

## 2 Rhopography

The *xenia* of antiquity share a striking and defining feature with all the later forms of still life painting: exclusion of the human form. Still life has never been pursued as the only available category of image-making: it has always been part of a field of genres that include portraiture and history painting, but existing in opposition to these as the genre where the human figure is deliberately avoided. In history painting we see the figure more or less idealised, and in portraiture we see the human figure more or less as it is, and both of these genres address the part of our imagination which builds and affirms the sense of human visual identity – what Jacques Lacan defines as the Imaginary.<sup>1</sup> But in still life we never see the human form at all. Still life negates the whole process of constructing and asserting human beings as the primary focus of depiction. Opposing the anthropocentrism of the ‘higher’ genres, it assaults the centrality, value and prestige of the human subject. Physical exclusion is only the first in a series of negations of the kinds of human-centred dignity we are used to finding in the other genres. Removal of the human body is the founding move of still life, but this foundation would be precarious if all that were needed to destroy it were the body’s physical return: the disappearance of the human subject might represent only a provisional state of affairs if the body is just around the corner, and likely to re-enter the field of vision at any moment. Human presence is not only expelled physically: still life also expels the values which human presence imposes on the world.

While history painting is constructed around narrative, still life is the world minus its narratives or, better, the world minus its capacity for generating narrative interest. To narrate is to name what is unique: the singular actions of individual persons. And narrative works hard to explain why any particular story is worth narrating – because the actions in the story are heroic or wonderful, or frightening or ignoble, or cautionary or instructive. The whole principle of story-telling is jeopardised or paralysed by the hearer’s objection: ‘so what?’ But still life loves

the ‘so what?’ It exactly breaks with narrative’s scale of human importance. The law of narrative is one of change: characters move from episode to episode, from ignorance to knowledge, from high estate to low or from low to high. Its generative principle is one of discontinuity: where states are continuous, homeostatic, narrative is helpless. But still life pitches itself at a level of material existence where nothing exceptional occurs: there is wholesale eviction of the Event. At this level of routine existence, centred on food and eating, uniqueness of personality becomes an irrelevance. Anonymity replaces narrative’s pursuit of the unique life and its adventures. What is abolished in still life is the subject’s access to *distinction*. The subject is not only exiled physically: the scale of values on which narrative is based is erased also.

Perhaps one may draw on the distinction made by Charles Sterling between ‘megalography’ and ‘rhopography’.<sup>2</sup> Megalography is the depiction of those things in the world which are great – the legends of the gods, the battles of heroes, the crises of history. Rhopography (from *rhopos*, trivial objects, small wares, trifles) is the depiction of those things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that ‘importance’ constantly overlooks. The categories of megalography and rhopography are intertwined. The concept of importance can arise only by separating itself from what it declares to be trivial and insignificant; ‘importance’ generates ‘waste’, what is sometimes called the preterite, that which is excluded or passed over. Still life takes on the exploration of what ‘importance’ tramples underfoot. It attends to the world ignored by the human impulse to create greatness. Its assault on the prestige of the human subject is therefore conducted at a very deep level. The human figure, with all of its fascination, is expelled. Narrative – the drama of greatness – is banished. And what is looked at overturns the standpoint on which human importance is established. Still life is unimpressed by the categories of achievement, grandeur or the unique. The human subject that it proposes and assumes is anonymous and creatural, cut off from splendour and from singularity. All men must eat, even the great; there is a levelling of humanity, a humbling of aspiration before an irreducible fact of life, hunger.

In the *xenia* from Campania, this principle of lowering human life to a level of primitive dependence and routine is strictly balanced against its opposite, an elevation of human life to the

greatest degree of refinement, elaboration and removal from nature. We saw in the last chapter that the *xenia* are incorporated into decorative schemes which move in carefully plotted stages between images of rusticity (bounty of nature, social harmony of man) and extreme sophistication (pictures within pictures, reality turned into theatre). And in the *xenia* described by Philostratus that, too, is the structure: the pictures move between a vision of pre-cultural simplicity, in which there is apparently nothing to do but eat what nature generously provides (*Xenia* I), and the more complex portrayal involving urban life, social stratification and the wealth of individuals (*Xenia* II). *Xenia* are bounded by the dual structure of megalography and rhopography, as these interpenetrate. Careful checks and balances ensure that the idea of the humble life, of creaturely necessity and dependence on nature, is countered by its opposite, the power of capital and of representation to break away from what is creaturely and replace it with what is artificial or simulated. One effect of this dual structure is to hold in check still life's capacity to explore the 'world without importance' for its own sake: what prevents that is precisely the commitment to the presentation of culture as circulating between luxury and necessity in a continuous cycle. An ethical view grounded in *sophrosyne*, the avoidance of extremes, constantly reminds sophistication of the place that must be granted to an earthy



18 Juan Sánchez Cotán, *Still Life*. Musée des Beaux Arts, Strasbourg.



19 Juan Sánchez Cotán, *Still Life with Fruit and Vegetables*. Hernani Collection, Madrid.

reality, directly apprehended, and at the same time reveals to a rustic version of life the possibility of overcoming necessity through cultural organisation, refinement, and symbolic play. The fuller development of still life depends on the disappearance of this classical balance and moderation. It is in the monastic culture of seventeenth-century Spain that rhopography's potential for overturning the scale of human importance is first revealed.

The kitchen pictures or *bodegones* of Juan Sánchez Cotán (1561–1627) are conceived from the beginning as exercises in the renunciation of normal human priorities. They exactly reverse the scale of values in which what is unique and powerful in the world is the pre-ordained object of the gaze, while that which lacks importance is overlooked (illus. 18, 19).<sup>3</sup> The work of Cotán is an inversion of the kind of vision one finds, say, in Velázquez' *Las Meninas*. There, the visual field is entirely obedient to social hierarchy: at its apex are the King and Queen, who as possessors of absolute power also have dominion over sight, and feature as the sovereign gaze surveying all of the court; below them is the Infanta, privileged spectacle of the

court, the centre of all attention, and then the various court functionaries, including Velázquez, who fill lesser rôles in this drama of observer and observed. Cotán makes it the mission of his paintings to reverse this worldly mode of seeing by taking what is of least importance in the world – the disregarded contents of a larder – and by lavishing there the kind of attention normally reserved for what is of supreme value. The process can be followed in either a 'descending' or an 'ascending' scale. From one point of view, the worldly scale of importance is deliberately assaulted by plunging attention downwards, forcing the eye to discover in the trivial base of life intensities and subtleties which are normally ascribed to things of great worth; this is the descending movement, involving a humiliation of attention and of the self. From another point of view, the result is that what is valueless becomes priceless: by detaining attention in this humble milieu, by imprisoning the eye in this dungeon-like space, attention itself gains the power to transfigure the commonplace, and it is rewarded by being given objects in which it may find a fascination commensurate with its own discovered strengths.

Cotán's paintings aim to persuade vision to shed its worldly education – both the eye's enslavement to the world's ideas of what is worthy of attention, and the eye's sloth, the blurs and entropies of vision that screen out everything in creation except what the world presents as spectacular. Against these vices of fallen vision, Cotán administers his antidote: hyperreality. It would not be enough simply to record the fruit and the vegetables and the game as they are: mere realism would not bite deep enough into vision to dislodge the habitual vanities and blindnesses which lurk there. The surplus of appearances in Cotán, his excess of focus and brilliance, reveals a conception of vision as inherently wayward, yet capable of correction. Left to its own devices, vision is assumed to be the opposite of what the paintings emphasise; it overlooks ninety per cent of the world in order to follow the tracks laid down for vision by the world's definitions of spectacle, and by its own desires. Fallen vision is a half-lit place of blurs and glimpses, shifting quickly, easily led. The *bodegones* of Cotán have an apotropaic function: to ward off this labile, unfocused imagery, to remove the interference of worldly attraction and to awaken vision to a sense of its own powers.

