

**IMPLICATIONS OF STILL LIFE REPRESENTATION  
OF THE DOMESTIC OBJECT**

by

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B.A., University of British Columbia, 2007

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## **ABSTRACT**

Still life representation is a curious tension between the banal and the vital. The genre of still life has always been considered a minor artistic category, marginalized in critical discourse and rejected by artists in favour of weightier subjects. Though constantly disparaged and/or ignored, the depiction of small, inanimate objects has endured, persisted, and prevailed since ancient history - traceable back to Greco-Roman antiquity and beyond - while other, loftier forms of representation have fallen in and out of favour through the ages.

The genre's historical and continuing vitality and magnitude in the face of mediocrity and discrimination are explored through research of particular artistic examples. Also documented here is the process of the creation of several of my own visual works which were produced specifically in response to this research.

## **DEDICATION**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Still life representation is a curious tension between the banal and the vital. The genre of still life has always been considered a minor artistic category, marginalized in critical discourse and rejected by artists in favour of weightier subjects. Momentous events, religious marvels, esteemed individuals, and sweeping landscapes have all traditionally and academically occupied the artistic ranks above still life in Western art; in contrast, still life is most often characterized by the depiction of the small, inanimate, and ordinary objects of everyday domestic life. Writing in 1678, Samuel van Hoogstraten described still life painters as “common soldiers in the army of art” (Jansen 53). André Fébien, seeing still life as a mechanical imitation of the lowliest objects of nature and use, and devoid of imagination or meaning, ranked the genre at the bottom of the hieratic order of painting laid out in his *Conférences de L’Académie Roiyale de Peinture et de Sculpture Pendant l’Année 1667* (Talley 136). Similarly, Gerard De Lairesse, writing in 1738, described the subject matter of still life as “trifles too low, and repetitions too irksome for the Taste of Noble Souls” (Talley 142). The sentiments linger on in modern discourse: a glossy, semi-scholarly book on Jean-Siméon Chardin, produced recently (2000) for the gallery-going crowd, tends toward ambivalence at best: the authors commend Chardin’s mastery of the still life genre, yet simultaneously condemn him for retreating into the world of objects, due to what they perceive as his

lack of confidence and success at depicting the more sanctified human form (Prigent 66).

Though the term “still life” was not created until the seventeenth century, during what became known as the Golden Age of painting in Northern Europe, and the whole taxonomic perception of “genre” itself is somewhat artificially and anachronistically imposed on earlier works of similar nature and content, the depiction of small, commonplace objects has endured, persisted, and prevailed since ancient history. Its ancestry is traceable back to Greco-Roman times and beyond, while loftier forms of representation have fallen in and out of favour through the ages. Consistently valued by the art-collecting public, the continuous contemporary theoretical disdain for the genre seems to have had little effect on popular tastes (Talley 157). The popularity of landscape painting fluctuates, portraiture and heroic painting lose significance, but the modest genre of still life has maintained a continuous history of artistic representation (Davenport 6). Arguably, this is largely due to the ability of much still life to provide a prosthetic form of sensual and psychological sanctuary: a familiar and liminal space in an unpredictable and constantly-changing world.

As with any genre of art, this is not to say that all still life is the same, or is necessarily good - the mere mention of “still life” today often conjures up uninspired, prosaic representations as frequently as it does superior works of emotion and vision, contributing to the long-standing prejudices against the genre. Pejorative terms such as “Sunday Painter” invoke images of ghastly, pseudo-Victorian hobbyist depictions of

teacups and pears, or garish floral arrangements posed on gingham tablecloths. It is to this unfortunate legacy that the entire genre often becomes hastily consigned.

This project explores and demonstrates the genre's historical and continuing vitality and magnitude in the face of mediocrity and discrimination. Some frequent and recurring motifs of still life, namely the lobster, the vase, and the peach, have been chosen to provide focus points for discussion and as touchstones for the continuity of representation. This essay's focus is on Western art, and is not intended to be a completist's survey of the history of still life painting. It also does not mean to imply that there is a linear evolution of the genre, or to suggest that one "truth" applies to the diverse and complex realm that has come to be known as still life depiction.

The specific artworks, artists, and motifs chosen for discussion here are those which have had a direct influence on my own artistic practice, and which resonate with my own interest in exploring the manner in which art can address the human aversion to unpredictability and randomness. Still life can work as a tonic to assuage the apprehensions of a hyper-vigilant or remorseful mind, and as an antidote to feelings of powerlessness. Still life can provide a centre for the restless soul, one which may have difficulty holding fast in the present moment.

Still life works can address these issues in various ways, on multiple levels, and these effects may alter over time. Methods of still life presentation vary widely - from second-century CE Roman floor mosaics featuring the discarded remainders of a rich and lively banquet, to the opulence, virtuosity and verisimilitude of seventeenth-century

Dutch *pronk* paintings, to Polaroids snapped by Andy Warhol in the 1970s (and countless representational media in between). The societies that have produced still life through the ages are of course themselves extremely diverse, with historical context and contemporary readings varying accordingly, ranging from a Roman freedman's displays of newfound wealth and status, to Giorgio Morandi's metaphysical post-war images of isolation and silence.

### **1.1 Status of the Viewer**

The viewer of still life enters a peculiar realm – possibly invited to take an intimate glimpse at the interior life of an imagined other, or even to become a welcomed subject within the liminality of the work itself. Still life “presents” rather than just represents – and is in that fundamental and unique sense ever-conscious of the gaze of the viewer (Bryson 1990 79). This serves to place a higher value and importance on the positioning of the spectator than when other subject matter dominates. A comparison of self with subject matter in many cases – heroic figures, religious scenes, or sublime landscapes, for example – tends to place the viewer in a deferential or obsequious state. Although still life representation does not serve to elevate viewer status in absolutely every case, it is peculiarly inclusive and receptive to the human viewer, being itself devoid of both human figures and, usually, of obvious narrative. As such, a viewer can access still life in ways which are not possible in the anthropocentrism, hierarchy, and implicit directed narrative of many other

representational artistic genres. Still life is, in a sense, “pure,” as it exists, particularly since the Renaissance, as visual art for the sake of visual art. The objects of still life, unlike the subjects of history or religious painting, for example, cannot be portrayed in any other artistic format: literature, theatre, song, or dance can perhaps talk about a peach, but they cannot depict or enact it (Saisselin 198).

Physical scale mediates the experience of art in a crucial way as well, and it is noteworthy that most still life paintings are small. To compare the status of self against a smaller-than-life-sized work by Morandi is a wholly different experience than to compare oneself against Jacques-Louis David’s massive “*Coronation of Napoleon*,” for example (Figs. 1 & 2). It is a matter of *presence*. As Susan Stewart describes experiencing the gigantic, we are “enveloped by it, surrounded by it, enclosed within its shadow” (71). The viewer can be seen to experience a large-scale artwork the same way that we do an abstract projection of the human body upon the vastness of a real natural landscape – our own significance wanes in comparison. The gigantic, (here, the David) acts as *container* for us, while the miniature (here, the Morandi) is instead *contained* for us, and we can therefore enter and leave it as we choose. We exist in the *presence* of the David, while the Morandi exists in *our* presence.



Figure 1. Photo by R. Haggart, 2005



Figure 2. Photo by R. Haggart, 2009

While still life is predominantly removed from narrative, it is, however, far from mute. Though static, still life objects do not exist in a vacuum – they have the continuing ability to energize the negative space around them, activate the space between the observer and the observed, and potentially offer refuge from the discomfort of change. In the same way that individuals will surround themselves with the tangible curiosities of their existence, souvenir spoons, family china, and personal icons, the objects of still life can provide an even deeper kind of stability and continuity (Miller 2).

Rhopography, specifically in this case, still life depiction which features comestibles and associated domestic paraphernalia, is the focus of this project: their artistic treatment, contemporary reception, and ongoing value will be considered through an in-depth examination of selected works of historical and more recent visual art. Through this examination, the intransience and continued vitality of the genre will be elucidated.



## 1.2 An Interior World

Subject matter chosen for portrayal in still life painting varies widely, but from the beginning has overwhelmingly featured foodstuffs, domestic items, and the vessels and utensils of eating and drinking. Though cultures are diverse, and interpretations change, the “things” on the tables in these works – vases, fruit, and other related objects – have remained instantly recognizable and relatively unchanged down through the millennia. That these objects have maintained a continuity of resemblance through time is attributable to an underlying common experience of material culture which speaks to the greater continuum of human existence, and is a rare and comforting case of consistency prevailing over change.

Gaston Bachelard describes the home as a physical refuge for daydreaming: “the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace” (Bachelard 6). The still life can be seen to take this sensibility even further, as a cross-temporal, cerebral refuge or impetus for contemplation, as well as a shelter from the flux and change of the exterior world. The “family resemblances” that exist between still lifes throughout time connect us to not only our surroundings and our own personal histories and ambitions, but to the wider achievements, hopes, tragedies, and possibilities of cultures past and future (Bryson 1990 13). Higher levels of cultural “achievement” – military victories, royal coronations, religious proceedings – dominate the history of art and discourse, but we cannot ignore the significance and

worth of the artefacts of the domestic table, the interior world, and the repetitive everyday routines which sustain and bind us (Bryson 1990 14).

