

# STILL LIFE A HISTORY



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STILL LIFE  
DEFINITIONS

- ➔ The English words come from the Flemish term **Stilleven** meaning “still” things – inanimate objects, fruit, dead animals (motionless).
- ➔ According to the Merriam Webster dictionary it is a picture consisting predominantly of inanimate objects and when the word “genre” is added refers to the category of graphic arts concerned with inanimate subject matter.
- ➔ In Graham Hopwood’s Handbook of Art still life is ‘the depiction of lifeless things such as ornaments, fruit and musical instruments.’

COVER IMAGE

Work depicted here by Gwyn Hanssen Pigott from the Newcastle Art Gallery collection

# JEAN-BAPTISTE OUDRY

b. Paris, France 1686. d. Beauvais, France 1755.

## The White Duck, 1753.



(Note this work was in the private collection of the Marquess of Cholmondeley, Houghton Hall, Norfolk; reported stolen in 1992 and is still at large).

- ➔ What is understated in these definitions is the Still Life capacity for rich allegorical and symbolic themes.
- ➔ The selected objects depicted in still life can mine the human condition, they are imbued with desire or banality, hope and despair, they take on symbolic resonance, referring to the transience of life and the passing of time.

- ➔ In painting prior to the 20th century, the ability to create an illusion was most valued and the genre of still life was where painters could flex their artistic muscle.
- ➔ In a famous story from antiquity, an art competition is staged between two still life painters known as Zeuxis and Parrhasius (context is Greece around 400 BC).

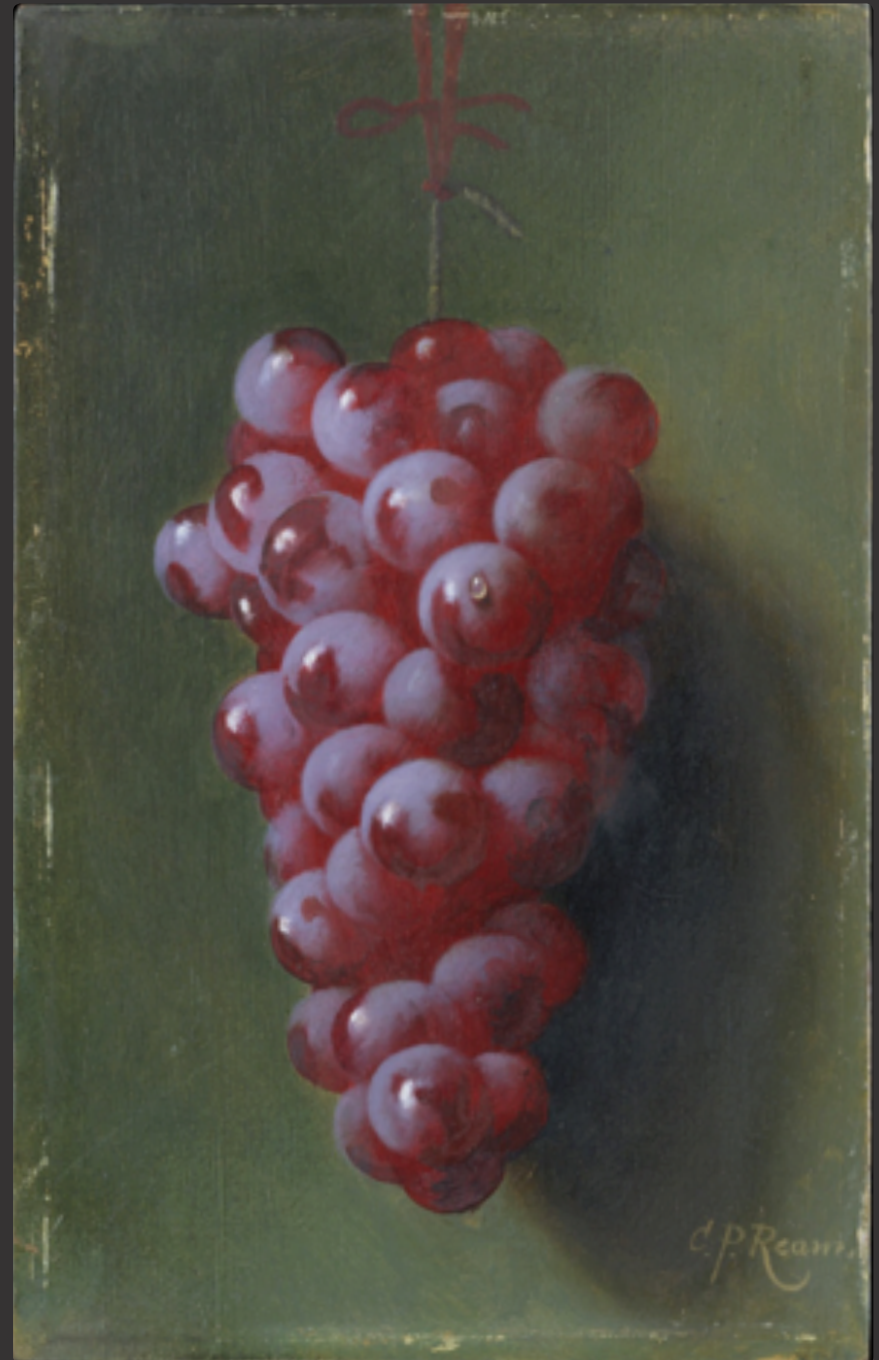
# CADURCIS PLANTAGENET REAM

b. Lancaster, USA 1838. d. Chicago, USA 1917.