The paintings show the same suspicion towards un-

reconstructed imagination as the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius. Before coming to the retreat and learning the exercises in visualisation, the subject's mode of vision is assumed to be passive: desire pulls the eye this way and that; no object emerges clearly, since before it can do so it is already darting to the next form that seduces it; the images which appear are in a constant state of eclipse and fading. Vision has no internal resources to assert against the permanent tug of desire: sight is ensnared in the world, caught in pathways it cannot get out of, following tracks laid down in advance by the world's show. Against this passivity, the *Spiritual Exercises* propose an active imagination that re-collects vision, and the self, around the brilliant, incandescent images which the *Exercises* builds up, slowly, during the period of the retreat. These greater images focus all the senses – sight, smell, hearing, touch: imagining Hell, the subject must think of its fires, its screams, its sulphur, its acid tears; all of the channels of sense converge on the work of visualisation to cathect the image. Above all, the visualisation must be sustained: the *Exercises* specify for how long an image is to be held in the mind without wavering (for the duration of three Ave Marias, three Paternosters, and so forth).<sup>4</sup> Through this powerful, carefully assembled imagery the vagaries of fallen imagination are brought to an end; the strong, centrally organised images banish the dispersed and fitful field of ordinary vision to the shadows. With Cotán, too, the images have as their immediate function the separation of the viewer from the previous mode of seeing, vision in dispersal and disarray: they decondition the habitual and abolish the endless eclipsing and fatigue of worldly vision, replacing these with brilliance. The enemy is a mode of seeing which thinks it knows in advance what is worth looking at and what is not: against that, the image presents the constant surprise of things seen for the first time. Sight is taken back to a vernal stage before it learned how to scotomise the visual field, how to screen out the unimportant and not see, but scan. In place of the abbreviated forms for which the world scans, Cotán supplies forms that are articulated at immense length, forms so copious or prolix that one cannot see where or how to begin to simplify them. They offer no inroads for reduction because they omit nothing. Just at the point where the eye thinks it knows the form and can afford to skip, the image proves that in fact the eye had not understood at all what it was about to discard.

The relation proposed in Cotán between the viewer and the foodstuffs so meticulously displayed seems to involve, paradoxically, no reference to appetite or to the function of sustenance, which becomes coincidental; it might be described as anorexic, taking this word in its literal and Greek sense as meaning 'without desire'. All Cotán's still lifes are rooted in the outlook of monasticism, specifically the monasticism of the Carthusians, whose order Cotán joined as a lay brother in Toledo in 1603. What distinguishes the Carthusian rule is its stress on solitude over communal life: the monks live in individual cells, where they pray, study – and eat – alone, meeting only for the night office, morning mass and afternoon vespers. There is total abstention from meat, and on Fridays and other fast days the diet is bread and water. Absent from Cotán's work is any conception of nourishment as involving the conviviality of the meal – the sharing of hospitality present in the antique *xenia*. The unvarying stage of his paintings is never the kitchen but always the *cantarero*, a cooling-space where for preservation the foods are often hung on strings (piled together, or in contact with a surface, they would decay more quickly). Placed in a kitchen, next to plates and knives, bowls and pitchers, the objects would inevitably point towards their consumption at table, but the *cantarero* maintains the idea of the objects as separable from, dissociated from, their function as food. In *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* (illus. 20), no-one can touch the suspended quince or cabbage without disturbing them and setting them rocking in space: their motionlessness is the mark of human absence, distance from the hand that reaches to eat; and it renders them immaculate. Hanging on strings, the quince and the cabbage lack the weight known to the hand. Their weightlessness disowns such intimate knowledge. Having none of the familiarity that comes from touch, and divorced from the idea of consumption, the objects take on a value that is nothing to do with their rôle as nourishment.

What replaces their interest as sustenance is their interest as mathematical form. Like many painters of his period in Spain, Cotán has a highly developed sense of geometrical order; but whereas the ideas of sphere, ellipse and cone are used for example in El Greco to assist in organising pictorial composition, here they are explored almost for their own sake. One can think of *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* as an experiment in the kind of transformations that are explored in the branch of

20 Juan Sánchez Cotán, *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber*. Fine Arts Gallery, San Diego.

21 Caravaggio, *Basket of Fruit*. Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Milan.





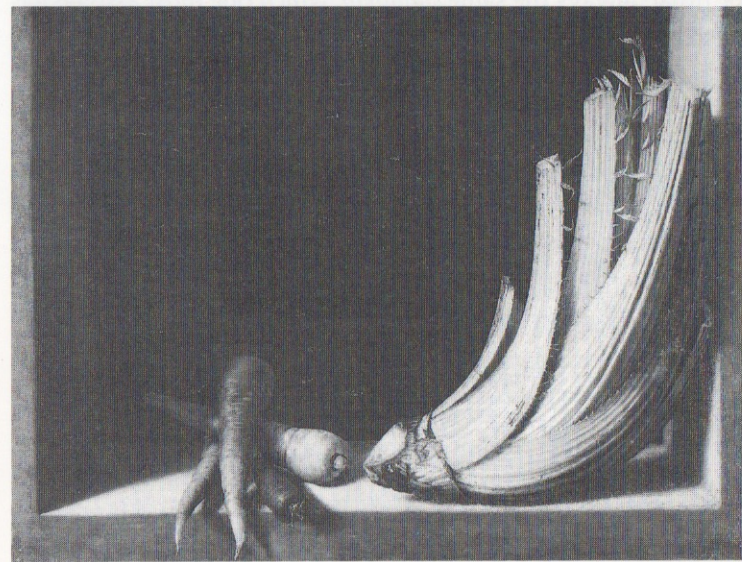
23 Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with Apples*. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

25 Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *The Smoker's Case*. Musée du Louvre, Paris.



24 Juan Sánchez Cotán, *Still Life with Vegetables*. Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes, Granada.

mathematics known as topology.<sup>5</sup> We begin on the left with the quince, a pure sphere revolving on its axis. Moving to the right, the sphere seems to peel off its boundary and disintegrate into a ball of concentric shells revolving around the same vertical axis. Moving to the melon the sphere becomes an ellipse, from which a segment has been cut; a part of the segment is independently shown. At the right the segmented shapes recover their continuous boundary in the corrugated form of the cucumber. The curve described by all these objects taken together is not at all informal but precisely logarithmic;<sup>6</sup> it follows a series of harmonic or musical proportions with the vertical co-ordinates of the curve exactly marked by the strings. And it is a complex curve, not just the arc of a graph on a two-dimensional surface. In relation to the quince, the cabbage appears to come forward slightly; the melon is further forward than the quince, the melon slice projects out beyond the ledge, and the cucumber overhangs it still further. The arc is therefore not on the same plane as its co-ordinates, it curves in three dimensions: it is a true hyperbola, of the type produced when a cone is viewed in oblique section. It is the same with the even more austere *bodegón* in Granada (illus. 24). The vegetable stalks are analysed as a collection of extraordinarily complex curves riding from staggered bases and tending towards separate asymptotes, within a general hyperbola falling from right to left.



The mathematical engagement of these forms shows every sign of exact calculation, as though the scene were being viewed with scientific, but not with creaturely, interest. Geometric space replaces creatural space, the space around the body that is known by touch and is created by familiar movements of the hands and arms. Cotán's play with geometric and volumetric ideas replaces this cocoon-like space, defined by habitual gestures, with an abstracted and homogeneous space which has broken with the matrix of the body. This is the point: to suppress the body as source of space. That bodily or tactile space is profoundly unvisual: the things we find there are things we reach for – a knife, a plate, a bit of food – instinctively and almost without looking. It is this space, the true home of blurred and hazy vision, that Cotán's rigours aim to abolish. And the tendency to geometrize fulfils another aim, no less severe: to disavow the painter's work as the source of the composition and to re-assign responsibility for its forms elsewhere – to mathematics, not creativity. In much of still life, the painter first arrays the objects into a satisfactory configuration, and then uses that arrangement as the basis for the composition. But to organise the world pictorially in this fashion is to impose upon it an order that is infinitely inferior to the order already revealed to the soul through the contemplation of geometric form: Cotán's renunciation of composition is a further, private act of self-negation. He approaches painting in terms of a discipline, or ritual: always the same *cantarero*, which one must assume has been painted in first, as a blank template; always the same recurring elements, the light raking at forty-five degrees, the same alternation of bright greens and yellows against the grey ground, the same scale, the same size of frame. To alter any of these would be to allow too much room for personal self-assertion, and the pride of creativity; down to its last details the painting must be presented as the result of discovery, not invention, a picture of the work of God that completely effaces the hand of man (in Cotán visible brushwork would be like blasphemy).