In its array of vessels, victuals and other household or personal items – the domestic tabletop displays to us the stuff of daily life. These inherently humble and ephemeral items, however, once depicted, become acutely transformed. They are charged with the power to defy death and evade decay, and therefore speak not only of the stuff of life, but of the elemental substance of the soul. Still life's qualities of permanence and stability remain constantly and consistently powerfully attractive, as they provide a respite from human neophobic tendencies and inherent resistance to, or fear of, change.

### **1.3 Scope of Project**

Some early precedents of still life, as it is recognized today, are addressed here via close examination of specific examples of Greco-Roman depictions of food, drink, and related accoutrement. The way that these depictions worked to variously signify earthly abundance, promote civic conviviality, or set benchmarks for artistic illusionism and its link to the sophistication of the Roman viewer, is of critical note.

During the middle ages and Renaissance, still life depiction is rare, as the objects of eating and drinking were mainly relegated to positions as liturgical or status-indicating "props" in various types of paintings, such as religious scenes, portraits, or figures from mythology and classical antiquity. At the end of the Renaissance, however,

works emerged which began to liberate these objects from their religious settings and allow them to stand on their own merit. In still life painting of the Baroque period, the religiosity of the objects may have been retained, as in Francisco de Zurbarán's famous *Lemons, Oranges, Cup and Rose* of 1633 (Fig. 3) whose elements are commonly interpreted as an altar to the purity of the Virgin Mary, but the concept that everyday objects were respected enough to actually qualify to stand on their own to represent holy figures and sacred ideas is of the utmost significance. In light of these distinctive qualities, the development of still life during the Renaissance and into the Baroque is a multifaceted topic, many of whose complexities and implications lie beyond the scope of this discussion.



Figure 3. Zurbarán – *Lemons, Oranges, Cup, and Rose*, 1633.

What has come to be recognized as the classical period or golden age of still life painting occurred in post-Renaissance seventeenth-century Northern Europe, yet many representations of Dutch still life table settings, unlike the early Roman examples which depict similar objects, can feel austere and somewhat exclusive. What conditions produce this effect? Though subject matter can be profoundly similar, these Dutch works themselves stand in significant contrast with Jean-Siméon Chardin's intimate and renowned eighteenth-century depictions of the ordinary objects of the scullery and kitchen.

Later Modernist takes on still life, such as the repetitive motifs and highly evocative works of Paul Cézanne and Giorgio Morandi, also provide a form of meditative refuge, and strengthen the case of still life as a provider of emotional nourishment, as well as possibly a safe place for transition, where the usual boundaries to thought, self-awareness, and behaviour are relaxed. Pop Art works, like those by Claes Oldenburg and Andy Warhol, for example, are most frequently discussed for their connection with the rebranding of the domestic/banal object in the face of mass production and consumerism – a discussion often tainted with pessimism and suspicion (Saisselin 203). However, these works, too, can in their own way satisfy human desires for consistency, and provide an ironic variety of comfort through repetition and familiarity. They are also potentially a site for fresh perspective and a mirror of a newly-emerged collective consciousness (Honnef 50).

Through researching these examples, I have also undertaken to examine my own inspiration for, and continuing interest in, producing artworks in the still life genre, and I have documented in chapter six the process of the creation of several works I produced specifically for and in response to this project.

## 2 ROMAN STILL LIFE ANTECEDENTS: A Place to Start

*“Parrhasios and Zeuxis entered into competition, Zeuxis exhibiting a picture of some grapes, so true to nature that birds flew up to the wall of the stage.”*

-- Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, ca. 79 CE

*“Purple figs dripping with juice...depicted with breaks in the skin...split apart because they are so ripe.”*

-- Philostratus, *The Imagines*, third century CE

When pointing to early common-era Roman depictions of vessels, victuals, food and drink as a direct antecedent of later still life, one must avoid oversimplification (Gombrich 103). Although the idea of a direct lineage and inherent evolution from the ancient to the modern was popularized and standardized in Art Historical accounts in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century in works such as Charles Sterling's seminal 1959 survey of still life painting, these works should be viewed more orthogenetically (9). It is critical that they are examined not only for their links to what later came to be known as still life, but for their own historical significance, and what they indicate about contemporary Roman society.

When it is analyzed in the context of its times, and amongst other contemporary surviving examples of Roman art, the vitality and significance of Roman proto-still life becomes clear. Rather than simplistic concepts or naïve motifs, Roman still lifes reflect contemporary interests in illusionism and conflating the real with unreal, particularly in the domestic sphere. They demonstrate instead canniness, humour, satire, and the

shrewd, sophisticated ability to discern true from false amidst the powerful and ubiquitous visual propaganda of the Roman Empire (Clarke 269).

Formally, many of the late BCE or early CE depictions of objects found at Pompeii and Herculaneum, for example, greatly resemble what has come to be thought of as the archetypal still life: isolated, intentional arrangements of highly-recognizable consumables and/or domestic use objects. In surviving wall frescos and mosaics, these depictions are known as *xenia*, a term derived from the practice of host/guest exchanges of food and other nurturing goods (Bryson 1990 17). Artists skilfully and thoughtfully produced these nascent still life images for the citizenry for reasons both distinct and culturally complex.

Figure 4 shows a famous Roman fresco in the fourth style, from Herculaneum, dated from about 50 CE; Figure 5 is another similarly-dated example from Herculaneum, and as in other Roman art, this imagery was likely inspired by earlier Hellenistic prototypes, demonstrating that this kind of rhopography has existed and held favour from the very beginnings of Western artistic tradition (Dunbabin 58). Preserved by the ashes of Vesuvius in 79 CE, these *xenia* are, for us, evocative reminders of the buried cities themselves: living cities, frozen in time, in this case quite literally “still life.”

For the contemporary Roman viewer, however, such depictions of vessels, utensils, and foodstuffs, usually in uncooked and unprepared forms, could have represented a “passionate attachment to the familiar realities of daily life,” and also communicated important information related to rituals of hospitality between host and

houseguest (Sterling 14). The guest was entrusted with the autonomy, and granted the privacy to independently prepare food to his liking in a separate space in the host's house and a larder brimming with the finest available fruits, seafood, breads, nuts, fowl, and more would have welcomed the visitors (Bryson 1990 23, Dunbabin 157).

Notably, objects such as those in Figures 4 and 5 are not the accoutrements and components of a large and ostentatious public banquet; they are instead the intimate elements of a private meal meant for preparation and consumption in a domestic interior. While these images could also have delivered messages of prosperity, this could be perceived more as addressing the bounty and prosperity provided by nature itself, rather than the sort of personal wealth perhaps represented by many Dutch works of the golden age of still life (Bryson 1990 25).



**Figure 4.** *Twig with Peaches and Glass Jar of Water, before 79 CE*





Figure 5. *Lobster, Vase and Shells*, before 79 CE

## 2.1 The Peach Speaks

Fig. 4 presents peaches, paired with a glass jar filled with water, and depicted on two registers, owing to the illusionistic space of the shelves upon which the objects perched. For static, “unreal” objects, the peaches are remarkably charged with life, and potentially descriptive of cycles and transition: from life-giving branch, newly cut from the sustaining tree, to detachment from the life-giving conduit of the branch, to the cutaway flesh exposing the stone of the peach. The stone signifies the end, or the death, of this Roman peach, but potentially also the resurrection and creation of an entirely new tree – further, the nourishing, delicious peach flesh is ever-ready for visual consumption and contemplation.

Though not as overtly symbolic, formulaic, or didactic as golden age Dutch *vanitas* works, commonly depicting human skulls, open books, and extinguished candles as reminders of the ephemeral and fleeting nature of human life, the Roman peaches are evocative of the cycles of nature, earthly life, and renewal in a comparable manner.

Notably, contemporary accounts of *xenia* often do not discuss the paintings as things unto themselves. Rather, the subjects of the paintings tend to be the subjects of the written accounts (Bryson 1990 30). Philostratus, for example, when speaking of a particular *xenia* (now lost), does not describe any formal aspects of the painting itself; his discussion instead focuses on the character of the items depicted: the juiciness of the figs, the texture of the chestnuts, the sweetness of the honey. Proceeding from this sensibility, items depicted in *xenia* can be seen to have been understood as standing in for the real thing, or as a conduit to the real thing (Bryson 1990 30).

In this sense, the fresh-from-the-sea, ready-for-the-pot lobster (Fig. 5), or the peach just plucked from the tree, for example, should be seen as a mirror of everyday reality. Pompeii and Herculaneum were middle-class towns, but these are not the highly unattainable, idealist luxury items of the upper classes; rather, they are the ever-present reminders of the true abundance that surrounds, and the attendant social tradition of sharing this bounty with the frequent visitor (Zanker 200). These *xenia*, then, interior depictions of a guests' brimming larder, would have constantly reminded household members of the continuity and importance of generosity and social ritual. The images would also remind the guests of the wealth and hospitality of that host.

