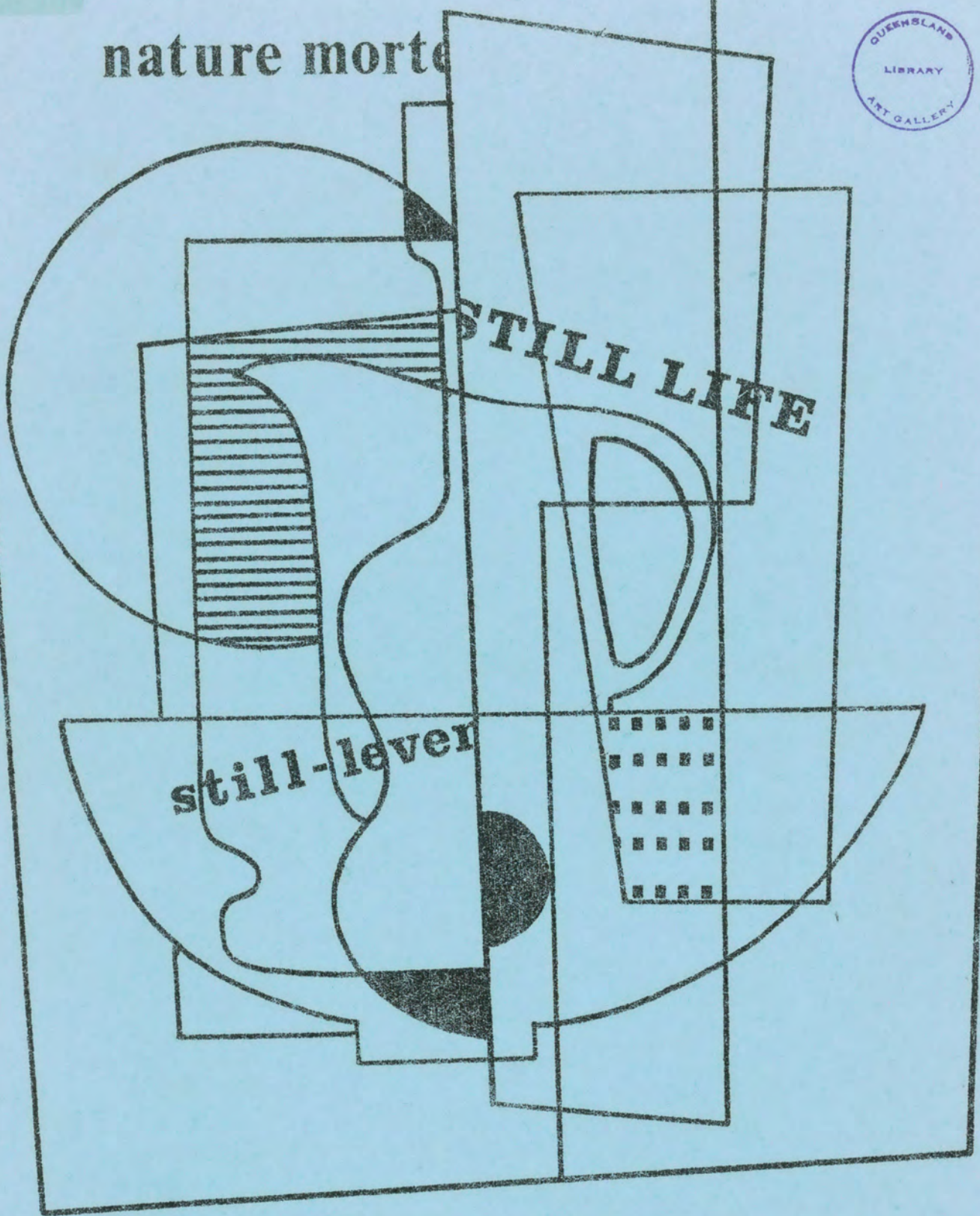


nature morte



**STILL LIFE PAINTINGS
FROM THE COLLECTION**

QUEENSLAND ART GALLERY

S.A.A. Excav.

1926/3

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STILL LIFE PAINTING - ITS ORIGINS

The Oxford Companion to Art defines the painting of still life as the painting of inanimate objects such as fruit, flowers, or utensils usually arranged on a table. The term derives from the Dutch still-leven, which did not come into use before the middle of the 17th century and denotes simply a motionless (still) aspect of nature (leven). It means the same in the French term nature morte which dates from the 18th century. The painting of such inanimate objects for their own sake and for the display of the painter's skill presupposes an attitude to the art of painting that is by no means universal in the History of art. It existed only sporadically in 4th century Greece, as when Zeuxis painted grapes and Pyreicus obtained great glory and high prices by painting not only low genre pieces but also 'foodstuff.' According to Vitruvius painters called pictures of eatables xenia from the custom of sending gifts of foodstuffs to foreign visitors. Descriptions of xenia are included in the "Imagines" of Philostratus. They seem to have had the features of genuine still lifes.

Amongst the profusion of styles and subjects in Roman painting still life doesn't dominate but fills an important minor role in wall decoration. The illusionism of the "transparent walls" at Pompeii, Herculaneum and Boscoreale will be well known to most, where **grand architectural** fantasies were portrayed to give an apparent larger dimension to rooms and at the same time re-create a theatrical extravagance in the home in general. Still lifes, garden pictures, landscapes and animal studies are the lesser subjects but are treated with the same degree of accuracy and faithful imitations of forms and colour - this time from nature not architecture.

Still life painting followed pretty closely the evolution of decorative mural painting in general - realistic in Second Style art, dainty and stylized in the Third Style, and lavishly varied and naturalistic in the Fourth Style Arts.

