

# IN THE PRESENCE OF THINGS

## Four centuries of European Still-life Painting

19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Centuries (1840-1955)

- The Calouste Gulbenkian Museum organizes an exhibition on the subject of Still-Life Painting in Europe, by presenting a selection of works from the second half of the nineteenth century up to the mid-twentieth century.

The emergence of photography around 1839-49 liberated Painting from the need of realist representation, while the social and cultural transformations that took place in the aftermath of Industrial Revolution, enabled a new understanding of reality. Within this context, still life became a field of experimentation for artists. One can take as an example the exploitation of light and colour carried out by the Impressionists, followed, as a reaction, by the major art movements that pervaded the first half of the twentieth century.

If photography served as a boundary for the start of this new presentation through still life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the year of Calouste Gulbenkian's death, 1955, concluded this path; it is an artificial date, but nonetheless symbolic in our mission to reflect and show the artistic production that interested the Collector as well as the art of his time. The most recent work in display is, in fact, a still life from that same year, by **Giorgio Morandi**, one of the major followers of the genre.

The show is not organized chronologically. There was a preference for a structure by themes, dealt with in twelve groups that explore the diversity of the depiction of 'things', leaving the choice of an itinerary up to the visitor.

The presence of works by leading painters, such as **Manet, Monet, Renoir, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne, Braque, Picasso, Juan Gris, Dalí, Magritte** or **Matisse** is faced with works by other artists that, although not having practiced mostly this genre, gave an important contribution, by exploring different methods using painting and other media. The ensemble also includes the Portuguese artists **Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso, Eduardo Viana, Mário Eloy**, and **Vieira da Silva**.

CAT. 1

**Paul Cézanne**

(1839-1906)  
*Still Life with a Ginger Jar and Eggplants,*  
1893-1894,  
oil on canvas,  
72.4 x 91.4 cm.

New York, Metropolitan  
Museum of Art. Bequest  
of Stephen C. Clark, 1960  
[61.101.4] © 2010.  
Image: The Metropolitan  
Museum of Art/Art Resource/  
Scala, Florence



## Reflections on presence

One place to begin an exhibition about the fate of still life in modernity is with Paul Cézanne's reinvention of the form. At its heart what Cézanne's mature art asks us to do is to consider what it is to co-exist with a world of things, and what it is to perceive and to think of the reality that is presented to us. Such oddities as the awkward piling up of objects are produced by the artist's efforts to render how the surfaces of things come at us out of visual depth. The artist is, in other words, trying to hold onto what it is that makes things present, and what it is like to be in their presence, via the medium of painting.

Artists working at the turn of the century sought to extend the radical practices of Impressionism, but they also needed to find solutions to what seemed its superficial grasp of the volume and mass of things, its lack of subjective content, and its preoccupation with the mere effects of light and colour. Towards the end of Cézanne's life his work became a reference point for younger artists, attracted as much by the statements published by the acolytes who visited him. His enigmatic intention to 'do Poussin again after nature' resonated with those seeking to reconnect with the traditions of French classicism; his insistence that 'nature for us is more surface than depth',

meanwhile, appealed to those exploring codes of representation.

## Negotiating tradition: gifts of nature and artifice

In the second half of the nineteenth century in Paris many artists sought to revise the standard academic still life offerings of the official Salon exhibitions. It took the challenges to academic codes made by artists such as Gustave Courbet,



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CAT. 6

**Édouard Manet**

(1832-1883)  
*Flowers in a Crystal Vase,* ca. 1882,  
oil on canvas,  
32.7 x 24.5 cm.

Washington, National Gallery  
of Art. Alisa Mellon Bruce  
Collection [1970.17.37]  
Photo: courtesy National  
Gallery of Art, Washington

challenges that were accompanied by much critical and theoretical debate, to open up alternative perspectives on tradition.

One key renegotiation of tradition centred on the reputation of the French eighteenth-century painter Jean-Simeon Chardin. Philippe Rousseau's *Chardin and his Models* of 1867 (cat. 2) is a manifesto statement on the revival of interest in the work of the great French eighteenth-century still life and genre artist, representing Chardin's self-portrait on a tabletop surrounded by various objects depicted in his art. An earlier work by Rousseau (cat. 3) and two other paintings in this section by François Bonvin (cat. 4-5) embody the same rather conservative understanding of Chardin.