The illusionism and verisimilitude of these still life progenitors were part of a larger system of depiction which characterized the four styles of Roman painting between the second century BCE and the second century CE, and included extraordinary examples of new ways of seeing, with architectural features imitated in paint, and extensive representations of natural landscapes introduced into the domestic interior (Ramage 93). In our *xenia*, the glass jar, half full of water (Fig.4), works on multiple levels – the civil and social information is delivered, but something is also happening in these spaces via the artists’ examination of and experimentation with perspective, light, and new optics. But when part of a leaf is placed behind the jug, for example, it results in a fantastically “twice removed,” circumstance. A wily representation first, is then subverted by the distortion of a leaf, creating a further abstraction, behind glass, and through water. The formal compositional qualities and observational awareness employed by the artist designate these objects firstly as signs for the “real thing,” and only secondarily as representations.

Another example of the Roman public’s enthusiasm for still life-type depictions both within and about the domestic space are the “unswept floor” mosaics (Fig. 6), which depict the remnants of a bountiful meal. These scattered still lifes are filled with humour, a demonstration of abundance, and also indicative of a heightened visual awareness on the part of both artist and patron. Coded in the true-to-life-sized depictions of discarded rinds, bones, pits, and carapaces are messages of tradition, conviviality and savvy.



Figure 6. *Unswept Floor*, second century CE

The humour is sophisticated: the highly-included viewer is a wry witness to the small, nibbling mouse who is fooled by the ersatz rind, the viewer, in turn, understands the reference but is not himself wholly fooled by the mock mouse. The rendered effect is one which both elevates the viewer's status and respects his or her authority over the domestic realm, while also acknowledging his or her potentially interactive contributions to the depiction and the illusion: tossing a peach stone to the floor could even be to contribute to the artwork.

These humble works, and their reception, can be seen as an essential form of commentary on the heroic visual vocabulary of the Empire. This propagandistic Imperial art was epitomized, for example, by works such as the contemporary statue of Augustus

Caesar (Fig. 7). That the citizenry produced illusory imagery in their domestic interiors reflected their understanding of the concept of propaganda – the idea that things are not always as they appear to be, and that a well-constructed visual image can wield power in various ways and on multiple levels. Vitruvius was famously disdainful of illusionary imagery, with his reasons perhaps being more political than formal – a common public who understands illusion and façade is potentially a dangerous one (Sterling 15).

The *xenia* and other illusory painting and tesserated work of the four styles can be read as not only enigmatic reminders of social duty, but also as the ability to question, manipulate, or even dispense with reality. The citizenry did not choose to fill their homes with Imperial imagery, but opted instead for subject matter that placed value on the status of the human viewer and stressed the importance and continuity of domestic life. While Vitruvius may have been pessimistic about the non-classical aspects of illusionistic painting, he was, however, supportive of the *xenia* in spirit: as pictures of foodstuffs, they carried forward classical Greek traditions related to the observance of social obligation in matters of hospitality and conviviality (Bryson 1990 52).



Figure 7. *Augustus Prima Porta*, first century CE

As in later still life eras, *xenia* provided a means for the artist to develop new ways of seeing, the images also exemplified the animalistic nature of the basic need to eat to sustain life, as well as the essential social significance of breaking bread with others (Davenport 13). The domestic interior, as exemplified by Roman *xenia*, was, and continues to be, a worthy forum for profound thought and experimentation. Viewing these images today, there is a comfort and familiarity of both experience and object – maintaining a well-stocked refrigerator, picking up something special from the bakery, and arranging an appealing bowl of fruit are all highly common preparations in the modern world when one is expecting guests.

Far from being a primitive, superstitious, or unadventurous art form, these early depictions of the stuff of pantries, domestic tabletops, and remnants of convivial meals

were part of a critical and multifaceted emerging visual language, a rich and complex system laden with peculiar implications and manifold layers of meaning. In ancient Rome, the still life reinforced customs of conviviality, and became a symbol for sophisticated and important social and domestic ritual and propriety. While these early ancestors of still life could serve a didactic function, they were also empowering: one is not required to bow down before the peach, one may consume it – freely, appreciatively, and in perpetuity. Today, we can look at such Roman peaches, vases, and lobsters and connect with the larger, ongoing human practices of, and even life-dependence on, nature and cultural conviviality.

### 3 THE NONHEROIC AND THE NEW INTIMACY: Chardin's Domestic Spaces

*"To look at pictures by other artists, it seems that I need to borrow a different pair of eyes. To look at those of Chardin, I only have to keep the eyes that nature gave me and make good use of them."* – Denis Diderot, *Salon de 1767*

*"His painting of a kitchen, a buffet, is, captured in passing, detached from the moment, deepened and eternalized."* – Marcel Proust, *Chardin au coeur des choses*, 1895

Chardin's art, produced in the eighteenth century, is now considered some of the greatest in the canon of still life painting (Bryson 1989 227). Working rhopographically, often representing foodstuffs and the common household utilitarian items which surrounded him, Chardin's still lifes were seen as a minor genre in a time when the megalography of history painting ruled supreme. For all of their ordinariness, however, Chardin's treatment and choice of subject matter can be described as subversive, having little in common stylistically or content-wise, with highly contemporary, ornate and unrestrained Rococo works, or with the melodrama of history painting, both of which dominated French eighteenth-century art. Like the Roman works, they were not images of crowned heads and power, instead they were images related to daily domestic ritual.

In contrast to prevailing and contemporaneous artistic sensibilities, Chardin's still life depictions make the "sublime out of the simple" (Bye 101). His still lifes are unique in that they show a side of daily life that was not seen in the overwhelming majority of contemporary painting; the scullery, the kitchen, the "low" spaces of the domestic



interiors, are all invoked in these depictions, and speak of humble items and activities associated with the world of servants and ordinary people (Bye 103). Taking the most ordinary of objects as subject matter, Chardin's still life painting was an art of the middle classes, and counter-reactive to the courtly themes and royal domination of the art of the previous period during the reign of Louis XIV.

While the frivolity, frothiness, and gaiety of contemporary Rococo works such as those by Boucher and Fragonard (Figs. 8 & 9) are themselves also a form of reaction against the stately themes and royal domination of the art of Louis XIV's time, Chardin's "extraordinary independence" (Sterling 85) from artistic convention was almost the opposite side of the coin from the Rococo movement. Rather than an explosion of garish pinks and golds, and a kitschy brand of putti-laden human erotica loosely based on mythology, or an elitist glorification of royalty, Chardin's compositions are devoid of obvious artifice. Like the Roman frescos and floor mosaics, Chardin's works are also important for what they were not.



Figure 8. Fragonard - *The Swing*, 1768



Figure 9. Boucher - *Setting Sun*, 1752

### 3.1 A Reimagining of *Pronk*

Chardin's still lifes are essentially deliberate adaptations of conventions first developed in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century (Bryson 1990 11); but rather than being a mere imitator, Chardin is frequently credited with retroactively re-legitimizing a genre which "almost suffocated" itself at its height (Bryson 1989 248). Yet, Chardin's still lifes were most definitely not the flowers, trophies, tapestries, and other exotic luxury items of those earlier paintings, which came to be known as *pronkstilven* ("spectacle- still-life") or simply *pronk* (Figs. 12 & 13) (Bedinger 131).

Similar to the contemporary *vanitas* paintings, *pronk* works were symbolically charged, with but messages and meanings wider in scope and interpretations more dependent on the individual viewer. The imagery of *pronk* paintings, though also primarily featuring foodstuffs, utensils, and household items, were highly emblematic or allegorical in nature, which lends a pretention to these works which is not apparent in works of Chardin, for example, even though they feature similar objects (Bedinger 131). The exotic fruits, fine porcelains, and precious metals of the *pronk* paintings are generally and foremost read as expensive status symbols, rather than objects of intimacy or conviviality. The sharply-described lines and angles, high reflection, crowded compositions, and saturated colours which typically characterized these works lend an air of sterility. Experiencing these works today, it is also difficult to ignore their colonial and exploitive associations (Meijer 149).

Though Chardin's choice of subject matter is fundamentally the same as the earlier Northern works, a still life by Chardin is not loaded with the overt symbology of the Dutch works (Chong 174). While both place value on the material items of the home, and involve the viewer in the scene, the objects of Dutch *pronk* paintings exhibit a purity of form that approaches austerity, despite all of their embellishment and noise. There is a feeling of the objects as being inaccessible to human touch, almost non-human in their perfection and elaboration. While the compositions of *pronk* paintings can still offer a moment of refuge for the viewer, inviting him or her to the table, the emphasis on new-world wealth can also have a distancing effect.

Although not all Netherlandish still life of the golden age was necessarily *vanitas* or *pronk*, the simpler works of the time are not necessarily without moralizing or economic content. Pieter Claesz's comparatively spare and simple *Herring Breakfast*, (Fig. 10) for example, features beer, pewter, and herring as an alternative to the more costly and lavish wine, gold, and lobster. Rather than simplicity or intimacy, however, the overarching feeling of the work could as easily be perceived as restraint, or cold asceticism; attributable, perhaps, to the Protestant Reformation movement which dominated Dutch faith from the mid-sixteenth century onward.



