

SILENCES

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1. From Sound to Silence

A picture or a sculpture are motionless and silent by nature. And because of our current habits, which often-times turn museums into temples of silent contemplation, we tend to forget how much artists have striven to overcome this intrinsic limitation of the visual arts, using colour, rhythm and composition to evoke the sound and fury of this world. Before cinema deprived the visual arts of this function, visitors of 19th-century salons flocked there in search of thrilling experiences to be discovered in paintings that were in fact far from silent and, in many regards, were the forebearers of modern-day blockbusters. A taste sanctioned by the hierarchy of pictorial genres, which made historical paintings (religious, mythological and historic scenes) the pinnacle of artistic expression, while still life, the epitome of silent painting, was pushed down to the bottom.

Still life, genre painting, landscapes, even portraits, have often been regarded as second-rate genres, meant to be viewed in a private, domestic context. Perhaps these less expressive pieces also require greater attention, more intimacy. At any rate, their silence should not be construed as the sign of a lack of ambition: efforts by early 20th-century Cubists to rehabilitate still life painting at a time when cinema was fast growing were an unequivocal gesture affirming the painter's resources and marked a significant step in their quest to find the discipline's founding principles. Considering painting as an object in and of itself, minimising the importance of the subject so something else might bloom in its place, leaning towards a more introspective dimension: these genres that have long been looked down upon are often those in which artists feel closest to us.



Camille Llobet

(Bonneville, 1982)

See *What is Said*, 2016

Film couleur muet, performance,
Silent colour film, performance, HD
video, 8'30"

Vidéo-projection performeuse
video projection, deaf performer:

Noha El Sadawy; conductor:
Philippe Béran; production:
ECHOS-ESAAAA-MAMCO
(Geneva), Centre d'art le 3 bis f
(Aix-en-Provence)

FRAC Grand Large Collection -
Haut-de-France

© Camille Llobet/2019, ProLitteris,
Zurich

Alongside the conductor, the deaf performer Noha El Sadawy expresses in sign language special moments of the Collège de Geneva orchestra's rehearsals. Through signing, she describes what she sees, but does not hear.

A conductor's gestures and sign language are two very different languages, that evolved from two antagonistic worlds: music and silence. However, there are similarities between these two modes of expression: they both use a precise, technical, coded structure and share a lot of sensitive expression. See *What is Said* presents a silent montage that focuses on the 'inductive' gestures of the conductor who drives the sound, and the 'receptive' gestures of sign language that describes the image of the rehearsal.



Aimé Barraud

(La Chaux-de-Fonds, 1902 –
Neuchâtel, 1954)

The Japanese Print, around 1930
Oil on canvas

Musée des beaux-arts
de La Chaux-de-Fonds, inv. 636
© Beneficiaries, Musée des
beaux-arts de La Chaux-de-Fonds,
photo: Pierre Bohrer

The painting within the painting is an ancient tradition of self-reflection. The work included can be imaginary or real and identifiable. It provides a reference that often informs us about the ambition of the artist who chooses to measure himself against it: it could be a tribute, a challenge or a bravura piece, or simply a form of Chinese portrait, based on the assembly of symbolic or familiar objects. This work by the painter Aimé Barraud, born in La-Chaux-de-Fonds, directly references another work in its title, *The Japanese Print*, but places it in the background of the image, behind the tools that allowed the realisation of the painting itself: brushes, pencils, inkwell, colours. Beyond the simple reference, this composition is a *mise en abyme* of creation. The contrast is striking between the calm of the workshop, the meticulousness of the realistic representation and the spirited nature of the reproduced engraving, depicting a scene of battle between samurai.



Unknown author, from Aert de Gelder Dordrecht's entourage

(1645 – Dordrecht, 1727)

Laughing Man, around 1665–1670
Oil on wood

Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva,
handed over to the City of Geneva
in 1805 according to the Consular
Decree of 1801 (Chaptal Decree),
1805, inv. 1825-0011
© Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva,
photo: Bettina Jacot-Descombes

It is impossible not to hear the loud sound of laughter emanating from this character painted against a dark background. Dressed like street singers and puppeteers, he has two bells on the puffed sleeves of his festive costume. In his left hand, he holds a triangle: is he about to strike the metal, or did he just stop to start again after adding a verse to his recital? His companion's dumbstruck expression (which could well be just a wooden puppet) produces a perfect comical contrast for the miniature show depicted within this narrow frame. Despite the ugliness of the character, no one can escape the loud and even contagious sound of his laughter. *Tronies*, the term used to describe character portraits, are one of the favourite baroque themes of Dutch painters, but here the intention is to involve the viewer through the excitement of his senses. In this case: hearing.

2. Silent Life

While in the 18th century the genre became known across Romance countries as “dead nature” (*nature morte* in French), it first appeared in the Netherlands around the mid-16th century, under the name *Stilleven* (literally still life). It probably developed as a by-product of some quiet genre paintings, such as Quiringh Gerritsz van Brekelenkam’s *A Kitchen Interior*, whose foreground alone would make a perfectly satisfying still life. One of the genre’s characteristics is the fact that it depicts natural objects (fruit, vegetables, fish, wild game, flowers), but isolated from their natural environment, transported in a human setting. Conceptualised as the fruits of man’s labour, their abundance conveys a sense of prosperity and may therefore be used to decorate a private interior, creating a *mise en abyme* effect in that it echoes the success of the ideal family life, quiet and serene, it symbolises.

In these peaceful settings and well-being deserved, which may also be suggested by the representation women – traditional custodians of the home –, engaged in conscientious work, paintings started showing new activities, which became increasingly associated with silence as they were practiced alone: for instance, reading and writing. In the quiet setting of the home, a silent conversation is allowed to bloom between the soul and God, and between human souls across time and space. And this latter conquest deserved to be immortalised in art.



Giovanni Battista Recco

(Naples, 1615 - Naples, 1660)

*Tubers, Cheese, Bread, Vegetables
and Bottles*, n. d.

Oil on canvas

Private collection

© Archives of Carla and
Francesco Valerio

This oil on canvas is attributed to Giovanni Battista Recco, a Neapolitan painter belonging to a great family of artists specialising in still life painting up until the end of the 17th century. The objects are carefully arranged on a wooden table, enhanced by the chiaroscuro. The striking naturalism employed by the artist gives the objects in this kitchen a certain density. The painter has created a physical distance between the different items on the table in order for the eye to be drawn in a certain direction, following imposed routes from the knife to the cheese, from vegetables to the cauldron. Born from the darkness that projects the tubers and bottles towards us, the space of the painting becomes the accomplice of the painter and the observer who strives to examine each detail, to appreciate its shape, the matte and the shiny, the smooth and the rough, before looking at it as a whole. The artist explores and innovates against a backdrop of naturalism with strong luminous contrasts - paving the way for powerful Neapolitan still lifes that would inspire other artists of his generation.



