

Objects of desire : the modern still life : May 25-August 26, 1997, the Museum of Modern Art, New York

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Objects of Desire

THE MODERN STILL LIFE

May 25–August 26, 1997

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Despite its origins in the frescoes of antiquity, its spectacular propagation in seventeenth-century Europe, and its stubborn persistence through all the cultural changes of the ensuing eras, the still life has generally been dismissed as a minor form of artistic expression and ranked below the traditional genres of religious and history painting, portraiture, and landscape. Throughout the twentieth century, however, artists have challenged, transgressed, and perpetually renewed the still life theme, engaging it as an exemplary and even paradigmatic vehicle for the recasting, but also the subversion, of earlier traditions. *Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life*, organized by Margit Rowell, Chief Curator of the Museum's Department of Drawings, explores this process through a rigorous selection of 131 works by seventy-one American and European artists. The exhibition is divided into nine sections, described below, which together present an inquiry into the still life as an evolving system of representation that ultimately reflects the relationships between art, society, and its objects, and embodies moral, economic, and social codes of meaning.

I. The World as Perceptual Field

In many ways, the development of the still life in the early years of this century reflected a visual dialogue with Cézanne. The distorted perspective, shifting relationship between objects and their surrounding space, and subtle, muted colors apparent in Cézanne's *Still Life with a Ginger Jar and Eggplants*, 1890–94 (fig. 1), broke down structural and spatial conventions and virtually blended figure and ground in a unified field. Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Henri Matisse found inspiration in both the selection and the organization of the objects in works like this one. Cézanne's choices of prosaic fruits and vegetables, simple utensils, and stoneware pottery reflect a preference for humble domestic objects that remained a persistent characteristic of the modern still life throughout the century's first decades.

II. Anatomies of Structure

The structures of objects, and their relationships to each other and to their surrounding spaces, were of primary interest in the development of Analytic Cubism during the period 1910–14. Picasso and Braque in particular, but also Juan Gris, Henri Laurens, and Fernand Léger, found the still life an exemplary site for innovation and experimentation. Abandoning the familiar domesticity of the objects in Cézanne's still lifes, they sought inspiration in the urban milieu. The ever-changing settings of the café table—cigars, pipes, newspapers, bottles of different sizes and shapes—were the chosen motifs in Cubist works of the period. The playful use of words and pasted paper to signify things introduces a more concrete reality:



1. Paul Cézanne. *Still Life with a Ginger Jar and Eggplants*, 1890–94. Oil on canvas, 29 3/4 x 36 1/2" (72.4 x 91.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Stephen C. Clark, 1960. ©The Metropolitan Museum of Art

in Picasso's *Siphon, Glass, Newspaper, and Violin*, 1912, for example, the cutout word "JOURNAL" represents a newspaper on a table, and in other works, marbled, faux-bois, or patterned paper represents tabletops or walls. Objects drawn or outlined over such collaged elements force a further shift in perception and provoke multiple viewpoints, dismantling and reconstructing reality.

III. Real Fictions



Whereas the disavowal of all accepted modes and conventions was a primary goal of Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Francis Picabia, and other artists of the Dada group during the teens and early 1920s, they also had a fascination with the most ordinary objects, particularly those that were utilitarian and mass-produced. Man Ray's *Gift*, 1921 (seen here in a later version made by the artist in around 1958) (fig. 2), is an ordinary flatiron of the period, but the tacks glued onto it (the artist's name and a jesting title are also inscribed) absolutely contradict the iron's function and thus its identity. By this transformative gesture the artist makes the object into a poetic statement. This metamorphosis—from reality to fiction, from concrete subject into an artificial system of meanings—is a central principle of the still life genre.

IV. Metaphysical Painting: Modern Classicisms/Ideal Geometries

The Metaphysical still life may be understood as representing a vision of a transcendent and nostalgic order of the world. The term "Metaphysical" here is less philosophical or literary than art-historical, and was applied, beginning as early as 1918, to the art made by Giorgio de Chirico, Carlo Carrà, and Giorgio Morandi between 1913 and 1919. In Carrà's *Still Life with Triangle*, 1917 (fig. 3), four simple objects—a bottle, a jug, a bowl, and a drafting triangle—appear in a cell-like space colored with a monochromatic haze, and projecting a sense of timelessness, airlessness, and closure. The use of classical motifs and geometrically structured compositions is typical of Metaphysical painting; in this it may be compared to works from the same period by Matisse and Picasso, which show a similarly spiritual and idealized approach in their organization of objects.

