

# MoCP

Museum of  
Contemporary Photography

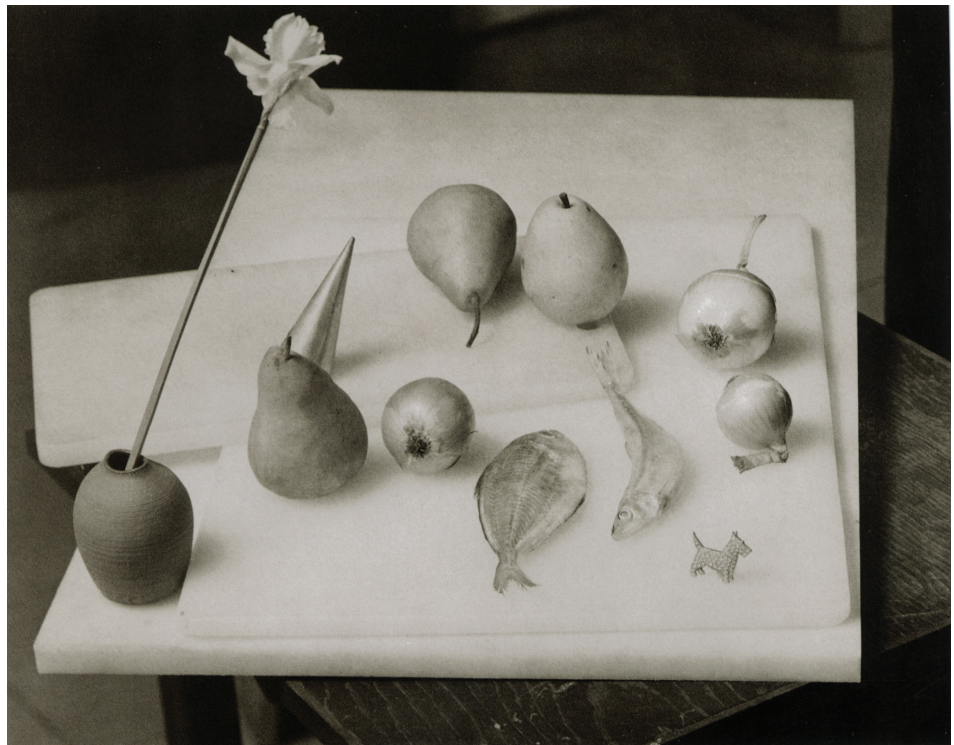
Columbia College Chicago

## FRAMING IDEAS

### Still Life: The Object as Subject

#### CURRICULUM GUIDE

This resource is aimed at integrating the study of still life photography into secondary and post-secondary fine arts, language arts, and social science curriculum. This guide contains questions for looking and discussion, historical information, and classroom activities related to images from the permanent collection of the MoCP, is aligned with Illinois Learning Standards Incorporating the Common Core, and can be adapted for use by younger students. A corresponding set of images for classroom use can be found at [www.mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php](http://www.mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php). The MoCP is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization accredited by the American Alliance of Museums. The museum is generously supported by Columbia College Chicago,



Jan Groover  
*Untitled #1308, 1983*  
From the collection of the MoCP

the MoCP Advisory Committee, individuals, private and corporate foundations, and government agencies including the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency. The MoCP's education work is additionally supported by After School Matters and the Llyod A. Fry Foundation. Special funding for this guide and the MoCP's work with K-12 educators was provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

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# Framing Ideas

## Still Life: The Object as Subject

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# Still Life: The Object as Subject

## The Still Life Tradition

A still life is a picture of objects that have been arranged in a composition. Photographic still lifes are usually made in a studio setting where artists use precise **composition** and lighting to render shape, show the surface of objects, establish mood, and draw the viewer's attention to certain elements. Artists often use natural and manmade objects carefully selected and placed in the scene to serve as **symbols** or **metaphors**. The still life has a long tradition in art history, specifically in painting.

**Irving Penn** is best known for his fashion photographs that, beginning in the 1950s, defined a new look for magazines and fashion photography. By placing models against plain backdrops, Penn allowed fashion and the body to stand alone as the subject of his images. He also created elegant and sparse still lifes for clients including Clinique, as well as for his own personal interest, and would often render beautiful seemingly mundane or unattractive items such as in the series of still lifes he made by photographing cigarette butts retrieved from the gutter. Many of Penn's images, including the image *Composition with Skull and Pear* 1979/81, evoke the exotic as well as the transitory nature of life.



