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Winter, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, c. 1573.

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STILL LIFE WITH WINTER AND FRUIT

Winter

Although a little short-sighted, winter is not dark. The knots on his neck turn the branches into meanders held up by the ivy. He continues with his trade as a copyist.

The taunt is a macabre, snarled mess of wild mushrooms. Behind the straw mat, he hides gloveless hands, crackling walnuts, gaping slits in the root.

This profile does not show misery, drought, pain, or abandonment. It optimizes a skepticism that, on the other side, blows grey and freezes the yellow.

The lemon stalk condenses into vertigo. With all its seed essence. Satire disrupts whim and melancholy. It is a collection, an erudite curiosity.

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In 1573, Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1537-1593) painted one of a series of composite heads representing the seasons of the year. Together with the other series created in different years with the same theme, they are included in almost all studies about still lifes. The Lombardian was commissioned to do them for the Emperor Maximilian II, for example, who would give them to August of Saxony. They are also allegories in which the groupings are of elements from a single semantic field that personify spring, summer, autumn, or winter. The fruit and flowers painted should be understood as parts of a greater whole: the composite head characterizes and symbolizes the season of the year in question. These figures could also represent the emperor (in his youth, for example, in the case of *Spring*) or in what is thought to be the last canvas he painted, Rudolf II as the exuberant, majestic Vertumnus, the god of transformation.

Arcimboldo helped Rudolf II of Hapsburg in Prague to gather a collection of marvels, and series like this of the seasons show it. In one of the canvases depicting the four elements, for example, the head of water is made up of marine animals that can be identified according to how far one is from the painting. Full of similarities and allusions, it would seem to reference a certain universal analogy between macro-cosmoses and microcosmoses, a certain order aimed at showing the Habsburgs' eternal power and the metaphysical transformation of nature. These strange, ingenious, erudite, and humorous paintings are also fantasies, inventions, "portraits," that owe as much to art as to science and

to magic. In addition, they are at the margins of the still life genre, since the immobile objects represented (in the case of *Winter*, the dry branches and ivy, the wild mushrooms, the nuts, or lemons) make up, bind together, and symbolize the season's characteristic frugality. In contrast to the magnificence of spring or summer, they are reflections about the passage of time and our common destiny. However, in one version of the series, an "M," a reference to Maximilian II, can be discerned in the mat the figure is wearing as a cloak. Also, the austere crown reminds the viewer that winter, the first season of the year in the Roman calendar, is the most important. When almost nothing is left, the emperor remains.



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Summer, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, c. 1563.

Observing, arranging, collecting, and repeating are common gestures in still lifes. To the networks of meanings that unite the objects in each painting's figures are added new constellations of meaning derived from the comparison of each canvas in the series and the other series.



Table, Clara Peeters, c. 1611.



Observing, arranging, collecting, and repeating are common gestures in still lifes. To the networks of meanings that unite the objects in each painting's figures are added new constellations of meaning derived from the comparison of each canvas in the series and the other series. The result is that they invite us, just as Arcimboldo did, to reflect, to play with meaning, and also to show and see how it is shown. In one of the versions of *The Summer*, on the figure's wheat collar can be read in golden braided blades of wheat the words "Guiseppe Arcimboldo F." A little lower, on his shoulder, where the sleeve begins, can be seen "1563." The painter who presents the emperor as the god of mutations reminds us that time passes and everything will fade. What we see is fleeting, an illusion, nonsensical, a trick created by the artist. Just as the name of the genre "still life" is contradictory because nature is in essence life,¹ the precision and exactitude in the flowers, the fruit, the animals represented capture the viewer's attention precisely because they are artifice. The name and date of the painter and when he painted accentuate the conditions, technique, and the artist's skill.

Several decades after Arcimboldo's time, in 1611, Clara Peeters finished her *Still Life with Flowers, a Silver-gilt Goblet, Dried Fruit, Sweetmeats, Bread Sticks, Wine and a Pewter Pitcher*. This is only one among several others she painted with the same objects: cherries, goblets, fishes, artichokes, sweets, flowers, birds. The realism in her representation and the theme show that we are seeing the work of an expert

painter, who knows her genre. If Arcimboldo incorporated his name in the clothing of *The Summer*, Peeters painted her own reflection six times in the composition's gilt goblet. Peeters also several times includes a bridal knife that allows us to suppose she was married—this was a common wedding gift—and that she lived and worked in Antwerp.

The motif of the knife on the tables depicted in still lifes would become very common, and its repetition would tend to put it at the edge of the table to emphasize the canvas's supposed three dimensions. Willem Claesz Heda (1594-1680), for example, used it in several of his canvases of untidy tables: empty oyster shells, overturned goblets, rolled-up lemon peels on half-empty plates, and wrinkled tablecloths with a knife at the edge of the table. In these, the still life is tumultuous, rebellious, the illusion of the edges. And it is all these things in a similar way to how, in other examples, it had been a cabinet of curiosities, a meditation about order, the filtration of serenity, or an alert to being. The examples multiply their contrasts of darkness and light, in addition to emphasizing appearances. These are paradoxes that, behind their transparent panes of glass, present us with things as though they were face-to-face with the viewer, illusions that force us to think on different levels of reality and about the skill in representing them. These diverse examples remind us that no still life is actually wild. Every jug of flowers includes an anecdote, a reflection, the announcement of someone who practices a craft and orders what we see.



Still Life, Wilhelm Claesz Heda, c. 1611.



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Still Life with Fruit (with Scorpion and Frog),
Hermenegildo Bustos, 1874.



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Still Life with Fruit,
Hermenegildo Bustos, 1877.



Hermenegildo Bustos (1832-1907) painted two still lifes of fruit, in 1874 and 1877. In addition to being a painter, the Guanajuato-born Bustos was an ice cream maker, farmer, carpenter, sexton, day laborer, musician, and tailor. In 1901, he painted a self-portrait depicting him wearing a coat he had also made.

He methodically logged his activities in the margins of a calendar, at the same time that he made portraits and kept records of the weather. This self-taught painter, who considered himself only an amateur, kept for himself his two still lifes with fruit, as though he was preserving two lists that reverberate like the infinite.

Mamey, mango, pomegranate, sapote, guava, black sapote, oranges, pears, prickly pear fruits, pineapple, potatoes, sweet potatoes, tamarind, papaya, soursop.... At some point it becomes difficult to understand the order of what is represented because it is no longer recognizable, it is imagined, invented, and you can even see something that is not there.

Banana, avocado—the criollo kind, with its soft, perfumed skin, that almost no longer exists—, the other pomegranate, a frog, green or red prickly pear fruits, watermelon, peaches, sapodilla, tomatoes, chili peppers, figs, scorpion... He paints surprises, alliterations, orders of the closest, anomalies, and gestures of observation. **MM**



Notes

¹ In Spanish, the term for “still life” translates literally as “dead Nature,” leading the author to say that Nature is, in essence, alive, and therefore is contradictory. [Translator’s Note.]