V. Forms of New Objectivity

The novelties mass-produced and -marketed in the 1920s—cigarettes, razors, pens, mouth-wash—were presented in advertising as icons of a modern society, and indeed as "objects of desire." The punchy visual vernacular of these promotions interested a number of artists including Stuart Davis, Fernand Léger, and Gerald Murphy, whose *Razor*, 1924 (cover), projects the flat, frontal, and scaleless aura of a billboard. These radically self-referential works are grouped here with paintings by Hannah Höch, Joan Miró, Iwan Babij, and Salvador Dalí of the same period. Making obvious references to earlier styles and subjects within the

2, above. Man Ray, *Gift*, c. 1958; replica of original of 1921. Painted flatiron with row of thirteen tacks, heads glued to the iron's bottom, 6 1/2 x 3 1/2 x 4 1/2" (15.3 x 9 x 11.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. James Thrall Soby Fund, 1966. © 1997 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP/Man Ray Trust, Paris



3. Carlo Carrà. *Still Life with Triangle*, 1917. Oil on canvas, 18½ x 24" (46 x 61 cm). Civiche Raccolte d'Arte, Milan. © Estate of Carlo Carrà/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

still life genre, these artists—whether associated with the German “*Neue Sachlichkeit*” (“New Objectivity”) group or with French and Spanish Surrealism—produced works that share a sense of uncanny realism, attaining “objectivity” through a strikingly concrete, precise, and deliberate articulation of forms.

VI. Allegories of Life and Death: Tradition Revisited and Transformed

In this century, the still life has found a relevance that repudiates the dictionary definition of the genre: “the depiction of inanimate objects or material goods.” Although presumably defined by convention, and seemingly removed from political or historical concerns, during the 1930s and ’40s the still life became for many artists a privileged theme through which they channeled both their personal anxieties and terrors and the disturbing, even apocalyptic sense of unrest that pervaded a period of economic depression, political instability, and war. The centuries-old genre of the *vanitas* or *memento mori*—which usually includes a human skull, often paired with books, candles, or domestic objects—reappears here in, for example, Max Beckmann’s *Still Life with Three Skulls*, 1945, which groups skulls with playing cards and liquor bottles, producing a nightmarish intensity.

VII. Languages of Surrealism, Languages of Subversion

Central to Surrealism, perhaps the most important literary and artistic movement of 1920s Paris, was the aim of subverting accepted cultural premises. The juxtaposition of unrelated



4. Meret Oppenheim. *Object*, 1936. Fur-covered cup, saucer, and spoon; cup: 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (10.9 cm) diameter; saucer: 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (23.7 cm) diameter; spoon: 8" (20.2 cm) long; overall height: 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (7.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase, 1946.

objects, words, and concepts—whether by chance or intention—was fundamental to the work of the Surrealists, who assembled disparate objects to dispel predetermined notions and to spark uninhibited (often erotic) associations. Meret Oppenheim's *Object*, 1936 (fig. 4), a teacup, saucer, and spoon covered with fur, is emblematic of the use of incompatible elements to convey sexual connotations and trigger the emotion of desire.

VIII. The Mechanisms of Consumer Culture

The presentation of the object, so vital to such aspects of consumer culture as packaging and advertising, was of great interest to artists in the postwar period, particularly during the 1950s and '60s. The Pop artists abandoned many of the established artistic conventions of the past, replacing them with mechanically reproduced, serially repeated, and prefabricated images, and chose as their subject the mythic representation of the consumer-tailored object. In the present exhibition, works by Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, and Ed Ruscha exploring the transformation of the commonplace object—a sneaker, a can of soup, a tin of Spam—into a commercially desirable commodity indicate the degree to which the still life is an evolving system of representation, closely related to changes in culture and society.

IX. Postmodern Simulacra

The ideologies and the political and economic framework of society today are vastly different from those at the dawn of this century. As the context for art made since the late 1970s or so, the postmodern world calls for a shift in the perception of still lifes from this period. Although the works in this group may examine subjects and even objects deriving from traditional still life themes (the *vanitas*, the domestic table, the vase of flowers), in their conception they differ quite strongly from apparently similar works of the past. Several of them may in fact be described as pastiches or simulacra of the still life—Andy Warhol's *Skull*, 1976, Robert Gober's *Untitled*, 1994–95, and Allan McCollum's *Perfect Vehicles*, 1988–89, for example, which appear intentionally neutral, mechanically executed, and of large or superhuman scale.

Other works are seemingly more conventional, showing objects assembled on a table, as in the classical still life. Even in these more recent variations on the theme, however, the table has become a reinterpretation and subversion of past examples. Charles Ray's *Tabletop*, 1989 (fig. 5), appears at first glance to be a still life in the most literal sense: a table laid with domestic objects. Yet the objects are actually moving, or spinning, very slowly. The tables in this group by Ray, Mario Merz, and Robert Therrien, not to mention Cindy Sherman's

photograph of one, raise provocative questions: is this a still life? Does a still life have to be painted, a representation, or *still*? What is the definition of a *modern* still life?

In the end, however, as different as the postmodern objects are, many of the works in this exhibition pose these or similar questions. In the twentieth century, the still life has proven itself a vital and evolving system of meanings, a visual language in which the most mundane and inanimate objects, transformed and recast, provide keys to understanding our thoughts, dreams, fears, and desires.

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Cover: Gerald Murphy, *Razor*, 1924. Oil on canvas, 32½ x 36½" (82.8 x 92.7 cm). Dallas Museum of Art. Foundation for the Arts Collection, gift of the artist. © Estate of Gerald Murphy.

5, below: Charles Ray, *Tabletop*, 1989. Wood table with ceramic plate, metal canister, plastic bowl, plastic tumbler, aluminum shaker, terra-cotta pot, plant, and motors, 43 x 52½ x 35" (109.2 x 133.3 x 88.9 cm). Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Gift of Lannan Foundation. © Charles Ray