The still lifes of Francisco de Zurbarán (1598–1664) share with those of Cotán the same Ignatian mission of reproof and refining worldly vision through a transfiguration of the mundane. Yet their procedure is quite different. In Cotán there is little sense that the objects shown in the painting have any relation to bodily contact: knives and plates, pitchers and cups

make no appearance, and in general touch is presented as though it were a source of contamination. But Zurbarán is more interested in the artefacts surrounding food than in food itself. What engages him is the sense of touch and the action of hands upon matter. In the painting of *Metalware and Pottery* in the Prado (illus. 25) every vessel records and dramatises the history of its manufacture.<sup>7</sup> In the earthenware vessels there is a strong sense of the potter's wheel turning and, as it turns, of the hands cutting notches and rims in the soft clay. It is the softness, even the slipperiness, of the clay that is registered in the loose, flopping curves of the handles. The body of the jar on the extreme right has been pressed when wet with a tool that makes gentle, even depressions in its thin walls. The long-necked pitcher to its left has been elongated and widened towards its top by fingers skilful enough also to carve a series of steps or bands without toppling the clay on the wheel. The rim of the full-bellied pitcher to its left has been shaped by the action of the thumb pinching the clay into a scalloped curve. And the bowl on the extreme left announces the more exacting manual procedures of wrought metal: carving, chasing, burnishing. They are forms which, passing from one set of hands, carefully direct the hands of those who will later touch and lift them. Imagine that you do so: the fingers, wrist and arm are obliged to find very different kinds of purchase on each object.

Still life is in a sense the great anti-Albertian genre. What it opposes is the idea of the canvas as a window on the world, leading to a distant view. Although its techniques assume a mastery of perspective, even in *xenia*, nevertheless perspective's jewel – the vanishing point – is always absent. Instead of plunging vistas, arcades, horizons and the sovereign prospect of the eye, it proposes a much closer space, centred on the body. Hence one of the technical curiosities of the genre, its disinclination to portray the world beyond the far edge of the table. Instead of a zone beyond one finds a blank, vertical wall, sometimes coinciding with a real wall, but no less persuasively it is a virtual wall, simply a cutting off of further space, like the outer boundary in medieval maps of the world. That further zone beyond the table's edge must be suppressed if still life is to create its principal spatial value: nearness. What builds this proximal space is gesture: the gestures of eating, of laying the table, but also – in Zurbarán – the gestures which create the objects out of formless clay and metal. The basic co-ordinates are not supplied by

calibration and mensuration, as the piazzas of Renaissance Italy or the floors of Dutch interiors supply the standard measurements of space by means of flagstones or tiles. Rather its units are bodily actions, specifically those of the upper body, the torso and arms. As a result, it is a space that is full of the idea of gravity, a sort of Einsteinian field in which distance and mass intersect. The eye not only reads for contour and volume, it weighs things: here the instruments are the muscles of the arm and hand. And the eye also registers the textures of things as part of their being, inseparable from their weight: the relative roughness of earthenware, the feel of a glaze, the hardness and coolness of metal; here the sensing instruments are the fingertips. The unit of direction is not the line, as in Albertian or perspectival painting, but the *arc*, since bodily movements always curve. And the unit of interval is less linear measure than relative degrees of rotation: gesture is always a matter of *turning*. Consider the constant change of the angles in which the double-handled vessels of *Metalware and Pottery* are seen, and the metal plates on either side: what they establish is the idea of form as something rotary, and in the end the product of a body continually dependent on the movements of muscles and joints. In the Zurbarán the angles of rotation are calculated to the finest interval, but depth and distance, with which perspectival painting is preoccupied, are virtually eliminated.

*Metalware and Pottery* (illus. 25) and *Lemons, Oranges, Cup and Rose* (illus. 26) are set in this 'haptic' space to a far greater degree than the still lifes of Cotán, with their negation of proximity and their interest in homogeneous, mathematical space. One is much more aware of the human hand in establishing the scene. The latter painting highlights the careful placement of the fruit and the sprig of orange-blossom, and invokes the fragrance of the rose and the aroma of the chocolate once these are lifted from their places and savoured. Since everything lies at equidistance along the same line, there is no sensation of the scene receding into space. The depth of field is shallow to a degree, and indeed contradictory clues make it difficult to construct the scene in depth at all (the front part of the flat rim of the pewter plate is excessively narrowed in relation to the rim of the chocolate cup, which therefore appears irrationally to tilt forward). The atmosphere is thoroughly tactile or kinaesthetic. Such space is normally 'dark', in the sense that gesture structures it with only partial reference to the eye: gestures, which depend on

25 Francisco de Zurbarán,  
*Metalware and Pottery*. Museo del Prado, Madrid.



26 Francisco de Zurbarán, *Lemons, Oranges, Cup and Rose*. Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena.

repetition and routine, can operate without constant monitoring, and for this reason theirs is the preterite domain of the 'overlooked'. But Zurbarán floods this normally darkened and non-optical space with brilliant, raking light. This is the device whereby vision is to be aroused from its habits of sloth and inertia, and made to see. A perfectly coherent tactile space is subjected to brilliant illumination, as though the lights had been switched on in a darkened room.

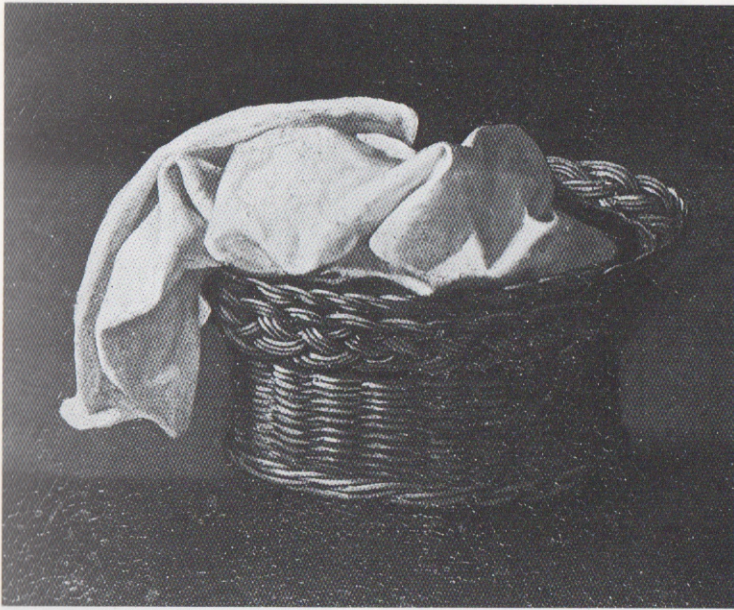
Chiaroscuro is important in Zurbarán because the profiles it builds along the dividing edge between dark and light create shapes for the eye that correspond to nothing known by the hand. To the fingers, the cup is smoothly continuous, but Zurbarán's high contrast cuts it into the two sides which are opposed. The citrus fruit recall the experience of texture with peculiar intensity – the familiar waxiness, the pores, the resilience of thick pith are all emphasised; but the harsh tenebrist lighting produces for the eye shapes which are unfamiliar and unpredicted. Imagine the scene lit softly: touch would reign. Chiaroscuro elicits from these objects a dramatic object-hood that is for the eye alone. There is a move to separate the starkly revealed visual forms from a tactile space which is also fully established. The subtle assault on tactility continues in the striking composition, where everything is laid out on a perfect line. Normally, composition invites the eye into a picture by establishing a path of entry, nearby objects leading to others that recede, and a path of circulation around the surface, through devices of low leading to high and back (the compositional pyramid favoured by the High Renaissance is a guarantee of accessibility to viewing, a mark of welcome). But these works of Zurbarán provide the viewer with no way to access their interior world: the equidistance of the objects from the viewing position instead pushes the viewer out and keeps the objects at arm's length. Between the eye and the forms it seeks to contact stretches a gulf which nothing traverses. And again this opposes the normal order of tactile space, where everything that appears can be reached, touched and moved around. Here, nothing can be touched at all: touch would do violence to the scene. The precarious balance of the rose on the edge of its plate, and of the blossom-sprig on the oranges, discourages any idea of reaching for the fruit or lifting the cup to sip its contents. The frontality of the composition shows that there is full awareness of the viewer's presence, and the composition is theatrical in the sense that everything moves towards the spectator. In fact it is hard to imagine a composition that more self-consciously *expects* the spectator's gaze, or more advertently turns towards it. Yet this awareness of the viewer's presence is unaccompanied by any sign of welcome, or of ushering in. Hence the feeling of impassiveness, of a protocol of distance. Tactile space is generally in constant movement: things are moved about, jammed together, lifted and carried informally, and the concept of motionless com-



27 Francisco de Zurbarán, *The Young Virgin*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

position is entirely alien to it. But that motionlessness is precisely what Zurbarán's objects insist on. Their placing has been calculated, in the words of Martin Soria, with hair-fine draughtsmanship; the least alteration would upset the harmonic ratios between the forms and ruin their perfect alignment. Only by forgetting ideas of tactile or kinaesthetic space can the viewer approach the painting without intrusion.





