



Visual representations of food

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1. SIGHT AND TASTE

How do you render taste visually? And why? How has the way in which we represent food and everything that goes with it – from the raw materials to the kitchen and its tools, to the sharing of food at the table and its appreciation – in the visual arts (from paintings to tapestries, from photography to the most up-to-date smart technology found on smartphones and the like) changed over time? To what extent is this representation the artists' aim? And which meanings has it been able to transmit? Food has a great significance in all cultures in which it is produced and consumed. This much we know. However, the moment in which it becomes part of a work – of art, for example – it is symbolically enriched, the art conferring ulterior meanings upon it that must be understood and analysed.

In this chapter we will discuss all of this, focussing in particular on a fundamental problem: that which distances whilst at the same time intimately binding, two highly diverse senses from the human perceptive apparatus. On the one hand we have taste, which, as we know, receives, processes and sends to the brain all information linked to the consumption of food. These are not just flavours but other sensations also, such as those

linked with the sense of smell (odours) or touch (the consistency or temperature of the substances) and even with an act of judgement (pleasure/ displeasure). On the other hand we have sight, an entirely different sensory channel that deals with the management of an entirely different kind of stimulus, such as the reception of light and darkness, the shapes of figures, colours, the measurements distance and position of objects beyond us. While taste is a sense that moves from outside the body to inside it, introjecting substances and processing them, sight carries out the opposite movement: it moves from the inside to the outside, as if leading the human subject to project themselves beyond their physical person. For this reason, as we are well aware, Western culture from Ancient Greece onwards has considered sight to be a more important sense than taste. It has been said that sight is closer to the mind, whilst taste is closer to the body; sight moves toward the intellect, taste towards the flesh; sight tends toward the sacred, taste is rather more human.

Though these hierarchies have varied greatly over various historic periods and in diverse human cultures, and though today we tend very much to scale them back almost to the point of denying them any value at all, they have, nevertheless, had an impact on those faced with the problem of visually rendering a flavour, or rather, of having to represent food through the visual arts. Such a representation, it has often been said, is very difficult, very limitative, if not downright impossible. It is believed that colours and flavours, shapes and consistencies, lights and materials are sensations that cannot be related to one another without significantly deforming their very essence. And yet, despite this conviction, and the objective difficulties it has brought artists and photographers, the history of the visual arts (but also that, for example, of advertising) is filled with works that represent taste, that visually render diverse aspects of food, from the raw materials to their culinary transformations, from delights at the table to conviviality. It is enough to recall the many paintings of the *Last Supper*, a religious theme that has within it a great many reproductions of food and drink, convivial forms and even examples of table service. Or think of the artistic genre of *still life*, in which in various ways nothing more is done than visually rendering the flavours of foods, in their natural state (fruit, vegetables, meat), or processed (cheeses, bread, meals, tables laden with food). Let's not forget the food photography that we find, for example, on restaurant menus. As well as illustrating the dishes, they also try to make them look appetising, often with disappointing results. Then we have the modern phenomenon, extremely common the world over, of photographing dishes in restaurants and sharing the images on various social networks. So, even if the visual representation of taste is problematic *in principle*, the various visual arts have *in fact* always found a great many ways in which to overcome this difficulty, often inventing aesthetic solutions of great value, making, as the

saying goes, a virtue of necessity. It is therefore possible to move from one sense to another utilising a procedure that we must study – *synaesthesia*. Something which, as we will see, is much more than a simple procedure, as it is fundamental to matters concerning taste.



Fig. 1.A. Hieronymus Bosch, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Gluttony*, 1500-1525, Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Fig. 1.B. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Land of Cockaigne*, 1567, Alte Pinakotek, Munich.

In ancient times they would say that if sin lies in surpassing a sense of measure, be it towards excess or insufficiency, then gluttony appears to be the sin par excellence, the one from which all the others seem to spring forth: lust, pride, sloth, and so on. It is, without doubt, exaggeration, binging, debauchery, but also an obsession that generates lack, such as the loss of lucidity and any meaning of life, that painters such as Bosch and Bruegel depicted so very well in their allegories of Gluttony and Cockaigne, in which obscenely splayed-out spherical figures are accompanied by the thin bodies of habitual drunkards.