Figure 10. Claesz – *Herring Breakfast*, 1636

The objects featured in Chardin's works, on the contrary, instead of overwhelming and distancing the viewer, exhibit signs of use and immediacy. The presence of the user is palpable, and carries over in an intense communion between viewer and viewed. Chardin's interiors are domestic homes, not the surreal showcases of the Dutch *pronk* paintings. Bryson describes Chardin as taking "enormous pains to show the house as a real economy run by its members, for themselves," and goes on to say that no other artist has "understood so well the humanity of households, or painted more convincingly the harmony that can reign between people and things" (1989 248) Chardin's peaches and walnuts, for example, are the humble items of the pantry, accessible, available, and safe for visual consumption by the viewer – the comparative worthiness of the viewer is not in question, either subtly, in the manner that is perhaps

reflected in the wealth and aristocratic privilege of the *pronk* painting, or overtly, as in the majesty and grandeur of history or mythology painting.

After Chardin, Anne Vallayer-Coster was arguably the leading French still life painter of the eighteenth century (Sterling 89). Her paintings also differ significantly from the earlier Dutch, though basic subject matter is in many cases almost identical. When compared with a similar painting by the seventeenth-century Dutchman, Kalf, for example, it is evident that Vallayer-Coster's work is sparer, more cozy, and more atmospheric than the *pronk* paintings.

When Vallayer-Coster presents the viewer with a lobster, (Fig. 11) she shows us barnacles and all. This is not a perfect lobster, not Kalf's (Fig. 12) or de van Heem's (Fig. 13) surrounded by opulence and light. The Dutch works are symbolically charged; the lobster, which periodically sheds its exoskeleton in an act of "resurrection," was a particularly powerful symbol, it being a reference to Christ. The peach, with its three parts (the flesh, the pit, and the seed) were suggestive of the Trinity, and also a symbol of truth (Impelluso 352).



Figure 11. Vallayer-Coster - *Still Life with Lobster*, 1781

Though the simple bread and grapes may still have suggested the Eucharist to viewers of the time, Vallayer-Coster's lobster is certainly more supper than sacrament for today's viewer; the handle of the knife is oriented toward the viewer, inviting participation in the depicted meal. Her peaches (Fig. 14), like Chardin's (Fig. 15) appear stable, genuine, and inviting, unlike the somewhat gravity-defying and tension-filled peaches in the cacophony that is the de van Heem (Fig 13).



Figure 12. Kalf - *Still Life with Lobster, Drinking Horn and Glasses*, 1653



Figure 13. Jan Davidsz de van Heem - *Lobster and Fruit*, 1648



Figure 14. Vallayer-Coster - *Still Life with Peaches and Grapes*, circa 1780



Figure 15. Chardin - *Basket of Peaches*, 1779



Unlike the interaction with a heroic or religious painting, to view Chardin's strawberries (Fig. 16) is to enter a world where the routine of the domestic home is the main event. Here, the viewer and subject matter are both invited to "come as you are." Further, that there is no sense of hierarchy or priority in the groupings gives the objects the opportunity to "emerge" in the unperturbed way that Diderot describes. The hazy non-specificity of both Chardin's and Vallayer-Coster's technique adds to this levelling effect, in what Bryson describes as painting "peripheral as well as central vision" there is an intimacy in their imprecise, loose quality (1989 243). In this way they are also highly modern, and it is no surprise that later modernist painters so often cite Chardin as an influence (Schapiro 20).



Figure 16. Chardin - *Basket of Strawberries*, 1761

Chardin's works were often designed to be integrated as decorative elements for domestic interiors, so both formally and emotionally they can be seen as carrying a sensibility strikingly similar to the Roman *xenia* (Sterling 86). Indeed, many of Chardin's works viewed today in galleries as framed examples of "easel painting," were actually originally produced to integrate into domestic décor as part of a wall, door, or to be placed in screens in front of a fireplace in the summer (Sterling 86). As such, these "interiors within interiors" recall Bachelard's notion of wardrobes or cabinets as "veritable organs of the secret psychological life," those which provide the very model of intimacy (78).

As Bachelard describes, the mind needs to "lay in provisions" in much the same way that the body does (Bachelard 78). Still life, particularly that which depicts larders, sculleries, and the like, can be seen to provide for the mind and the spirit in a strikingly similar way, psychological sustenance via contemplation and regard. Susan Stewart's analogy of the dollhouse may also apply: occupying a space within an enclosed space, there is the "promise of an infinitely profound interiority" (61); like a locket, or a trunk full of cherished items, the objects of still life hold vigil until they are once again desired by the gaze of their keeper. Unlike the locket or the trunk, however, the still life is constantly open, accessible, and welcoming.

### 3.2 A Familiar and Reliable World

Chardin's triumph was that he was able to produce superior works from officially inferior subject matter. In one way, choosing to produce heroic, history, or especially religious painting is a shortcut to meaningful content – when the choice has been made to depict a high-status scene, the artistic challenge is mainly to do it justice. The opposite sentiment is at work with the depiction of objects like Chardin's – how to elevate ordinary subject matter to worthiness for and by depiction. This easily takes as much inventiveness, consideration, skill, and intuition as any history painting, and may even be a greater test of talent and integrity.

Today, to stand at the Louvre and view many of Chardin's works at once, one notes a striking similarity in form and composition among them. The very same objects reappear, again and again, but rather than becoming tedious, they begin to interact as familiar and humble characters. Far from being merely formulaic, unimaginative, or bland, these arrangements draw the viewer into an intensely intimate and reliable world. Not the smooth, photographic finish or high polish, colour, and glitz of the *pronk*, this is instead an inclusive and unassuming realm of familiarity, use, and sanctuary. Rather than pure and saturated, Chardin's colours are muted, low-contrast, and harmonious. As in *Basket of Strawberries*, for example, brushstrokes are soft and visible, and paint colours are scumbled in multiple, semi-transparent layers, allowing deeper layers of colours to show through with a misty, grainy luminosity (Prigent 82).

The effect rendered is one in which the viewer can access a relaxed, familiar world where he or she is safe and at home, where class disappears, and where all are free from threat or the duty of hyper-vigilance (Bryson 1989 243). Even nature itself is seemingly controlled, with its bounty contained, prepared, and presented for our consumption (Bedinger 76). Bachelard describes the childhood home as possessing a humility and a “primitiveness which belongs to all, rich and poor alike, if they are willing to dream” (4). Much the same can be said of Chardin’s humble, understated domestic still life representations, for as Baudelaire expresses it, the “gold-ridden walls” of a palace have “no corner left for intimacy” (47).

The still life genre provided Chardin with a method to express new, even subversive ideas, and provided the contemporary viewer with an opportunity to consume these ideas in a haven of colour, texture, and domestic familiarity. Viewing these paintings as recontextualized in current times, we can ask ourselves what has changed. Nearly everything, of course, except that the kitchen is still the heart of the home, peaches still look wonderfully inviting stacked in a silver bowl, and a cooked lobster presented on a platter is a striking, yet attainable, meal for many. Most significant is the promise, or at least the hope, of a perpetual sustenance: consumed in the home, and provided by nature.

#### 4 MODERNISM, MEDITATION, AND MORANDI

*“With an apple, I will astonish Paris.”* – Paul Cézanne, 1895

*“The fear of reality, the terror, that’s what those sweet flowers of Morandi are all about.”* – Giorgio Bassani, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Continis*, 1962

The works of Chardin and Vallayer-Coster have always been appreciated by other artists, including many Modernists. Henri Matisse repeated copied paintings by Chardin, and was exceptionally inspired by Chardin’s technique and depth, revering his works as “magical” (Spurling 68). Cézanne, Morandi, and Picasso have all cited Chardin as inspirational to their own work, and the effect of this influence on their own contributions is significant (Schapiro 20). Cézanne painted nearly two hundred still lifes over the course of his career, and in doing so, like Chardin, brought about much-needed legitimacy to the genre. He also altered still life representation significantly with his use of distorted perspective and highly complex compositions.

While introducing complexity, however, Cézanne was still able to achieve balance, order, and calm by the use of harmonious colour, complimentary shapes, and repeated motifs and objects. His highly self-conscious arrangements are still able to represent what seems very much like a genuine everyday moment (Schapiro 21). These works, unlike religious or history painting, but like most other still lifes, have no titles other than “still life with... (possibly followed by a brief list of some of the depicted items).” They do not rely on the literary, they are significantly free from the tyranny of

text. They are self-evident, timeless possessions accessible to all, not reserved for the literate, the well travelled, or the monied.

#### **4.1 Harmony and Control**

Like Chardin, Cézanne chose to represent many of the same elements repeatedly, in what Meyer Schapiro calls a “family of objects” (25). Cézanne painted five still lifes showing the same flower-decorated pitcher and, in the background, the same soft brown drapery decorated with leaves (Figs. 17 & 18). Over time, the sensual apples and peaches that Cézanne continually represented became almost synonymous with the artist himself. As Schapiro explains, the fetishized items of still life can also be seen to have provided a sense of personal control for the artist. In the case of Cézanne, a sense of control over his own environment and his unacceptable sexual desires is achieved by his mastery over these objects (Bedinger 28, Schapiro 26).