Maurice Quentin de La Tour

(Saint-Quentin, 1704 – Saint-Quentin, 1788)

Portrait of Father Jean-Jacques Huber (1699–1744) Reading, 1742

Pastel on paper

Cabinet d'arts graphiques du Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, Ernest Saladin legacy, 1911, inv. 1911-0068

© Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, photo: Jean-Marc Yersin

Illuminated by candlelight, Father Jean-Jacques Huber, friend and sole heir of the artist, is absorbed in reading Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*. The chiaroscuro, the tight framing and the sobriety of the composition focus the attention on the concentrated yet mischievous expression of the figure. The practice of silent reading, which was rare in Antiquity, developed in the Middle Ages, first in monastic and then university circles, and then among scholars and secular notables. While the practice of reading aloud remained, it became widely popular in the 18th century. In contrast, it establishes a more personal, secret and free relationship with the written word, which is magnificently reflected in Quentin de La Tour's work. Exhibited at the Salon in 1742, this famous portrait was described in the 19th century by the brothers Edmond and Jules de Goncourt as "*a masterpiece framed like a Chardin, in which the pastel technique is almost on a level with Rembrandt*".



Camille Corot

(Paris, 1796 – Ville-d'Avray, 1875)

Young Woman at the Fountain, around 1860

Oil on canvas

Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, on permanent loan from the Jean-Louis Prevost Foundation & Gandur Foundation for Art, 2010, inv. BA 2010-0001

© Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, photo: Bettina Jacot-Descombes

Mainly known for his landscapes, Camille Corot is also an exceptional painter of figures. However, these works that the artist kept in his studio and showed only to a limited circle, were not revealed to the public until much later. From the late 1850s onwards, Corot painted multiple variations of female figures such as the Greek, the Italian, the reader or the woman at the fountain. In these paintings, memories of his travels and the reminiscence of great masters such as Raphael and Poussin emerge. The model, in costume, most often adopts a thoughtful and silent attitude, just as in this painting where time seems suspended – while the figure, whose picturesque details and physical peculiarities Corot has attenuated, reach the timeless universality of a female "type".

3. Left Unsaid

If it is at times associated with the contentment of peace and prosperity, silence may also be heavy with unspoken words: secrets and things too fearful to utter. Hanging on the lips of their counterparts, Mattia Pretis prodigal son and Léopold Robert's suitor appear frozen in time as they wait for an answer. Space seems to stretch in the charged silence between Vallotton's man and woman, who remain bound together only by their mutual hatred. And Vallotton is an exceptionally gifted example of an artist who excels at representing the unspoken. Viewers are introduced into his Intimacies as spectators of scenes, which, despite their sharp lighting, remain utterly impenetrable. Are they love scenes or murder scenes? The painter wrote in his journal: "*I feel that I paint for people who are well-adjusted, but who, deep down, are not entirely devoid of repressed vices. I do so like this state, which is also my own.*"

Behind each painting, there is an unspoken truth, that of its creator. What was the artist thinking when he or she painted it? What was his or her intention? Paintings show things, but leave the essential unsaid. Sometimes, these unspoken truths are the very subject of the depiction. After all, couldn't Maguerite Burnat-Provins's *Self portrait with finger on mouth* just as well have been called *The secret*?



Félix Vallotton

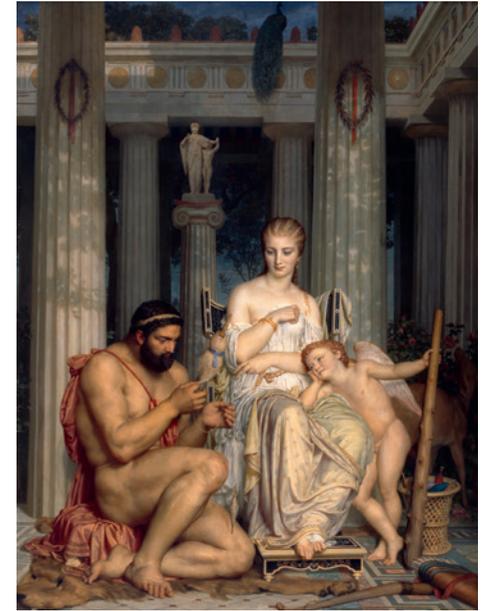
(Lausanne, 1865 – Paris, 1925)

The Hatred, 1908

Oil on canvas

Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva,
purchase, 2001, inv. BA 2001-0025
© Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva

Félix Vallotton calls his great allegorical or mythological compositions the “great machines”. *The Hatred* evokes both Dürer’s famous *Adam and Eve* and the subject of Adam and Eve driven from Paradise as Masaccio represented it in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence, with a bare background and a grimacing woman, her hand folded over her breast. Rather than the idealisation of bodies, the artist prefers the dissonance between raw reality and linear arabesques, thus imposing on us a different perspective on the conflict between man and woman. Vallotton writes about the underlying violence of their relationship in his diary: “*What has the man done that is so serious that he has to endure this terrifying associate that is the woman? It sometimes seems, from seeing thoughts so violently contradictory and impulses so clearly opposite, that there can only be winners and losers between the sexes.*” The result in this composition is an implacable confrontation, whose intimacy, revealed by nudity and an angry attitude, is projected into the public space.



Charles Gleyre

(Chevilly, 1806 – Paris, 1874)

Hercules at the Feet of Omphale,
1862

Oil on canvas

Musée d'art et d'histoire, Neuchâtel,
inv. AP 86

© Musée d'art et d'histoire,
Neuchâtel, photo: S. Iori

Heavy silence and the exchange of glances characterise this painting by Swiss artist Charles Gleyre, dedicated to a mythological episode from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. After his famous labours and following a crisis of madness during which he massacred his family, Hercules was subjected by the oracle of Delphi to a year of servitude to atone for his wrongs. Purchased as a slave by the queen of Lydia, Omphale, he made many exploits in her service, but was also subjected to humiliating orders, which forced him to wear women’s clothing and spin wool. The diversion of the heroic and virile figure of Hercules is at the centre of this work, in a seemingly calm and happy scene discreetly contradicted by the characters’ expressions. Hercules appears to be sulking, concentrated on his cattail, towards whom Omphale’s shrewdly ironic look and the tender (or mocking?) look of a cherub converge. The painter creates a work that reverses traditional roles and power relations between men and women, with the finesse and careful composition that characterise his mature works.



Mattia Preti

(Taverna, 1613 – Malte, 1699)

The Return of the Prodigal Son, n. d.

Oil on canvas

Private collection
© Archives Carla and
Francesco Valerio

This painting is inspired by the parable of the prodigal son as told in the Gospel according to Luke (15:11-32). After leading a dissolute and costly life, a young man returns full of remorse to the family home, where he is forgiven by his father and welcomed with joy. His elder brother, who had followed his father's rules, did not understand this welcome. The father replied to him, *"we had to feast and rejoice, because your brother was dead and now he is alive"*. Mattia Preti, a Neapolitan painter who also worked in Rome and Malta, explored this theme on several occasions. In this piece, he delivered a particularly touching and intense interpretation of the scene. It is in the silence of the painting, in the chiaroscuro, in the glances filled with emotion and modest gestures, that certain unspeakable feelings can be expressed – the love and mercy of the father, the remorse and gratitude of the son. This beautiful painting is a replica, by the master or his assistants, of a painting dated around 1660.