As such, art has set aside the relation between food and nutrition, between the need to eat and the daily consumption of food (a natural and physiological phenomenon), in order to attribute other, purely cultural values and meanings to food. For instance, the sharing of food at the table, the emotional atmosphere in the kitchen, the search for pleasure in whatever we are eating, that same hierarchy of the five senses, the philosophical problem of the nexus between appearances and reality, the tendency to construct actual classifications of things and beings through their alimentary reappropriation, their culinary transformation and consequent incorporation. Sometimes paintings bear a moral lesson, such as that which reminds us not to overindulge in our food consumption on pain of falling into the 'mortal sin' of gluttony, or religious sentiments, starting with the representation of the theological 'mystery' of the Eucharist. At other times, painting instead aims to render a sense of ugliness, disgust, the obscene, sin, and it does so by depicting decomposing food, rotting meat, all kinds of wastefulness. As regards the current trend of photographing food dishes, it is clear that this also assigns different meanings to each one, depending on how indulgent they are, how exclusive and how much they cost.

2. PAINTING AND FOOD

However, we must immediately question what the visual arts are talking about when they depict the various cultural elements and the social phenomena involved with food? We can start by saying that the history of Western art has seemingly never paid a great deal of attention to food, considering it – according to an old idealist idea dating back to at least the Greek philosopher Plato – a 'low' phenomenon of little importance because it has to do with the body and is therefore far removed from spirituality, religious or otherwise. However, despite this sort of prejudicial judgment, food appears in paintings all over the place. It provides an opportunity for vital and essential definition of the human and social experience, and is also present simply as a decorative element in both sacred paintings (think of the numerous convivial scenes found in the Holy Scriptures, from the aforementioned Last Supper to the Marriage in Cana, from the Feeding of the 4,000 to Supper at Emmaus), and in the secular, such as those that depict kitchens or marketplaces, scenes depicting hunts or landscapes, dishes or mealtimes (just think of Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*). In the history of art, we find, albeit rarely, each of the principal moments involving food: the raw materials and their production, first agricultural then industrial, those moments involving their culinary transformation, the spaces dedicated to this and the tools used in this process; the moments of its consumption and its rituals, of appreciation of the dishes; and those bound to their eventual re-use or their expenditure. From ancient to medieval art, from the great humanist-renaissance age to the time of Dutch realism, all the way through classi-

cism to romanticism, *verismo* and the great avant-garde experimentation of the twentieth century, food is depicted in all of its forms and environments. Looking at these paintings it is as if we find reflected in them the main cultural attitudes linked to food over each particular time and place: who or what is in the kitchen, where and how people eat (standing, sitting, alone or in company, at a table, in a Triclinium, and so on), what are the typical practices for the cook or those sharing the table, how and where do servants appear and so on. Let's take the example of the famous painting by Diego Velasquez, *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (1620). The painting is divided into two parts. In the foreground is a young woman, probably Martha, intent on crushing something with her pestle and mortar. From the ingredients on the table next to her (egg, garlic, chilli pepper), we can assume she is preparing an aioli sauce, a kind of mayonnaise eaten with fish. Behind her we find the scene that gives the painting its title. Christ is talking with two other women, one of whom is probably Mary. It is a situation whose importance is marked out by the second woman in the foreground, an old woman who points to those talking as if to tell the spectator which part of the painting is the most significant, the sacred part, the part to which the spectator must pay attention. It is as if this second scene were reflected in a mirror, showing us that which Martha is looking at. As a result there is just one environment, an environment in which, whilst Christ preaches to one of the two sisters, the other is preparing a common dish for their meal. Created here is a social hierarchy between the two young women – Mary is receiving the Word of the Lord, the other limits herself to participating in this prayerful scene from afar as she cooks. And so here there is a kind of recipe represented within a painting that is sacred but also secular. From this painting we learn a great deal about food, cooking, domestic environments and so on. Last but not least we have the four fishes at the very front of the painting, an evangelical symbol onto which a bright light falls, highlighting their patent freshness and piquing the appetite.



Fig. 2. Diego Velasquez, *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (1620), National Gallery, London.