The reinvention of nature and of artifice was left to artists able to occupy the alternative territory established not only by Courbet but also by the approach to colour and modern subjects found in the work of Eugène Delacroix, known as Impressionists. The key senior figure here was Edouard Manet, whose free and economical depiction of flowers (cat. 6), for example, is meant to extend exactly the kind of embodiment of things in oil paint that Chardin was so adept at.

### A play of relationships: the still life as form

If modern artists could now practice still life for its own sake and as a showcase for the values of painting, how should it now be defined: a table top; an array of objects playing out relationships of texture, colour, and light; the intimacy of a painter's studio or home; a poetic arrangement?

Young artists associated with Impressionism, such as Bazille (cat. 12), Monet (cat. 16), and Renoir (cat. 13), flooded their paintings of flowers with light and colour in a challenge to the comparatively darker, still academically influenced practices of their contemporaries such as Rousseau and Bonvin. These stunning paintings brought with them a modern relationship to the natural, conceived both scientifically, as the operation of the spectrum that makes up the reflections of white light, and philosophically, as the ordinary or everyday in contemporary experience. Impressionism, which took its name from a painting by Monet shown



at the first exhibition in 1874, was far from a stable and unified project, however, and Monet himself moved away from some of its precepts in the 1880s, while other artists were beginning to rethink its implications. Along with Cézanne, whose jewel-like depiction of apples of 1877-8 (cat. 15) was made just at the point he turned away from his brief engagement with Impressionism, Vincent van Gogh too rejected the urban spectacle in the 1870s in favour of a more personally meaningful exploration of nature, reinvested in his case with symbolic value.

CAT. 20

**Pierre Bonnard**  
(1867-1947)  
*Still Life*, 1922,  
oil on canvas,  
43.5 x 47 cm.  
Cambridge, Lent by The  
Syndics of the Fitzwilliam  
Museum [2379]  
© The Fitzwilliam Museum,  
Cambridge © Pierre Bonnard,  
ADAGP, SPA 2010

### Structure and space

The early years of the twentieth century were marked by a rapid succession of radical innovations in painting: the abandonment of naturalism in drawing or colour and the outright rejection of perspective construction; representation itself might be re-imagined as a sign language or as the expressive trace of subjective experience. Still life, as an art form that focused attention on groups of objects in a confined space, was the perfect form in which to pursue the rigorous rethinking of representational language that a new vocation for painting seemed to require. Often this kind of experiment involved a reductive approach to the means of painting; so in his later work Giorgio Morandi depicted quivering groups of carefully prepared bottles, jars and jugs in mute colours on a table top (cat. 27-28), while abstract artist Ben Nicholson (cat. 26) sought to rethink the space of painting as a series of overlapping structural planes

CAT. 22

**Juan Gris**  
(1887-1927)  
*Chessboard, Glass*  
*and Dish, 1917,*  
oil on panel,  
73.3 x 103.2 cm.

Philadelphia Museum of  
Art: The Louise and Walter  
Arensberg Collection, 1950  
[1950-134-98]



verging on relief sculpture (an art that he often deployed).

Much of this experimentation allowed artists to pursue careers built on an ostentatiously modern language of still life painting that could also be seen as 'classical' or 'universal'. Thus Spaniard Juan Gris, one of the most skilled and sensitive artists to emerge from Parisian Cubism, was able to rebuild his career as the First World War came to an end by developing a decorative approach evident in the two major canvases in this section (cat. 22-23).

### Exiles and others: politics, primitivism and the personal

One of the key currents in the development of modern art was an increasing valorisation of individuals or cultures viewed as marginal, 'outsider' or 'other' in comparison to Western European 'civilisation'. Gauguin and Van Gogh sought new models for their art among rural communities and also in Japanese prints and objects (as in Gauguin's *Still Life with Fan* in this section, cat. 31). Rejecting the cosmopolitan artistic context of Paris, they attempted to establish an artist's colony

CAT. 29

**Vincent van Gogh**  
(1853-1890)  
*Basket of Lemons*  
*and a Bottle, 1888,*  
oil on canvas,  
53.9 x 64.3 cm.

Otterlo, Kröller-Müller  
Museum [KM 111.196]  
© Photo: Collection Kröller-  
Müller Museum, Otterlo,  
The Netherlands





CAT. 36

**Henri Matisse**  
(1869-1954)  
*Still Life, Bouquet of Dahlias and White Book*, 1923,  
oil on canvas,  
50.2 x 61 cm.  
The Baltimore Museum  
of Art: The Cone Collection  
[BMA1950.249]  
Photo: Mitro Hood  
© Succession H. Matisse/  
SPA 2011

in the South of France. Gauguin tried to export this idea to Tahiti and then the Marquesas Islands, an act of 'going away' or self-imposed artistic exile that enabled him to create a hybrid of Tahitian and Western artistic motifs.