Marguerite Burnat-Provins

(Arras, 1872 – Grasse, 1952)

Self-Portrait with Finger on Mouth,
around 1900

Oil on canvas

Musée d'art du Valais, Sion
© Musée d'art du Valais, Sion,
photo: Michel Martinez

Writer and painter Marguerite Burnat-Provins portrayed herself in this work by means of a synthetic and enigmatic figuration. The arch of her index finger closes and hides her lips. This gesture is associated with the traditional iconography of silence, which dates back to an ancient codified representation of the Egyptian god Horus, and was also used in representations of the Greek divinity Harpocrates. Placed in the centre of the painting that is filled by the figure on an almost abstract background, this gesture intensifies the impact of the frontal gaze, challenging us through a visual and silent dialogue. This self-portrait thus questions the very act of vision in a self-reflexive dynamic. This observational dimension is underlined by the scarlet glow around the deep black eyes. However, is this *signum harpocraticum* with its symbolic significance an invitation for us to remain silent? Or is it an expression of the artist's desire to remain silent? In the past this gesture demanded secrecy to those in the know. Intense vision and absence of speech are represented here by an artist, whose later work was to take on a visionary and hallucinatory aspect.

4. Sacred Silence

The sacred is an invitation to the silence of reflection and prayer. In Christian art, some pieces were meant to inspire devotion by allowing viewers to feel closer to God and speak to Him: pious images, created in such a manner as to let viewers feel the presence of the religious event depicted, becomes a medium of meditative art. Sacred scenes like the birth and death of Christ are presented in this way for contemplation, in an effort to inspire viewers towards attention to mystery and inner reflection. This call for prayer may also rely on the viewer's propensity to mimic the holy figures being depicted: their gestures, their attitudes, their expressions and their eyes are all meant to silently prompt believers to follow their lead.

In the context of religion, silence appears as the condition for a closer bond with God: in that regard, representations of Saint Jerome, the translator of the Bible, as a hermit speak volumes. In the 16th and 17th centuries, theologians, men of the cloth and mystics all advocated silent prayer in their own way, not least of which Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* and Teresa of Ávila in *The Interior Castle*. According to the mystic John of the Cross, when the spirit remains quiet, "*God instructs the soul*". Only in silence can God's word reach its full magnitude. And the contemplation of pious images also greatly contributes to this process.



Jusepe de Ribera
 (Játiva, 1591 - Naples, 1652)
Saint Francis of Paola, 1640
 Oil on canvas
 Private collection
 © Archives of Carla and
 Francesco Valerio

Devotion to Saint Francis of Paola (Paola, 1416 - Calabria, 1507), the Italian hermit and founder of the Order of the Minims, developed in southern Italy after the Council of Trent. The religious image which, according to the precepts laid down by the Counter-Reformation, must be a medium for piety, offers here a devotional model for the spectator. Wholly absorbed in a silent dialogue with God, the saint, with his eyes raised to heaven, expresses the intensity of his devotion. 'Charitas' is written on the sheet he holds in his hand, a Christian virtue that refers both to the love of God and to the love of neighbour, as well as to the motto of the saint, who adopted it following an apparition of the archangel Saint Michael. This sober and powerful painting, of great visual quality, is an invitation to follow the example of Saint Francis, of whom Bossuet said: *"O the ardent lover! He is wounded, he is transported, he cannot be taken from his dear cell, because he embraces his God in peace and solitude."*



Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn
 (Leyde, 1606 - Amsterdam, 1669)
Saint Jerome in a Dark Chamber,
 1642
 Etching and chisel, condition II/III
 Cabinet d'arts graphiques
 du Musée d'art et d'histoire,
 Geneva, old collection,
 inv. E 2008-0159
 © Cabinet d'arts graphiques du
 Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva

Rembrandt's extraordinary talent as an engraver was the main reason for his international fame beyond the Netherlands. This etching testifies to the artist's incredible talent for manipulating the chiaroscuro. The subtle rays of light coming through the window are the only source of light here, introducing minute variations into the darkness that envelops the entire room, a metaphor for Saint Jerome's inner quest. Often depicted as a hermit in the desert or studious in his office, Saint Jerome appears to be frozen in thought, his head leaning on his left hand with an air of melancholy. The spiral staircase probably evokes the depth of the soul. The book on the desk refers to the theme of *lectio divina*, a form of prayer valued by the Fathers of the Church, which promotes communion with God through attentive reading and listening to the divine Word.



Lubin Baugin

(Pithiviers ou Courcelles-le-Roi, around 1610 – Paris, 1663)

The Dead Christ Mourned by Two Angels, around 1645–1650

Oil on canvas

Musée des Beaux-arts, Orléans, purchased in 1978 with the participation of the Société des Amis des musées d'Orléans, inv.78.1.1, City of Orléans
© Musée des Beaux-arts, Orléans, photo: François Lauginie

Considered Lubin Baugin's masterpiece in the field of religious painting, this piece was probably originally intended to decorate a private chapel. In a twilight atmosphere, two cherubs watch over the imposing body of the Dead Christ resting on a shroud. The elegance of the curves brings to mind the painting techniques of the Fontainebleau school and Parma school, in particular Le Corrège. The mineral and unadorned decor, the colour palette consisting only of shades of grey, white and beige and the sober clarity of the composition encourage meditation and prayer. The same minimal approach and silent quality can be found in many of the artist's still lifes. His subtlety was praised by art historian Jacques Thuillier: *"His universe, imbued with a fine blue light that takes away the weight of beings, engages ideal creatures in a dream of sweetness and tenderness and offers (...) a delicate fictional refuge."*



D'après Georges de la Tour

(Vic-sur-Seille, 1593 – Lunéville, 1652)

Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene, 1640

Oil on canvas

Musée des beaux-arts, Orléans, seized during the French Revolution, inv. 561.A, City of Orléans
© Musée des Beaux-arts, Orléans, photo: François Lauginie

Considered a very good copy of a lost original, this painting is inspired by the events preceding the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, mentioned in the Golden Legend, a collection of hagiographical accounts compiled by Jacques de Voragine. After he had miraculously survived the arrows of Roman soldiers, Sebastian was cared for by Irene, a young widow. With the help of her servant, she healed his wounds. The theme inspired de la Tour to depict an intimate and silent night scene. Thanks to the effects of chiaroscuro, the artist who, in the words of writer Pascal Quignard, *"made the night his kingdom"*, draws the viewer's entire attention to the delicate and precise care provided by the young woman.

5. Vanity

Silence is conducive to meditation on the finitude and illusory nature of human things. Vanitas is a pictorial genre that developed in 17th-century Holland before it spread to the rest of Europe. These paintings are an invitation to ponder our mortal destinies: underneath the splendour of life and the piles of riches, they reveal faint traces of death, silently at work. This theme owes its name to the refrain from *Ecclesiastes*: “*Vanity of vanity, all is vanity.*” Set against a grim background, objects are shown in a state of corruption, they rot and wither as they seem about to shrink back into the void that produced them. The sobriety of the compositions, the isolation in which objects are placed, the conspicuous use of dark colours and monochromes, are in keeping with the silence that these images encourage.

These paintings bring together a jumble of objects evocative of the vanity of worldly things, such as riches, power and pleasure of the senses, symbolised by coins, jewels, opulent fabrics, weapons, games and wine. They show the vanity of knowledge, represented by books, scientific devices and the arts. They also feature many symbols of the passage of time, the fragility of existence and death, such as skulls, sandglasses, burnt candles, withered flowers or crystalware ready to break into pieces, much like the crack we see in the table below the basket of glasses depicted by Sébastien Stoskopff.