## Still life with grapes

- ➔ The stakes are to create the most convincing illusion. First Zeuxis paints grapes in a bowl so realistically that birds attempt to peck them.
- ➔ Assuming the competition won, the artist went to view his competitor's work attempting to pull back the curtain to reveal the artwork Zeuxis realised he had touched the painting. He conceded defeat that his work had tricked birds but Parrhasius had fooled a human being.

Oil on canvas 35 x 24cm,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



# ADRIAEN VAN DER SPELT

b. Leiden, Netherlands 1630. d. Gouda, Netherlands 1673.

# FRANS VAN MIERIS

b. Leiden, Netherlands 1635. d. Leiden, Netherlands 1681

## Still Life with Flowers and Curtain, 1658.



Oil on wood panel, 47 x 64cm,  
The Art Institute Chicago.



THIS NOTION OF CREATING  
AN ILLUSION OF REALITY,  
TO INDEED TRICK THE VIEWER,  
IS A KEY IDEA IN THE HISTORY  
OF STILL LIFE PAINTING.

# FRANS CUYCK VAN MYEROP

b. Bruges, Belgium 1640. d. Ghent, Belgium 1689.

## Still-Life with Fowl, 1670s.

- ➔ This work is an influence on the artist Laura E. Kennedy as well as the next work to follow "After Oudry".

Oil on canvas, 120 x 93cm,  
Groeninge Museum, Bruges, Belgium.



# JEAN-BAPTISTE OUDRY

b. Paris, France 1686. d. Beauvais, France 1755.

## A Hare and a leg of Lamb, 1742.



98 × 73cm,

Cleveland Museum of Art.

# JACOPO DE' BARBARI

b. Venice, Italy 1450. d. Brussels, Belgium 1516.

## Still Life with Partridge and Gauntlet, 1504.

- ➔ A small work measuring just 49x42cm captures the idea of illusion and deception.
- ➔ Possibly created for a hunting Room. Like a trophy, it looks as if the spoils of the hunt are displayed for the viewer as well as a deceptive note for the taking.
- ➔ It is trompe l'oeil at its finest — a term used for all types of illusions. Something artists would strive to achieve, to be in the same league as Zeuxis and Parrhasios and continue to do so.



Oil on wood, 52 x 42 cm, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany.

# SYMBOLIC THEMES IN STILL LIFE



- ➔ The other was the deeper, sometimes symbolic meaning within the objects depicted.
- ➔ To return to the work by De Barbari, there is also the symbolic references. In this particular work there is a symbolic reference in the partridge known as a perdix perdix. Perdix is another name for a great inventor from Antiquity whose uncle became so jealous of his talents that he was thrown from a cliff.
- ➔ Athene saved the nephew by turning him into a partridge. The work raises questions about art/creative as depicted in story of "Perdix" and power depicted literally in the weapons.

# ALEXANDER POPE

b. Massachusetts, USA 1688.

d. Massachusetts, USA 1744.

## The Oak Door, 1887.

➔ An example of *Trompe-l'œil*



Oil on oak 127 x 104cm,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



17TH CENTURY  
DUTCH MASTERS

# WILLIAM MICHAEL HARNETT

b. Clonakilty, Republic of Ireland 1848.  
d. New York, USA, 1892.

## Violin and Music, 1888.



Oil on canvas 101 x 76 cm,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



# JACQUES DE GHEYN II

b. Antwerp, Belgium 1565.

d. The Hague, Netherlands, 1629.

## Vanitas Still Life, 1603.

➔ 17th Century Dutch still life painting



Oil on wood 82 x 54 cm,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

- ➔ While objects could represent the trivialities of everyday life conversely they could allude to the transient nature of human life.
- ➔ Vanitas and *Memento Mori* are key concepts of still life. Vanitas literally meaning vanity where a work would depict worldly goods and *Memento Mori* a reminder of death.
- ➔ Together the concepts ask the viewer to ponder the value of worldly possessions to remember that we are not immortal. Images of decaying fruit, spent flowers, clocks ticking, blown bubbles, skulls, flickering and or extinguished candles were all used symbolically in vanitas paintings as indicators of mortality, death and the passing of time.

# PIETER CLAESZ

b. Berchem, Belgium 1597.

d. Haarlem, Netherlands 1661

Still Life with a Skull and a  
Writing Quill, 1628.



Oil on wood 24 x 35cm,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

# EDWAERT COLLIER

b. Breda, Netherlands 1640. d. London, England 1707.

## Vanitas Still Life, 1662.



Oil on wood 94 x 112cm,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

# MARGARETA HAVERMAN

b. Breda, Netherlands 1693. d. Paris, France 1723.