In the House of Julia Felix, Pompeii (re-discovered 1952) the still life subjects found painted in the nymphaeum (outdoor dining area) were to be found in the orchard and vineyard which surrounded the house. In "Bowls of Fruit and Amphora" one is taken with the representation of various fruit in a glass bowl half filled with water, and the texture of the earthenware jar and the leaning small amphora. Light, shade and shadow are depicted with skill, the light background reduces the depth into the picture and the unusual split level planes in the immediate foreground give a fore taste of modern picture composition.

There was little room for still life proper within the context of Christian medieval art, but during the same centuries the painters of the Far East developed the most subtle understanding for the hidden life of plants, birds and insects. They only approximate in subject to the Western conventions of still life, but it isn't until the revival of the classical ideals of illusionistic naturalism with Giotto or Gaddi that the still life re-emerges. **Giotto's trompe l'oeil niches in the Arena Chapel, Padua**, suggest a higher form of realism than ever portrayed before.

Caravaggio (1573-1610)

Caravaggio's masterful representation of the colour and texture of actual objects and manner, in which light affects them was a major pre-occupation in that artist's life. Several paintings containing still lifes exist, the "Supper at Emmaus" (National Gallery, London and Brera Gallery, Milan) in both versions shows how these simple objects on the table receive Caravaggio's extreme care and sensitivity. The famous "Ambrosian Still Life" with its extremely low eye level places the objects in a dramatic and easy to view position. Caravaggio's ever present concern with the actual appearance of things led him to include the blemishes with the imperfections. The red apple, dominant object of the group has a worm hole distracting from its acceptability and the withering leaf, depicted with an insect eaten group of leaves on a twig, strike a realistic chord amongst the more perfect examples. The cane texture of the basket, the clouded grapes, and the natural textures of the other fruit make this still life a masterpiece of the Mannerist period.

It was in 16th century Holland that still life first emerged as a distinct category of painting. The van Eyck brothers, Hubert and Jan had confirmed the Renaissance spirit and techniques in Northern European painting, although remaining firmly outside the heroic and Classical tradition of the true Renaissance. They had set a standard of objective realism that was to find its highest expression in the portraits, seascapes, landscapes, interiors and still life painting of the Dutch Masters of the 16th and 17th centuries.

The Dutch, prizing modesty as a great virtue, lived in small houses without large public rooms. As a result, there was an excellent market for paintings. But pictures had to be small and Classical and heroic subjects avoided. The still-life was made to order. The painter need never run short of subject matter. He could work in a small studio rather than away from home. He was left alone to perfect his technique without his patron quibbling about flattering likenesses, suitable themes, or literal truths, he could paint as and when it suited him.

A power to evoke a feeling of quiet security is typical of Dutch still life painting. Part of the reason is obvious; the subject matter of the table and an abundance of food - a theme never carried to absurdity. The more important reason is that the compositions are well planned and stable. A cup or glass is not only judged for its own beauty, but for the relationship of its ellipses to the picture as a whole. A spiral of lemon peel is an essay in geometry and brush control.

Qualities such as the powdery bloom on a peach, the iridescent glow of an oyster shell or mother of pearl knife handle, the glint of gun-metal, the glass of wine simultaneously reflecting, holding and conducting light are all somehow observed and analyzed with detachment and set down on canvas in such a way that the paint acquires these qualities itself. The brush work is subdued and the hand of the artist concealed. It is only after careful study that the unsigned work of Pieter Claes (1591-1661) Wilhelm Heda (1594-1682) and Jan David de Heem (1606-1684) can be recognized.

The objects represented in many Dutch still lifes were probably first grouped in a box, or surrounded by screens controlling the light, then viewed as a reflection in a tinted mirror. Such preparations would immediately give shadows and depth, and highlight the clear but subdued gleam of the 17th century still life.

Technically Jan Vermeer (1632 - 75) does not come into this category of still life painters, since all his works contain human beings. It would be more correct to describe them as "Still Life with People." He painted every familiar household object, bread, jugs, jewellery, needlework - with the same characteristic and loving detail that is to be found in the true still life. He captures a moment in time with a tranquility and simplicity that turns the mundane domestic scene into a picture of rare and unmistakable magic.

The Masters of Dutch still life painting at its height about 1650 were Jan de Heem (three in the Queensland Art Gallery Collection.) Abraham van Beyeren, William Kalf and van Aelst.

John Baptiste - Simeon Chardin (1699 - 1779)

