

# The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release  
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## AN UNPRECEDENTED EXHIBITION OF THE 20TH-CENTURY STILL LIFE OPENS AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ON MAY 25, 1997

### *Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life*

On View: May 25–August 26, 1997

Media Preview: May 21, 10:00 a.m.–1:00 p.m.

Unprecedented in style and scope, *Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life* traces the international development of the modern still life, and reveals the extraordinary innovations that twentieth-century artists have introduced to the 400-year-old tradition of still life painting. On view at The Museum of Modern Art from May 25 to August 26, 1997, the exhibition demonstrates how a diverse group of modern artists has engaged, challenged, developed, transgressed, subverted, and perpetually renewed the idea and genre of the classical still life. Unique juxtapositions and groupings of works provide key insights into the formal inventions of the avant-garde and the evolving language of modern art. Through its rigorous investigation of the still life genre, this wide-ranging exhibition, which is organized by Margit Rowell, Chief Curator, Department of Drawings, offers an innovative overview of the art of this century.

Beginning with Paul Cézanne's *Still Life with a Ginger Jar and Eggplants* (1890–94), this provocative exhibition consists of some 130 paintings, sculptures, and objects created by 71 European and American artists (see attached list). These include masterpieces by Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso from the first half of the 20th century; avant-garde experiments from World War I through the 1950s by Dada, Metaphysical, and Surrealist artists; and finally Pop art and contemporary work from the 1960s through the present.

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By encompassing works not traditionally considered still life, such as Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, Joseph Cornell's boxes, and works by Allan McCollum and Kiki Smith, the exhibition expands the boundaries of the genre. "The difference between the paintings of the classical still life tradition and those of the twentieth century is that the relation between the artist and society has fundamentally changed," writes Ms. Rowell in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition. "Virtually freed from the fictitious realisms or realistic fictions solicited by a predetermined clientele (whether church, state, or an individual client), twentieth-century artists can, generally speaking, indulge in the formulation of their own narratives, their own structures and objects of desire."

*Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life* is organized into ten thematic sections which together reflect important messages conveyed by the works about the relationship between art, society, and its objects, and the range of meanings—symbolic, moral, romantic, mythic, sexual—they embody. Ms. Rowell notes in her essay, "These works (like all artworks) do not depict the real or the natural but are cultural signifiers, and the codes by which they operate are not spontaneously invented and reinvented but ideologically determined, not personal to the artist but strategically symbolic of the priorities and desires of a given society at a given time." The ten sections are as follows:

**The World as Perceptual Field:** This first section centers on the still life during the early years of the century. "During the period 1907–12, the example of Cézanne's still life paintings was vividly present, not only in the treatment of subjects but in the organization of the spatial field," Ms. Rowell writes. Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Henri Matisse were among the artists whose works engaged in a "visual dialogue with Cézanne."

**Anatomies of Structure:** Between 1910 and 1914, Picasso and Braque, as well as Juan Gris, Henri Laurens, and Fernand Léger, used the still life genre to experiment with the structure of objects, and their relationships to each other and to their surrounding spaces. Their Cubist works focused on new subject matter (urban and café life), a new pictorial syntax, and avant-garde techniques such as collage and constructed sculpture.

**Real Fictions:** Dada artists of the 1910s and 1920s, such as Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, and Man Ray, were fascinated with the most ordinary objects, particularly those that were utilitarian or mass-produced. By using these elements in ready-mades, machine paintings, and other works where they were stripped of illusionistic or contextual clues, Dada artists translated prosaic objects into poetic statements.

**Metaphysical Painting: Modern Classicisms/Ideal Geometries:** Between 1913 and 1919 the Metaphysical artists Carlo Carrà, Giorgio de Chirico, and Giorgio Morandi created a series of enigmatic paintings which often showed the artifice or drama of a theater set. Their classical motifs and rigorously ordered compositions corresponded to a timeless and metaphysical vision rather than a focus on modernity.

**Forms of New Objectivity:** In the 1920s Stuart Davis, Fernand Léger, and Gerald Murphy depicted mass-produced, practical items (typewriters, pens, razors) in the flat, colorful style of promotional advertisements. Other artists, including Iwan Babij, Salvador Dalí, Hannah Höch, and Joan Miró, proposed a “magic realism” through a literalist rendering of forms and exact references to earlier treatments and subjects within the still life genre.

**Allegories of Life and Death: Tradition Revisited and Transformed:** In the 1930s and 1940s—a time of economic depression, political instability, and war—still life became a



means for expressing anxiety and unrest. Such artists as Max Beckmann, Chaim Soutine, and James Ensor channeled their intense emotions through established iconographic themes—set tables, for instance, or the age-old *vanitas* motif.