“At first sight,” as John Richardson has observed, “these paintings seem a relatively straight-forward representation of a classic still life subject, but on closer examination anomalies emerge. By subtly adjusting the way things look and registering tonal relationships with almost scientific precision, he has endowed his still life with an extra measure of tangible reality and has heightened our experience of forms in space” (Pioch Webmuseum).



Figure 17. Cezanne - *Still Life with Curtain and Flowered Pitcher*, circa 1899



Figure 18. Cezanne - *Still life with Curtain and Flowered Pitcher*, circa 1895

Perhaps the most striking case of particular objects emerging to become an artist's own visual language is to be found in the work of Giorgio Morandi. Working from his studio in Bologna, a place which, reportedly, he rarely left for long, Morandi repeatedly represented the same simple elements: vases, bottles, and boxes (the occasional shell or loaf of bread makes a cameo appearance), yet he staged a virtually endless array of variations among them (Figs. 19-22).

The seemingly compulsive nature of Morandi's artistic process, with its repetitive motifs, restrained colours, and diffident forms, has been called depressive by some, and his subject matter has been accused of being empty of meaning and chosen only for formalist reasons (Braun 89; James 578). To write off Morandi's work as tedious, morose, or monotonous is, however, ironically to dismiss its most crucial quality: that Morandi finds "fullness in emptiness" (James 578). It also reflects a disregard of the contemporary significance of the positioning of the stylistic development of these works in the inter-war period. Current discourse tends to either ignore Morandi's own political leanings, tidily attributing the sparseness and isolation of his work to his own presumably detached, retiring, and apolitical nature or, to the other extreme, it tends to be solely and teleologically focused on his dubious links to Fascism. Much is usually lost when focus is too far at either end of the spectrum; the international and generally liberal foundations of Modern art no doubt account for much of the avoidance of discussing Morandi's perhaps inconvenient political associations.



To circumvent discussion of Morandi's politics, in particular his association with the proto-Fascist *Strapaese*, a literary and artistic movement that developed in Italy after 1926, whose proponents invoked nature in patriotic defense of national territory, is to overlook the way his work addressed or reflected contemporary Italian desires to retrench, and become self-reliant after the hardships of World War I (Braun 89). Part of this ethos was a longing to return to a culture that was local and traditional, and that promoted the daily rituals of an agrarian society (Braun 90).

The stillness and composure that infuse Morandi's still lifes embodied just that kind of provincial tranquility. The works provided viewers with the vital opportunity to contemplate "simple and enduring things," and to seek revitalization through a nostalgic return to the utilitarian wares of less complicated times (Braun 104). Morandi may have become the poster boy of *Strapaesani* conservatism, but the implicit notion that his paintings spoke to the fundamental human desire for peace, stability, and simplicity in the face of change and uncertainty are of the highest significance (Abramowicz 122).



Figure 19. Morandi – Still Life Objects, 1916



Figure 20. Morandi - Still Life Objects, 1938



Figure 21. Morandi – *Still Life Objects*, 1941

A review of a recent Morandi exhibition at the Tate Modern states “looking at Morandi’s paintings, one could forget where one was” (James 578). While the reviewer in this particular case was referring specifically to the way that the works of Morandi successfully transcended the potentially distracting environment of the new Tate gallery, this sentiment can be extrapolated to a much wider arena. Bachelard, discussing the sanctuary and pleasure of retreating to a corner, describes *immobility* as one of the conditions that humans most highly prize (137). We can take refuge in one of Morandi’s still lifes in much the same way we can sit snugly in a quiet corner of a favoured room – in the static, non-coercive, and tolerant prosthetic present moment that either experience provides, we inhabit a safe haven.

When discussing his own still life work, Morandi ascribed only formal or aesthetic meaning to it. In this subversion of the genre, more overt than that of Chardin, Vallayer-Coster, or even Cézanne, he did not feel the need to justify the genre's worthiness through any symbolic associations or hidden messages (Abramowicz 11). Morandi's vases and candlesticks are in no way the sacraments of vestal virgins - his familiar objects evoke domestic ritual, rather than religion or rhetoric.

If there is any kind of "holy communion" at all in a Morandi still life, indeed it is to be found in the mutuality between the artist and reality, image, and viewer. The suppressed lights and darks, lack of visual extremes, and dreamlike quality of the images are painstakingly unthreatening; the viewer is invited to view the work without any object staring back or challenging his or her status. Even the objects themselves do not vie for status or importance within the composition – all elements are realized to an equal degree. In Fig. 22, for example, the thick paint of a background or shadow is as purposeful, textural, and present as the objects themselves, giving all pictorial elements equal gravity. The works are tonal, rather than colourful, shapes are silhouetted rather than described, and the effect achieved is an aura of pictorial equivalence. That objects and setting are not fully described, distinguished, or resolved in Morandi's works presents the viewer with a particularly high-value opportunity for collaboration, invited to "complete" the work in his or her own mind's eye. Much as Roland Barthes enthrones the reader, who replaces the author as the essential source of meaning, the viewer of a

Morandi still life, through his or her own interpretation of the artistic work, achieves authority and influence over it (Barthes 3).

Simply stated, this deferential consensus about what is represented in a still life allows the viewer to participate not only in reception of the work, but also in the creative process itself (Gail 560). The hazy, shimmery, mid-tone, non-specificity of Morandi's portrayed objects increases this opportunity – while the familiar outline of a vase, jug, or loaf of bread is recognizable to all, the detail and particulars are open to interpretation on a highly personal and intimate level. Morandi's works are so conducive to contemplation and meditation that the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. offered guided group meditative/relaxation sessions in conjunction with their Morandi exhibit of April 2009. A press release for the meditation events explains that Giorgio Morandi's works "combine subtlety of design with a meditative aura, infusing his still lifes of bottles, bowls, and jars with an unexpected intensity," and that the artist's "quiet paintings encourage the viewer to slow down, offering a respite from the demands of everyday life" (Pinkster 2).

#### **4.1 Custom and Vigil**

Much as Bachelard describes the image of a light in a far off house, and personifies the house as keeping vigil, the objects in Morandi's still lifes themselves hold vigil, they are sentinels, with the capacity to release us from our own hyper-vigilance (34): "Motionless, mute things never forget: melancholy and despised as they are, we

confide in them that which is humblest and least suspected in the depths of ourselves” (Bachelard 143). Morandi’s repeated visual elements become like meditative mantras, calming, compelling, and transformative.

Like a dream, these images transcend time and place: Morandi’s clocks have no faces and his bottles no labels. As a result, the objects themselves begin to assume new roles – the white bottle becomes a recognizable face in the crowd – one which sustains us with its familiarity. The repetition of the images themselves can invoke the daily routine and ritual of home life, the quotidian yet customary routine of cleaning, bathing, preparing meals, and perhaps of interacting with the same individuals on an intimate and consistent basis. In a review of a recent exhibit of some of Morandi’s later paintings, Tyler Green of *The Arts Journal* notably commented that “I don’t often see Morandi on view at museums, but when I do it’s like seeing old friends. Looking at Morandi’s paintings in different venues is like seeing snapshots of friends taken over a number of years” (Green, *Arts Journal*).



Figure 22. Morandi - *Still Life Objects*, 1962

To view the work is also to be in communion with the artist, whose small bedroom doubled as his studio. The habitual routine of arranging the objects, preparing the canvas, and mixing the colours is palpable (Abramowicz 7). The silence, repetition, low-contrast, and empty spaces in Morandi's work offer the mind an opportunity for daydreaming, and provide a place for the imagination to take hold, rejuvenate, and fill in the blanks. Rather than the banality of repetitive, realist elements or action, the works are instead imbued with the power and haunting familiarity of a stark and recurring vision, enigmatic and revelatory, persistent and timeless. For the viewer, judgement and duty are suspended for a time, because, as Bachelard describes, "an image that

issues from the imagination is not subject to verification by reality” (86). That Morandi’s art is not seen more often in museums is due largely in part to the fact that most of his life’s works are held in private collections – the significant implication being that many of these works hang on the walls of private interiors.



## 5 POP ART STILL LIFE: The Postmodern Peach

*"I like boring things."* – Andy Warhol, *POPism*, 1980

*"The pictures on the walls aren't like movies. They don't move, they don't talk, and they'll last longer. They will last longer."* – David Hockney, *Boston Globe*, 2006

Clement Greenberg had championed the term *kitsch* to describe the visual attributes of mass culture as early as 1939, and declared it the number one threat to the health and integrity of the artistic avant-garde (31). Pop Art, characterized by the repeated conventions, commercial foundations, mass-production, and the deliberate inclusion of elements of popular culture, epitomized Greenberg's definition of kitsch, and was viewed by many critics as an unwelcome impostor in the world of contemporary art. Pop Art still life, therefore, has had to contend with such Modernist-critic golden-ageism, in addition to flouting the overall longstanding prejudices against the genre itself. Though not all subject matter of Pop Art has been still life, much of it has, and notably, the sentiments exacted upon the movement, particularly against its representation of consumable objects, have quite a familiar ring. Like the criticisms historically levelled against the whole gamut of still life depiction, Pop has been seen by many of its critical opponents as outright lacking in artistic merit, sophistication, and originality.