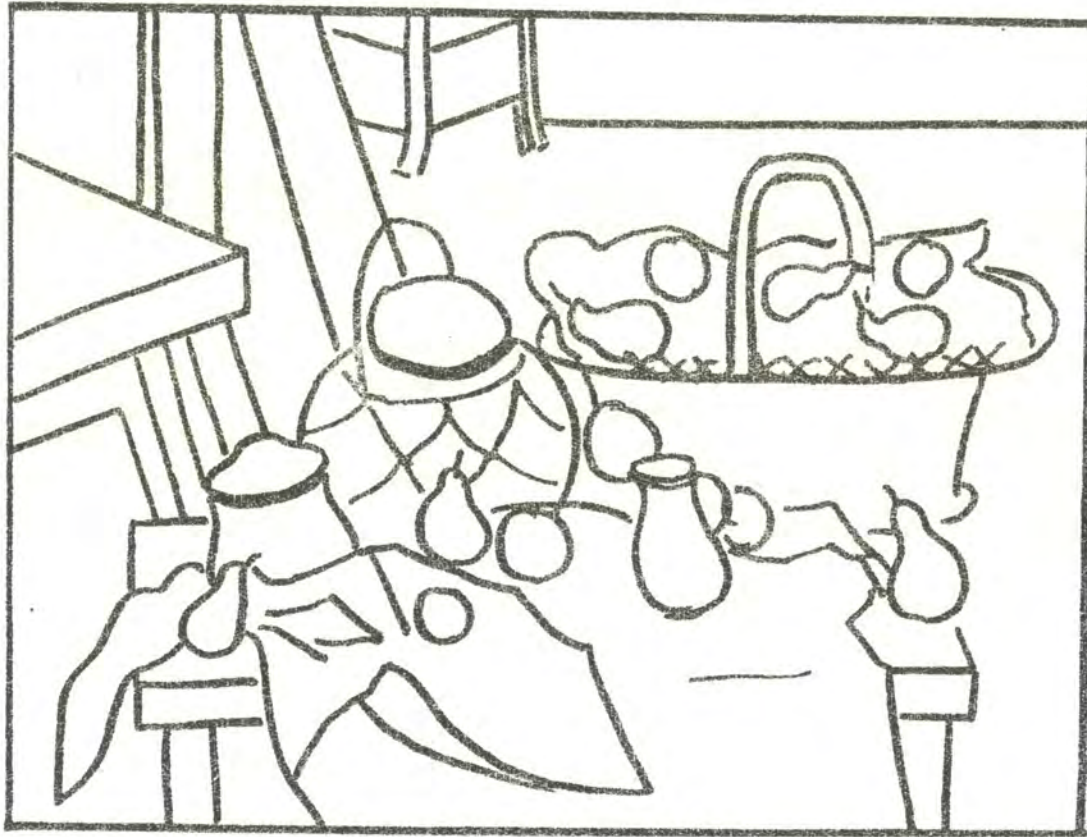
Well known for his still lifes was admitted to the Paris Academy on the strength of two still life pieces "The Skate" and "The Sideboard" (Louvre Paris). This almost unbelievable incident marked the artist's great talent for sensitive painting, for the almost despised still life subjects were regarded by the Academy as being one of the lowest forms of art. At the other extreme "history" paintings (large scale figure compositions of moral religious or mythological subjects,) were the highest forms.

In most of Chardin's paintings there is a reflection of his bourgeois background and life, he led a simple life, was honest and contented with his domestic status. There are at times touches of the Flemish painters (the same serenity and intimacy that Vermeer expresses) but his paint is richer, thicker and more scumbled than the Dutch master's style.

"The Girl Scraping Vegetables" (National Gallery, Washington) is a humble subject, yet the composition and the use of negative shapes gives it a monumental quality. "The Cellar Boy" and "The Scullery Maid" both in the Hunterian Museum Glasgow show Chardin's interest in rendering the textures of everyday objects without losing the dry scumbled paint he preferred to use.

The many still life paintings he did in his earlier years are more crowded and have a stronger feeling for the simple functional objects about his house. Some objects are featured repeatedly but it is the depiction of the quality of light as it falls on these objects that is more important. The light on glass, the sheen of well worn copper, the glistening scales of wet fish, the rosy glow of polished apples, give complete visual satisfaction.

His second marriage brought him a more comfortable mode of living but his later paintings hardly reflect more affluent times - they show the simplest elements such as kitchen utensils, fruits and vegetables.



Diderot in praise of Chardin remarked "It is not white, red and black that you mix on your palette, it is the real substance of things. You take on the end of your brush air and lights and transfer them to canvas." Although Chardin raised still life painting to one of the highest forms of art, he simply could not make a living out of it.

Cezanne more than anyone of that time changed the direction of painting in the western world. Cezanne in his isolation turned to still life subjects, a popular belief being very few models had the patience to pose for him as he was both demanding and impatient. Whilst this was partly true his main intention was to use these inanimate forms the way he wanted them. Like the larger elements in his landscapes Cezanne moved his apples, lemons, pears etc. around his canvas like chessmen - he fore-shortened or tilted bottles, bowls or jugs, he raised the backs of tables to reduce the depth of his picture field and played the game he most enjoyed, that being the meaningful use of colour wherein tones were vitally important. Shape and volume are the real things we look at today for with his firm, deliberate and separate brush strokes he gave volume or form in a way no other artist had previously painted.

Cezanne dispensed with some laws of perspective, something at which his 17th century predecessors would have been alarmed. Cezanne painted from one side of a table top to the other, plotting the position of objects in space by marking the points where their forms intersected or overlapped. Consequently the sides of a wide table will diverge instead of converging, and an edge of a plate will reappear from behind an object which cuts it at another level. In distorting his space it is frequently to reduce the space in the canvas to a foot or two. Later as we will see this is reduced to a few inches at the hands of the Cubists.

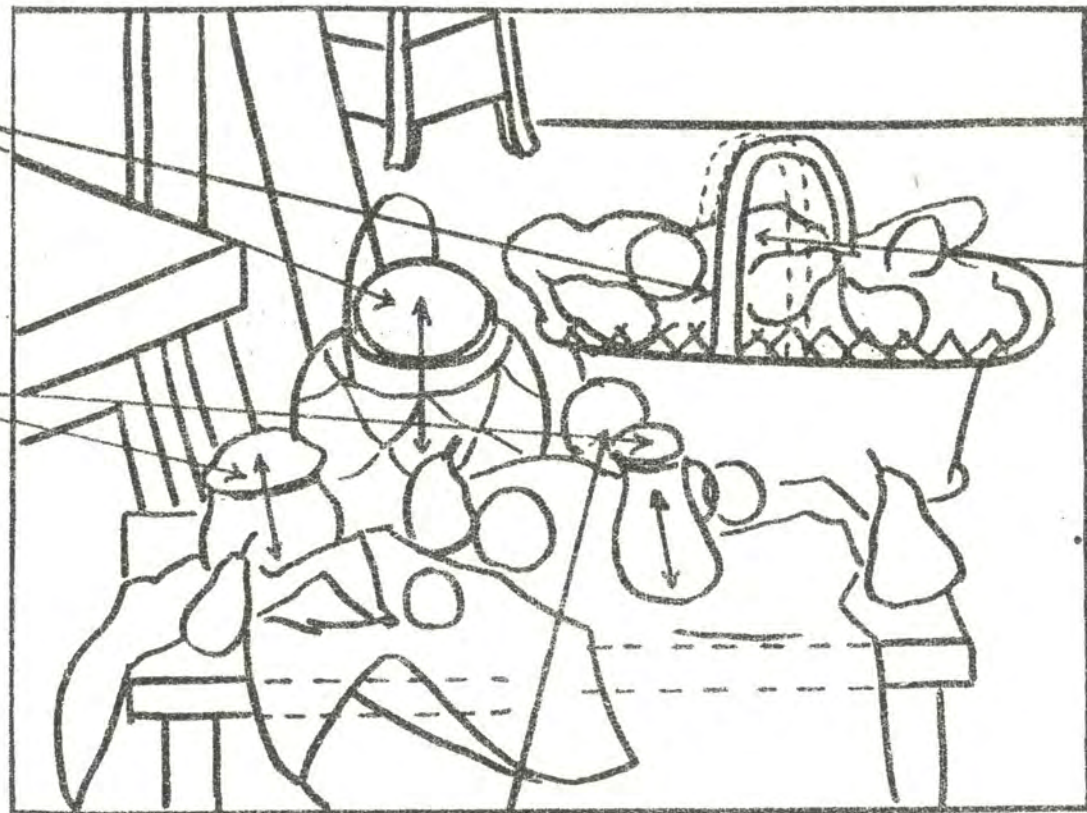
In analyzing Cezanne's still life painting opposite we are introduced to several peculiar methods he used to provide greater interest and more movement and tension in his paintings. He frequently used distortion and multiple eye levels, this painting being an excellent example of this.