In the context of this exploration of alternative cultural meaning, the depiction of an array of ordinary objects became the vehicle for personal meanings and the pretext for dramatic departures from the conventions of pictorial composition and finish. For Van Gogh, a basket of lemons and a bottle (cat. 29) were made to stand for the drama of the co-presence of artist and thing, while the expressive surface, use of vibrant colour and spatial distortions were all meant to capture a flow of human feeling. German artist Max Beckmann's exile was brought about not by aesthetic beliefs but by the rise of the Nazi regime, which regarded his work, along with that of many other modern artists, as 'Degenerate'.

### The thing as such – materiality and immateriality

Still life can be thought of as an art form focused on the world of objects, but in modernity the very nature of objects becomes a matter of uncertainty. The interrogation of the existence of things went hand in hand in modern art with a

radical questioning of representational strategies. Works by Cubists, Futurists and other avant-garde groups asked a variety of profound questions about the conditions or perspective from which we are bound to grasp things in painting, the nature of the reality of the external world,

CAT. 44

**Georges Braque**  
(1882-1963)  
*Still Life: Bach (Violin Bach)*, 1912,  
pasted paper and  
charcoal on paper,  
63 x 48.3 cm.  
Kunstmuseum Basel,  
Kupferstichkabinett,  
Schenkung Raoul La Roche  
[1963.22]  
Kunstmuseum Basel, Martin  
P. Bühler © Georges Braque.  
ADAGP, Lisboa 2011



or indeed our ability to transform or remake it. This section includes one of the early *papiers collés* ('pasted papers') created in the South of France in September 1912 by Georges Braque (cat. 44). This simple object, comprising charcoal lines and printed wood grain-effect paper, is nothing short of a transformation of the practice of pictorial representation. Pictorial space is compressed into a shallow relief, and the material character of written language and the texture of things jostling together in a new form of composition.

Russian Vladimir Tatlin aimed to take both the materialism of Cubism and the question of a modern sculptural still life in a direction beyond representation altogether (cat. 48-49). This is not merely to say that Tatlin wanted to make abstract works, but that the objects he called 'Counter-Reliefs' were meant to be just that: autonomous objects constructed with revolutionary materialism. Here we leave behind the artifice of still life in favour of engineered reality.

### Modern life: machines and mass-industrial things

The machine was first celebrated in modern art by Futurism, in the work of artists such as Carlo Carrà, Boccioni, Gino Severini. Futurism drew in the important critic Ardengo Soffici, whose painting in this section looks into the workings of an oil lamp (cat. 52). In the capitalist Euro-

pean countries recovering from the First World War, however, the machine-produced object, with its perfect forms and complex or simple shapes, seemed to herald a new, purer reality; one celebrated by the artists Ozenfant and Jeanneret (Le Corbusier) (cat. 54-55) in their 'Purist' publication of 1920 onwards, *The New Spirit*. Ozenfant and Jeanneret rejected the improvisational and playful character of Cubism, arguing instead for a perfected industrial universe intended to chime with an architecture aiming at the renewal of humanity. Fernand Léger shared in some of these fantasies, but his vision also incorporated a socialist ideal of the new life that would be produced for the worker by the improvements promised by mechanical production.

### Modernisms: national identities and the lure of Paris

For many artists in countries across Europe, Parisian Modernism was the central point of reference for the development of their own practices. This often meant finding the funds to spend time studying in one of numerous alternative 'academies' that had sprung up in the French

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CAT. 54

**Amédée Ozenfant**  
(1886-1966)  
*Bottle, Pipe and Books*,  
1918,  
oil on canvas,  
73 x 60 cm.  
Musée de Grenoble  
[MG 1993-6-1]  
© Musée de Grenoble  
© Amédée Ozenfant, ADAGP,  
Paris, 2012