**Irving Penn**  
*Composition with Skull and Pear* 1979/81  
From the collection of the MoCP

This image connects to an influential tradition in still life painting called vanitas that was prominent in Dutch painting of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Paintings made in this tradition, including the below image by Peter Caesz, would use objects such as the human bones and tipped chalice we see here to **symbolize** the fleeting nature of life and the inevitability of death.



**Peter Caesz**  
*Vanitas Quiet Life*, 1656  
From the Collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Austria

- What do you notice in Irving Penn's still life above that might connect to the vanitas tradition?
- How might the objects we see here serve as symbols or metaphors? For what?



## Additional Views

**Jan Groover** (see cover image) creates complex, spatial arrangements in her still-life photography that heighten the beauty of the objects, and affect and at times confuse our visual perception. To create the image *untitled #1308*, 1983, Groover selected objects with delicate and silvery surfaces and arranged them precisely in the scene. Notice how the stem of the flower lines up with the edge of the cutting board. What else do you notice here about how she arranged these objects?

Groover photographed her composition with a **large format camera** to capture precise detail. She then printed the image using the platinum/palladium process on luminous vellum-like paper to enhance the delicacy and the wide range of tones of the objects she photographed. A painter by training, Groover makes reference to art history in her photographs, from Renaissance perspective drawings to post-impressionist painter Paul Cezanne's (1835-1906) tabletop still lifes.



**Paul Cezanne**

*Basket of Apples*, 1895

From the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago



**Roy DeCarava**  
*Ketchup Bottles, Table and Coat*  
1952, printed 1982. From the collection of the MoCP

**Roy DeCarava** captured life in the African American community in Harlem from the 1950s through the 1990s in his characteristic moody, and dark style. In his image *Ketchup Bottles, Table and Coat*, 1952, DeCarava's use of deep, dark tones hides visual clutter, in what appears to be a diner, to focus our attention on select objects in this scene. This impromptu still life—a single place-setting, the remnants of a meal and a heavy coat hung on the back of a chair—evoke a melancholy story about a meal eaten alone.



**Abelardo Morell**  
*Pieta by El Greco, 1993*  
From the collection of the MoCP

**Abelardo Morell** immigrated to America from Cuba at the age of fourteen. His family settled in the basement apartment of a building in New York City where his father worked as the building's superintendent. Knowing little English, Morell relied on his keen visual perception to learn about his new surroundings, often from the odd perspective of the slit-like windows of their apartment. A sense of curiosity and wonder of everyday objects and scenes has marked Morell's work throughout his career. Having young children opened new perspectives for Morell as he played with them on the floor and gained

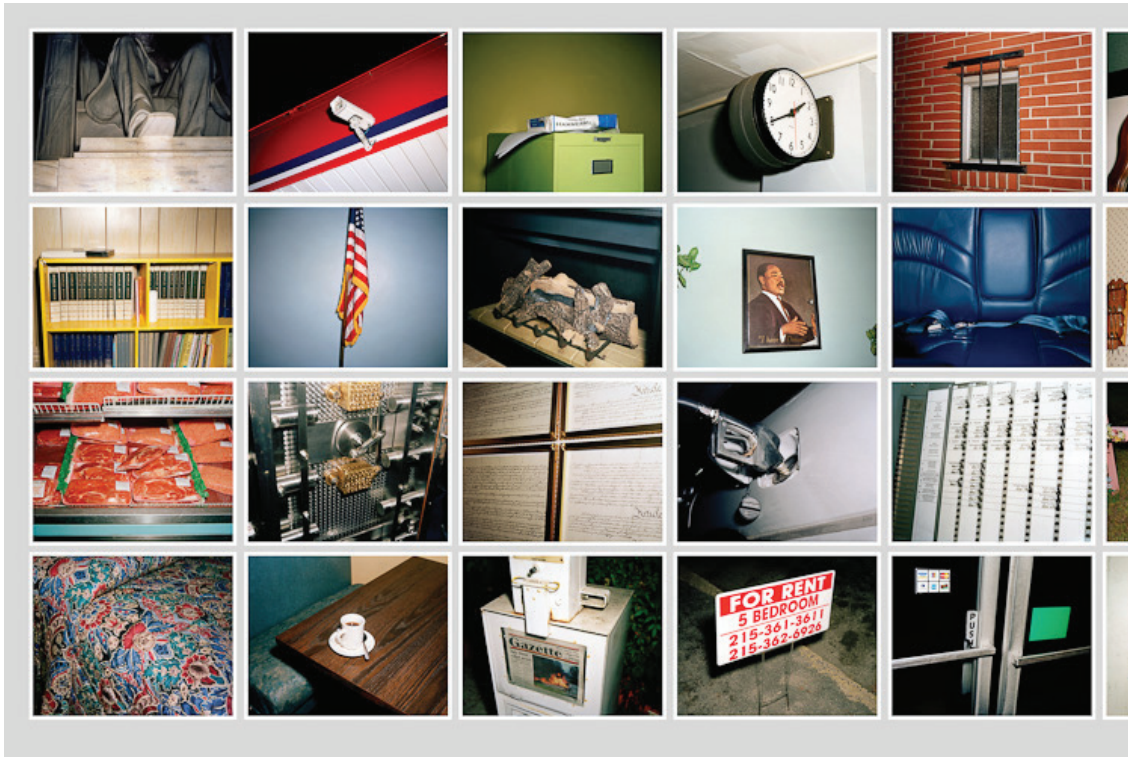
a fresh look at familiar things by looking at them from a low **vantage point**. Much of his work is an exploration of human visual perception and how the camera sees. In the above image *Pieta by El Greco*, 1993 which is from a series Morell made on books and their illustrations, he pulls our attention to the play of soft light on the lush paper and inks, and the sensual bend of the pages, which distorts and hides some of the illustrations from our view. We notice the beauty of the object as well as the difficulty of reproducing and viewing works of art in books.



