

Object Lessons



Wayne Thiebaud, *Two Cheese Cubes*, 2011.

©CALI COLOR, SACRAMENTO/COURTESY PAUL THIEBAUD GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO

An exhibition of the works of Wayne Thiebaud was held recently at the Museo Morandi in Bologna, Italy, alongside Giorgio Morandi's oeuvre. The show was curated by Alessia Masi in collaboration with Carla Crawford. Masi interviewed Thiebaud for the show's catalogue. Following are excerpts of their conversation:

Alessia Masi: You have claimed Morandi as a personal influence in your work. What are your reactions to your dialogue with Morandi?

Wayne Thiebaud: I'll see if I can focus on some main things. There are such good lessons to learn from looking at his work. They have to do with certain propositions that I think serious painters need to be aware of. One of them, I think, is the wonder of intimacy and the love of long looking. Of staring

but at the same time moving the eye, finding out what's really there, and there are so many things that are subtle and may look like something at one moment but not the next. There's always that kind of "not quite" with Morandi and yet the feeling of totality is so nicely complete. It's always a joy to look at his work. He also cautions us painters against the idea of over doing. It's alright to have drama but not melodrama. So many good lessons.

AM: When did you first see Morandi's work? Was it love at first sight or an acquired taste?

WT: Well he was hard to see here in America for such a long time and I'm so damned old that people have trouble remembering that it really was very difficult to find his work in exhibitions. But once you got a little taste of seeing one or two you found they were really interesting puzzles. I suppose I would say I was slow to appreciate them. At first it looked like they were hardly focused, that they were sort of scruffy and somewhat inept. We were used to American bravura and the way in which Americans tend to be a little over the top and striking out for attention. These didn't come to you, you had to go to them.

AM: Your careful study of light on the form plays a strong role in your paintings. Like in Morandi's work, the light seems to come from inside your paintings themselves, while they take shape, a sort of luminous energy. Could you comment on the role of light in your paintings?

WT: Well I think we're talking about a very interesting duality about light and the use of light in painting. One category has to do with the formal properties of light and imitating it, that is to say,

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of knowing what a highlight is, a cast shadow, a reflected light and so on, and then replicating that or using that strategically as a way of determining volume. So in a sense you're showing how light works by specific annotation. The other kind of light however is quite a different tradition, that's where, as you indicated with your reference to Morandi, the light is created by way of creating energy, by the juxtaposition of colors and the interaction of those colors to create light quite different from the modulation of volumetric rendering. If we look at Bonnard, or Matisse, or Vuillard, that tradition, the wonder of it is the way the light comes off the paper by way of color. It's not what we refer to as natural light, but it's a kind of eternal light, or symbolic light, or light that is sustained by the energy of the interaction of color.

AM: We know that Morandi had an almost ritualistic way of finding the right composition for his paintings. He would place various objects on the tables in his study and work with each of them until he was satisfied with their positions. He would then mark the paper beneath the objects with a pencil. He would do the same for his own feet on the floor so that he would be able to find that "unique point of view" again. Can you relate to this meticulous search for the right composition in your own work?

WT: I can, because I've read so many instances of painters, all the way from Morandi through many others who are fascinated by it. The most ridiculous one, I think, was Ingres, who loved to tie threads on all those draperies and pin them in such a way that the point of tension every time that he restructured his subject was back to exactly the same marks. So the idea of structural development, Morandi does it that way. Mondrian made thousands of little thumbnail drawings. Sometimes he could make as many as a hundred little three inch by two inch or four inch by five inch drawings of placements for a particular piece. Where the lines would intersect, how much space in one area as opposed to another. This was

one of the things I got out of the old art directors who always had you make lots of tiny little compositions before you made a large one. I've been taught that in my teaching experience as well, to try to have students get so they're always trying for one more variation of what they're looking at rather than getting too early cast in concrete, getting a composition that doesn't work—it's too heavy on the right or it's not coherent—or whatever. This testing out different set ups is one of very basic needs of any serious artist. Watching de Kooning work as I had a privilege to do or working with Diebenkorn and seeing how long he would look and slightly move things or re-draw. I think, the whole idea of collage was developed because you're blotting out an area you don't want which re-establishes the plain and then being able to go back and make adjustments. So yes, I think that certainly attention to composition is a mark of anyone who's serious about it. It's probably a pretty neurotic activity, but that's what it is.

AM: How do you work in terms of reference in your own studio. Do you work from life? From memory or imagination? Do you ever use photographs as reference?

WT: Mostly a lot of drawing, a lot of painting, a lot of reading. I read a lot of poetry. I cannot use photographs. I have a kind of quarrel with them. I don't like them very much. It's such a different world from painting. . . . So when you look at, say, Vermeer who everyone talks about being photographic, and if you're thinking that you're doubting Vermeer as a painter, you're missing what looks almost like salt crystals for focus, little scattered points of light, almost pointillism, and then these curious and difficult edges that are almost impossible to find. You think you can, you keep looking but it's very hard to determine whether that's the background or the object or the arm. I find that extraordinary. Also, all you have to do is cut a hole in a piece of eight-in-a-half by eleven paper about the size of a dime and put it on any part of a Vermeer painting and you say, "yep,

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that's Vermeer. That's not a photograph." But you can also do that with great stylists of any kind. Oh yeah that's a Seurat, that's a Picasso, this is a Derain, this is a Degas, this is a so-and-so. Just through that little coin-like opening. So you have to draw a lot, you look a lot, you learn to see more carefully than people usually see and remember that lesson that Ingres gave his students of the gray scale. He told his students that he wanted them to make a gray scale from white to black and that he wanted to be able to see that each step of these hundred little squares that they were going to paint was a marvelous transition from black to white. The students rebelled and said "ah, you crazy old son of a so-and-so. I can't see that many!" And they tried like mad, he'd go on and say, "oh number 38 is the same as 37. You've got to make that nuance change!" So they rebelled and gave him hell and stopped working. So he brought out his own student project of the same kind and it had a thousand steps! Now you think he's lying, until you look at the back of that Turkish bather, what beautiful subtle values!

AM: On September 27, 2010, Google, the world's most popular search engine, celebrated its 12th anniversary with a digital image of their logo written on a Thiebaud birthday cake. Have you ever entered "Thiebaud" in a search engine? If so, what did you think of the results?

WT: Oh, not much. I don't really like to look at my own paintings, so we hang other people's works and I'm not much interested in looking at my own. There's always something wrong with the damn things! Or I want to get up and work on them. I often like to get rid of them actually. I'm afraid I've become a little bit self-conscious. n

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