The major or more obvious eye level focuses on the front of the basket the sugar bowl and the small pitcher. If we were to follow the ellipses of the latter two forms they appear at a normal level.

The second eye level is somewhat higher, the opening of the ginger jar and the top of the basket and the table top, to the left are wider and more open assuming we are looking down on them from a higher position.

The third eye level is more a point of view for the handle of the basket curves to the back right rather than back left as if seen from the far right.

The tensions Cezanne builds up through changing eye levels is often more obvious when he tilts objects like bowls and table tops forward whilst they give the objects a greater sense of three dimensionality they also relate more clearly to the flat plane of the picture, which at first reading seems a paradox.



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We have a strange feeling we are not observing the objects from directly in front but from the left of centre making us feel we are seeing around the objects.

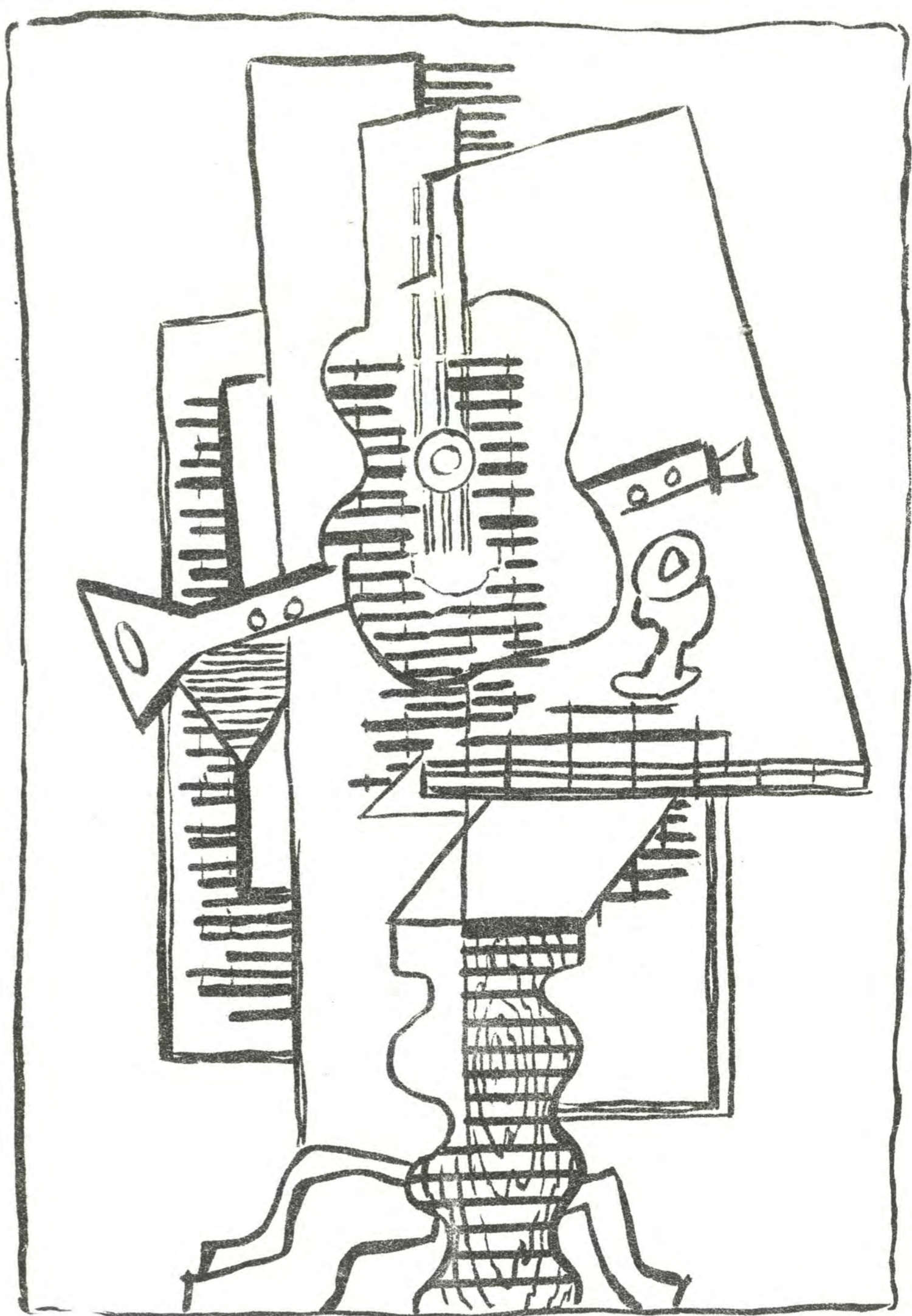
An extraordinary distortion is seen in the splitting of the edge of the table top. The two edges in no way link up in a straight line along the table top. We sense the tension under the cloth but this is not an unusual device for other artists who paint abstractly have resorted to this highly intellectual and conscious way, sometimes dividing the picture plane into a dark and light object, as in Braque's familiar table jug.