Much as Junius, in 1638, scoffed at still life for only "seeing small, usuall [sic], and vulgar things" which did "not deserve any admiration or praise," Hilton Kramer, in 1961, suggested that Pop attempted to "reconcile us to a world of commodities, banalities,

and vulgarities” (Talley 135, Honnef 13). Stanley Kunitz accused Claus Oldenburg’s sculptural representations of foodstuffs, and Andy Warhol’s multi-reproductions of soup cans, of being the “signs and slogans and strategems come straight out of the citadel of Bourgeois society” (Honnef 13). True enough, perhaps, but these are also, of course, the substance of everyday life for much of the Western population – the modern Bourgeois.

### 5.1 Claes Oldenburg’s Faux Food

Oldenburg is famous for his objection to over-interpretation of his work, and has historically had little to say about it himself, a tactic which he maintains to this day. His *Pastry Case* of 1962, a sculptural work which featured painted plaster versions of nine different food items, is a key work in Pop Art history (Honnef 56). Here, instead of “home-made” in a domestic kitchen, these items are “hand-made” by the artist in his studio (Fig. 23).



Figure 23. Oldenburg – *Pastry Case*, 1962

The presentation of the items, here in true three-dimension, is reminiscent of the Roman *xenia* frescos (Fig. 4). Presented on multiple registers, the pastry case becomes the modern 'larder,' containing the kind of food items one might present to guests. While Oldenburg's perspective and the vessels are real rather than illusionary, the food itself is representational, as in the ancient Roman works. Also similar to the Roman works, Oldenburg's pastry case is a mirror of the times, in this case, times where an array of readymade foodstuffs are widely available and constantly on display, ready to be purchased outside of the home and transported there for consumption.

Because Oldenburg's sculpted *Pastry Case* food items themselves do not strive for a strong *trompe l'oeil* effect, there is no apparent intention to trick or deceive the viewer into thinking the items are real. Though instantly and semiotically indicating the "real" objects they represent, the forms are soft, and not highly illusionistic, which affords the viewer the opportunity to perceive these works in the manner of a Rorschach blot. Oldenburg, though characteristically reserved about discussing his work, was always interested in psychoanalysis, and appreciated that objects inspired viewers to make mental lists and free associations while discerning forms (Foster 455). Like Morandi's repeated motifs, Oldenburg's unpretentious, generalized forms provide a direct avenue for the role of the viewer to merge with that of the artist, levelling the status of both in the process.

Oldenburg's humble items are loaded with social and critical significance, however. Far more than banal renderings of lowly items, they speak of a consumerist

society where the line between the public and the private is no longer clearly defined, and where mass marketing and advertising have turned imagery of foodstuffs and other consumable items of daily life into something very public. Oldenburg's food items themselves, often thickly painted and spattered in an array of contrasting colours, are also a direct reference to an alternate brand of consumption: the contemporary dominance of the art world by the Abstract Expressionist movement. With works like those of Jackson Pollock selling for huge sums of money, art had itself become a serious consumer affair (Foster et al. 454).

Forty years after *Pastry Case*, Claes Oldenburg, now working with Coosje van Bruggen, continues to view still life representation as a vital and substantial means for expression. Food and common use items still dominate his subject matter, now often re-imagined as colossal-scale projects in large public areas. The pair's most recent work is an indoor installation called *Balzac Petanque* (Fig. 24). This work features groupings of toddler-sized, hyper-realistic looking peaches and pears, constructed of fiber-reinforced plastic, stainless steel, and cast epoxy (website). The 38 pieces of fruit are accompanied by a single knife and a large, plain picnic cloth. Customarily reserved, Oldenburg will say only that the work was inspired by Honore de Balzac's obsession with fruit, and that it is an homage to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French art, including the paintings of Chardin and Cézanne (Leffingwell 2). The work is also, by title, formally associated with the lawn game of *petanque* or *boules*.



Figure 24. Claes Oldenburg/Coosje van Bruggen - *Balzac Petanque*, 2002

The peaches and pears are arranged in groupings which could suggest families, meetings, or teams. Literally, the outside (a picnic) brought inside (the gallery), the work raises interesting paradoxes. Beyond evoking a whimsical, Lilliputian land of make believe, the scale of the work invites the viewer to complete and change the work with his or her own physical presence. Though the objects are uncannily large in scale, the feeling rendered is one of inclusion, rather than exclusion in the style of a monumental history painting. These familiar objects, though subverted in their size and setting, have

a welcoming quality; their gentle interactions, pleasing, rounded shapes, and luscious, painterly surfaces have visual and sensual appeal.

A still life that one could, theoretically, physically inhabit, could be the ultimate form of escapism and refuge. Comforted and protected by the non-threatening, highly-familiar shapes and colours, the viewer imagines merging with the work itself, not just observing, but actually becoming. The phenomenological effect of *Balzac Petanque* creates an opportunity for the viewer to experience an alternative brand of homeworld (Husserl 173). Here, the familiar is rendered uncanny by way of scale, but the net effect is not necessarily intolerance or disorientation.

## **5.2 Andy Warhol: All the Compulsive Comforts of Home**

It is not surprising that nearly all Pop artists had at one time or another, necessarily or by choice, practised commercial art. Andy Warhol was the most notable of these figures, coming from the world of advertising and commercial illustration. The still life that Warhol produced was both two- and three-dimensional, with his repeated images of Campbell soup cans, of course, being the most well-known (Fig. 25).



Figure 25. Photo by R. Haggart, 2007

These images have become so much a part of the collective unconscious that it is difficult now to discern whether it is the actual soup labels themselves, or the depictions of the labels which are so instantly recognizable. The modern larder or scullery is full of these images: colourful cans, boxes, labels, all familiar, ready and waiting, and intrinsically comforting (Fig 26).



Figure 26. Photo by R. Haggart, 2009

In depicting Del Monte Peach cans, crates, and other commercial food containers, (Fig. 27 & 28), Warhol demonstrated that food product packaging and branding had become just as recognizable as the peaches themselves, whether in a Herculaneum fresco or in a Vallayer-Coster painting (Fig. 4 & Fig. 14). The repetition of these images, like the repetition of advertising on grocery store shelves, reflects the social context of both the art and the actual foods depicted. Klaus Honnef explains that the “industrially produced commodities of American civilization, lent the dignity of art by Warhol, shaped the life of the American middle class, of which he was a part, as much as sex and death” (Honnef 88). As commercial, banal, and vulgar as the images might be, they represented vital, recognizable sustenance for nearly anyone who viewed them. Honnef takes this sentiment further when he states that Warhol’s



repeated motifs and static objects are reactions to the fear of both life and death, and conjure up a “Faustian need to hold on to the fleeting moment” (81). Fundamental human fears of life, death, and change, can take some brief respite in these familiar and repetitive Pop representations of the materials of everyday life.