28 Detail of *The Young Virgin*, Francisco de Zurbarán (illus. 27).

Zurbarán first creates a scene which greatly depends on ideas of touch and the memory of hands, and belongs to the visually lazy or sightless journeys of the body through its immediate envelope of space. Then he floods the stage with light, separates visual from tactile form, and offers the eye – alone – a spectacle so immaculately self-contained that the only appropriate response is to disown the tactile reflexes as crude and ham-fisted. As with Cotán, there is a sense of reproof and correction offered to a mode of vision that inhabits the world benightedly, in the shadow zone of gestural repetitions and muscular routines. The painting is severe in its demands on perception: the flooding of the darkened world with light is painful as the eye is stung into action, and disused optical pathways are re-opened and switched to current. But the strain is necessary, if vision is to rise above the fallen world. The ability to see what is insignificant with clarified vision is presented as a spiritual gift, and in *The Young Virgin* the still life objects (flowers, book, scissors, embroidery, chocolate cup, linen basket) are attributes of sainthood, signs of grace and purity (illus. 27, 28).

The work of Cotán and Zurbarán reveals considerable ambition for rhopography as a genre: it is treated with the same gravity of purpose as the religious paintings to which Cotán devoted himself after entering the Carthusian order in 1603, and

the paintings of monks, priests, popes, saints and evangelists which Zurbarán executed throughout his career. The spiritual rationale for their elevation of rhopography to a level comparable with sacred painting is clear if we compare their work in still life with that of Caravaggio (1573–1610), as represented in the *Basket of Fruit* discovered by Lionello Venturi in 1910 and kept in the Ambrosiana, Milan (illus. 21). Caravaggio is concerned, as they are, to remove from his composition the sense of tactile familiarity, and by this means to present the eye with heightened, defamiliarised forms. But it is hard to discover behind this procedure the spiritual rigour that is so vividly present in the Spanish paintings. Caravaggio's work is conducted in the antique spirit of the *xenia*, as an exercise in simulation or *trompe l'oeil*; one moves from considerations of desire, and its correction, to connotations of theatre, and aesthetic – rather than monastic – detachment.<sup>8</sup>

It is the attack on three-dimensional space that gives the *Basket of Fruit* its peculiar intensity; its scherzo-like character comes from pushing as far as it will go the experiment of effacing all clues concerning depth.<sup>9</sup> Anyone who has spent time with cameras will know what happens to depth of field when a zoom lens is used: all the planes of a scene collapse together. That is precisely what happens here. Much of the effect is due to the blank background, all the more striking in a scene which elsewhere is highly detailed and apparently aims at faithful naturalism. Everything behind the basket of fruit is eliminated, even shadows. There is no way of knowing how far back in space the basket and its contents are supposed to go. This would be confusing enough, but the painting so lowers its viewpoint, coming down to the height of the table, that the ledge on which the basket rests is also eliminated; this makes it impossible to know how deep is the table, let alone the space beyond it. Instead of perspective lines travelling into depth, there are only planes, all of them perpendicular to the eye; there are no diagonals, and nothing tilts inward. Information concerning the distance of one plane behind another is systematically blocked. Profiles are cultivated, to the detriment of depth. Though we are shown the basket in all its details, down to the last woven reed, it is a moot question whether the basket's form is circular or oval; it does not 'turn', in the sense teachers of drawing give to this word. The leaves themselves are pure silhouettes – the two vine-leaves to the extreme right, and the grapes hanging from their

stalk nearby, are hardly filled in at all, but left as blank as the background behind them. A similar stencilled look comes from the gaps left in the high, central leaves by the work of insects, and from the channels between different segments of vine- and fig-leaves. One of the properties of silhouettes is to trigger the instant recognition of a form while supplying no data concerning relief; it is a powerful device, well known to the street artists who at the corners of buildings paint a human outline in black against the wall – an outline which any paranoid urban passer-by is quick to fill in. Here, the device is used to create the feeling of forms so real that they leap forward, positively projecting into the viewer's space rather than emerging slowly within their own.

This inhibition of depth extends to Caravaggio's handling of colour, which also works against establishing a sense of volume. If a painter is to render convincing the particular volumes of fruit, the way they feel to the hand that closes round them, the solidity and rotundity of their curves, it can be helpful to choose fruits whose colours are especially even and uniform – apples that are entirely green or all red, fruit without marks – for then all the gradations of their hue and tone can be read by the eye as indications of contour. But Caravaggio chooses fruits with complex markings on their skin – an apple that is thinly striped, figs which have cracked; fruit with blemishes – the larger and smaller wormholes in the apple, the pock-marked surface of the pear. Moreover, he denies the fruit the fullness of volume they would have when seen completely, when their entire edge is shown and their global form is disclosed: each fruit overlaps with others, and not even the basket is allowed its complete outline. A principle of heaping obscures the particularity of individual form and mass. To this Caravaggio adds the difficulties of isolating objects under conditions of chiaroscuro. When lighting is even, and no extremes of light or dark prevail, it is easy to grasp individual objects because all their edges show; but when there is high contrast and middle tones are played down, the image breaks up into areas of light and dark that are independent of contoured form. Here, the light yellow of the lemon on the left merges with the yellow of the apple without a break, the black grapes fuse together into a single patch of dark, and at the right of the basket the stark contrast of the basket's edge against the brilliance behind it produces a cut-out, an effect of flatness and not of receding curves.

All of these strategies remove the still life from the familiarities of tactile apprehension. The third dimension is taken out, and the image seems strangely monocular: it is a painting which supplies to both eyes open the look the world has when seen with one eye closed. And in this respect it is close to the work of Cotán and Zurbarán, who similarly drive a wedge between the tactile and the visual, and thereby estrange what is familiar and everyday. But there is an important difference, which is that Caravaggio's painting makes no reference to a mundane space, now lit up and transfigured. All of Cotán's still life has as its *mise-en-scène* a larder, an absolutely real and ordinary space (and though his *cantareros* may look peculiar in the north, they are still to be found in good working order in the southern part of Spain, from Toledo to Andalusia to Extremadura).<sup>10</sup> It is vital to Cotán's aim of deliberately humbling vision, in order to chasten it and shake its pride, that the eye is led back to a place it knows is there, but has ignored. And in Zurbarán, too, however radiant the objects become, they are still part of ordinary space and an everyday world: there is nothing dramatic or exceptional in the basket of linen or the cup of chocolate near Mary's chair. Zurbarán's whole point is the interpenetration of what is ordinary and unassuming with what is exalted and sacred so that, handy-dandy, the mundane and the supramundane change places. But Caravaggio gives his basket of fruit no worldly context at all. All signs that the place is indoors, in a particular house and room, have been erased; even the table ceases to be a table – to the right of the painting it becomes an abstract band, part of the background. Cotán and Zurbarán bring vision down deep inside the material world, among the pots and pans: what they seek is the *bathos* of vision, an end to artificial splendours and inflated grandeur; against the vision of the Court they propose that of the monastery. But Caravaggio deliberately abstracts his still life from any mundane location we can recognise. This renders impossible the kind of switching between levels of reality, from humble to exalted and back, which Cotán and Zurbarán pursue. If this play of reality levels is somehow lost in Caravaggio what, then, is the aim of his painting?

