

***From Audubon to Warhol:
The Art of American Still Life***

Philadelphia Museum of Art

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

October 27, 2015–

January 10, 2016

***From Audubon to Warhol: The Art of American Still Life*, curated by Mark Mitchell, staged an artful rumination on the evolution of the still life, which staked ties to both local and national identity.¹ Bold declarations peppered throughout the exhibition acknowledged Philadelphia as the central location from which the American variant originated. At the risk of crediting the city for the entire genre, the exhibition made good on the claim for Philadelphia's primacy. This was particularly evident in the way that the exhibit took stock of the impressive holdings from local private collections, the museum's own walls, and loans with strong historical connections to the city. The flexible, contorting definition of the still life, which masterfully slid between macro- and micro-level investigations of the practice, was the single thread that united the show from beginning to end.**

Two works by Raphaelle Peale (1774-1825) anchored this thread at the exhibition's beginning. Peale, who hailed from a family of artists inextricably linked to Philadelphia's history, was known to have trained his attention on the minutiae of the natural world. The intensity of his focus was first made manifest in the creases and folds of a crisp white cloth in *Venus Rising from the Sea—A Deception (After the Bath)* (c. 1822), which can be seen in figure 1. With the





Left, Installation view, *From Audubon to Warhol: The Art of American Still Life*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. (Photo Credit: Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, photographed by Joseph Hu. 2015 11 09 JH002)

Above, Installation view, *From Audubon to Warhol: The Art of American Still Life*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. (Photo Credit: Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, photographed by Joseph Hu. 2015 11 09 JH012)

reach of a hand and a foot just beyond the fabric in an otherwise undefined space, this painting helped to establish what would become an ongoing engagement with themes of mystery and curiosity—which are so central to the still life tradition. On the next wall of this pine-colored room’s winding path, hung another “deception” (*Catalogue*

Deception, after 1813, also visible in figure 1), which depicts a deceptively naturalistic book with dog-eared pages and the word “Paintings” inscribed in simulated typeface. The painting’s green background was nearly indistinguishable in color from its enlarged surrounding frame and the wall on which it was installed, causing

the room to brilliantly encompass a larger, overarching *trompe l’oeil* illusion. And, thus, the ambitious project of defining an entire artistic genre—in a scope spanning the past three centuries—began.

In addition to attempting to define still life throughout, another claim made here was that the still life was a template through which Americans could visualize their national identity by illuminating cultural values that were distinct from the Old World. In the United States, the still life was often concerned with scientific exploration and precision—as testified by the anatomical accuracy of John James Audubon’s (1785-1851) ornithological catalogues of bird species. Visitors were even invited to compare his work with the real thing; a group of taxidermied Carolina parrots once owned by Audubon himself appeared in a glass display case nearby his work. Framed as an avatar for national identity in this exhibition, the still life threatened to encroach upon the domain of the landscape, which has long been seen as the paradigmatic symbol of cultural identity due to its direct allusions to the land.

Aided by the porous division of historical eras, the exhibition performed transitions with utter deftness, and thematic continuities prevailed. American consumptive habits were meticulously traced back to the nation’s Puritan roots and the acquisition-centered spirit of the “Protestant work ethic.” The scrutiny of the natural world that constituted the show’s opening quickly ceded to a reality in which the environment became another subject to be exploited, coveted, commodified, and eventually cultivated as a rarity.

The still life’s relationship to national identity persisted as the exhibition’s



most consistent line of query. Multiple solutions were suggested, begging to be uncovered like a collection of nesting dolls. It was addressed most directly in the second of the exhibition's four sections, simply entitled "Indulging." Paintings representing bountiful arrangements of fruit and flowers—both delectable and exotic—came in overwhelming, abundant supply, and made strong visual appeals to the senses. The result mirrored the effects of a curiosity cabinet, in which the viewer is encouraged to indulge their consumptive desires, immediately and conspicuously. Florid, overflowing, and overwrought color and detail overtook Edward Goodes's (1832-1910) *Fishbowl Fantasy* of 1867. Its garish palette, which dances on the brink of kitsch, signals an important shift in American history. This was the moment when the scientific focus on nature fixed its lens on the consumer object and the nation came to be defined as an industrial and entrepreneurial powerhouse rather than by its offerings of natural beauty. The trajectory of capitalistic excess that was broached in the exhibition's final bookend—Andy Warhol's Pop *Brillo Boxes* (1964)—was charted accordingly.