Patrick Neu

(France, 1963)

Crystal Armour, 1995-1998

Crystal, wire, white goose feathers

Collection 49 Nord 6 - FRAC

Lorraine, Metz

© P. Neu/2019, ProLitteris, Zurich,
photo: Marc Damage/TUTTI

Patrick Neu uses opposing themes with an extremely confident instinct. In his hands, a solid 15th-century armour becomes the embodiment of fragility when he presents it lying on the ground, moulded in Saint-Louis crystal. An armour made of crystal is an object that is useless and incongruous, but that also tells a story and is hypnotising. It is a chimera that combines a shape and a material that are strictly incompatible. The essential strangeness of the object is further intensified by the feathers that cover it, as if it had been hastily abandoned in a henhouse. Neu appears to have built an object from a story, but without ever telling it to us. The spectator can only wonder and consider different scenarios, since the artist does not hint at any answers. But if the work exerts such a fascination, it is also because it shows something that one would rather expect to hear, and because it combines two opposites in a concrete form.



Jan I Brueghel

(Bruxelles, 1568 – Anvers, 1625)

Bouquet of Flowers in an Earthenware Vase, around 1610

Oil on wood

Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, formerly on loan from the Garengo Foundation, 1990, inv.1990-0033
© Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, Photo: Bettina Jacot-Descombes

This modest ceramic vase contains an extravagant bouquet of slender flowers, from different seasons and countries, captured at full bloom. Everything here reveals the great technical skills of Pieter Brueghel the Elder's youngest son, Jan Brueghel the Elder, who was known as Velvet Brueghel, in tribute to the finesse of his brush strokes and his ability to delicately render the textures of materials. Working for various princely courts in Europe, he is particularly appreciated for his floral compositions. Some features of this painting direct its reading towards a meditation on the theme of vanity, illustrated here by some jewellery, and the fleeting nature of life on earth which is symbolised by a cockchafer and a small broken stem on which some petals are already fading. Far from the sobriety that often characterises French still lifes, the painting nevertheless invites us to reflect on our existence.



Sébastien Stoskopff

(Strasbourg, 1597 – Idstein, 1657)

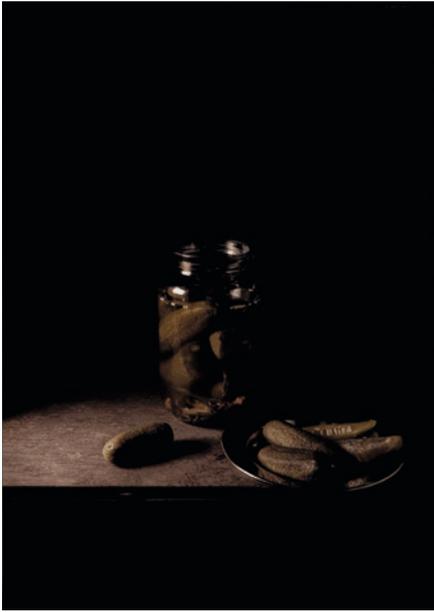
Still Life with Basket of Glasses, 1644

Oil on canvas

Musée de l'Œuvre Notre-Dame/
Arts du Moyen Âge de Strasbourg,
Strasbourg, inv. MBA 1776

© Musée de l'Œuvre Notre-Dame/
Arts du Moyen Âge de Strasbourg,
photo: M. Bertola

The basket of glasses is a central motif in the late work of Sébastien Stoskopff, an Alsatian artist who trained with Daniel Soreau, a painter specialised in still lifes. With a remarkable minimal approach and a dazzling pictorial dexterity, Stoskopff manages to restore the pure and fragile brilliance of the glass, the subtle nuances of transparency and iridescent reflections. A few very fine white lines, drawn with a brush on the dark background, are enough to render the tangible reality of the material. The representation of a matte-coloured *pâté en croute* lying on a letter is a striking contrast to the fragility of these crowded glasses, while bringing a touch of rustic reality to this still life. Beyond its great technical mastery, this poetic and refined work has a moral and meditative significance. It evokes the transience of human existence, like the crack in the furniture on which everything rests.



Mat Collishaw

(Nottingham, 1966)

Last Meal on Death Row. Stacey Lamont Lawton

Last Meal on Death Row. William Joseph Kitchens

Photographs, type-C chromogenic printing, 2010

Courtesy of the artist and the BLAIN|SOUTHERN Gallery
© Mat Collishaw/2019,
ProLitteris, Zurich

Each of the works in the *Last Meal on Death Row* series by English artist Mat Collishaw presents dishes matching the menu chosen by death row inmates for their last meal, staged in compositions and lighting conditions directly inspired by the aesthetics of 17th-century Dutch still lifes. While the banality of the tableware and foods presented, often extremely simple dishes or junk food, contrasts with the richness of that of his old models, the artist nevertheless highlights them with sumptuous lighting, in a contrast that, added to their tragic context, makes them authentic and poignant contemporary vanitas. The choice of menu for their last meal, the final choice in the inmates' lives, could lead the viewer to expect a revealing personal choice; but most of the time it only reflects consumption habits of a disconcerting banality. Mat Collishaw's work can be seen as a reflection on our relationship to the world through images where representations of beauty and cruelty are inextricably linked.



Author unknown, French, Parisian school

Portrait of the Man with Lute,
between 1630 and 1640

Oil on canvas

Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva,
donation from the Brière family,
1887, inv. 1887-0002

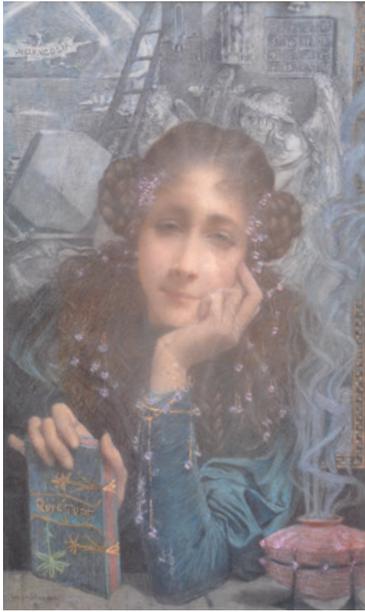
© Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva,
photo: Bettina Jacot-Descombes

On a table covered with a tablecloth there is a lute, a box and a jumble of writing instruments. On one end stands a man making an intriguing gesture with his left hand. Is it a gesture of speech? Is he pointing at the book on the shelf fixed to the wall? Everything here represents a silence that could break at any moment: the overturned lute holds the sound of its strings, the closed book its words, and the red wax seal may have sealed a secret. And the table is not actually a table; a slight irregularity in its right corner reveals that it is a string instrument, also muted by the fabric that covers it. Is it just a coincidence, given the history of the painting? Formerly attributed to Diego Velázquez, this painting was known as *Portrait of Cervantes in prison*. A romantic identification that expresses in its own way another form of silence to which artists are sometimes reduced. Proof of this is that there are indications that it could be a posthumous tribute to the lute player Jacques Gauthier, imprisoned in London in 1630 for making derogatory remarks about King Charles I.

6. Melancholy

Though silence gives us a way to access our mind and listen to our inner selves, this introspective quest may also be related to a glum or sorrowful disposition. Usually associated with mourning, melancholy is linked to the existential vacuum that nothing satisfies, neither human afflictions, nor the intellectual challenges – mathematics and geometry in Dürer's *Melancholy* –, nor even the comforts of religion – taking the form of a Buddha and a Virgin Mary in Charles Barraud's oeuvre. It is nonetheless a highly prolific theme, as evidenced by a rich iconography codified by a single position – pensively resting one's head in one's hand –, which is the visual translation of worried self-scrutiny. This contemplative posture typical of melancholy, of which Dürer's print is an archetype, constitutes a common thread throughout Western art history.