We find a very different scene, one that is no longer culinary but convivial, depicted in the painting *Déjeuner d'huitres* (Dinner with oysters, 1735) by Jean-François de Troy, a French eighteenth century painter. Here we have an aristocratic ambiance that is male and celebratory. A dinner of oysters, a particularly tasty food with aphrodisiac properties, prepared with salt, garlic and butter, showered with well-chilled Champagne – we know this because it is held in the cooler in the foreground. Here we have a refined men-only gathering, all of whom are clearly in a state of inebriation, celebrating among the porcelain, crystal and glass, their greedy and disorderly consumption of a food considered erotic. They are all looking up at a fresco featuring scenes of love. The food here is in no way sacred, but secular, with its connection to physical love and festivities. The painting, destined for the dining hall of the private apartments of the King of France in Versailles, is therefore an invitation to live in a carefree, jovial way, much like life in the King's court. It depicts an eating habit, a very particular, indulgent and arrogant way of enjoying food that was typical of French nobility just before the Revolution in 1789.



Fig. 3. Jean-François de Troy, *Déjeuner d'huitres* (1735), Musée Condé, Chantilly.

We find an entirely different kind of conviviality in the popular celebration depicted in *The Peasant Wedding* by Bruegel (1568). Here, a peasant couple are celebrating their wedding feast at an enormous table laid out in a barn. Those sharing the table are wearing clothes typical of the era. We can recognise the bride from the crown she is wearing on her head and the dark drape hung behind her. The bridegroom, as tradition dictates, is serving the table and probably the figure on the extreme left of the painting who is pouring beer into a jug. The meal is a simple one, polenta for all (of different colours and, therefore, provenance), served on a simple board, a door perhaps. It is the triumph of the details of daily life that make this painting a feted masterpiece.



Fig. 4. Pieter Bruegel, *The Peasant Wedding* (1568), Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

3. VISUAL LANGUAGES

But returning to this chapter's initial quandary of trying to understand how to visually render a taste sensation, and how the social meanings of food are more generally transmitted through the visual arts, we must get to know the tools that enable this to occur. In other words, we must understand how visual language works. Just as verbal languages exist (Italian, English, Spanish, etc.), so those belonging to images exist in much the same way. On the one hand, this makes them very powerful because they are capable not only of representing things but of also speaking to the world, or rather expressing different kinds of meaning. On the other, however, it renders them more fragile because they are subject to precise codes that must be understood in order to understand them. Just as in order to understand a language we must learn its rules, so in order to understand the meaning of an image we must be familiar with the codes it employs. We find proof of this when we look at

an image. I may not understand its meaning, so I limit myself to seeing that which it represents without grasping its more profound significance. In order to represent things, and in order to be able to convey meaning, images use particular codes. It is often said that images 'imitate' reality, that they 'look like' it to such an extent that, by looking at them, we see the world that they represent. But in order to do this, we must first possess and use precise linguistic rules. First and foremost are those of a *figurative* nature linked to the mechanisms of imitation. These are followed by those that are *plastic* and linked to mechanisms such as colour and form, and are therefore purely visual.

Let's look at an example. Here is a painting by Vincenzo Campi, an artist from the Veneto who painted 'market paintings'. This is a genre developed between Holland and Northern Italy in the latter half of the eleventh century, when food became to all intents and purposes the main subject of artistic representation. Food is exhibited in the foreground as if laid out on a market stall, with a series of connections binding them that recapture and partially modify their symbolic value. Not only, therefore, do the various fruits find a new meaning, but they end up speaking about something else, providing the spectator with a sort of discourse on ethics and human life in general.



Fig. 5. Vincenzo Campi, *Fruttivendola* (1580), Frugger Collection, Kirchheim Castle.

