

Country Life
UK, Print
1 May 2024
Circulation: 40,560
EVE: £2,040

Rees & Co



Arts & antiques



Carla Passino

Anything but still

Since Simon Verelst's floral triumphs and Edwaert Collier's skulls, still life has given artists in Britain a vehicle to push boundaries and explore facets of our existence

STILL life came to Britain on a boat, sailing over the North Sea with the 17th-century artists who left their native Netherlands to make themselves a home and a name on these shores. The explosion of the Dutch merchant economy had turned fruit and flowers, glass and silverware into artistic subjects, with an entire genre devoted to them. When the Netherlands market became saturated, some painters took their craft to Britain, which they saw as 'the Cockaigne of all the Arts', according to Dutch Enlightenment painter Jacob Campo Weyerman. From The Hague came, in 1669, Simon Verelst, the self-proclaimed 'God of Flowers'. There must have been some substance to his boasting, because one of his paintings so enchanted Samuel Pepys that the great diarist called it 'the finest thing that ever, I think, I saw in my life'.

Another Dutch arrival, Edwaert (Evert) Collier, enthralled the British public with pictures of musical and navigational instruments, clocks and—crucially—skulls. For still lifes were more than decorative groupings of objects: they 'explored themes such as *vanitas* and *memento mori*, expressing the transience of life,' says Melanie Vandenbrouck of Pallant House, West Sussex, where a new exhibition, 'The Shape of Things', will trace the evolution of the genre in Britain.

By the 18th century, British painters had embraced still life with gusto. The Smith brothers of Chichester, George and William, filled their canvases with kippers and eggs,



Still Life with Cut Melon, Glass and Fan, about 1919/20, by George Leslie Hunter

bread and cheese, fruit and mighty joints of beef; Mary Moser, the youngest among the Royal Academy founders, painted flowers, although she also excelled in other genres. Yet, at the time, academies in Britain and France considered still life inferior to historical or religious pictures, portraiture and even landscape. The reputational turning point came in the early 20th century, when leading painters such as William Nicholson made still life a major strand of their work. His painting of a silver casket, included at Pallant House, has 'a very 17th-century feel, that really lavish reproduction of the texture of objects against a distinctive, dark background'.

There were, however, major differences between the genre's 17th-century heyday and the Edwardian era. In the latter, subjects were often humble: jugs, bottles, bowls of fruit. Artists moved away from symbolism, approaching still life instead as a way to explore form, colour and composition—one such was Duncan Grant, who experimented with almost abstract arrangements of objects.

The traumatic aftermath of the First World War saw painters return to the realistic depictions of objects, veer towards Surrealism, or—particularly those based around St Ives in Cornwall, including Ben Nicholson—take the genre along in their move towards Abstraction, with a progressive dissolution of forms.

It took another trauma—the Second World War—to return to the fore the preoccupations with *vanitas* and *memento mori* that had animated the first still-life painters. In the post-war years, artists such as Prunella Clough embraced sombre motifs—dead plants, animal skulls—that reflected, in their matter-of-fact decay, the shadows of the conflict and the restrictions of rationing. A decade or so later, all this was swept away by the Pop Art generation's wave of optimism. David Hockney's giant Typhoon tea packets or Patrick Caulfield's bold pictures of pitchers—as rich in colour as they were sparse in lines—drew from the American consumption boom and the language of advertising, glossy magazines and comics.

The second half of the 20th century also saw a return to figurative still lifes—often tinged with a desire for contemplation—as with Elizabeth Blackadder's luminous compositions of flowers from her garden. 'Within that kind of work, you find something about stillness, quietness, interiority and inner life, which subsequent artists will be taking as their own,' says Dr Vandenbrouck.

Today, still life is a prism through which British artists consider many facets of our existence, whether it's motherhood, climate change or, in Maggi Hambling's skull paintings, the reminder, yet again, that nothing lasts forever. And therein lies the essence of still life: this genre so devoid of people turns out to be a great vehicle to explore the human condition in all its complexity.

'The Shape of Things: Still Life in Britain' is at Pallant House, Chichester, West Sussex, from May 11–October 20 (www.pallant.org.uk)

A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN

COMBINING furniture of similar styles is a safe approach to decorating, but a well-conceived contrast can be more interesting, because it highlights the traits that make each piece distinctive and appealing. Interior designer Rose Uniacke does this successfully when she chooses to pair a clean Bauhaus chair with a mid-century glazed bookcase inspired by the Arts-and-Crafts Movement and attributed to Reynolds of Ludlow: 'This 1930s Marcel Breuer steel-and-leather armchair is an elegant example of Bauhaus design, stripped down and industrial,' she notes. 'There is the impression that it is a single, continuous piece of tubular steel, quietly contradicting the detailed nature of the cabinet behind—yet there is a synergy, a strength in form and structure.'