Figure 27. Andy Warhol - *Delmont Boxes (Peach Halves)*, 1964

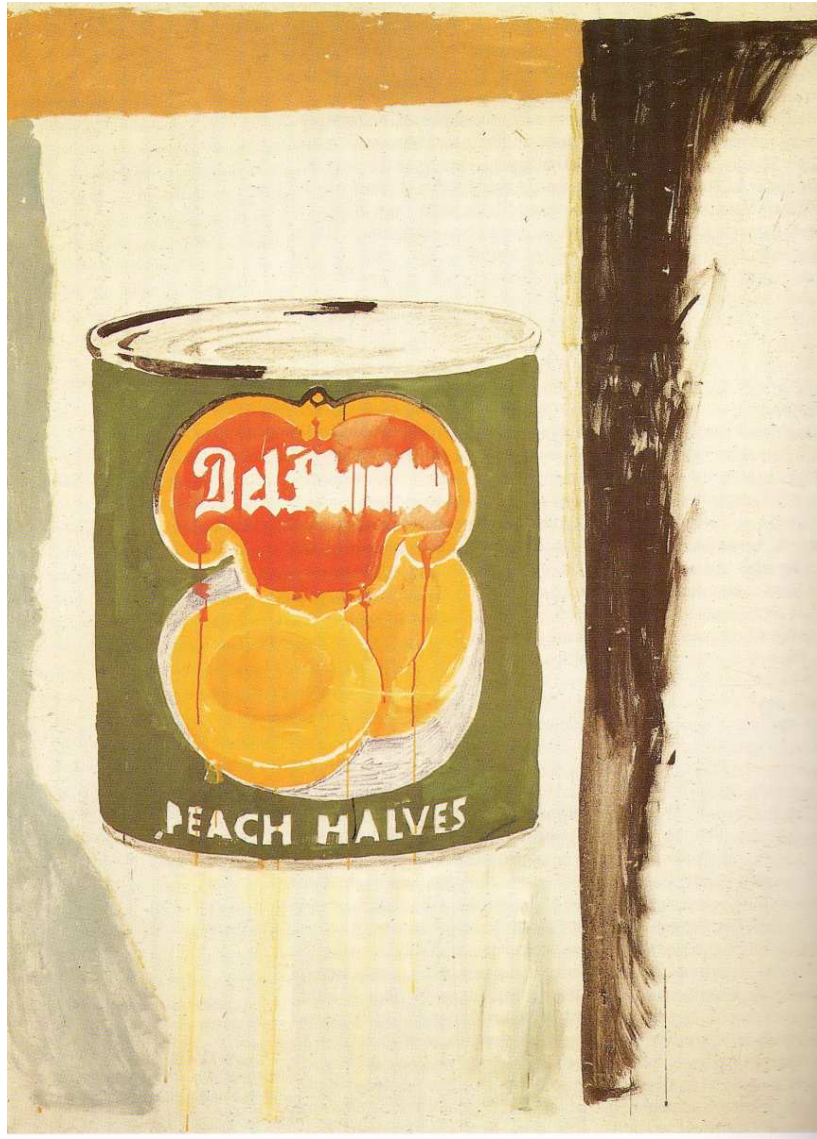


Figure 28. Warhol - *Peach Halves*, 1962

Just as Bachelard describes the memory and primitiveness of the humble childhood home as accessible to all classes of people, Warhol's representation of a Coca-Cola bottle reminds us similarly that class distinctions may evaporate when everyone drinks Coke: the president and the movie star drink the same Coke that I do,

and their wealth will not buy them a better Coke than mine, as it is all the same Coke (Honnef 88, Bachelard 4).

The blurring of the commercial and the non-commercial, particularly of art and advertising, was always a built-in possibility with still life (Saisselin 200). Throughout Chardin's career, he produced numerous painted panels for the expressed purpose of hanging above the doorways of commercial establishments (Sterling 86). These panels featured still life representations of the commodities and merchandise of the particular establishment, be it a charcuterie, apothecary, bakery, or silversmith (Sterling 86). As far back as the early eighteenth century, the immediacy of the imagery of still life was recognized as a powerful communications tool, and not to appreciate this is to engage in a utopian fantasy about the purity of art. Pop increased this sensibility by an order of magnitude, fully recognizing still lifes' visual vocabulary as the *lingua franca* of the masses.

The commercial aspects of Pop art do not sully or automatically disqualify it from having the ability to provide feelings of shelter, stability, and nourishment. Commercialism and artistic worthiness are not always mutually exclusive. Erwin Panofsky, as early as 1936, stated that "non-commercial art has given us Seurat's *Grande Jatte* and Shakespeare's sonnets, but also much that is esoteric to the point of incommunicability. Conversely, commercial art has given us much that is vulgar...to the point of loathsomeness, but also Dürer's prints and Shakespeare's plays" (119).

Warhol took the use of repetitiveness as a form of refuge to new heights, and saw mass-production as a great leveller of society. The significance of authenticity and originality in art was dubious. As Warhol pithily described, “the more you look at the exact same thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel” (64). If “emptiness” can be seen here as a positive state, achieved in order to escape fear and instability, and to shield oneself against an uncertain reality, then the placebo sedative provided by such repeated imagery can serve a protective function. A repeated and familiar image is a dominated image, one which does not threaten the viewer any more than Morandi’s vases and vessels (Foster 490).

As a notoriously unreliable narrator, however, it is important to remember that Warhol’s comments on emptiness and the repetitiveness of his imagery could as easily have been a criticism of an increasingly inhumane, trivial, and Capitalist society. That the public taste instead chose overwhelmingly to perceive these images with comfort and delight, however subversive the intention of the artist may have been, is a significant example of the desire of the viewer to access comfort and nostalgic escapism via familiar and domestic imagery (Bedinger 29).

### **5.3 A Contemporary Pastiche**

In an example of recent mass advertising, we are promised all of the comforts of hearth and home, domestic and familiar, just as we are in the most chaotic situation imaginable – at an airport. Arguably, there is no place potentially more neophobia-

inducing, impermanent, jarring, unnerving and unheimlich than the international terminal of an airport in any large city. In this approximately life-size poster seen recently at Gatwick Airport (Fig. 29), advertisers have (either consciously or unconsciously) tapped into the power of still life and its ability to appeal to the agitated masses with messages of control, comfort, and familiarity. A calming glass of wine is graciously offered, a luxurious lobster awaits and reminds us of the Vallayer-Coster painting that we saw in the quiet sanctity of the Louvre, soothing soup is abundant and ready, and shopping bags remind us of our personal power to consume just as we are stripped of our shoes and wallets and forced to walk through metal detectors by armed officials. The golden arches, like Warhol's soup cans, may be seen to send messages of oddly comforting familiarity.



Figure 29. Advertisement at Gatwick Airport, Photo by R. Haggart, 2009

## **6 TWO WAYS OF LOOKING: An Artistic Investigation of Still Life**

I have created two separate series of paintings over the course of this project. The first relates to nostalgia and the homeworld of objects, and the second to issues surrounding objectivity, subjectivity, and relationships with food. Reviewing reflections from my Graduate Liberal Studies journals, kept over the past two years in various courses, I recognized two distinctive, repetitive themes; firstly, that common domestic elements or objects can be deeply evocative of home and security, and secondly, ongoing philosophical concerns related to my own perceived tendency to psychologically dwell somewhere generally outside of the present moment. My aim, through art, is to attempt to extrapolate those personal issues to a wider arena, at the same time addressing broader human interests and concerns.

### **6.1 Series One: *Homeworld***

Each of the four paintings produced for this series (Figs. 30-33) includes a set of personally treasured domestic objects, which, individually, or in one combination or another, have been on prominent and regular display in my family household(s) for as long as I can recall. These items all now occupy privileged spaces in my own home, garnering attention from all who live or visit there. The objects are moved around from time to time, and rearranged in still life fashion – but they exist in real-life space.



Figure 30. Haggart - Acrylic on canvas, 16"x 16"



Figure 31. Haggart - Acrylic on canvas, 16"x 24"





Figure 32. Haggart - Acrylic on canvas, 16"x 24"



Figure 33. Haggart - Acrylic on canvas, 16"x 16"

None of these items has any significant monetary value – the older vase might fetch a hundred dollars at an online auction. I consider them irreplaceable, however, to the point of paranoia about losing them through breakage, theft, or other imagined disaster. Yet, once artistically depicted, I feel some sense of relief, as depicted objects cannot physically break or be stolen. These objects essentially also represent certain people to me: in them I can spend time with those who are departed, or I can find a place of solace where further loss cannot occur. Ironically, of course, the paintings could themselves be lost in the very same disaster that might claim the actual objects, but, somehow, the psychological relief by depiction endures.

In addition to somehow preserving these domestic objects, or evoking memories of loved ones, these depictions provide a suspended prosthetic moment for me to reside in for a time, mitigating my tendencies to cast about in the future, or reanalyze events of the past. The paintings provide a space within a space; one which is not subject to the same properties or laws which govern temporal reality. The “everydayness” or ordinariness of the objects, and the permanence lent to them by depiction, suspends an alternative, yet highly familiar, reality.

## **6.2 Process**

For the artist, the suspended moment is not only present in these completed works; it is also felt during the process of their creation. To spend time with the actual objects, repositioning them, observing the relationships between them, and thinking

about their historical places in my life is also to spend time in familiar and meditative territory. Further, the almost habitual process of mixing the paint colours, describing the shapes of the objects and the shapes between them – all of which I can almost do with my eyes closed now – is both reassuring and energizing.

The body of artwork that I produce for commercial purposes differs significantly from these still life depictions. Mainly multi-media sculpture designed for site-specific public display, it consists of large-scale, chimerical creatures which tend to either frighten, amuse, or both (Figs. 34 & 35): popular opinion has proved that these sculptures do not provide a place of stillness or comfort for the typical viewer. To spend time with the domestic objects of still life is, for me, a calming and necessary counter-reaction to the often physically- and creatively-taxing production of these larger-than-life commercial works.



Figure 34. *Giant Octopus*, tentacle-span 2.5 meters. Sculpture and photo by R. Haggart, 2007



Figure 35. *Cosmic Entity (after Lovecraft)* being loaded for delivery. Sculpture and photo by R. Haggart, 2008

In producing these sculptures, dangers and potential pitfalls are everywhere: the engineering has to be secure and precise in order for the sculpture to be physically safe for public display, further, there is always a looming deadline, a short supply of local materials, a menacing financial contract, and continual urgings from the client to “make it bigger!” In contrast, still life depictions like those of the *Homeworld* series provide a sense of control; their familiar shapes, colours and relationships are a safe artistic haven when compared to the unpredictable, expectation-heavy, tension-filled process of producing a large-scale commissioned work. These still lifes are, both in process and in completion, a recollection of moments of simple, controllable spaces and outcomes. Refuge can be taken not only in the repetitiveness and tradition of objects for the viewer, but also in the method and ritual of process for the artist.