This painting entitled *La fruttivendola* (The Greengrocer, 1580) depicts a scene in which a young woman – elegantly dressed despite her job – is peeling an apple as she displays her abundant wares, whilst in the background peasants collect

fruit from the trees. From the producer to the consumer? In some ways, yes. On one sense we find ourselves faced with a realistic scene, in which every detail of the single elements present in the painting have been depicted with the utmost care: the cabbages, the cherries, the asparagus, the pumpkin, the peaches, and so on, are painted with very fine brushstrokes which make them seem absolutely real. However, there is a series of clues that leads us in the opposite direction towards a painting of extreme complexity and calculated structure that imposes a moralising discourse on the spectator. The woman, as we have already commented, is wearing a dress that seems entirely out of place given her job. In fact, it seems to wholly contradict her role, as she appears as an aristocratic lady delighting in being surrounded by particular splendid and appetising fruit. Not at all like a greengrocer. Upon careful consideration, we notice that the fruits laid out at the market, though very fresh, grow in different seasons, something that would be impossible at a real market. Furthermore, the scene is not set in an urban context, where markets are generally found, but in a rather non-descript countryside, the very place where the fruit is usually harvested (as is happening in the painting's background) but not sold (as seems to be the case in the foreground). Lastly, consider that enormous lily protruding from a basket of apples and aubergines. Not only is it out of proportion with the other elements in the painting, but it is also somewhat out of place. What is a lily doing in a market stall fruit display?

So, the first thing to consider in a painting is that which does not fit in, that which betrays the spectator's expectations, expectations that the painting's title, for example, helps to create. Are we really looking at a greengrocer? Not exactly, or at least, not just that. Firstly, we must note that this painting belongs to a cycle of various paintings destined for the dining hall of the rich German banker Hans Fugger, a fervent catholic. The others depict people selling poultry and fish. It is, therefore, a cycle of paintings that revisits the fundamental elements of nature that, in the ancient Greek tradition, are water (fish), air (birds) and the earth (fruit). This painting speaks of the earth and its fruits in all of their variety and singularity. This explains the presence of fruit from different times of the year in the same display. The painting does not depict a market but the fruits of the earth, the wealth and abundance that nature provides for humankind. Far from a realistic representation, Campi's painting speaks to us about the correct usage of this abundance. So there are peaches, cherries, pears, aubergines, blackberries and melons for the summer, nuts, almonds, apples and grapes for the autumn, asparagus, beans, artichokes for the spring, and white cabbage for the winter. The fact they are all present in one single market tells us of the human's eternal struggle with time and natural spaces when it comes to food. Though nature imposes its seasonal rituals and climatic changes, we have people (also

a matter of cuisine) attempting to eat fruit out of season, perhaps inventing specific techniques for their production and conservation.

This is what the painting depicts. However, other, predominantly visual communicative mechanisms are used here, producing additional meanings. Take for example the way in which the fruit is displayed throughout the space on the canvas. At the lowest part of the painting are the most lowly plants, those that produce an edible bulb below ground: onions, garlic, shallots. These are flanked by the plants whose roots we eat, such as radishes, and those whose leaves we consume, such as cabbage. Higher up, inside baskets, we have beans; and balanced on top are asparagus and artichokes, vegetables that grow above the earth. Lastly, in the highest part, we find on display the most refined group, fruit, which grows far from the earth: cherries, blackberries, pears, almonds, hazelnuts, figs, apples, melons, peaches and apricots. So there is a precise logic in placement, moving from low to high and reproducing within the element of earth, a precise hierarchy for that which it produces. If you think about it, there is no reason to place the positive at the top and the negative at the bottom. The painter is the one who has decided to do so simply by laying out the fruit and vegetables on his canvas, and creating that which we call a semi-symbolism*, a kind of equivalence in which both "high : low = better : worse", and which can also be read as "high : better = low : worse". On reflection, we see that this is an equivalence that has nothing realistic about it. It is the painter who has created this system and made it signify. The only exception are the cherries, placed in two containers near the bottom, next to the vegetables; and the aubergines, which should be lower down but are placed high up. Yet another peculiarity. If we connect all of this with the case of the lily, an oversized flower that emerges as if 'on its feet', without any support, from the basket of aubergines and apples. The lily - a known symbol of nascent Christ (it is almost always present in depictions of the Annunciation) and therefore wholesomeness and purity - faces upwards, in parallel with the bunch of grapes to its left (another oversized element) in an entirely unnatural way. It distances itself as much as possible from the aubergines (*malum insanum*), a vegetable long considered harmful and cursed, and placed by no means coincidentally in a basket alongside worm-eaten apples. Here we have another semi-symbolism*: "lily : aubergine = purity : danger".