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CAT. 63

**Maria Helena Vieira da Silva**  
(1908-1992)  
*Blue Still Life*, 1932,  
oil on canvas,  
81 x 60 cm.  
Lisbon, CAM - Calouste  
Gulbenkian Foundation  
[PE 107]  
Photo: Paulo Costa  
© Vieira da Silva, ADAGP,  
Paris, 2012



capital, often via contact with fellow nationals already there, or at the very least becoming acquainted with what was happening in Paris via magazines or by seeing work in private collections closer to home. This section features the work of a number of artists of different nationalities who either went to Paris to absorb what they could of the new languages of art, or who modified their own national practices in response to aspects of modern art, producing fascinating hybrid practices (in fact, many artists whose work features in other sections also made the trip, including Tatlin and de Pisis, for example). Portuguese artists, Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso, Eduardo Viana, and Vieira da Silva (cat. 59, 60 and 63) spent time studying in modernist circles in Paris, the latter two also benefiting from contact with Robert and Sonia Delaunay during their stay in Portugal for several years during the First World War.

The Picasso still life in this section (cat. 58) was made just in the period when the artist was finding new ways to trade on his Spanish identity while testing the conventions of pictorial representation in response to the examples of Cézanne, Gauguin and Matisse. It is easy to see that the intensity of this painting refers to the seventeenth-century Spanish tradition in still life.

### The things themselves: the shock of photography

The development to still life in modernity happened alongside the widespread circulation of photographs and (later on)

the new invention of cinema. The fixing of images that had appeared in popular scientific instruments such as the camera obscura happened more or less simultaneously in France and Britain around 1839. Early techniques were enormously complex and expensive, but the technology improved rapidly during the nineteenth century. Photography opened up the world of natural appearances in an entirely new way, with the static nature of still life being the perfect medium for initial experiments, although views of buildings, landscapes and portraiture were also very important themes. This section includes early photographic still lifes by French and German amateurs and photographic entrepreneurs. At the centre of the display is the encounter of Courbet's vigorous painting of grapes on the vine (cat. 70) with Aubry's photograph of a bunch of grapes from a few years earlier (cat. 69). The clash of painting and photography here recalls, somewhat ironically, the famous story, narrated by Pliny the Elder, of the mimetic representation of grapes by Zeuxis in a competition with his fellow painter Parrhasius.

### Crisis of the object: dreams and nightmares

Surrealism, a literary and artistic movement founded by Breton with several other French poets, writers and artists in 1924, sought above all to transform reality via the liberating force of the unconscious. In Freud's thinking objects were often the locus of sublimated or repressed



CAT. 69

**Charles Aubry**  
(1811-1877)  
*Bunch of Grapes*,  
ca. 1864,  
albumen paper print  
from a dry collodion  
process glass negative,  
pasted onto cardboard,  
36.5 x 27.5 cm.  
Paris, Musée d'Orsay  
(deposit of Mobilier national)  
[DOI 1979-10]  
© Photo RMN (Musée d'Orsay)  
/ Hervé Lewandowski

CAT. 70

**Gustave Courbet**  
(1819-1877)  
*Bunch of Grapes*, 1871,  
oil on canvas,  
40.5 x 32.3 cm.  
Petit Palais, Musée des  
Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris  
[PPP00574]  
© Petit Palais / Roger-Viollet



CAT. 84  
 René Magritte  
 (1898-1967)  
*The Portrait*, 1935,  
 oil on canvas,  
 73 x 50 cm.  
 The Museum of Modern  
 Art (MoMA), New York. Gift  
 of Kay Sage Tanguy, 1956  
 [574,1956]  
 © 2010. Digital Image, The  
 Museum of Modern Art, New  
 York/Scala, Florence  
 © René Magritte, ADAGP,  
 SPA, 2010

desires. The surrealist fascination with what Freud called the ‘dreamwork’ opened still life painting up to the flux of desire and fantasy (evident in the paintings here by Dalí and Magritte, cat. 83-84), and supplanted the logic of composition with the dream situation of the juxtaposition of ostensibly unrelated objects. Initially, Surrealist artists sought ways to avoid conventional approaches to painting in order to subvert conscious control. By the end of the 1930s artists explored other mediums: the making of Surrealist objects and Surrealist cinema.