**Laura Letinsky**

Untitled, from the *Morning and Melancholia* series, 2001  
From the collection of the MoCP

**Laura Letinsky** says of her work, "I explore formal relationships between ripeness and decay, delicacy and awkwardness, control and haphazardness, waste and plentitude, pleasure and sustenance." In her series *Morning and Melancholia* Letinsky creates highly precise images of the aftermath of making and eating food often by photographing tables after dinner parties. The above untitled image evokes the sensual pleasure of eating as well a sense of loss. What connections do you see between Letinsky's image and the Irving Penn, Peter Caesz, and Jan Groover images we looked at earlier?



**Mebane and Hyers**  
Installation view (detail)  
*Empire*, 2006  
From the collection of the MoCP

To create their series *Empire*, collaborative team **William Mebane and Martin Hyers** traveled around American in 2006 and photographed objects in peoples' homes and work environments as they found them—without changing or arranging them. The artists aimed to represent a range of Americans in this project, from different regions, ethnic backgrounds, and socioeconomic levels. In order to gain access to locations of interest, Hyers and Mebane explained to the property owners that they are photographically collecting objects for a time capsule.

The individual impromptu still lifes they created serve as portraits of the inhabitants of each home. As a group, this body of work presents a sort of portrait of America. The result is a visual investigation of twenty-one states at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In its entirety, *Empire* encompasses 9,000 photographs, with each edit varying to describe a unique perspective of American life and values. *Empire* was presented at the MoCP in the 2012 exhibition *Peripheral Views: States of America*. See <http://www.mocp.org/exhibitions/2012/07/peripheral-views.php>

### Still Life: Suggested Viewing

Zeke Berman; Christian Boltanski; Roy DeCarava; Lorna Simpson; Abelardo Morell; Irving Penn; Jan Groover; Laura Letinsky; Olivia Parker; Rei Taka; Joel Peter Witkin; William Mebane and Martin Hyers.

# Still Life: The Object as Subject

## Questions for Looking and Discussion

### Activities

#### 1. Create an Impromptu Still Life Self Portrait

Inspired by the work of Mebane and Hyers or Roy DeCarava's image of the remnants of a meal, look around your personal space at your personal objects and how they are arranged. Consider things such as the objects on your bed-side table, the place where you put down your things when you enter your home, the top of your desk, and the items you post on your wall or refrigerator.

- What do you notice about these things?
- What do you notice about how they are arranged?
- What do you think others might learn about you from this?

Take a photograph of one of those scenes. Consider how you will frame or compose the image in your camera. Play with **vantage point** by looking at the scene from above, below, at close range, farther away, from the side, etc. Choose the vantage point that you think works best for this image and make that picture.

Do this project as a class or with a group of friends. Print and post your images together.

- What would you learn about each individual from looking at each work? Why?
- Do you think you might be able to identify who is the maker of each image just by looking at their stuff?
- Taken as a whole, what might this range of images suggest about this group of peers?