The last distortion in the painting shows Cezanne's habit of tipping the objects off their vertical axes to left or right. Here the sugar bowl and jug are inclined towards the left while the ginger jar remains vertical. The conflict between static and dynamic axes continues throughout the painting with the strongest axial variations occurring the pears.

It is most unlikely that Cezanne considered all these distortions and differences at the point of time of painting. We tend to theorize about his work, for Cezanne worked by feeling and intuition, the accidental distortions arose from the inner necessities of the particular problem at hand. But for the interested viewer and student we frequently like to see how it was done and laborious efforts to emulate the master may prove over-conscious and studied.

Georges Braque

Having first being impressed with the structural composition of Cezanne, Braque later developed an interest in the form of Cubism Picasso was evolving. They were closely associated until about 1914 when Braque became more interested in collages. Recovering from a war wound in 1917 he became interested in still life and except for one or two lapses into other subjects it became his major pre-occupation. Braque's abstracted studies lack the serenity of Morandi or the sensitivity of Chardin's brushwork - but they have a generous monumentality - a complication of design, a richness of painted surfaces and warm woody colour schemes which pick up exciting natural textures. The subject rarely changes - the table top - whether the dining room table full of vases, jugs, fruit, vegetables and instruments; the studio table with the artists clutter of pots, jars, brushes, and the still life models, or the graceful gueridon which he painted many times mainly in admiration for the unique shape of the table's structure, whether the still life shapes are abstracted, simplified, distorted or cut into or through with other shapes - they never entirely lose their identity for each has its place in grand compositions which readily stir the emotions. Textured effects of wall paper, wood grain, newspaper or tablecloth never take over and dominate for each highly coloured texture has its compensatory area of tone thus creating a constantly satisfying visual appeal.



In many of Georges Braque's still lifes the two-dimensional quality is maintained whilst he suggests a space between the flat planes. Hints of shadows or slightly receding planes simply become the negative shapes or the foils for the positive shapes.

Giorgio Morandi (1890 - 1964)

An Italian Painter who more than most contemporary painters went his own way and worked in isolation from current movements. After early landscapes he painted almost exclusively still lifes giving them literary and symbolic content. He worked for subtle combinations of colour within a narrow range of tones (mainly high key) and he concentrated on purely plastic expression and created a poetic simplicity few artists have been able to imitate. Serene and uncomplicated his forms huddle together most frequently as if to give support to each other - at times they are strung out parallel to the picture plane and balance precariously along its edge.

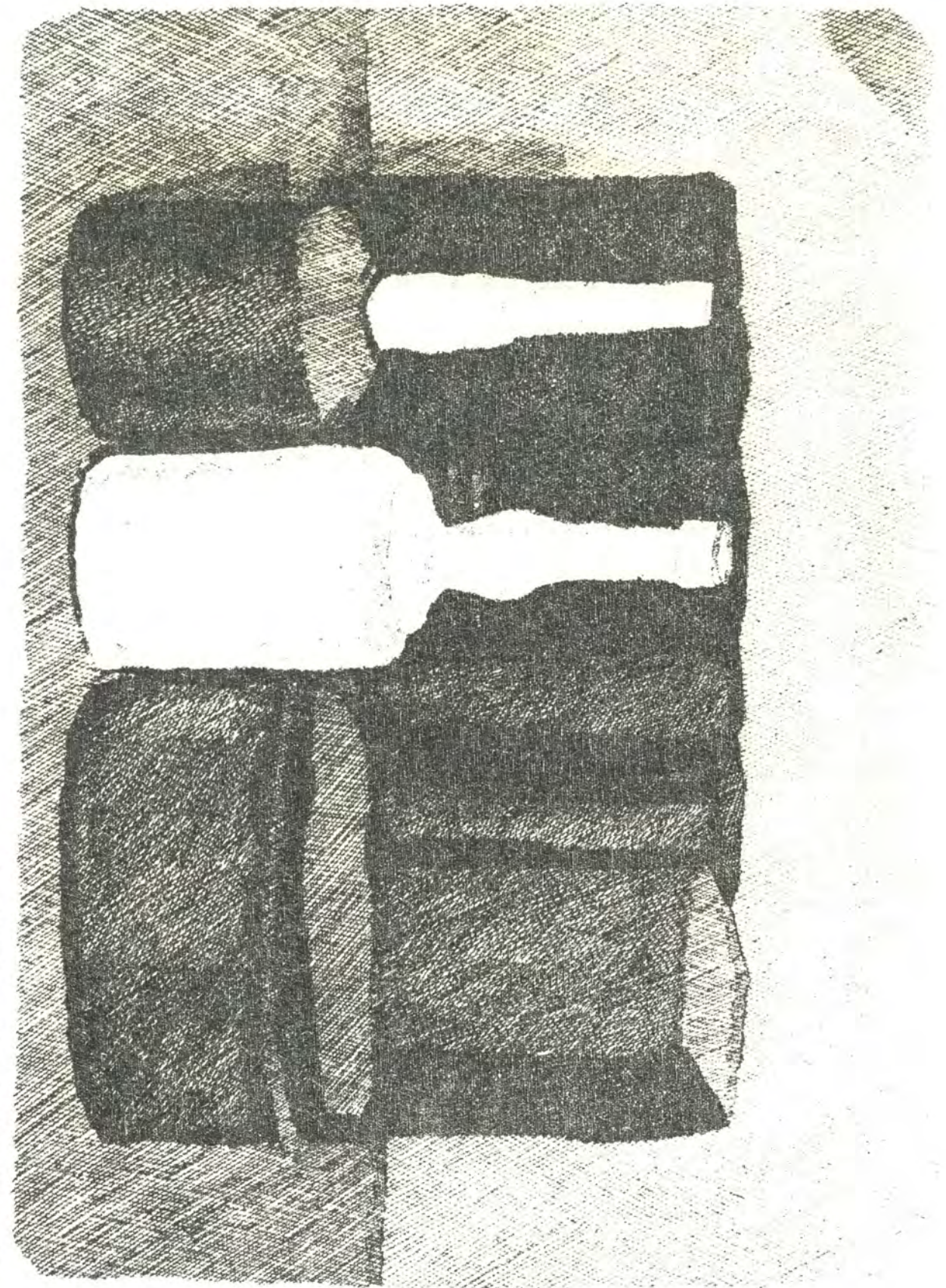
The bottle still lifes which form the major part of his art may be grouped according to various points of view, that is according to composition, colour and mood. Some regard Morandi's work as being monotonous because of the subject matter mainly - but this is only a superficial observation; for those who look below the surface know that hardly two of Morandi's still lifes are similar. It is his particular genius that out of the humblest boxes, tin cans, old oil lamps and dusty bottles that he produces works of art full of poetry. His still lifes can be melancholic, or romantic and sometimes playful in conception and execution. Some are slightly stronger in colour, others subtle in their light and shade.