Since Antiquity, melancholy has regularly been regarded as a defining feature of a creative temperament, as if this state of latency was the flip-side or the very nature of the artist's genius. It is no wonder then that it seeped into so many self-portraits, the most introspective genre of all. These pieces show us how physical an experience silence is, rendered in painting either by a withdrawn posture or absent-minded look – whether the eyes are closed, lowered or staring blankly into emptiness. Because even when it is directed towards the viewer, the vague and distant look on the faces of these silent figures appears to pull away from this world only to plunge deep within their own souls.



Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer

(Alger, 1865 – Vésinet, 1953)

Melancholy, 1896

Pastel

Private collection, Switzerland

© Beneficiaries, photo: I. Comina

Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer's *Melancholy* is adorned with a soft evanescence, just like its Leonardesque hinting smile. The background explicitly references the engraving of Albrecht Dürer, which had become archetypal at that point, depicting an angel turning away from mathematical knowledge and technical practices and wasting away in the contemplation of the infinite void. During the Symbolist movement of the late 19th century, melancholy took on nuances of introspective serenity. Thus, in this painting, Lévy-Dhurmer expresses a state of mind free from darkness through the ideal beauty of the actress Marguerite Morenom. In the foreground, the book entitled *Quiétude* (Tranquility) and the poppy smoke give an impression of quiet torpor. Painted after a stay in Italy, the work includes reminiscences of Renaissance art. Although frontal, the female figure's gaze is elusive: her melancholic introspection has taken her away from the weight of the world, and her escape is underlined by the impalpable powdery effect of the pastel. Dürer's dodecahedron, a symbol of the illusory, haunts and surrounds her escape – a spectral presence also found in Marco Tirelli's work.



Henri Martin

(Toulouse, 1860 – Labastide-du-Vert, 1943)

The Silence, 1897

Lithograph

Langenstein Collection, Saint-Gall

© Langenstein Collection,

photo: Christian Eggs

Silence, a subject dear to symbolists, is often expressed through the form of different women in the paintings of the late 19th century. In this lithograph by Henri Martin, it is a strand of hair hiding the young woman's lips that evokes silence. The faded tone of this allegory gives an impression of melancholic serenity. The long, brown and straight hair seems to drape over the bust of the model whose serious and pale face looks like a marble statue. A crown of thorns encircles the perfect oval formed by this ghostly face that seems to be on the verge of disappearing. The thistles, on the right, are a leitmotif of the artist's work, for whom the spikes and sharp lines of the plant express the fateful attraction exerted by the woman. Henri Martin was a regular guest at Madame Sans' salon in Toulouse, a very beautiful woman who died suddenly in 1895. The titles of his paintings and the succession of allegories produced between 1890 and 1900, from *Fleur du Mal* to *Silence*, can be interpreted as the milestones of a genuine sentimental journey.



François Barraud

(La Chaux-de-Fonds, 1899 – Geneva, 1934)

Self-Portrait, 1930

Oil on canvas

Musée des beaux-arts de La Chaux-de-Fonds, on permanent loan from Gottfried Keller Foundation, inv. 1310

© Musée des beaux-arts de La Chaux-de-Fonds, photo: Pierre Bohrer

In the aftermath of the First World War and until the early 1930s, Germany saw a return to realistic figurative painting, marked by a desire to truly represent reality, known as “New Objectivity” (Neue Sachlichkeit). Without being affiliated to the movement, the four Barraud brothers developed a work in La Chaux-de-Fonds that largely shared this sensitivity, and which also made its mark on other painters of the city such as Charles Humbert and Madeleine Woog. The most famous of them, François Barraud, developed an austere and refined work. This self-portrait represents him with his painting equipment in his studio, a narrow and dimly lit mansard room. The lateral and cold light projects deep shadows on the walls. The leaning figure that appears unstable, is overly elongated. The contracted facial expression, the threatening presence of the pair of scissors and the colour palette reduced to a monochrome of grey tones all underline the depressive nature of the posture. The artist, already ill with tuberculosis at the time, appears to be showing his intuition of his imminent end in a work of great visual acuity, with an elaborate and complex composition.



Jean-Etienne Liotard

(Geneva, 1702 – Geneva, 1789)

Self-Portrait, aka “*Hand on Chin*”, around 1770

Pastel on canvas

Cabinet d'arts graphiques du Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, purchase, 1925, inv. 1925-0005

© Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, photo: Bettina Jacot-Descombes

Known for his brilliant but uncompromising style, combining finesse, sober lines and absence of artifice, Jean-Etienne Liotard, a renowned miniaturist and portrait painter, produced about twenty self-portraits, in which he examines his own image with remarkable insight. Painted at the age of 70, this pastel (the artist's preferred technique) is one of his last self-portraits. It is extremely pared-down and delivers an image of the artist that is somewhat different from the previous ones: the softened contours and the hazy background envelop the figure in an aura as if to extract it from the here and now. Even though his eyes are turned towards the spectator, the painter does not look at us, his gaze is rather entirely directed inward. Liotard, who was very fond of this pastel, exhibited it at the Royal Academy in London in 1773. He had it engraved in 1781 to illustrate the chapter devoted to chiaroscuro in his *Treatise on the Art of Painting*. The work is also known as ‘*Pathetic Self-Portrait as a Turk in Love*’ because of the gesture of the hand to the chin, which, according to customs of Turkish tradition, was formerly interpreted as the sign of submission of a man in love.



Zoran Mušič

(Bukovica, 1909 – Venice, 2005)

Self-Portrait, 1990

Oil on canvas

Ditesheim & Maffei Fine Art,
Neuchâtel

© 2019, ProLitteris, Zurich

Zoran Mušič was 35 years old when he was sent to Dachau in 1944. In the midst of horror, he drew the daily life of the camp on makeshift paper: dozens and dozens of his companions dying or dead. After he returned to the world of the living, Mušič drew from the memories of his childhood the inspiration for a work dominated by the landscape, gradually bringing him to the borders of abstraction (*Dalmatian Motifs*). It would take a quarter of a century for current events, particularly the images of the Vietnam War, to bring up again in his work the images of deportation, with the series *We Are Not the Last*. These representations, of which his peaceful and luminous post-war work appear retrospectively as the opposite, haunt the rest of his figurative work, such as his *Plant Motifs*, showing trees and stumps with entangled roots, or the series of self-portraits he pursued until his health declined. In the latter, it is impossible to recognise the artist's figure. He is virtually reduced to a spectrum, marked with white on an unprepared canvas and partially covered with black. Only the acuity and the insistence of an elusive gaze persist, on the verge of disappearing.