Perhaps one can draw here on Stephen Bann's distinction between *representation* and *presentation*.<sup>11</sup> Representation would involve mimesis, the repetition of what is already there, a representation of realities already known. Cotán and Zurbarán are representational in this sense: they never cease referring to

things generally familiar, and their refusal to depart from what is already given is part of their conception of painting as the exercise of humility. This art does not invent things for its own sake, or indulge in fantasy or caprice. The constant return to familiar things is a mark of sobriety and self-restraint, a refusal to enter into flights of imagination; on the contrary, their aim is to dispel illusion and remind vision of its actual place and powers (it should go without saying that one is dealing here with a *rhetoric* of realism, with 'reality-effects', regardless of the actual presence of a previous model). But in the Caravaggio, the reality that is shown exists only inside the painting. Its spatial co-ordinates are not the three dimensions that make up the known world, but the two dimensions of the painting's surface. This is the significance of Caravaggio's reversal of the Albertian gaze. When the painting is thought of as a window, leading the eye through to vistas behind it and beyond, the canvas is self-effacing in the representation or resurrection of prior things: it pretends to disappear, or to turn to glass, before the reality which lies out there beyond it, and which it merely relays or transfers to the space of viewing. Caravaggio breaks with this fenestral conception of the canvas: instead of receding, objects come forward, as though the vanishing-point were not 'behind' the canvas, on some internal horizon, but in front of it, in the space where the viewer stands. The *Basket of Fruit* does not recede: it projects. And as it does so, it announces that the only space where the objects reside is in this projection that is sent out from the canvas towards the spectator. The painting shows objects that exist there, and only there – not in some prior, receding space that is neutrally copied or transcribed. The basket of fruit and the fruit are presented, not represented; they come into being on the canvas for the first time, not as transcription but as originary inscription.

The *Basket of Fruit* marks a return to the *xenia* of antiquity in its themes of theatricality and simulation: no less than the grapes of Zeuxis or the curtain of Parrhasios, its wish is to deceive the eye. And in fact this may have been its literal intention. The canvas shows the marks of nails, as though originally it had been fastened directly into the wall without a frame, so that placed at eye level it might beguile the eye into thinking it a real basket, real fruit.<sup>12</sup> It is eminently skenographic painting, in that its space is not that of reality but artifice, theatre. Where Cotán and Zurbarán stress an earthly plane of existence which

can be sublimated by purifying attention, the Caravaggio deliberately cuts still life's ties to the earth; if there is transfiguration here, it comes from art. The basket of fruit is of no value in itself; it gains its value from what art is able to do with this insignificant and unpromising material. This indicates a quite different purpose for rhopography as a whole. In the case of Caravaggio's work in the 'higher' genres, art is always subordinate to the religious narrative it illustrates; but when what is depicted lacks that importance, then art can display *itself*. The *Basket of Fruit* shows art's capacity to raise the insignificant to its own heights – and it needs the insignificant to demonstrate those heights. The rhopography of Cotán and Zurbarán has a radical edge to it that wants nothing to do with the megalographic, with art as a form of grandeur, or magniloquence, but in the Caravaggio still life the interest lies exactly in the power of art – and of this artist – to raise an intrinsically humble branch of painting to the level of the heroic. The impersonal demonstration of the power of art shades here into a form of aggrandisement unthinkable in Cotán and Zurbarán. Caravaggio wants hyperbole, not bathos; by means of unaided technical skill he is able to turn dross to gold. It is of no consequence if, in the process, the reality of the still life as part of an actual world is sacrificed, and indeed that sacrifice is necessary if painting is to move from representation to presentation, from a stage of transcribing reality to a stage where the image seems more radiant, more engaging, and in every way superior to the original – which the painting can dispense with.

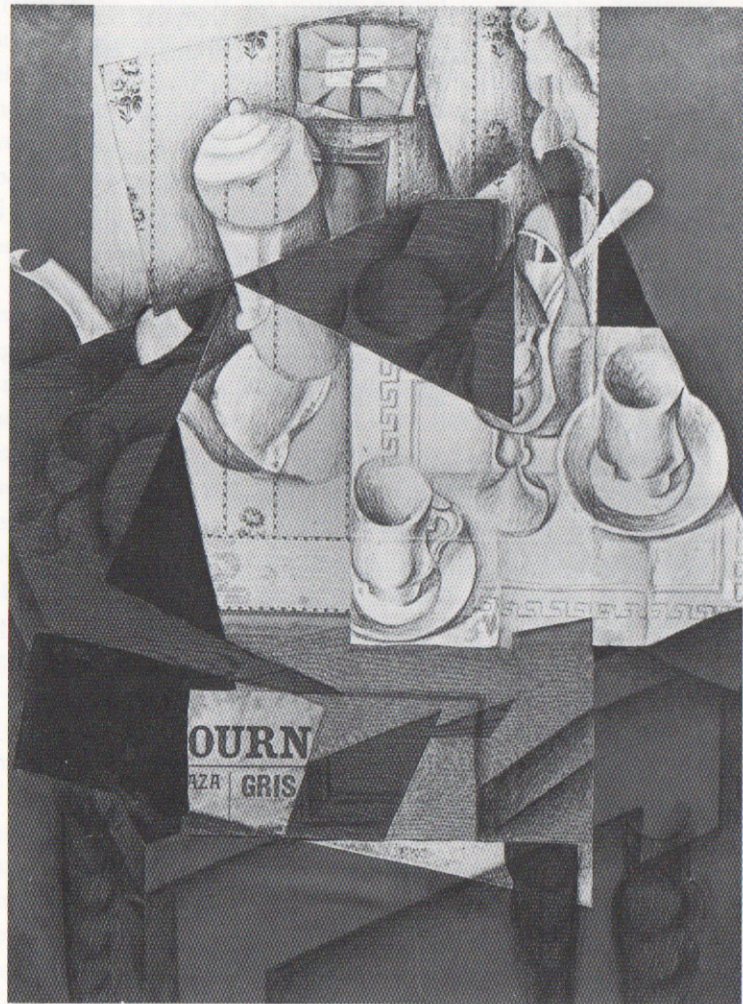
Still life's potential for isolating a purely aesthetic space is undoubtedly one of the factors which made the genre so central in the development of modernism. The *Still Life with Apples* by Cézanne (1839–1906), for example, makes no attempt to refer its arrangement of fruit, bowl and table to any aspect of a recognisable meal, or scene within a house (illus. 22). On the contrary, it aims to remove itself from function altogether: the fruit are disposed with no rationale except that of forming a compositional armature for the painting. The table-cloth and linen have been creased and rumped not to suggest the aftermath of a meal but rather to display the fruit as aesthetic spectacle. Imagine the present arrangement of the fruit on a table left bare, without these strangely crumpled linens: the contrivance of the composition would be patent and discordant; there would be a clash between the real spatial co-ordinates of

a table, where objects are usually placed according to domestic function, and the elaborately staged *mise-en-scène* that has been set up to make the painting. The creased folds of the napkin and the arching, billowing table-cloth serve the purpose of suppressing the table as a familiar object in a household and of abolishing its four-square, cubic co-ordinates, which would give to the fruit, bowl, glass and pitcher too firm an anchorage in their own space (one notes the way the plane of the table surface is broken and denied, the right side placed much lower than on the left, where it joins the frame). The linens have a euphemising function: through their association with the casualness of a meal now come to an end, they help pass off the artifice of the composition as natural. And they have a dislocating function: they hide the space where the objects might exist for their own sake and convey them into aesthetic space, where they become objects uniquely destined for the gaze. In place of their own geometry, they are reconstructed in terms of the painting's internal rhythms: the oscillation of arc and circle, the play between tan and lemon, the contrasts of yellow and green against brown and russet red.

Presentation, not representation: as with Caravaggio, what is shown comes into being only inside the picture. The integrity and separate visibility of each dab of paint foregrounds the work of the brush in building the scene, over the scene itself. The thin application of pigment, and the fact that the canvas shows through in almost all areas (where it is not actually left blank), imply that we are able to follow all of the painter's stages of construction step by step, with nothing having been concealed. Even the preliminary outlines round the apples remain visible. No erasure: everything that was painted remains on view. The method of construction is slow, as though there were a pause for reflection between each stroke of the brush, and this suggests the continuous and unwavering exercise of compositional judgment. Each move is the outcome of previous moves, and anticipates those which follow: Cézanne's hundredth stroke takes into account the previous ninety-nine, and prepares the way for the next to come. Each stroke is saturated with self-reflexive attention, so that what is presented in the end is not the objects but the consciousness that builds their (re)presentation. In a very limited sense this is theatrical painting: every stroke that makes up the scene turns away from any reality which the scene might have in independence from the activities of painting and of view-

ing, and towards the spectator (first Cézanne, then us). But where the word 'theatricality' suggests a pursuit of dramatic effect and sudden impact, here the theatrical relation of viewer to scene is subsumed in the slow, grave concentration of building the painting stroke by stroke out of nothing. There is even a curtain, the classic sign of theatre: and it is a painted curtain, whose design of leaves and fruit is so continuous with the table composition that its own principle of theatricality enters the still life proper and completes its irrealisation, its Parrhasios-like turn from reality towards artifice. But the removal of the reality principle is necessary if the painting is to display in the purest form the unbroken series of aesthetic judgments by which it is constituted.

