

Press Release

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Vienna/Art/Culture/Exhibitions

AUGENSCHMAUS – VOM ESSEN IM STILLEBEN

A FEAST FOR THE EYES – FOOD IN STILL LIFE

Attachments to message at <http://presse.leisuregroup.at/kunstforum/augenschmaus>

The exhibition “A Feast for the Eyes – Food in Still Life” is devoted to a central theme of still life: the connection of art and life in the representation of food and drink. In its promise of all-embracing sensuous experience, still life has always exercised an unbroken fascination right up to the present day, when there is a total availability of practically everything. This confrontation of 90 works from different art landscapes and epochs is a thematic treatment of the everyday culture of eating and drinking and its changes, from the sixteenth century until today.

Six “narratives” cast light on the multifaceted levels of meaning in still life: The object as subject – the birth of still life; Vanitas – allegories of life and death; food between the basics of existence and consumer object; table/tableau and the female-coded space of still life; flesh – images, the edible, and taboos; and, coursing through the centuries: still life as a field of painterly experimentation.

“Culinary” still life embodies nutritional habits, cultic rituals and discourses from the world and time of their origins, which reflect to an equal extent existential basic needs as well as transcendental aspirations of the human being. **Giuseppe Arcimboldo’s** composite heads and **Pieter Aertsen’s** kitchen pieces manifest the simultaneous appearance of still life south and north of the Alps in the second half of the sixteenth century. Here we see the transformation from being an accessory of a (religious) pictorial narrative to becoming an autonomous pictorial genre, focusing on the illusionistic representation of everyday things.

The exhibition explores the spectacular high-flying dimension of the genre in the seventeenth century throughout Europe, focusing here on the “hyper-realistic” still life of the “Golden Age” of the Netherlands: the prosperous climate of the young republic fostered the growth of an art market for the private space of the middle-classes, and a regular boom in picture production. Individual types of still life evolved, seen for instance in “The Set Table” by **Willem Claesz. Heda**, dessert still life by **Clara Peeters**, Vanitas still life by **Willem Kalf** or hunting pieces by **Frans Snyders**. The Dutch term *stilleven* first crops up in 1650 and signifies an object that is still, unmoving (leven = model).

Despite its general popularity, as of the seventeenth century still life was demoted to the bottom rung in the hierarchy of academic genres, with the reproach that it was pure handicraft and devoid of conceptual meaning. It was this very position as an outsider beyond the pale of the academic canon that gave it a more or less “maverick” status, which encouraged painterly experimentation, as we see in the eighteenth century in **Jean-Siméon Chardin** or **Anne Vallayer-Coster**. Chardin’s interpretations of unpretentious everyday things which free themselves from the compulsion to imitate reality and shift the interest from the subject to the way of representing it show him to be a central forerunner of modernist painting.

“The day will come when a single independently painted carrot will cause a mighty revolution” – Emil Zola has the painter Lantier say this in his *Künstlerroman* *L’Oeuvre* (1886). With **Paul Cézanne**, still life became the experimental medium par excellence – his apples are paradigmatic of this. In the twentieth century, it played a programmatic role for artistic innovations, for which Cézanne’s autonomous pictorial creations form the essential starting point. The exhibition demonstrates this with a wide range of artists: **Pablo Picasso** and **Georges Braque**, who achieved the cubist revolution by loading it “on the backs” of things – **Vincent van Gogh**, **Oskar Kokoschka** and **Paula Modersohn-Becker**; also **Giorgio Morandi** with his meditative jugs or **Andy Warhol** with his iconic soup cans.

For centuries still life was regarded as a “feminine” genre because of its focus on the domestic, “material-palpable” sphere of life. For many women painters, for whom the access to academe – or to nude studies – remained closed, it became the reserve of the private practice of art, in the slipstream of the public-prestigious art scene. This makes the history of still life painting actually into a history of the production and reception of women artists, which the exhibition is presenting for the first time with outstanding works by **Fede Galizia**, **Louise**

Moillon, Clara Peeters, Anne Vallayer-Coster, Berthe Morisot, Paula Modersohn-Becker or **Maria Lassnig**, In the 1970s, artists like **Martha Rosler** unmasked traditional stereotypes of woman as the cook, the nourisher or the “savoury” sex object and demonstrated how the visual element participates in the construction of gender differences.

The transformation of food from being the subject of painting to becoming the actual artistic material is launched in the Eat Art movement with **Daniel Spoerri** or **Dieter Roth**, who aim at an unconditional connection between art and everyday (culinary) experiences.

With selected positions demonstrated in **Zoe Leonard, Damien Hirst, Harun Farocki**, or **Sam-Taylor Wood**, contemporary forms of expression are presented which relate to the still life tradition but at the same time take up and press ahead current cultural practices and discourses to do with food.