Much as Bachelard describes daydreams of the secret corners of the childhood home, these depicted domestic objects are representative of a “space that does not seek to become extended, but would like above all still to be possessed” (Bachelard 10).

### **6.3 Series Two: *Transfiguration***

Earlier this year, a New York gallery featured a show entitled Andy Warhol’s *Still Life Polaroids* (Paul Kasmin Press Release). Featured were 70 individual snapshot images of food, clothing, utensils, and other banal, everyday items, taken by Warhol between 1977 and 1983. The repetitive, familiar objects of these Polaroids offer the kind of “empty,” meditative quality that Warhol evoked with his depictions of grocery-store-

shelf or kitchen-pantry items, although in these snapshots, brands are not evident – it is purely the form and arrangement of the items themselves that are so recognizable and, at times, oddly reassuring.

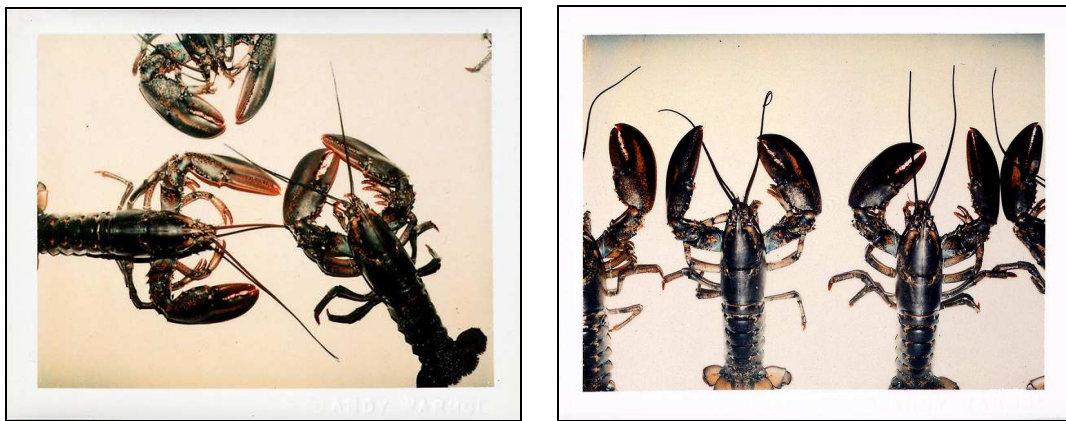


Figure 36. Warhol - *Polaroid Still Lives*, 1978

Several of Warhol's snapshots feature lobsters (Fig. 36), but Warhol's are not the singular cooked and garnished lobsters of Kalf (Fig. 12), de van Heem (Fig. 13), or even of Vallayar-Coster (Fig. 11). Judging by their colour and extended telsons, these crustaceans could have been alive at the time they were photographed. Notably, the bright red-orange colour of a cooked lobster is very much the colour associated with lobsters in general, while the dark, blue-brown, and perhaps less-spectacular colour of a common live lobster, bears far less association to the popular image of the red and radiant creature. Such images raise critical questions about objecthood, and about our often ambiguous relationships to the food we eat. These are among the topics for consideration I hope to raise in series two: *Transfiguration* (Figs. 37 & 38).

*Transfiguration* consists of a diptych, with each painted panel measuring 24 x 36 inches. Source materials include photographs taken first of a live lobster, purchased to be cooked at home for dinner for myself and my family, and second, those taken of the lobster just after cooking. Normally, I do not care to paint from photos, but the ephemeral nature of the subject matter dictated it here; further, the use of photos is intended as a reference to Warhol's Polaroids and other mechanically-reproduced imagery. The larger-than-life scale of this diptych relates to my commercial sculpture, but in *Transfiguration*, subject matter is "real," rather than imagined. The effects of and connection between scale and status, in both the subject matter and, comparatively, the viewer, are of artistic interest.





Figure 37. Haggart - *Transfiguration* panel 1, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 36"



Figure 38. Haggart - *Transfiguration* panel 2 , acrylic on canvas, 24" x 30"

I chose to title this series, unlike much still life. Foremost, the title is a reference to Medieval lobster-as-Christ symbology (Impelliso 352). In Christian mythology, the transfiguration of Jesus was the moment when he crossed over, from the mortal to the divine: reportedly, at the moment of this miracle, he became filled with the radiance of divine light (New Advent). At this moment, Christ's value to humankind was increased. I am curious if this is also true of a living creature which is transformed into a food object. This series is meant to ask at what moment does this lobster, an earthly, living subject, become instead an *object*? The moment it is taken from the ocean? Is purchased? Is killed? Is cooked? Is depicted? Consumption exists on multiple levels.

With *Transfiguration*, I present a longtime-favourite food; one served in celebration and on special occasions throughout my childhood and carrying on into my adult life. My intention is to present the beauty and appeal of this creature, while also presenting an opportunity to reminisce about special gatherings of the past, where the sacrifice of this creature-turned-object provided a centrepiece to activity and conviviality. The process of shelling and consuming a lobster is an interactive one, and the aftermath of such meals recalls the Roman *Unswept Floor* (Fig. 6).

What makes something food, be it animal or vegetal, is its transfiguration from living thing to dead object (Bedinger 26). Here, the lobster becomes fetishized in a sense, as the living subject is replaced by an inanimate object. If fetishism is seen as a means of control, then, as with the ancient Roman peach, the control over nature is implied. The lobster, depicted at a time of transformation, both reminds us of the

benefits from nature, and the silent and linguistically indescribable interval of metamorphosis.

## **7 CONCLUSION**

The accessible and universal elements of domestic still life works provide a familiar and inclusive interior, which can serve as a site for the mind to linger, taking some temporary respite from duty, regret, or anxiety. The repeated elements and motifs of still life have endured through history as recognizable and reassuring forms, constantly worthy of depiction. Representation of the unexceptional, inanimate objects of domestic-themed still life will continue to provide spiritual sustenance and an arena for private contemplation for as long as their forms remain recognizable to human culture. The viewer will continue to be able to recognize his or her own elevated status in the absence of human subjects, grand narratives, or overt symbology.

Far from insignificant, monotonous, or insipid, all labels regularly and traditionally levelled at still life depiction, the longevity of the still life genre is a testament to its tacit and essential ability to provide the viewer with ongoing, varied, and vital forms of psychological and emotional nourishment and stimulus. In an increasingly complex and mechanized world, the genre will continue to be relevant and vital as a result of its non-reliance on the technological, its elemental engagement with the spectator, and its unique capacity for collapsing time and culture.

Our own feelings of comfort, safety, civilization, home, and permanence are at the heart of these works. They intrinsically evoke the intimate space of the tabletop, at which people eat, read, drink wine, and perform other domestic or personal rituals. Whether these activities are experienced in a group, or in solitude, the domestic still life

provides an encompassing and unbroken link with civilized human tradition. For the artist, the genre is a powerful vehicle for experimentation and exploration utilizing a rich and accessible visual *lingua franca*. Still life has the ability to implicate both artist and viewer in a complex social group; one in which the common roots of civilization and domestic ritual travel back into a “vast preceding cultural community which is in solidarity with its members” (Bryson 1989 237).

Academic contempt or disregard for the familiar and lowly objects of still life has not meant an end to the genre (Bedinger 21). According to Gombrich, repetition and simplicity are what form the very foundation and cohesion of the genre of still life, and account for its ongoing appeal (105). The repetition and consistency of forms over time includes the viewer in the widest possible cultural horizon, and the images create a realm where the viewer is naturally, if not always at ease, at least at home. Stewart describes a child’s dollhouse as an articulation of the tension between interiority and exteriority; as occupying a space within a closed space (61). Domestic still life can be perceived in much the same way, as a place where the promise of an “infinitely profound interiority,” is held, readily consumed by the eye, and nourishing to the soul (Stewart 62).

Ancient Roman imagery of lobsters, vases, and peaches, which was already immensely old in its own time, is in a vital sense continuous with the objects present in the works of Vallayer-Coster, Cézanne, or Morandi (Bryson 1989 236). Warhol’s simulated peach crates and photos of lobsters, and Oldenburg and van Bruggen’s

oversized, three-dimensional peaches and pears also invoke the modern larder, and the food of the domestic table. While historical context varies widely, the imagery remains recognizable through the ages of human history.

Our domestic lives are not at all a static matter, but instead can be viewed as a horizon of all of our experiences and dreams – and as a site perpetually rich for artistic and philosophical investigation, contemplation, and representation. Still life provides a microcosm of the domestic realm; a controlled and mediated environment where the viewer can take up residence for a time, freeing the mind from obligations of vigilance, and constant adjustment and negotiation with an unpredictable world. Still life depictions themselves have often been an intrinsic and integrated part of the domestic interior itself, presented as a floor mosaics, fireplace screens, or wall frescos.

Bachelard observes that “a simple image will open up an entire world,” and “by solving small problems, we teach ourselves to solve large ones” (135). In the meditative space of the domestic still life image, wider concerns can be assuaged for a time, or, alternately, can be addressed and mitigated in the safety and comfort of a contained, sustaining, and predictable homeworld. The house protects the dreamer, but the still life protects the dream.

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