Giorgio Morandi frequently defies the laws of good composition giving an almost equal division of the picture plane, crowded monotonous shapes, poised along the foreground in a static restricted space. We could call this a very symmetrical closed composition.

Ben Nicholson's two dimensional still life compositions are often mixtures of kitchen objects and geometric shapes. His main concern is for classic proportions, the overlapping of shapes and pleasing rhythms.

In Nicholson's pristine line whether it be in a painting, drawing or etching we see the clarity of the artist's thinking and the sensitivity of his draughtsmanship. It is immediate and deadly accurate, too clinical for some but for many it exudes all the classicism of the great periods in art history wherein proportion and composition were paramount concerns.

What of the still life painters of today's art world? We have passed through the period of the "kitchen sink" artists like Englishman John Bradley who emphasized the shabbiness and disorder of things in use, the packets of corn flakes, the upturned glasses, sauce bottles and chip fryer arranged in an abandoned clutter. Despite these effects these paintings still have a substantial quality.



GIORGIO MORANDI - "Still Life with Nine Objects", 1954

But if we can include Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, Patrick Caulfield and Tom Wesselmann amongst our still life painters much is to be learnt from their Pop Art exploits.

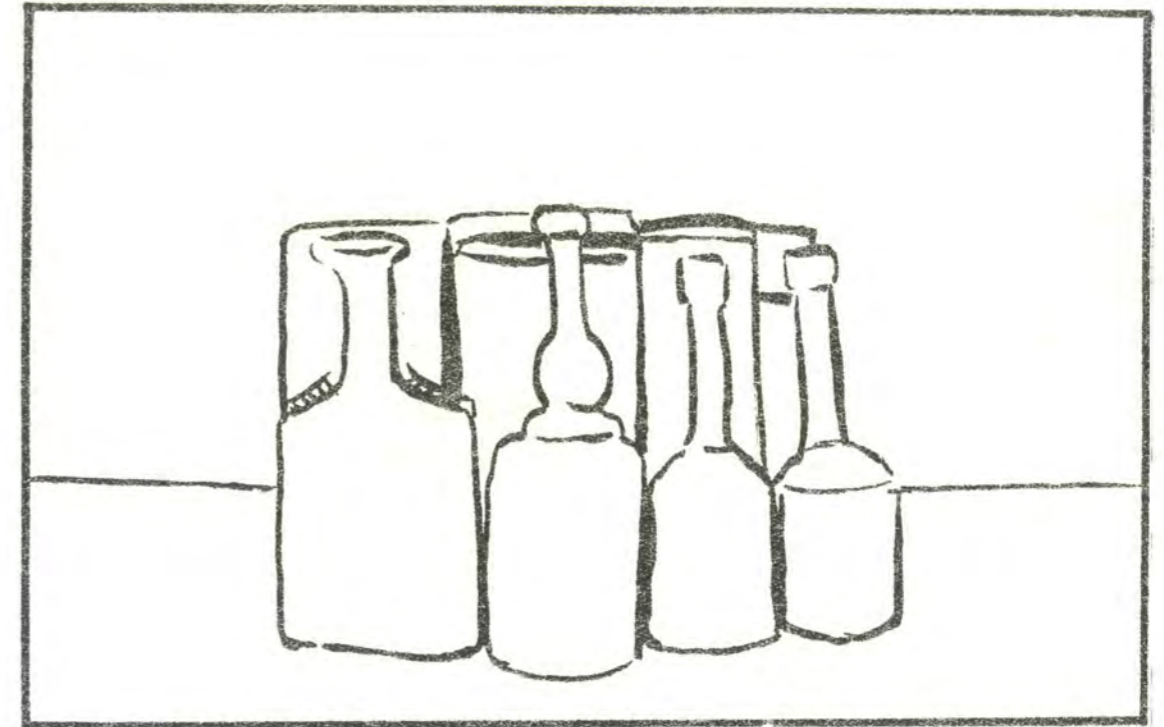
Andy Warhol's tongue in cheek comments utilizing the common place Coca-Cola bottles and Campbell Soup cans in such a repetitive manner are re-echoed by Wayne Thiebaud with "Refrigerator Pies" (Pasadena Art Museum) leading us to reflect on the cold mass produced world and consumerism.

