many of the artists featured in those earlier projects are also included in this survey of twentieth-century still-life paintings from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Among these artists are Stuart Davis, Preston Dickinson, Samuel Halpert, Marsden Hartley, Walt Kuhn, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Henry Lee McFee, Walter Murch, Georgia O’Keeffe, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Franklin Watkins, and Max Weber. What is different about this show, however, is that of the sixty-six works included over a third were created after 1980.

In fact, there was a surprising resurgence of interest in still-life painting in the 1980s. Exhibitions such as Frank H. Goodyear Jr.’s 1981 survey *Contemporary American Realism Since 1960* at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; Linda Cathcart’s 1983 exhibition *American Still Life, 1945–1983* at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston; Dahlia Morgan’s *American Art Today: Still Life* (1984) at the Art Museum,

Florida International University, Miami; Paula A. Foley and Zoltan Buki’s *Contemporary American Still Life* shown at the New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, in 1986; and the 1994 survey *Still-life Painting*, organized by Karyn Esielonis at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, are important benchmarks of this revival. The Houston exhibition, in particular, prompted a wide range of critical responses.² This, in part, precipitated a number of revisionist art-historical views of still-life painting, most notably Norman Bryson’s landmark study *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, published in 1990.³

Although the development of still-life painting in Europe and America cannot be completely told through examples of paintings in the Metropolitan Museum, the collection does include many notable still lifes. The earliest Western still-life painting in the museum’s collection, *Vanitas Still Life* (fig. 1) by the Dutch painter Jacques de Gheyn the Elder (1565–1629), is in fact the earliest known depiction of the vanitas theme. The composition has great simplicity. The human skull sits in an alcove surrounded by the symbols of human vanities—a large soap bubble, a tulip, smoke, and coins.

The Netherlands provided the richest soil for still-life painting. These works were painted for, and acquired by, an appreciative bourgeoisie to decorate their houses. The museum owns the works of two painters who might be said to represent two styles fashionable at the time. Jan Brueghel the Younger (1601–1678) presents the “salon” still life with his jewel-like *A Basket of Flowers* (fig. 2). His Flemish contemporary Jan Fyt (1611–1661) creates the “kitchen” still life in images of dead partridges, hares, and birds.

When the French Jean Siméon Chardin (1731–1768) looked at Dutch still-life painting, he studied Fyt’s rather than Brueghel’s work. Chardin was the first great artist to paint still lifes of commonplace objects, usually food and kitchen utensils. The museum owns one early still life by Chardin, *The Silver Tureen* (fig. 3). In this painting, a curious cat studies a pewter soup tureen and a dead hare, and some apples are set against a dark background. What is striking about the work is its simplicity, especially if compared to *Still Life with Silver* (fig. 4) by Chardin’s contemporary Alexandre François Desportes (1661–1743). Desportes’s huge canvas presents a buffet

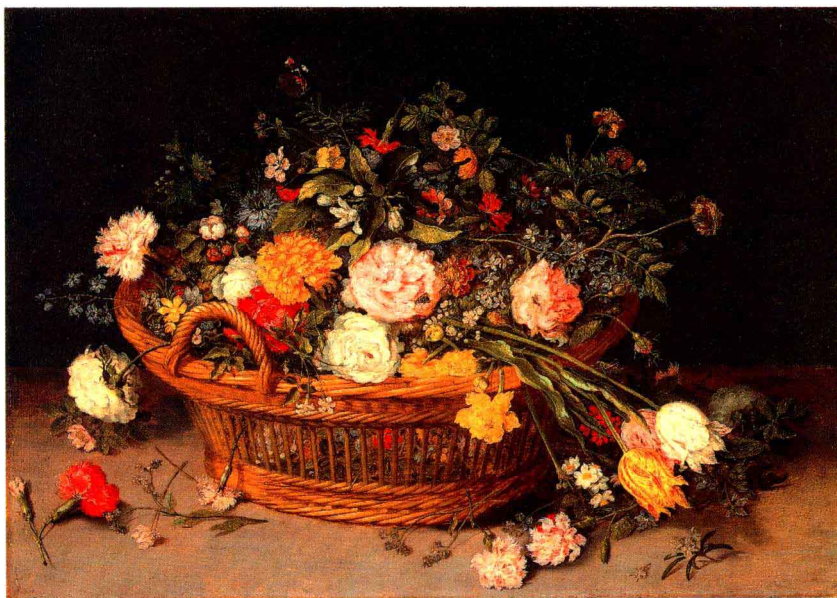


FIG. 2 Jan Brueghel the Younger, *A Basket of Flowers*. Oil on wood, 18 1/2 x 26 7/8 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Miss Adelaide Milton de Groot (1876–1967), 1967 (67.187.58)



FIG. 3 Jean Siméon Chardin, *The Silver Tureen*, ca. 1728. Oil on canvas, 30 x 42 1/2 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1959 (59.9)