**Languages of Surrealism, Languages of Subversion:** The practice of juxtaposing disparate objects and incompatible elements was fundamental to the Surrealists as a means of subverting accepted cultural premises. In paintings, sculptures, and objects, Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, Meret Oppenheim, René Magritte, and Jean Dubuffet allowed the processes, associations, and images of the subconscious mind to reveal themselves.

**The Mechanisms of Consumer Culture:** In their works of the 1950s and 1960s American Pop artists (Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol) and their European contemporaries (Daniel Spoerri, Piero Manzoni, Marcel Broodthaers) looked for formal and conceptual inspiration in the values and images of a consumer-oriented society. They worked with unconventional subject matter—a pair of sneakers, a tin of Spam, a can of soup—and methods (serial repetition, mechanical reproduction, prefabricated images).

**Postmodern Simulacra:** Although postmodern works made since the late 1970s may examine subjects and objects derived from the traditional still life, they are conceptually and technically very different. Pastiches or surrogates of still life, these works by artists as disparate as Robert Gober, Gerhard Richter, and Allan McCollum emphasize scale, literalness, and physicality in an attempt to disconnect from familiar circuits of meaning.

**Cézanne and Magritte Revisited:** Contemporary pieces by such artists as Mario Merz, Charles Ray, Cindy Sherman, and Robert Therrien continue to work with the classical

convention of objects assembled on a table. On close inspection, however, they prove to be subtle recastings of the genre, and they raise provocative questions: Is this a still life? Must a still life be painted, a representation, or *still*? What is a *modern* still life?

The exhibition closes with Wolfgang Laib's *Milkstone* (1988) in which a living substance, milk, is poured on a marble slab, contained, and stilled. As Ms. Rowell writes of Laib's works in the epilogue of the catalogue, like other still lifes, "They force us to 'look at the overlooked,' transformed and regenerated into an autonomous symbolic system."

An indemnity for the exhibition has been granted by the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. Generous support is provided by AT&T. The publication accompanying the exhibition is made possible by a grant from the Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller Fund.

#### PUBLICATION

***Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life***, by Margit Rowell, accompanies the exhibition. The fully illustrated catalogue contains an essay by Ms. Rowell and is published by The Museum of Modern Art. Clothbound, \$50.00, distributed by Harry N. Abrams, New York, and paperbound, \$29.95, are both available in The MoMA Book Store.

#### TRAVEL

The exhibition will travel to the Hayward Gallery, London (October 9, 1997–January 4, 1998).

#### ACOUSTIGUIDE

Candice Bergen is the featured narrator on the 45-minute audiotour of the exhibition. She is accompanied by Glenn D. Lowry, Director, The Museum of Modern Art, and Margit Rowell. In addition to the English-language version, the recorded tour is available in Spanish and French. Audiotours are \$4.00, members \$3.50.

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For further information, contact Alexandra Partow, 212/708-9756, or Lisbeth Mark, 212/708-9847, Department of Communications. Visit our Web site at [www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org).

## Artists included in the exhibition:

Arman  
Iwan Babij  
Georg Baselitz  
Max Beckmann  
Umberto Boccioni  
Georges Braque  
Marcel Broodthaers  
Patrick Henry Bruce  
Carlo Carrà  
Paul Cézanne  
Christo  
Le Corbusier  
Joseph Cornell  
Tony Cragg  
Salvador Dalí  
Stuart Davis  
Giorgio de Chirico  
André Derain  
Jim Dine  
Jean Dubuffet  
Marcel Duchamp  
Raoul Dufy  
James Ensor  
Dan Flavin  
Lucio Fontana  
Domenico Gnoli  
Robert Gober  
Juan Gris  
Philip Guston  
Richard Hamilton  
Hannah Höch  
Alexei von Jawlensky  
Jasper Johns  
Frida Kahlo  
Paul Klee  
Jeff Koons  
Wolfgang Laib  
Mikhail Larionov  
Henri Laurens  
Fernand Léger

Roy Lichtenstein  
Alberto Magnelli  
René Magritte  
Man Ray  
Piero Manzoni  
Henri Matisse  
Allan McCollum  
Mario Merz  
Joan Miró  
Piet Mondrian  
Giorgio Morandi  
Robert Morris  
Gerald Murphy  
Claes Oldenburg  
Meret Oppenheim  
Amédée Ozenfant  
Francis Picabia  
Pablo Picasso  
Iwan Puni  
Robert Rauschenberg  
Charles Ray  
Odilon Redon  
Gerhard Richter  
Ed Ruscha  
Morton Schamberg  
Cindy Sherman  
Kiki Smith  
Chaim Soutine  
Daniel Spoerri  
Robert Therrien  
Andy Warhol