Patrick Caulfield the English artist in "Still Life on Table 1964" and "Pottery 1969" (Tate Gallery) give us vulgarized subject matters which demand a high level of sophistication for appreciation. The still life in his hands became pictorial (almost cartoon-like in their delineation) clichés.

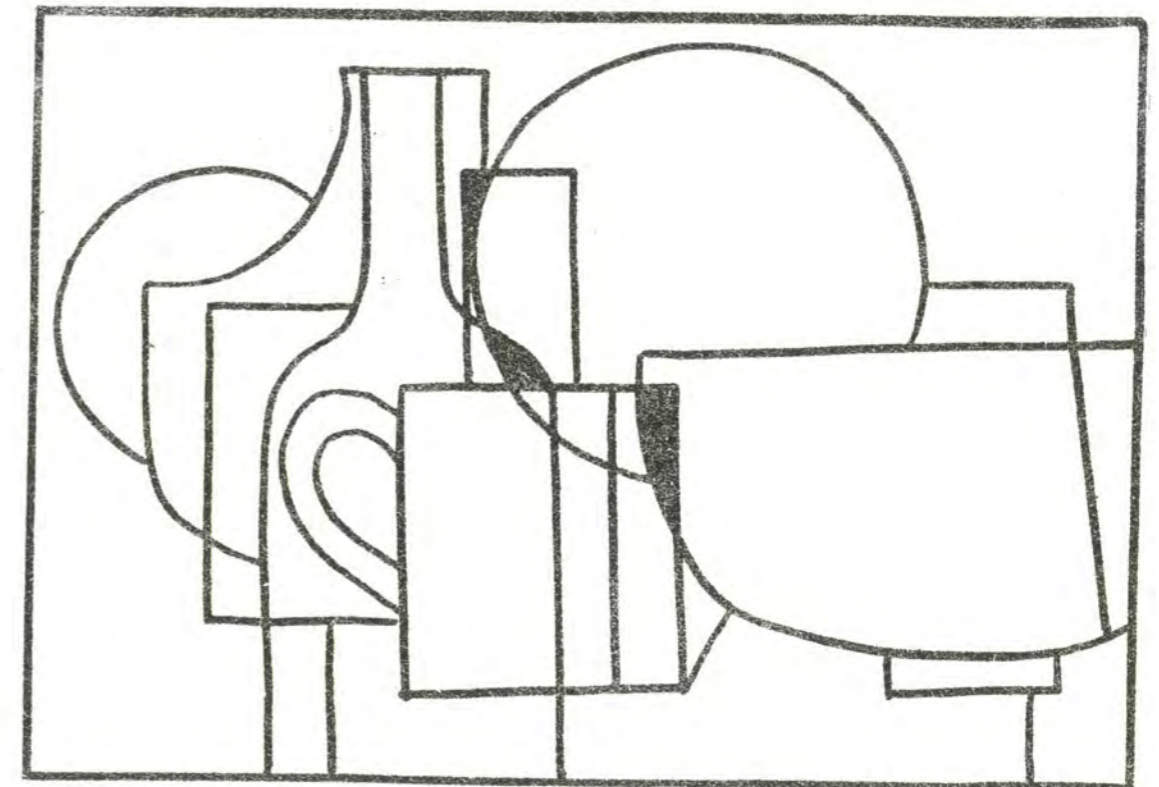
The degree to which still life objects can be portrayed is limitless. If we think Claes Oldenburg has made the final statement with such giant constructions made from canvas or vinyl stuffed with kapok or foam then we have only to wait for new directions in art for the answer. "Hamburger with Pickle, Piece of Layer Cake with Icing and Giant Ice-cream Cone" 1962 and "Hamburger, Popsicle, Price" 1962 are two of Oldenburgs food 'sculptures' which include Ice-cream Sundaes, Hot Dogs, Pecan Pies and Chocolate Eclairs - they are "filled with the joy of sensation, mouthwatering and brightly enamelled". Again they reflect the vulgarity and tastelessness of such low protein fun fair type foods. They are repulsive to the eye yet bring to the subconscious salivary memories of the past.

Like so many artists before him Oldenburg and the Pop artists and the New Realists are only interested in the common place - but their images are directed more towards the brashness or trashiness of 20th century life, advertising images, the pre-cooked take away foods and fake displays of food in shop windows.- (The Peters Ice-Cream cone type symbol common to our milk bars)

There is little left that appeals - perhaps what is left is tasteless in more ways than one.



George Morandi frequently defies the laws of good composition giving an almost equal division to the picture plane, crowded monotonous shapes which are balanced along the foreground edge, and a static restricted space. We could call this a very symmetrical, closed composition.



Ben Nicholson's two dimensional still life compositions are often composed of kitchen objects and geometric shapes. His main concern is for classic proportions, the overlapping of shapes and pleasing rhythms of straight and curved lines

