

# THE LIVES OF STILL-LIFES

Still life painting – nominally the depiction of inanimate objects – is one of the most traditional genres. It dates back to classical antiquity, though the first surviving examples come from Pompei in the first century AD. In terms of a separate, definable genre, we obviously think of the Dutch masters of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, ranging from the florid virtuosity of Jan van Huysum to the intense simplicity of Adriaen Coorte (who I think of as the ‘Vermeer of still life’). We think of the Spanish masters, Francisco de Zurbarán and Juan Sánchez Cotán (a specialist still-lifer) whose artful arrays of objects on flat surfaces have a sacramental quality – maybe even of Goya, whose few still lifes are expressive in an unprecedented manner.

We think of the hunting-shooting pictures of Frans Snyders in Flanders, and Alexandre-François Desportes and Jean-Baptiste Oudry in France, who can transform their functional assemblages into creations of real style. We think of Chardin (the Jean-Siméon hardly seems necessary) for his unique magic of complex simplicity, into which we see far more than is actually put there by his brush. We think of the great naturalists of 19<sup>th</sup>-century France, the dogmatically concrete Gustave Courbet, the beguiling Henri Fantin-Latour, and Edouard Manet, whose occasional still lifes pulsate with painterly excitement. We of course think of Paul Cézanne, whose still lifes grant inert objects a tangible existence through paradoxical non-description. (I cannot define how they work.) There are of course many others - but that is enough name dropping. It is astonishing that so much variety and individual vision can emanate from such an apparently limited genre.

Passing into the twentieth century, it is not by chance that Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque effected their assault on traditional pictorial values on the stock ‘bourgeois’ genres of still life, portraiture and landscape - the bread-and-butter of many worthy artists. There is hardly a major movement of the first half of the century that did not touch on still life in one way or another, and we can hardly omit Giorgio Morandi, whose abstracted bottles, jars, jugs and mugs aspired to convey metaphysical dimensions far beyond their humble origins.

Where does James Gillick stand in this historic succession? He seems to me to be a musician of still life painting. It is a matter of intervals – of the space of things, one to the other, of the ratios of insideness to outsideness, of the resonances of solid to hollow. There is a sense when we place two objects on a windowsill that there is a precisely right position for each of them, above all in relation to each other. James has refined the art of intervals so that it becomes a mysterious science whose formula is undefinable.

It is also a matter of colour, never too many colours, but of subtle and restrained harmonies in which the sharps and flats are perfectly judged. There is often a silvery tone, in which a note of pronounced colour sings out radiantly. It is often against this tone that a dark form punctuates the space, assuming a surrogate blackness that is deeper than its actual tone. A sudden little impasted touch of white lead, standing proudly on the paint surface, ‘pings’ into visual reality the reflected edge of the near or far side of a vessel. A ceramic or metal handle, that would otherwise look matt, is glazed by

no more than a tiny touch of light. In a bronze pot, that is ninety percent shine, it is the dark ellipses at its upper lip and base that render the tactility of the form.

As we look into the paintings closely and carefully, resisting the short time spans of contemporary looking, we see how restrained is the description. We think we see a lot of detail, as with Vermeer, but as with the Dutch master much of the detail is in our head. The knowing visual cues of colour, tone and texture trigger our act of seeing-in a lot more than is there. If we are cajoled uncannily into re-seeing what was in front of the painter's eyes, it is more effective and sustaining than if he laboriously ladles out all the descriptive properties of the object under his purview. When we go close, we see that the surfaces are very painterly. Each leaf comprising the fronds on a delft jug is the product of a soft brush loaded with a lovely blue turned deftly in the artist's fingers in a single move. The accompanying eggs are duck-egg blue. The adjacent bread has a mealy roughness that drives a quite different paint texture.

We should be aware of the material craftsmanship required to control these effects. Each is painted on a board that has been lined with linen and coated in radiant white gesso, scraped to a marble-like smoothness. The pigments, of a traditional nature and hand-ground, work with the priming and each other to compose visual tunes with the precision of a violinist playing a Bach partita. The meticulous care over materials pays off spectacularly.

We have been talking about visual effects. But there is more. The objects have their own embedded properties. They possess a 'touch', a temperature and a weight. We know that the silver and ceramic that compose the same jug will be relatively colder and hotter to the touch of our fingers. We can define the weight of each object without fail. We know how much effort is needed to pick it up. The old padlock exudes stern weight. It also carries its clunky sound. Each of the objects has a sound. We hear what will happen when the silver spoon is cracked on the shell of the intact eggshell. The pale head of chicory, a little moist to our touch, awaits the crunchy incision of the adjacent knife. Every item has its inherent 'stuffness', that goes beyond an account of what it simply looks like. This is notably true of the heavy old compass and its leather case, weighty on the worn paper. There is a lot of memory present.

The items portrayed are the products of optics and physicality. They are also bearers of sentiment. They have a feeling, often delicately implicit. Part of this comes from their age and the signs of lived lives. In the classic still life there is no person present - at least in terms of obvious presence. But in the greatest still lifes, the human and the humane are deeply manifested by the objects. The vessels have been made with love and placed with consideration. They have been cleaned and polished. They are owned and even cherished. In the case of the pair of pheasants, the emotion is more obvious. Less a straight celebration of a good day's shooting, the cock and hen pheasants are endowed with the quality of a *memento mori* that features in not a few 17<sup>th</sup>-century still lifes. There is the underling life and death of things.

James Gillick uses paint as paint, and paint as visual alchemy, to show us what he sees and feels. In doing so he shows that still life can still have something deep to say.

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