The problem of the encounters with objects intended to be merely functional was explored a decade before the foundation of Surrealism by the former Cubist artist Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp’s Readymades, to some extent identified with the wartime nihilism of Dada for their refusal of the values of art, were also to some extent philosophical meditations on the limits of aesthetic response and ironic comments on the relationship to objects of desire in shop windows. The Readymades, represented in this section by his *Bottlerack* of 1914 (cat. 76), became

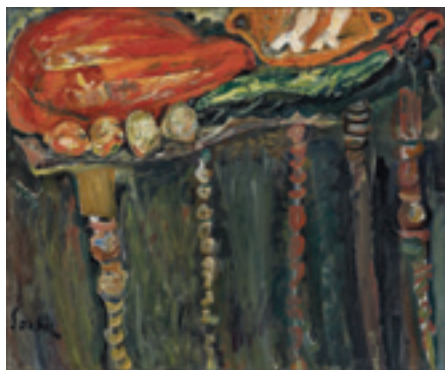
very significant for Surrealism in the 1930s alongside Dalí’s own constructed ‘Surrealist objects’ (cat. 85).

Man Ray’s early film *La Retour à la raison* (cat. 78), made in Paris just in the formative moment of Surrealism, shows how film technique could make objects cinematic. Two other avant-garde films, by Hans Richter and Fernand Léger (cat. 77 and 79), are driven by ideas emerging from the crucibles of Cubism, Futurism, Dada and Purism. These films again take some of the objects that had been the centre of still life painting and animate them, set them to work in ways that reject that tradition altogether.

### From the hunt to horror

The ‘game’ still life was a major decorative type favoured by many artists in the nineteenth century, including, for example, Dominique Rozier (cat. 88). The ‘Hunting Trophy’ composition, with its array of mixed game and shooting paraphernalia, made for a spectacular pretext for painterly skill and an attractive decoration for bourgeois households. Impressionists Manet and Renoir (cat. 86-87) show how this rather formulaic sub-genre could be revitalized for a modern and sophisticated urban audience. They had the ability to rediscover the contract between painting and the material surfaces of the bodies of dead animals that had been forged by artists in the seventeenth century in Spain and The Netherlands and, of course, in France by Chardin.

The great and sometimes related tradition of vanitas and memento mori in still life found new meanings in the context of industrial warfare and pogroms. Chaim Soutine’s consistent pursuit of the raw-



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 CAT. 89  
 Chaim Soutine  
 (1893-1943)  
*Nature morte au  
 morceau de viande  
 crue*, 1926-27,  
 oil on canvas,  
 54 x 65 cm.  
 Musée d’Art Moderne de la  
 Ville de Troyes [MNPL 309]  
 © Photo: Laurent Lacot  
 © Chaim Soutine, ADAGP,  
 Paris, 2012

**William Nicholson**

(1872-1949)

*Cyclamen*, ca. 1937,  
oil on panel,  
39.3 x 31.1 cm.London, The Samuel  
Courttauld Trust, The  
Courttauld Gallery bequest  
of Miss Lillian Browne, 2005 [  
P.1982.LB.287]The Samuel Courttauld Trust,  
The Courttauld Gallery,  
LondonPhoto: Richard Valencia  
© William Nicholson, DACS,  
SPA 2012

ness of flesh that he found in Rembrandt has, perhaps unintentionally, such a modern resonance (cat. 89). Artists such as Pablo Picasso also resorted to traditional imagery in these contexts, finding a new and urgent post-religious role for skulls and candles, sea urchins or slabs of meat (cat. 90).

### Taking the side of things

This exhibition considers what becomes of still life painting in modernity? Can this form of painting be said to survive the many challenges posed to it by the work in the rooms that follow, made by artists associated in different ways with Cubism, Futurism, Dada, Constructivism and Surrealism, or by the brutality of world events?

This single painting by William Nicholson, a contemporary of these developments but an artist who clung steadfastly to the values of still life painting, is set alongside the actual earthenware jug depicted in it



(cat. 92-93). Nicholson returns to the old question that preoccupied the first still life painters in the sixteenth century: what is it for a jug to be transformed into the pictorial order, what kind of painting can render its obdurate reality?

#### OPENING TIMES

Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday: 10.00 a.m. – 6.00 p.m.

Thursday and Saturday: 10.00 a.m. – 8.00 p.m.

Closes Monday and Bank Holidays (December 25 and January 1)

Entry: €5.00 · Entry + Audio guide: €6.00

#### SERIES OF LECTURES (free admission)

*Presence in Perspective: The Modern Still Life*

Monday: 6.00 p.m. – Auditorium Two

7, 21, 28 November and 5 December

#### CONCERTS (free admission)

*Sound Transformed: Music after 1840*

Sunday: 5.00 p.m.

27 November – Library Hall

11 December – Museum Hall

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**Calouste Gulbenkian Museum**

EXHIBITION GALLERY  
CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN FOUNDATION

21 October 2011 – 8 January 2012



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