Mark Lewis

(Hamilton, 1957)

Snow Storm at Robarts Library, 2015

Video, 10'06"

Collection of the Geneva
Contemporary Art Fund (FMAC),
purchase, 2017, inv. 2017-058

© Mark Lewis

It begins with a slow panorama, showing the city of Toronto from left to right, in a wide shot and in black and white. An introduction that a few details will quickly disrupt: in this urban landscape, from the few chimneys visible in the distance, smoke is not rising out, it is flowing in, or rather back inside; the cars are not moving forwards but backwards. At the end of the panorama, the camera moves towards a building with a modern and angular architecture, miraculously passing through a glass window behind which a young woman, stands flipping through a book featuring images from the school of Siena, confirming in passing the artist's interest in painting and its history. Colour replaces black and white. The city, now seen from inside the building, is once again subject to the laws of time: cars are moving forwards, pedestrians too. (Fabrice Lauterjung)

7. Poetry of Silence

The ancients defined painting as “silent poetry” and Leonardo da Vinci recommended his disciples studied how the deaf moved, as if their silence made them capable of pure, unadorned expression. However, in “silent poetry”, there is poetry, a form of language. This pictorial tale may take on any of several faces: a woman facing away from us and sitting next to a silent piano, the sketch of a Venetian landscape, an empty hall, objects carefully arranged on a tabletop, a feeling of loneliness barely concealed behind inscrutable eyes. Each painting reveals three levels of solitude: that which the artist felt as he or she was painting, that expressed by the painting’s subject and that experienced by the viewer gazing at it.

The limited palette, the fact that the subject is reduced to a small number of objects or motifs, forces the viewer to pay attention to the means of depiction – especially to the importance of light, which embraces and reveals – and plunge into contemplation. We are surprised by the silence that we can feel oozing from these compositions: some of them are devoid of human presence, others show people in silent communication. And there are also those that depict arrangements of unidentified containers, which tell us of the artist’s solitary quest for strict and coherent balance shaped by silence. In this microcosm, meticulously condensed and controlled it deploys a form of pure pictorial expression free from distractions, which brings to mind Maurice Denis’s words: “Remember that a painting, before it becomes a battle horse, a woman in the nude, or an anecdote of some sort, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours, laid on in a certain order.”



Vilhelm Hammershøi

(Copenhagen, 1864 –
Copenhagen, 1916)

*Interior with Piano and Woman
in Black*, 1901

Oil on canvas

Private collection

© Private collection, photo:
Bettina Jacot-Descombes

Ida Hammershøi, the artist's wife, stands with her back turned, to the right of the piano in the living room of their apartment on Strandgade 30 in Copenhagen. Most of the artist's interior scenes were painted in this apartment, where the couple lived between 1898 and 1909 – the most productive period of the artist's career. The piano, a social symbol reflecting the level of education of its owners and an instrument associated with women in countless paintings, is represented here in an original way. Despite the chair and the open score that could encourage Ida to play the instrument, she seems to take no notice of it. It is as if she is absorbed elsewhere, perhaps in a book she is reading. This is one of the specific features of Hammershøi's art who, under the exterior of an apparently banal daily life, includes mysterious and indecipherable details in his paintings.



Giorgio Morandi

(Bologna, 1890 – Bologna, 1964)

Still Life, 1949; 1950-51; 1960

Oil on canvas

Collection of Augusto and
Francesca Giovanardi, Milan

© 2019, ProLitteris, Zurich, Milan
photo: Alvise Aspesi

Giorgio Morandi

(Bologna, 1890 – Bologna, 1964)

Still Life, 1953, 1957

Oil on canvas

Musée Jenisch, Vevey, Foundation
for Arts and Letters, FAL-007,
FAL-009

© Musée Jenisch Vevey, 2019,
ProLitteris, Zurich, photo: Julien
Gremaud

“Some may travel the world and see nothing of it. To understand it, it is necessary not to see too much of it, but to look closely at what you see.”
True to this quote, apart from a few landscapes, most of Giorgio Morandi's work consists of still lifes carefully composed from a small repertoire of objects (pots, vases, boxes, objects with crisp contours or delicate grooves) that can be found in many of his paintings. Like the extras of a silent play, endlessly remade, the subject of which is the essence of figurative painting, the composition of coloured masses and the rendering of light. These objects, which are both individual and generic, are either painted or covered in roughcast by the artist to better catch the light or harmonise their chromatic values. They are seen from a slight downward angle to leave space for the shadows that provide rhythm and relief within a minimal space, in contrast with the purity of the frontal composition which appears to be blend and dissolve into the vibrancy of the light.

8. Silent Landscapes

Seemingly devoid of anecdotes, landscape painting invites contemplation and, as such, a silent response. Considered at first a minor and decorative genre, it rose to prominence from the 16th to the 18th century thanks to the artist's careful study of nature and topographical features. Associated with man's changing perspective on his environment, this gratifying genre may also be a medium of reflection or meditation on man's relationship with nature – in turn threatening or domesticated, safeguarded or (today) threatened.

Calame's romantic landscapes are a tribute to the feelings inspired by the dangerous beauty of nature: mighty mountains and forests stand tall and proud, the harsh winter is suggested by a snow-covered cemetery, much like Alain Huck's dense underwood is a raw and impregnable presence. On the contrary, Luigi Rossi depicts a waking dream, where clouds turn into women. Frédéric Clot also seems to evoke a getaway, a reverie in a cabin set deep in the woods, where strands of barb wire and inexplicable puddles are the only signs of a post-apocalyptic landscape. And how could we not bring up the familiar landscape of Lake Geneva and the surrounding mountains? If landscape painting invites silence and deferential contemplation, Hodler's last paintings take us out to the balcony of a Geneva flat, at 29 Quai du Mont-Blanc, immersed in stifled silence, between hope, contemplation and death anxiety.



Ferdinand Hodler

(Berne, 1853 – Geneva, 1918)

Lake Geneva and Mont-Blanc at Dawn (October), 1917

Oil on canvas

Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva,
purchase, 1918,
inv. 1918-0025

© Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva,
photo: Flora Bevilacqua

Ferdinand Hodler painted this landscape from his apartment on the Quai du Mont-Blanc fifteen times between January and May 1918. The bay of Geneva and Mont-Blanc between Le Môle and Petit Salève. He was ill and could no longer leave his home to work in his studio. The painting shows simple composition, limited to horizontal layers of colours that sweep across the landscape like a musical staff. This pared-down style is the result of a lifetime of pictorial research, at the crossroads of the aesthetic trends of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as realism, symbolism and expressionism. While the artist initially favoured form over colour, he eventually found a balance between the two, and a new freedom. In 1917, he declared: *“Now I own both of them and, more than ever, colour does not only accompany form, but forms are expressed and modulated through colour. Now, how wonderful! I have mastered wide open spaces.”*



Alexandre Calame

(Vevey, 1810 – Menton, 1864)

Winter, 1851

Oil on canvas

Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva,
donation from Amélie Calame,
sister of the artist, 1873,
inv.1873-0012

© Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva,
photo: Bettina Jacot-Descombes

This painting is part of a famous series dedicated to the four seasons, all kept at the Geneva Museum of Art and History. They evoke the ages of human life through landscapes with symbolic connotations. Using the typology retained by Nicolas Poussin in his series exhibited in the Louvre, Alexandre Calame associates each season with an hour of the day and a stage of life. In this painting, each detail contributes to creating a disturbing silence: the snow, the mist, the cold moonlight striking against the wall of an abandoned cemetery, the dark, naked and gloomy trunks that grow thinner towards the sky and, finally, the bell tower that we can barely make out at the end of the path delineated by the shadows of the trees on the snow. A metaphor for the last season of life, when man is about to die and forever remain silent, *Winter* makes the silence of death visible.