The positioning of various elements in the painting becomes significant both in their reciprocal relationship and in their placement in particular areas of the painting. What lies at the very centre of the canvas? On close inspection we find the woman's right hand, intent on peeling an apple, a famously ambivalent symbol (vitality, but also sin). Intent, that is, on separating that which is dirty (the peel is sinuous, like a serpent) from that which is clean. This gesture is not only at the centre of the painting but is emphasised by the fact that

the greengrocer is looking the spectator in the eyes as if singling them out, as if saying to them: "look what I am doing, you do it too". Here we find the painting's message: in order to enjoy the fruits of nature you must be able to distinguish between them, know them, weigh up their ethical and spiritual value before their nutritional worth. This is taste: the capacity for judgement, knowing how to distinguish before being able to appreciate.

And we could continue, as this painting is abundant with dispositifs of meaning. On one hand there are dispositifs linked to depiction, to the codes of visual representation in the world: an aubergine is represented by its purple colour in order to be recognised, just as the cabbage must have its wrinkles and the pumpkin must be displayed cut in half so that we can see its seeds. On the other hand, the dimensions of the objects we see can also become significant (think of the lily), as can their abstract form (the sinuous nature of the peel) and their colour. The greengrocer's cheeks are the same colour as the peaches in her lap, whilst the red of the cherries, distributed throughout various points in the painting, is reflected in her coral necklace. The analysis aims to locate the *figurative language* present in the painting (modes of representation, difference between solid objects and abstract geometric figures, and so on), as well as its *plastic language* (shapes, colours, positions). By making the dispositifs set in motion by these two languages relevant, the various meanings present in the painting can emerge.

4. ON SYNAESTHESIA

There is, however, another form of visibility used to produce meaning, which is of great importance particularly when it comes to depicting food. It is a mechanism I have already cited: that of synaesthesia. What is this exactly? It is those mechanisms used to evoke one sensation through another – in our case, a sensation of taste through sight. A rather well-known example is that used to produce the sensation of a cold drink by presenting it inside a container whose outside is covered in little bubbles or clouded, or even standing in ice. Advertising has often played with this strategy, which despite being rather simple and somewhat banal, is nevertheless very effective. Similarly, the sense of lightness evoked by certain diet foods is represented the wind, even by bodies flying. The aim is efficacy: the image does not exist in order to represent, but to provoke sensations and perceptions, to set in motion the perception of the body in its entirety, to pique the appetite and get our mouths watering. This is also used, particularly in modern art (see *Eat Art* by Daniel Spoerri), to achieve the opposite effect, to provoke sensations of refusal or disgust. The issue with synaesthesia is not therefore to transmit messages but to 'make us experience' precise, calculated physical sensations.



Fig. 6. A.B. Beer Adverts.

Another very common way of doing this, both in painting and photography (advertising or otherwise) is that of creating images in which the spectator's gaze is brought significantly closer so that what emerges is their materiality, the different consistency of the substances rather than the form of the objects or dishes. This happens frequently with still life, as we find in the famous paintings by Francisco Goya depicting slices of salmon, works that are so well known that they have more recently been recreated photographically. The image is brought

so very close, their perfect details, the colours clearly laid out, the light properly directed, that it seems you can almost feel their tender flesh, their fibres. It is almost as if you can touch them, smell them, taste them between your teeth.



Fig. 7. Francisco Goya, *Still Life with Slices of Salmon* (1808-1812), Oskar Reinhart Sammlung am Roemerholz, Winterthur.

Although very different both in the way they are made and in their intentions, the photographs of some foods aim almost as a matter of course to restore their consistency. This happens with chocolate, whose viscosity is communicated by once more bringing the gaze much closer to the product in order to create the perception of it being almost tactile and, therefore, also one of taste. What's more, the chocolate's semi-liquid nature allows the substance to be played with in order to create various shapes.



Fig. 8. A.B. Chocolate adverts.