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|-----|---|--|---|---|--|
| 1. | APPLETON, Jean
b. 1911
Australian | "Still Life"
Oil on board
60.7 x 76.2 cms | | | |
| 2. | BELL, George
1878-1966
Australian | "A Painters Table"
Oil on canvas
75.1 x 62.2 cms | | | |
| 3. | BELLETTTE, Jean
b. 1919
Australian | "Still Life"
Oil on board
80 x 33.7 cms | | | |
| 4. | BROOKER, William
b. 1916
British | "Still Life on a Bamboo Table"
Oil on Canvas
50.5 x 60.3 cms | | | |
| 5. | BUNNY, Rupert
1864-1947
Australian | "Flowers"
Oil on Canvas
46 x 38 cms | | | |
| 6. | COLQUHOUN, Archibald, D.
b. 1894
Australian | "Still Life"
Oil on Canvas
81.3 x 63.5 cms | | | |
| 7. | DE HEEM, Jan David
1606-1684
Dutch | (1) "Fruit"
Oil on Canvas
36.2 x 46 cms | (2) "Fruit"
Oil on Canvas
36.2 x 46 cms | (3) "Fruit"
Oil on Canvas
58.1 x 83.8 cms | |
| 8. | DE MAISTRE, Roy
1894-1968
Australian | (1) "Still Life with Chair"
Oil on Canvas
91.5 x 71 cms | (2) "Interior"
Oil on Board
66.7 x 41.3 cms | | |
| 9. | DEXTER, William
1818-1860
Australia | "Game"
Oil on Canvas
44.5 cms (round) | | | |
| 10. | FARMER, John
b. 1897
Australian | "Rhododendrons"
Oil on Canvas
66 x 55.8 cms | | | |
| 11. | FEINT, Adrian
b. 1894
Australian | "Flowers and Fruit"
Oil on Canvas
66 x 55.8 cms | | | |
| 12. | FOX, Ethel Carrick
1876-1952
English/Australian | "Still Life"
Oil on Canvas on plywood.
61 x 49.8 cms | | | |
| 13. | GARMAN, Theodore
1924-1954
English | | | | "St. John of the Cross with Flowers"
Oil on canvas
167.3 x 121.9 cms |
| 14. | GIRSON, Bessie
1868-1961
Australian | | | | "Interior with Flowers"
Oil on Canvas
72.4 x 60 cms |
| 15. | GOULD, William
1808-1853
British/Australian | | | | "Still Life with Game"
Oil on Canvas
59.7 x 71.1 cms |
| 16. | GREENE, Anne Alison
1878-1954
Australian | | | | "Still Life with Apples and Pears"
Oil on Canvas on Board
36 x 43.5 cms. |
| 17. | GRIFFITHS, Harley
b. 1908
Australian | | | | "Plums"
Oil on Board
36.8 x 45.7 cms |
| 18. | HEYSEN, Hans
1877-1918
Australian | | | | "Zinnias and Fruit"
Oil on Canvas
69.5 x 82.8 cms |
| 19. | HUNTER, George Leslie
1879-1931
Scottish | | | | "The Chinese Vase"
Oil on Canvas
60.9 x 50.5 cms |
| 20. | JENNER, Walter Isaac
1836-1902
English/Australian | | | | (1) "Still Life"
Oil on Canvas
24.8 x 30.2 cms (oval) |
| | | | | | (2) "Still Life"
Oil on Canvas
24.8 x 30.2 cms (oval) |
| 21. | MILLER, Godfrey
1893-1964
Australian | | | | "Still Life"
Oil on Board
52.1 x 57.2 cms |
| 22. | MURCH, Arthur
b. 1902
Australian | | | | "Still Life"
Oil on canvas
46 x 50.8 cms |
| 23. | NEWBURY, Albert Ernest
1891-1941
Australian | | | | "Mixed Flowers"
Oil on Canvas
53.3 x 65.4 cms |
| 24. | O'CONNOR, Kate
1886-1968
Australian | | | | "Between Hours"
Gouache on Board
100 x 74.6 cms |
| 25. | OLLEY, Margaret
b. 1923
Australian | | | | "Lemons and Oranges"
Oil on Board
76.2 x 101.6 cms |

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| 26. | PRAX, Valentine
b. 1899
Algerian | "Petit Vase Blanc"
Oil on glass
31.5 x 31.5 cms | | | |
| 27. | PRESTON, Margaret
1883-1963
Australian | (1) "Banksias"
Oil on canvas
64.8 x 53.3 cms | | | (1) "Hot, Cold and Steam"
Oil on Plywood
50.8 x 61.6 cms |
| | | (2) "Aboriginal Still Life"
Oil on Canvas
45.7 x 50.8 cms | | | (2) "Stove Theme"
Oil, collage.
96.5 x 53.7 cms |
| 28. | REES, Lloyd
b. 1895
Australian | "Still Life"
Oil on Canvas on Board
29.5 x 36.5 cms | | | (3) "Still Life"
Oil
35.6 x 45.7 cms |
| 29. | SCOTT, William
b. 1913
Scottish | "Towards the Left"
Oil on Canvas
86.4 x 111.5 cms | | | |
| 30. | SHORE, Arnold
1897-1963
Australian | "Banksias"
Oil on Canvas
64.2 x 76.2 cms | | | |
| 31. | SMITH, Grace Cossington
b. 1892
Australian | "Interior"
Oil on Board
91.4 x 58.1 cms | | | |
| 32. | SMITH, Joshua
b. 1905
Australian | "Poppies"
Oil on plywood
45.7 x 50.6 cms | | | |
| 33. | SMITHER, Michael
b. 1939
New Zeland | "The Colander"
Oil on Board
90.7 x 102.5 cms | | | |
| 34. | SPENCER, Stanley | "Interior of Cookham with Spring
Flowers"
Oil on Canvas
50.7 x 76.2 cms | | | |
| 35. | STRACHAN, David
1919-1970
Australian | "Bird with Cherries"
Oil on board
27.7 x 37.5 cms | | | |
| 36. | STREETON, Sir Arthur
1867-1943
Australian | (1) "Hydrangeas"
Oil on Canvas
91.7 x 71.7 cms | (2) "Sunflowers"
Oil on Canvas
91.7 x 71.7 cms | | |
| 37. | VLAMINCK, Maurice
1876-1959 | "Nature Morte"
Oil on Canvas
32 x 39.3 cms | | | |
| 38. | WAKELIN, Roland
1887-1971
Australian | "Still Life"
Oil on Board
55.9 x 45.6 cms | | | |
| | | | | 39. WILSON, Eric
1911-1946 | |

1942 was the year of the
bombing of Pearl Harbor
and the attack on
the Philippines.
The United States
entered the war
on December 7, 1941.
The war lasted for
four years.

1941-1945

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