Luigi Rossi

(Cassarate, 1853 – Biolda di
Tesserete, 1923)

Youthful Dreams, 1894

Oil on canvas

Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva,
purchased with the help of the
Diday Foundation, 1895,
inv.1896-0013

© Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva,
photo: Dona De Carli, Locarno

Exhibited in Geneva in 1896 at the Swiss National Exhibition, this major painting by Symbolist painter Luigi Rossi is the first version of a composition that gave rise to two other paintings, entitled *The Fisherman's Dream* and *Mirage*. The canvas is mainly occupied by a pond, partly covered with water lilies and delicate reeds. On the shore, a young man depicted from behind, lying with his head resting on one hand, invites the spectator to enter the space of the painting to contemplate, as he is doing, the peaceful spectacle of the waters lit by soft, rose-coloured light. The clouds reflected in the water draw the evanescent forms of female nudes: it is the fisherman's dream materialised by the painter's brush.

9. Spaces of Silence

The silence of Dutch scenes and still lifes developed in enclosed spaces, carefully controlled and domesticated. Landscapes show frames of outdoor environments, far away from the hustle and bustle of the city. Other settings include transition places, where the describable coexists with the unspeakable, the visible with the invisible, much like Alexandre Joly's installation – a black mirror showing the water-like undulations of sound waves rippling across its surface – stands on the verge of what is perceptible. The barge he depicts here is a reference to Arnold Böcklin's *Island of the Dead*, treading the threshold between life and death, between darkness and light. A suspension stretched out like a fermata, from day-break to day's end in Mat Collishaw's video.

Similarly, Simon Edmondson and Thomas Huber's imaginary places, featuring blinding patches of light, suggest a limit-experience. They are mental spaces, which suggest what would be too preposterous to represent: perhaps "the silence of infinite places", which so scared Blaise Pascal. But what art does is convey the idea in a way that is instinctually perceptible, as suggested by the way James Turrell or Marco Tirelli's art seems to give form to light.



Alexandre Joly

(Saint-Julien-en-Genevois, 1977)

Absolute Sine - The Boat, 2009

Boat, tarpaulin, coloured water, vibrating speakers, CD player, amplifier, sound composition

Musée des beaux-arts, Le Locle

© Alexandre Joly

If a membrane is what separates two worlds, it begs the question as to which one could serve as the boundary between the visible and audible realms. Alexandre Joly offers an answer with his work where he attempts to materialise sound: in his *Absolute Sine* series, which began during the exhibition *Le souffle du scaphandre* in 2004, vibrating speakers generate sound frequencies that sculpt the surface of black-tinted water. Turning it into an inverted eardrum, a drum skin on which the blows are given from the inside. For his latest staging to this piece, Alexandre Joly has salvaged a large, old boat. Inside, the mirror of black water is riddled with vibrations. The installation becomes a hypnotic evocation of a landscape in which the river to be crossed remains contained within the boat.



Mat Collishaw

(Nottingham, 1966)

Island of the Dead, 2008

Video installation

Courtesy of the artist and of the BLAIN|SOUTHERN Gallery

© Mat Collishaw/2019,

ProLitteris, Zurich

Between 1880 and 1901, Arnold Böcklin produced six versions of the *Island of the Dead*, each presenting a different light fluctuating between night and day. The painting depicts an islet of cliffs enclosing a group of cypress trees and some bare buildings. A boat sails towards it, carrying a woman, a mysterious standing white figure and a rectangular object usually identified as a coffin. Inspired by personal events (the loss of one of his daughters, buried in Venice) as well as mythology (the crossing of the Styx, separating the world of the living from that of the dead), Böcklin created a new image that immediately became iconic, one of the most widely reproduced of its time. It is the third version, kept in Berlin, that Mat Collishaw has chosen to work from. Using a computer programme, he modelled its landscape in three dimensions in order to represent it continuously from dawn to dusk, in a three-minute video. At the end of the cycle, as the island sinks back into darkness, the image fades behind what turns out to be a two-way mirror. The spectator is then confronted with his own reflection, a most disturbing personalised *memento mori*.



Simon Edmondson

(Londres, 1955)

Palace, 2016

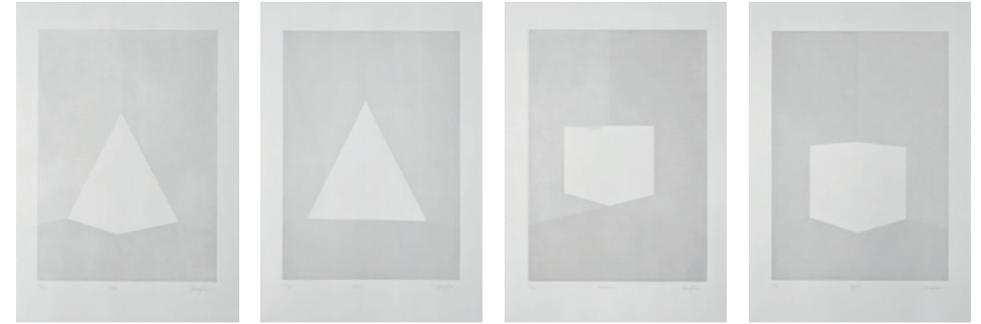
Oil on canvas

Ditesheim & Maffei Fine Art,
Neuchâtel

© Ditesheim & Maffei Fine Art,
Neuchâtel, photo:

Simon Edmondson, Madrid

English painter Simon Edmondson describes his large paintings as interior landscapes. Figurative, with a similar style to Francis Bacon or Lucian Freud, they are also marked by his fascination for Baroque painting, from Titian to Goya, whose political and social activism also are of interest to him. *Palace* is part of a series inspired by Velázquez's masterpiece: "*My idea was to faithfully recreate on canvas the space in the Prince's quarters that can be seen in Velázquez's Las Meninas, as if the fire of 1734 had never happened and Real Alcázar de Madrid had survived until modern times, and convert them into a kind of hospital or asylum. In my studio, I physically recreated this part of the Real Alcázar and simulated its lighting. (...) I rearranged and replaced all the characters (including the dog) with patients and orderlies of the asylum or hospital that the Real Alcázar de Madrid houses in my version. (...) Above all, I wanted to avoid the speculative and theoretical discussions that Velázquez's work continues to spur, trying instead to highlight (...) a vision of the inevitable fragility and possibility that surrounds the human condition.*"



James Turrell

(Los Angeles, 1943)

Alta/Gard/Munson/Squat,
1990-1991

Aquatints on Zerkall vellum

Collection of the Geneva
Contemporary Art Fund (FMAC),
Geneva, inv. 1992-068; inv. 1992-
067; inv. 1992-069; inv. 1992-070

© James Turrell, photo: Georg
Rehsteiner

James Turrell studied psychology, mathematics, astronomy, geology and art. He has transformed his studio into a true experimental laboratory, where light becomes a medium in its own right, at the service of a work that makes perception the very subject of the piece. The *Still Light* series (eight aquatint engravings, 1990-1991) repeats a subtle interplay between dimensions, by translating into a surface the visual effect of one of his series of installations, consisting of light projections onto corners of walls in darkened spaces, which give the viewer the impression of seeing a volume of pure light. The work is the result of a mental and perceptive process that creates illusion.