★ Still life's capacity for moving across different levels of reality and artifice is probably the basis of its interest to Cubism, particularly in those phases of the latter's development when the release of painting from its mimetic rôle was felt to be best demonstrated through a structure of serial thresholds from the real to the represented.<sup>13</sup> *Breakfast* (1914; illus. 29) by Juan Gris is fascinated by the way an image can engage simultaneously with quite different modes of interaction between signs and what they represent, and it playfully runs through a whole gamut of modes (index, icon, symbol), like semiotics on vacation. The inclusion of fragments from the real world – newspapers, wallpaper, a manufacturer's label – plays with the ancient connection between still life and *trompe l'oeil* by pushing illusionism over the edge into actual quotation from the world. Of particular interest to Juan Gris is the way a small area of the image can rapidly jump from one level of reality to another: the Eugene Martin label at the top of the painting is tied into a 'parcel' by strokes of crayon that seem, just over the label, like *trompe d'oeil*, but towards the edge of the parcel peter out as obvious crayon lines. The area around the newspaper brings together something real (newsprint), something obviously represented (the wooden mouldings), something half way between (*faux bois*), and something that refuses to represent at all (pure black). It takes what is usually the one element that lies outside visual representation, the artist's signature, and makes it part of the composition; next to that it draws on the *faux bois* shape reminiscent of a picture frame. The wit of the painting comes from the speed with which it darts from one level of reality to the next, and from the paradoxes of occupying one (or more) levels at the same point.

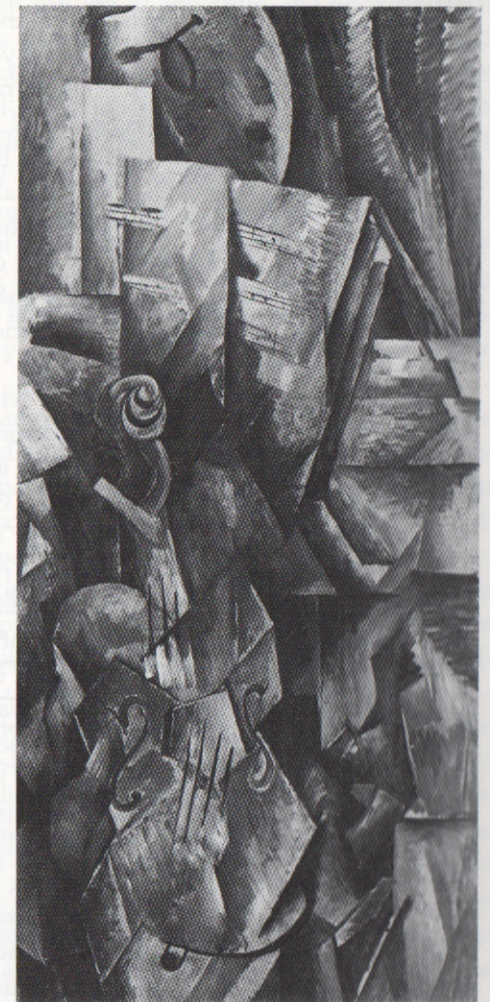


29 Juan Gris,  
*Breakfast*. Museum  
of Modern Art,  
New York.

And however vertiginous the painting's ontology becomes, its play with shifting modes of illusion is grounded in the familiar reality of tables, cups and saucers. It is the security and dependability of that routine space which allows the metaphysical transformations to take off and soar.

Cubism relies on the forms of still life to provide stable, legible anchor-points for the fragmented planes and spatial torsions it cultivates. For this reason it tends to reduce its forms towards the minimal schema of recognition – the point at which, without further elaboration, the viewer recognises the lines as representing bottles, tables, glasses (illus. 30). It practises a glyphic reduc-

30 Georges Braque,  
*Violin and Palette*.  
Solomon R.  
Guggenheim  
Museum, New  
York.



tion in which the painting can elicit from the viewer a sure recognition of such things while making the least possible commitment to describing their space. The merest sketch of an *f*-curve is enough to establish a violin, or a scroll curve the top of a guitar – and without these the space quickly becomes incoherent. Even in analytical Cubism, the interest is less in 'abstraction' than in the *pull* between the forces of abstraction and the gravity and inertia of still life's familiar forms. The 'blind' routines of hands around a table, or the more intricate movements of fingers on a musical instrument, anchor the transformations of optical space in a space of tactile familiarity that is strong enough

to bind together even impossible facets and smithereens. At that level of creatural habit and routine, the eye usually follows only the gross visual cues of things – we do not normally sit at our breakfast table in rapt contemplation of the cups and spoons. Forms are edited and streamlined to the basic minimum (in this sense Cubist still life may, after all, be realist), and Cubism does nothing to re-complicate or enhance those basic, compelling formulae. Looking at Cubist still life one discovers nothing one does not already know (indeed one may find less than one knows). This indicates a rather problematic relation to the whole idea of 'rhopography'.

The problem concerns the relation which still life proposes between the viewer and the everyday world, the world trampled underfoot to make way for what is of importance – whether in life or art. The works by Caravaggio, Cézanne and Juan Gris indicate one way in which rhopography can actually avoid the challenge which low-plane or quotidian reality poses for painting. Caravaggio and Cézanne, in very different ways, are fully prepared to sacrifice the actuality of what they portray in order to show something else, the power of art to ennoble and elevate even a humble basket of fruit, or the capacity of art to embody and dramatise the detailed workings of aesthetic consciousness. In the case of Juan Gris, everyday reality is reduced to a glyphic outline in order to support and stabilise a metaphysical *jeu d'esprit* which takes mundane reality only as its starting point. What is shown is art itself, as something which in the presence of an everyday world always grows *impatient*; it is not content to be subservient to that prior world, and seeks autonomy and escape. And though what is painted remains humble and commonplace, in its state of restlessness and self-assertion, there is only one place rhopography can go – *megalography*. The Caravaggio still life structures itself as though it were an heroic history painting: the rhythms and ratios of its forms have the same amplitude and breadth as a major composition, and though physically the painting is small (47 × 64.5 cm), it feels monumental in scale. Similarly with the Cézanne there is less interest in the actual colours of fruit than in the clashes which pigment can produce between acid green and ochre; less curiosity about the actual shape of lemons than about volumetric rhymes they can be persuaded to yield if they are treated as variations on a sphere. The goal, to make great painting ('From Giotto to Cézanne'), enormously exceeds the depicted subject. A contradi-

tion emerges between the life of the table, the unexceptional nature of its routines, the creaturely anonymity of eating, and the pursuit of the image which is in everyway remarkable, the unique expression of its individual creator, the breakthrough work or style that will move European painting into a different era. In the world of low-plane reality that still life actually inhabits, because there are no events, there is none of the drama of history; because at this mundane, creaturely level we are all more or less the same, there is no distinction. But the Caravaggio and the Cézanne still lifes are convinced of their power to break with painting's history, and to remake it; they are megalographic in every sense.

In Cotán and Zurbarán megalographic ambitions are of course singularly absent, and everyday life is confronted without evasion. Their sense of painting as a spiritual discipline, bound up with self-negation and the reduction of ego, leads them to still life as a branch of art particularly suited to a vocation of humility. The problem which everyday reality poses for painting does not exist for them spiritually, but (so to speak) technically. In its quality of attention, still life possesses a delicate and ambiguous instrument. Its whole project forces the subject, both painter and viewer, to attend closely to the preterite objects in the world which, exactly because they are so familiar, elude normal attention. Since still life needs to look at the *overlooked*, it has to bring into view objects which perception normally screens out. The difficulty is that by bringing into consciousness and into visibility things that perception normally overlooks, the visual field can come to appear radically *unfamiliar* and *estranged*. Consider again Cotán's *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* (illus. 20). The attention invested in its objects certainly brings forth their reticent visibility, and the beauty or extraordinariness it finds there could hardly have a location more mundane (one can think of the *cantarero* as an early kind of refrigerator). But precisely because the location *is* so ordinary, the quality of attention brought to bear on the objects stands quite outside normal experience and the normal domestic round. Defamiliarisation confers on these things a dramatic objecthood, but the intensity of the perception at work makes for such an excess of brilliance and focus that the image and its objects seem not quite of this world. In the routine spaces still life normally explores, habit makes one see through a glass, darkly; but when the object is revealed face to face, the departure from the habitual

blurs and entropies of vision can be so drastic that the objects seem *unreal*, *unfamiliar*, *un-creatural*. The objects depicted by Cotán belong less to the cocoon of nearness than to a kind of eerie outer space (Charles Sterling said of the quince and cabbage that they 'turn and glow like planets in a boundless night'<sup>14</sup>). Similarly, Zurbarán's *Lemons, Oranges, Cup and Rose* (illus. 26) shows a visual field so purified and so perfectly composed that the familiar objects seem on the brink of transfiguration or (the inevitable word) transubstantiation. Standing at some imminent intersection with the divine, and with eternity, they exactly break with the normally human.