In its analysis of the still life genre's ever-evolving subject matter, the exhibition also diagnosed the origins

of certain Americanisms, such as the nation's hypocritical relationship to vice. Allusions to intoxication were both figurative and literal, as still lifes featuring glasses of cognac and wine populated the walls. The language used in the exhibition sketched synesthetic parallels that connected the tactility of silk to the taste of ripened fruit and the aroma of flowers in bloom. It was implied that pure visual delectation—the first in the hierarchy of senses—would ultimately transcend all other sensory experiences. This meditation on desire, as vividly illustrated in William McCloskey's (1859-1941) *Wrapped Oranges* (1889), brilliantly historicized the American penchant for polarized extremes, in this case: puritan self-denial and pleasurable, sinful indulgence.

The third section, entitled "Discerning," was the weakest by comparison, and provided a moment of slack in what was otherwise a taut thematic thread. It opened with a discussion of the new culture of beauty that arose in late-nineteenth-century America, one informed by foreign—mostly European, but also Japanese—tastes. The segue to the work of the great Philadelphia *trompe l'oeil* masters William Harnett (1848-1892), John Peto (1854-1907), and John Haberle (1856-1933), whose paintings were indispensable in a show dedicated to

the American still life, seemed rather abrupt. A wall evoking the décor and mood of Theodore Stewart's New York City saloon, the first venue to possess and display Harnett's *After the Hunt* (1885) recalibrated the exhibition's investigative focus onto redefinitions of Old World traditions in the context of the New World. This arrangement implied that the new locus for an emerging art market, which was unburdened by immobile class distinctions, was in the process of defining itself.

In the subsequent presentation of *trompe l'oeil* works by Peto and Haberle, the exhibition's thematic momentum regained its ground. Descriptions of these paintings as new, post-Civil War takes on the history painting genre stressed qualities that are fundamental to the nation's character, such as the interest in observation-based inquiry and the nation's complex relationship to material culture. The fact that paintings such as Peto's *Reminiscences of 1865* (1904) and Haberle's *The Changes of Time* (1888) focus so intensely on mass-circulating material such as printed text, photographs, and banknotes, highlights a democratic spirit that would later be adopted by Warhol. The inherent banality of the subject does more than just simply telescope forward to the



Pop era. It represents the moment when the taste for such quintessentially commonplace objects was first seeded.

What would have been a perfunctory mention of early-twentieth-century approaches to the still life was invigorated by Charles Scheeler's (1883-1965) *Rolling Power* (1939), which opened the fourth and final section: "Animating." The contradiction of presenting a steam locomotive—a machine celebrated for its capacity for reaching high speeds—as a still life, suggests that the genre is open to negotiating its defining terms. The bold position of Scheeler's work also served as a reminder that the vitality of the early twentieth century was intrinsically wedded to American commercial culture, even embedded in the history of this very painting, which was created for publication in *Fortune* magazine. Clinical white walls in this section announced the coming of the machine age in which the modernist flora of Joseph Stella (1877-1946) and the desert-scapes of Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) are replaced by such fetishized consumer objects as Gerald Murphy's (1888-1964) *Watch* (1924–25) in the forward march of time.

The exhibition ended, not with a reaffirmation of the object—or even the consumer product—but rather with a survey of the commercial-packaging-

inspired works of Stuart Davis (1892-1964), Roy Lichtenstein (1923-1997), and Andy Warhol (1928-1987). After submitting itself to rigorous study, exploitation, and fetishization, the still life's significance is ultimately eclipsed by its beautiful, seductive veneer. Consequently, the viewer was forced to confront the history of the American object of consumption as well as the seductive box that contains it.

The universal applicability of the term "still life" reached its logical conclusion in Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*. Extending beyond painting, the exhibition's scope addressed the complex history of America's and Americans' relationship to the object, as found in nature, as made by man, and as seen in the byproducts of promotional marketing. The viewer was consistently reminded of the ever-so-important links between the still life's American manifestation and Philadelphia. All lines inevitably traced back to the city—even in works with tenuous connections to the genre, such as the readymades of Morton Schamberg (1881-1918) and Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968). Carried out with vision and brilliance, the exhibition was a testament to the Philadelphia Museum of Art's strong sense of identity.

Far left, Installation view, *From Audubon to Warhol: The Art of American Still Life*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. (Photo Credit: Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, photographed by Joseph Hu. 2015 11 09 JH045)

Center, Installation view, *From Audubon to Warhol: The Art of American Still Life*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. (Photo Credit: Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, photographed by Joseph Hu. 2015 11 09 JH067)

Top right, Installation view, *From Audubon to Warhol: The Art of American Still Life*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. (Photo Credit: Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, photographed by Joseph Hu. 2015 11 09 JH081)

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Endnotes

1. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue, Mark Mitchell, *The Art of American Still Life: Audubon to Warhol*, New Haven and London: Philadelphia Museum of Art, in association with Yale University Press, 2015.