10. Scores of Silence

Silence is constitutive of music: it is the essential backdrop from which rhythm and notes emerge. Yet, experiencing complete silence is impossible. Bodies are noisy, and so are the places they inhabit. It is the memory of a soundproofed room he visited in 1940 that inspired John Cage to write *4'33"*, a three-movement composition for silent instrument or orchestra. Expecting to hear silence, the composer was first disappointed when he realised he heard noises high and low, before he eventually decided to incorporate these noises that can't be helped (noises of the performance and the environment in which it is staged) into a form of aesthetic open to randomness. As he once said: *"Until I die, there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death."*

But other sounds or tunes follow us as well, haunting us in silence: the obsolete recordings to which we will never listen again; the night-time jungle conjured up by vines of magnetic tapes photographed by Christian Marclay; stagings of lost operas by Adolphe Appia, whose only testaments left to us are drawings of the decors featuring long horizontal lines, like blank staves, ready to be filled with notes; or the song of mermaids – though not as fearsome, by Kafka's account, as the silence they address to those who would seek it to escape a certain death.



Christian Marclay

(San Rafael, 1955)

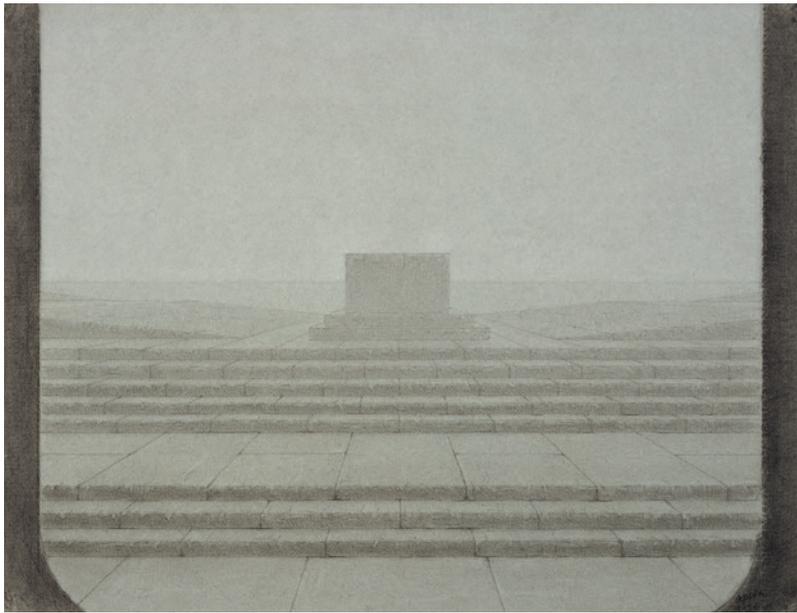
Wardrobe, 1988

Wooden wardrobe with cut-outs

Courtesy of the artist and of the
Paula Cooper Gallery, New York,
Pictet Collection

© Christian Marclay. Courtesy
Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Christian Marclay's highly varied work revolves essentially around the material and plastic aspects of music and sound, particularly through the recording mediums and the visual culture associated with them (record covers, onomatopoeia, etc.). His *Wardrobe*, a usually banal domestic piece of furniture, include a singular feature, two large openings in the shape of cello or double bass F-holes, carefully cut out by the artist in the door panels. Their presence, as well as the very material of the object, unequivocally reminds us of the stringed instrument and its many visual representations. Among multiple references, the artist is openly hinting at Man Ray's famous retouched photograph *Le Violon d'Ingres* (1924) showing Kiki de Montparnasse from behind, between a woman and a cello, itself inspired by Ingres' *Turkish Bath* (1863). Assimilated to a simple sound box that cannot be played, the work invites us to imagine, beyond the perceptible silence, a wide range of possible sounds for the one who will lend an ear and know how to listen. By the simple force of a familiar visual motif, the artist manages to make the silence tangible.



Adolphe Appia

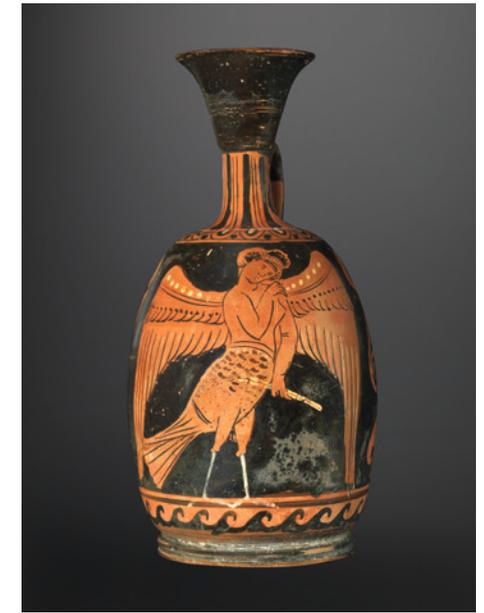
(Geneva, 1862 – Nyon, 1928)

Set for Gluck's 'Iphigenia in Aulis', Act I, 1926

Charcoal and blending stump
on light blue watermarked
Canson paper

Cabinet d'arts graphiques du
Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva,
old collection, inv.1993-0069
© Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva,
photo: Flora Bevilacqua

Just a few words alone can summarise Adolphe Appia's graphic work: a few steps and a terrace that opens onto the horizon at sea. The oblique shadows of pillars and walls make the space vibrate and structure the foreground to oppose it to the distant light. In these drawings, the artist shows his technical mastery, the harmony of volumes and the balance of proportions. These are drafts, projections on paper of the three dimensions of a theatre scene, an imaginary universe that has never been entirely realised the way he had envisioned it. Appia is ahead of his time with his hierarchy of values: he wants the focus to be on the actor by stripping the stage of everything that is not essential. The stage area is no longer decorative but functional, giving light the fundamental role that animates and transforms the space. By freeing up scenes from clutter and favouring light, Appia wanted musical time to become a silent stage area.



The Ixion Painter

Musician Mermaid,
between -330 and -320

Painted terracotta vase

Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva,
on permanent loan from the Hellas
et Roma Association, 1983,
inv. HR 0026

© Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva,
photo: André Longchamp, Geneva

Silence is not confined to painting. This small vase, called a lekythos, is often linked to funerary contexts. It contained scented oil. But beyond its function, its belly is adorned with a hybrid being famous in mythology. A mermaid spreading her wings holds a flute in her left hand, while her head rests thoughtfully on her shoulder. This creature, both woman and bird, charmed sailors with music and songs and drove them to the bottom of the sea. This ceramic thus evokes music with destructive powers that leads men to eternal silence. Here, the mermaid is not playing, she is silent, letting the observer imagine sounds so compelling that they would lead people to their death. Between Adolphe Appia's drawing of a boat moored to the quayside, awaiting to depart for a long journey and Alexandre Joly's boat filled with dark and rumbling waters, this silent mermaid takes us from one world to the other.

SILENCES

Exhibition presented at the Rath Museum
from 14.06.2019 to 27.10.2019

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Bénédicte De Donker, Mayte Garcia,
Caroline Guignard, Élisabeth de Halleux,
Brigitte Monti, Christian Rümelin

AUTHORS

Ingrid Comina, Alix Fiasson, Mayte Garcia,
Élisabeth de Halleux, Gabriel Umstätter

RESTORATION

Victor Lopes

PRODUCTION

Bertrand Mazeirat

ADMINISTRATION

Martine Struelens

SET DESIGN

atelier oï, La Neuveville

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TRANSLATIONS

Hubertus von Gemmingen
Studio ACE (Vénusia Bertin)

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