Such contradictions point to a problem of distance from the everyday which seems always to be present in rhopography. Cotán and Zurbarán plunge vision downwards to a level of creaturely simplicity where the human subject is authentically humbled and reproved, yet the world revealed at this level is also altered by the re-education of vision. Appetite, tactility, the body, are all chastened, and to this extent one is dealing with a quite specialised sense of everyday life, the routines of monastic discipline. The lines of Théophile Gautier point to a way in which the rejection of bodily appetite in Zurbarán is closely bound up with the sense of guilt:

*Moines de Zurbarán, blancs chartreux qui, dans l'ombre  
Glissez silencieux sur les dalles des morts,  
Murmurant des Pater et des Ave sans nombre,  
Quel crime expiez-vous par de si grands remords?*<sup>15</sup>

And in Cotán there seems to be an obscure equation between spiritual worth and the refusal of food. Vision is forced to become materialist, in opposition to the idealisation that operates in the 'higher' genres, and painting is made to confront material life directly; but the world which then emerges is also to some degree rejected. Though situated at a creaturely or bodily level, vision will not participate in a creaturely relation to what it sees. It is divorced from tactile space and sensuality: food enters the eye, but must not pass through touch or taste; there is retention of the purity of the body's internal spaces, a refusal to yield and open the body to the rest of the material world. The inside of the body is a dark void: this may be one of the metaphorical connotations of Cotán's empty *cantareros*.

When driven to extremes, hyper-attention not only produces an interval between the perceiving self and objects; it separates

the self from other selves. The subjects *stares* or *glares* at the world. Still life can hardly avoid quickening attention, but beyond a certain point the self becomes enclosed within itself, saturated with perceptions now of a manic or obsessional intensity. This is true not only of Cotán and Zurbarán, but of the still lifes of Caravaggio and Cézanne as well: the Caravaggio *Basket of Fruit* is hyper-real in its focus and micro-relief, and Cézanne's *Still Life with Apples* suggests an exhausting feat of compositional calculation, indefinitely prolonged (like Flaubert, Cézanne has no *facility*). The kind of attention provoked by still life isolates both painter and viewer from the rather hazy, rather lazy visual field the subject normally inhabits. This isolation runs counter to the actual scene which still life always centres on – food, and the table, with their inevitable associations with conviviality and hospitality. The whole thematic of the meal points in the direction of civil society, where the self re-experiences its grounding in the social field, together with others; at table the subject is re-embraced by human fellowship. Defamiliarising the table, whether through a surplus of appearances (Cotán, Zurbarán) or through a maximising of aesthetic distance (Cézanne) takes away the warmth of this solidarity and its embrace.

The quickened attention which rhopography brings to the familiar space of eating can end by creating a sense of estrangement from the social field in the very situation where people purposively come together. And still life's adjustments of the relative forces of defamiliarity and familiarity in the social field can become a matter of extraordinary delicacy. If the balance is right, a harmony can be created in which the still life supplies a mode of clarified vision, yet without disrupting the sense of membership in civil society, and the self is experienced in terms of fellowship but also of perceptual revelation. *Dessert with Wafers* by Lubin Baugin (c. 1611–1663) is able, perhaps, to build and show such harmony, together with all the tensions that produce it (illus. 31).<sup>16</sup> Pushed further and its incipient hyper-reality, the fastidiousness of its composition and its love of the immaculate, would cut the self off from the social field and its conviviality; raised to a pitch just a bit higher and the intensity of its perceptions would generate a manic glare, and disconnection between the self and the social world around it. Baugin resolves the tension by proposing a social field which, though welcoming, still insists on the formalities. A certain distance between individuals is proposed which respects the isolation



31 Lubin Baugin,  
*Dessert with Wafers*.  
Musée du Louvre,  
Paris.

implied by the perceptual intensities, yet the distance is tempered by a sense of inclusion. The dessert is not primarily intended as nourishment, but as social pleasure – the wafers tilt out towards the viewer, as though inviting the viewer to take one and join in the hospitality. Baugin balances the solitude of perceptual illumination against personal interaction, and the painting implies a milieu careful to integrate aesthetic and social distance with social connectedness and pleasure. There is some measure of return to the ideas of the antique *xenia*, as described by Philostratus: an awareness of relations between guest and host, of food as a means of ensuring social interaction and circulation. This awareness includes recognition of the social distance between persons, of hospitality as an affair also of prestige and the display of refined taste, and of a tension between prestige and intimacy.

Because rhopography is committed to looking closely at what is usually disregarded, it can experience extraordinary difficulty in registering the everydayness of the everyday – what it is actually like to inhabit ‘low-plane reality’, without departing from that into a re-assertion of painting’s own powers and ambitions, or into an overfocused and obsessive vision that ends by making everyday life seem unreal and hyper-real at the same time. The central issue is how to enter into the life of material

reality as a full participant, rather than as a voyeur, and how to defamiliarise the look of the everyday without precisely losing its qualities of the unexceptional and unassuming. It is here that one can place the significance of Chardin (1699–1779). — Chardin’s solution to the problem of defamiliarisation is to cultivate a studied informality of attention, which looks at nothing in particular. He shows no signs of wanting to tighten up the loose world of the interiors he presents. On the contrary, his own intervention is unassuming, and seems so ordinary as to *relax* rather than *heighten attention*. Often still life composition involves a staging of the scene before the viewer, a spectacular interval or proscenium frame between the scene and the spectator. We have seen the way in which Zurbarán places his objects along an exact geometric line, and the feeling of distance and of proscenic barrier this creates. In the Caravaggio *Basket of Fruit* the scene does not belong to the real world so much as to a space of (re)presentation, a space where *figuration is destined to appear*.<sup>17</sup> And in the Cézanne *Still Life with Apples* there is a radical departure from the ways in which everyday objects really appear on tables, in order to maximise the sense of aesthetic distance and to establish the mode of depiction, rather than what is depicted, as the painting’s primary concern. Even with relatively unassuming still life paintings, such as the *Dessert with Wafers* by Baugin, when the painter has hit upon a satisfying arrangement of the elements on the table, three-quarters of the work of composition is already done: the placement of the wafers, for example, is calculated with immense and evident pains, and as with Zurbarán the least alteration of the motif would disturb the hair-fine symmetry and balance. But in Chardin, compositions of this self-conscious kind are avoided. He does not, of course, neglect the arrangement of the motif (quite the reverse), but he works hard to remove the feeling of a proscenic barrier or of spectacular distance between the viewer and what is seen. He seems to want not to disturb the world or to re-organise it before the spectator, as though to do so would be to keep the viewer at arm’s length and to push the viewer out from the scene, when what is valued is exactly the way the scene welcomes the viewer in without ceremony, to take things just as they are found.<sup>18</sup>

For this reason his canvases tend to avoid priorities. Even blank background – which, for example, in Caravaggio is left uniform and eventless – is filled with incident, with mysterious