## Vase of Flowers, 1716.

- ➔ That the sensual beauty of worldly things is fleeting, that the best bloom is cut, dead, and will wither and die.
- ➔ That the ripest fruit will decay and rot, that death and according to the Church, final judgement await.

Oil on wood 79 x 60cm,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



# WILLEM KALF

b. Rotterdam, Netherlands 1619.  
d. Amsterdam, Netherlands 1693.

## Still Life with Fruit, Glassware, and a Wanli Bowl.

- ➔ Nature morte
- ➔ Vanitas
- ➔ Memento mori



Oil on canvas 58 x 50 cm,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

# CHARLES NÈGRE

b. Grasse, France 1820. d. Grasse, France 1880.

## Still Life with Game Birds, 1859.

- ➔ Photography too is not new to the genre of still life. Louis-Jacques-Mande Daguerre 1787-1851 was a key player in the invention of photography, creating one of a kind images on a silver plated sheet of copper which he called daguerreotypes. These works from as early as 1839 were compositions in still life. The genre lent itself to the limitations of this new medium which needed still subjects and good lighting.

Albumen silver print from glass negative 43 x 34cm,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



# PAUL CÉZANNE

b. Aix-en-Provence, France 1839.

d. Aix-en-Provence, France 1906.

## Still Life with Jar, Cup and Apples, 1877.

- ➔ Still life facilitated the experiments of Cezanne.



Oil on canvas 60 x 73cm,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



- ➔ In terms of the hierarchy of genres in Western painting, Still Life was considered to be the lowest. With History painting, Portrait painting, Genre painting and Landscape painting taking priority.
- ➔ However as a humble subject matter it has presented a unique opportunity for artists as a site for experimentation and has continued to track the shifts and changes within art history.
- ➔ Arrangements of fruit allowed Cezanne to investigate form and thereby influence the radical experiments of the Cubists, Picasso and Braque who invented collage in a still life art work. (Picasso, Still life with chair caning 1912)
- ➔ In the name of still life Andy Warhol scours the banality of the everyday with his Campbell soup can, while producing soul searching political messages in inanimate images of the electric chair.

# PAUL CÉZANNE

b. Aix-en-Provence, France 1839.

d. Aix-en-Provence, France 1906.

## Still Life with Apples and Pears, 1891–92.

- ➔ Still life facilitated the experiments of Cezanne.



Oil on canvas 44 x58cm,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

# JUAN GRIS

b. Madrid , Spain 1887.

d. Boulogne-sur-Seine, France 1927.

Still Life with Checked Tablecloth  
Paris spring, 1915.



Oil and graphite on canvas 116 x 89 cm,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

# PAUL GAUGUIN

b. Paris, France 1848.

d. Atuona, Hiva Oa, Marquesas Islands 1903.

## Still Life with Teapot and Fruit, 1896.



Oil on canvas, 47 x 66 cm,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

# VINCENT VAN GOGH

b. Zundert, Netherlands 1853.

d. Auvers-sur-Oise, France 1890.

Shoes, 1888.



Oil on canvas 45.7 x 55.2 cm Purchase,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

# VINCENT VAN GOGH

b. Zundert, Netherlands 1853.

d. Auvers-sur-Oise, France 1890.

## Roses, 1890.



Oil on canvas 93 x 74 cm,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

- ➔ In contemporary hands, still life is a platform to explore our contemporary world. The distraction of human activity is kept out of the frame...yet much human activity/struggle/invention is present ... is precisely the process of creating the work. Artists utilise the genre to speak about the political and the personal, to explore the human condition and everyday experience.
- ➔ The chosen objects are like relics or objects of evidence.
- ➔ With the 17th century Dutch Masters as the corner stone of Still Life, artists from the twentieth century to now embrace its capacity to reflect the tenor of its time.
- ➔ From the intellectualism of Cubism, Pop Art's search for the quotidian object, Jeff Koon's kitsch commodities of capitalism, to Damien Hirst's pill cabinets and butterfly paintings reflecting on death, the genre continues to offer grounds for experimentation. Arguably Duchamp's innovative readymades are indeed representations of Still Life.

# GIORGIO MORANDI

b. Bologna, Italy 1890. d. Bologna, Italy 1964.

## Still Life alternative title Natura morta, 1957.

- ➔ Two significant influences on Still Life in Australia and the works in the exhibition are Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964) depicted here and Gwyn Hanssen Pigott (1935-2013).
- ➔ Morandi is the two dimensions to Hanssen Pigott's three dimensions subtle poetic still life arrangements.



Oil on canvas 35 x 40cm,  
Art Gallery of NSW collection.



# GWYN HANSSEN PIGGOT

b. Ballarat, Australia 1935. d. London, England 2013.

## At the gates, 2003.

- ➔ Hanssen Piggot made famous for her finely crafted porcelain still life installations, with palettes such as this one composed as an oil painting might be.



Glazed Limoges and southern ice porcelain 13 pieces  
20 x 100 x 50cm,  
Newcastle Art Gallery collection.