Variation: Instead of creating an impromptu a self-portrait still life, you could create a portrait of someone else by looking for interesting arrangements of things in their environment.

#### 2. Write an Ode to Common things

Still lifes encourage us to carefully consider the characteristics and importance of, and the symbolic associations we attach to objects. An ode is lyrical verse, often with a set structure, that praises its subject—usually an object. With a tradition going back over a thousand years, odes are Greek in origin and were originally accompanied by music. \*This lesson is inspired by an activity led by arts integration specialist Cynthia Weiss and poet Jenn Morea.

Closely read Pablo Neruda's poem *An Ode to Common Things* or *Ode to My Socks* for the attention they pay and praise they give to everyday objects.

- What do you notice about the words and types of description Neruda uses?
- What do you notice about how he arranges the words and phrases?

Read John Keat's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* for its more formal and traditional ode structure, which consists of 10 line **stanzas**, and **iambic** verse. Notice how the last words in each line within the stanzas rhyme in a pattern of abab cdecde. Horacian Odes such as 17<sup>th</sup> century English poet Andrew Marvel's poem *An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland* follow a simpler aabb aabb structure. Most odes end with a concluding line or epode that breaks from the rhythm established in the stanzas.



**NOTE TO TEACHERS:** Decide on the ode structure you would like your students to use among the wide range of simple or more complex possibilities. The Poetry Foundation's website <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/> is a great source of poems—like contemporary poet Kevin Young's humorous *Ode to The Midwest*—vocabulary, and teaching ideas, including the following simple ode structure by poet Danielle Pafunda:

Ode to \_\_\_\_\_

one word describing the subject

one word describing the subject

fact about the subject

wild card line (imagine your subject speaking or acting or speak to your subject)

**Begin Writing:** Select an everyday object that is important to you. Decide what structure you will use for your ode.

Begin by writing about why that thing is important to you.

- How does it make you feel? Why?
- List words that describe the characteristics of your subject through at least two senses. How does it look, feel, smell, sound, taste?
- Try to find fresh words to describe your subject rather than relying on the familiar or cliché.

Look at what you have written so far and select the elements that you think are most important. Given the structure you have selected, draft lines of text and arrange them into stanzas. Edit and revise your ode until you are pleased with the results. Read it aloud and discuss it with your classmates.

# Still Life: The Object as Subject

## Glossary of Terms

### **composition**

How one composes an image in the camera's viewfinder or in the scene to be photographed. The organization of elements within the image.

### **iambic**

Iambic verse alternates stressed/unstressed or short/long syllables. Iambic pentameter is a line made up of five pairs of short/long, or unstressed/stressed, syllables.

### **large format camera**

A camera that uses a sheet of film 4x5 inches or larger. A larger negative is capable of capturing more detail and producing higher resolution in printing than a smaller negative. Large format cameras generally give the photographer more control over things like perspective and focus. Large format cameras are bulky and must usually be used on a tripod and take more time to set up and adjust, resulting in a slower and more methodical way of working. Today some large format cameras are fitted with sophisticated digital backs that offer the quality of a large negative and the convenience of a digital file.

### **metaphor**

A figure of speech in which one thing is used to represent or designate something else.

### **point of view (vantage point)**

Where a photographer stands in relation to the subject he or she is photographing. It can also refer to the photographer's view or opinion of that subject.

### **stanza**

In poetry a stanza is a unit within a larger work.

### **symbol**

A symbol is something that references something else in appearance or by association.

## **Illinois Learning Standards for English Language Arts Incorporating the Common Core: Standards Addressed in This Guide:**

**CC.K-12.L.R.3 Knowledge of Language:** Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

**K-12 R R.2 CC.K-12.R.R.2 Key Ideas and Details:** Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

**CC.K-12.R.R.1 Key Ideas and Details:** Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

**CC.K-12.L.R.6 Vocabulary Acquisition and Use:** Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

**\*CC.K-12.R.R.6 Craft and Structure:** Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

**\*CC.K-12.R.R.9 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:** Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.3d** Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events.

**FINE ARTS STATE GOAL 26:** Through creating and performing, understand how works of art are produced.

A. Understand processes, traditional tools and modern technologies used in the arts.

**FINE ARTS STATE GOAL 27:** Understand the role of the arts in civilizations, past and present.

A. Analyze how the arts function in history, society and everyday life.

*This guide was produced by MoCP manager of education Corinne Rose. Copyright © 2013 by Columbia College Chicago*