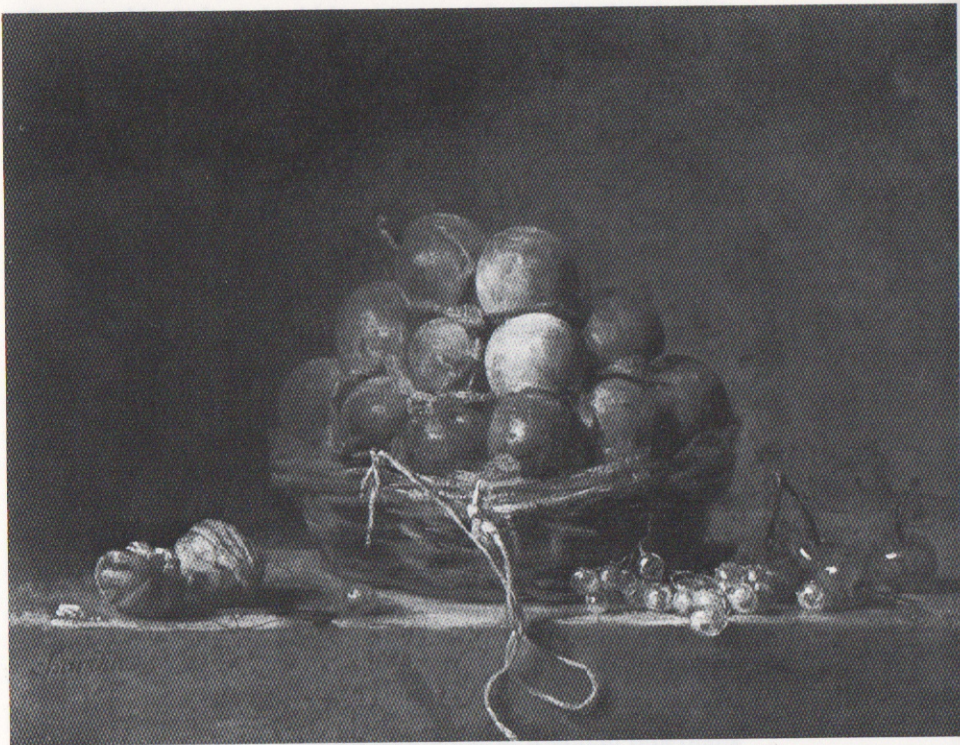


flickers and sparks of colour that can be as engaging to the eye as any of the presented objects. No single square inch of the painting has been declared unimportant, and the objects are not intrinsically more significant than the areas between them. This is an extraordinarily difficult technique, since it involves activating and energising areas of a scene which vision is normally quick to pass over, and what is impressive is that this investment in blank or empty areas of the canvas does not end by overcharging the scene with interest – the problem, again, of estrangement and alienation. The canvas is treated as uniformly eventful, as though to suggest otherwise would be to upset the evenness of regard (Chardin's, and then the viewer's) as it moves with equal interest and equal engagement across the entire visual field. Chardin undoes the hierarchy between zones of the canvas which the whole idea of composition traditionally aims for – the regulating and directing of the gaze from what in a painting is of primary to what is of secondary or tertiary importance. He gives everything the same degree of attention – or inattention; so that the details, as they merge, are striking only because of the gentle pressures bearing down on them from the rest of the painting.

For the same reason, all the forms tend towards blur – perhaps Chardin's most significant innovation, as though he were trying to paint peripheral rather than central vision, and in this way to suggest a familiarity with the objects in the visual field on such intimate and friendly terms that nothing any more needs to be vigilantly watched. In his fascinating essay on Chardin, Michael Baxandall has traced the influence of Lockean ideas concerning perception, and of medical theories concerning the eye's angle of vision and focal length, as these gained popular currency in the eighteenth century and in Chardin's milieu.<sup>19</sup> Chardin takes from these sources the idea of making painting a record of the actual impression which sight might form of the objects before it, the adventures of the eye as it travels across the scene from perch to perch. In certain Chardin still lifes one sees that some points are in greater focus than others, as if what were depicted were the vagaries of the glance in 'real time'. In fact, modern research into the muscular movements of the eye has shown that the paths it follows is a tangle of lines, with many recursions and re-takes, guesses, revisions and apparently haphazard probings of the visual field; and probably a painting which took upon itself to portray the world as it appears to

the 'saccadic' leaps of the eye would look nothing like Chardin. But Chardin's fiction of how the eye moves from one point to another (never more than few points emerging as 'focused') is convincing enough, and it conveys the idea of vision moving in unhurried fashion over a familiar scene; not tensely vigilant (Cotán, Zurbarán, Caravaggio) but with a sense of having enough time to take the scene in without strain. It is hard to find before Chardin convincing evidence in painting of this strategy of portraying vision in time, as a narrative, and the presence of narrative should bring his work into the category of anecdotal or history painting – megalography. But in these narratives which tell only of brief journeys across a corner of everyday life, nothing significant happens: there is no transfiguration or epiphany, no sudden disclosure of transcendence. The eye moved lightly and without avidity: it is at home.

What secures the ease of the eye's movements, and its licence to blur the scene before it, is Chardin's acute understanding of the nature of tactile space. The objects in *The Smoker's Case*, for example, have been placed so as to suggest an informality largely unconscious of appearances (illus. 23). What binds the space is gesture, the habitual movements of taking a lid from a cup and laying it down – exactly where is not an issue – and of lifting and pouring from the pitcher. The long-stemmed pipe is one of those forms which divide smokers from non-smokers: to those who only look at its shape, it seems bizarre, but held in an accustomed hand it directs a whole repertory of satisfying gestures, actions of filling and stoking, rebalancings of its weight, minor adjustment and flourishes. In the puppet theatre of Japan, the pipe and its box are conspicuous stage properties because they permit the manipulator such an expressive range of movements, movements all the more revealing of a figure's character because largely below the threshold of awareness; the props can be useful in comedy because of the automatism of such gestures, their demonstration (not least to non-smokers) of enslavement to habit. In *A Basket of Plums* (illus. 32) the fruit have been placed with no particular sense of their final form, which seems to have emerged unplanned. Where the lemons in Zurbarán's still life are laid on the dish with every attention to angle, projection and profile, here the form is in a sense ludicrous, or rustic; the hand has simply dropped the fruit where they fall, with the same partial inattention as in reaching for a glass it knows is there. The blur in Chardin is not simply optical,



though theories of focal length and aperture may well have influenced it; it is the blur that comes from manual override, when the hand takes over from the eye and lets it off duty.

Objects are arranged informally: they can be crammed together or moved about as required. Chardin allows a certain casualness of inattention to loosen his paintings and give them air. Tasks are not rushed: they succeed one another in a gentle rhythm of co-operation between hand and eye, in a low-plane reality of quiet duties and small satisfactions. And interpenetrating the tactile space inside the painting is the tactility of the painting itself. In his lifetime Chardin shrouded his technical procedures in secrecy – there is no record of anyone having seen him at work, and it was rumoured that he applied the pigment with his fingers. Which may well be true: paint in Chardin is trowelled and stroked, it mimics the texture of terra-cotta or of glaze, it dribbles; its texture is buttery, or like cream cheese, it is an almost comestible substance which everywhere announces that it has been *worked*.<sup>20</sup> Inside the painting, one sees objects which are constantly being touched: polished metal,

32 Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *A Basket of Plums*. The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia.

familiar plates and cups, linen freshly pressed and tables swept and cleaned. The space is built from routines that are efficient, though not to a point of strain; between people and things a placid harmony reigns. And the worked surface of the canvas suggests a continuation of that internal harmony out into the space of the painter, and of the viewer. Chardin does not work erratically or by inspiration; the level of his output is unerringly even, and even though he has the reputation of raising French still life by sheer force of technique to the heights reserved for history painting, there is little in his work that suggests megalographic ambition. Instead of using still life to bring out a brilliance and focus which painting, with its superior mode of vision, can see in things that normal perception overlooks, Chardin deliberately returns pictorial vision to the ordinary facts of looking. As he does so, he presents his work as unassuming craft or *métier*, its skills visible in every area of the canvas, but not displayed at the expense of his subject-matter. On the contrary, the casualness of the Chardin interior, its modesty and sense of ease, are qualities which he maintains in the way he presents his own activity. He seems to paint in his own house, not in a studio, and his work is part of the house, taking its rhythms from the domestic space around it.

In the work of Chardin, rhopography directly enters into the material world. Its wish is to participate in low-plane reality, not to purify it or render it spectacular. It accepts the material fate of living in a creaturely universe, subject to limitation and routine; there is no protest against that, only against modes of painting that seek to break out of creaturely limitation into more exalted forms of art and perception. The degree of its immersion in materiality can be measured in the way it accepts vision anatomically, as a matter of the eye's apparatus, its muscles and lens. Chardin's work assumes that the way the eye naturally sees its world needs no reproof or enhancement, and in this its feeling for human equality is evident as much in the way sight is presented, as in the themes of human fellowship and interaction which still life is able to express through the symbols of food. But even Chardin is caught in a field of power and class that considerably complicates rhopography's vision of equality. Which brings us to the problem of display.