The same thing often occurs in adverts for milk, in which this becomes a substance that can take any form, a liquid that progressively learns how to create different objects and figures from our world. And so, overflowing from glasses or cartons, we find milk storms, closed fists, towers of Pisa, athletes' bodies, hearts, even drops of milk that become amiable anthropomorphic characters.



Fig. 9. A. B.C. Milk adverts.

Returning to still life, the technique used in this genre of painting often consists of being able to render the different materiality of the foodstuffs and the objects accompanying them on the table. For example, showing reflective materials such as glass bottles or glasses, or crystal goblets, side by side is an inspired method achieved by knowing how to use light effectively. Where some substances shine, others such as the cheeses or peaches absorb the light. This contrast between reflection

and absorption has become a rule in still life as we see in the depiction of pheasants, whose feathers partially absorb and partially reflect the light. Celebrated in these cases is the texture of things, the rough, the smooth, crispness, foaming, their viscosity, but also the softness of a cake, its being more or less fluffy, as in this photograph in which the material opposition between the panettone's soft sponge and the harder and brightly coloured candied fruits is celebrated.

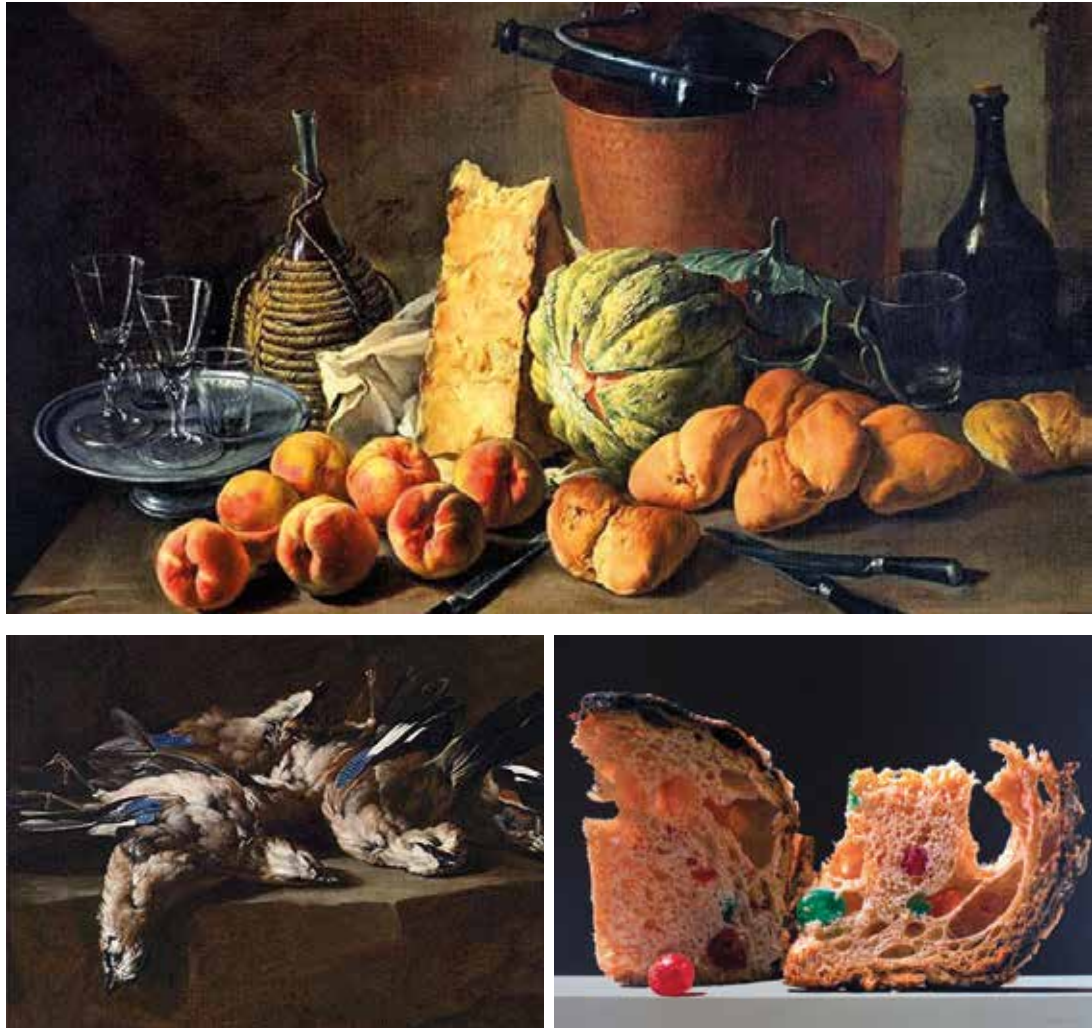


Fig. 10. A.B.C..

Manca Didascalio

As emerges rather clearly from many of these images, synaesthesia is essentially intrinsic to the act of eating and drinking. In the sensorial process of taste each of the other senses play a role (such as smell and touch), so the synesthetic image has more routes to take. It is not only a case of visually rendering taste, but of managing the presence of multiple sensations and evoking them in the image. This is the great lesson that art teaches to those who want to speak about taste with a little more awareness. Furthermore, sight is also an integral part of the tasting process. As a result, as we will see, today thanks to smart technology we tend to give excessive importance to images of dishes, and it is indisputable that their visual

component contributes to the construction of a taste judgement, or one of disgust. Vision, so to speak, anticipates taste; it directs it, even substituting it. There are certain types of cuisine, such as Japanese, in which the visual, particularly the chromatic, component is fundamental, and others in which this is less important, such as modern western cuisine, though the visual is by no means absent here. The food industry plays a great deal on this, tending to amplify it for commercial reasons. Lastly, we should remember that sight even contributes to the creation of the plates through synaesthesia during the cooking process. It is well known that the colour of foods during cooking indicates their progressive transformation. For example, a golden tone is a sign of crunchiness and, more generally, of the various textures and consistencies. So even the preparation of food is inherently synesthetic.

5. FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography has a notable specialisation when it comes to the depiction of food. There is no recipe book today that is not accompanied by photographs of the finished dish and the phases of its preparation. The photograph of the dish, as well providing a model to aim for, acts to tempt the reader to purchase the manual and then make the recipe. These are images that must show the food and must make us desire it, delight in it, urging us to first taste it with our eyes. It is a complex message that uses its own language, one that does not limit itself to reproducing reality, showing it exactly as it is, but that fills reality with meanings.

As regards food preparation, the value of the photograph comes from that which we could call its 'informative potential'. It is not easy to verbally describe the different phases involved in preparing a dish. Saying 'finely chop' an onion, for example, does not help us understand exactly how small those pieces should be, nor does it show us exactly what a 'well-browned' piece of meat looks like. All this information is easily communicated using the photographic language that we have the increasingly common habit of using to create visual recipes, in which words are incidental, if not entirely absent. One example of this is *The Family Meal* from a man long considered the best chef in the world, Ferran Adrià. Photography has a representative capability well beyond verbal language.

However, the very elements that at first sight seem to be enormous advantages, and that have authorised the success of food photography, can, however, become limitations. Firstly because there are often patent differences between the dishes made and those idealised in photography, even when they are prepared industrially. Every so often, for example, the Internet provides us with comparisons between the photographs of hamburgers that appear in the advertising of well-known fast-food outlets and those taken by consumers of the product bought at their restaurant. In the former, the hamburger is monumental: perfectly golden bread, brilliantly green lettuce that looks fresh and crisp, the visible layer of sauce that is perfectly

contained within the structure of the product, and so on. In the latter, however, the bread is pale, soggy like the salad inside it, with sauce dripping out all over the place. Not only is the second image less pleasant to look at, it even seems smaller and is undeniably less appetising.

Another limit is imposed by that very representative capability discussed earlier. The details transmitted by any one photograph are so numerous that it is difficult to predict which one will grab the spectator's attention. They might, for example, focus on the kind of onion that is depicted and erroneously believe that the recipe can only be made with that particular kind. They then find that is impossible to purchase where they currently are and they assume that without that particular onion they will not be possible to cook that dish, when in fact any onion would do. This is why photographs are often accompanied by captions that describe what is being demonstrated, guiding the spectator's gaze so that they do not only notice those details that they hold to be effectively necessary or suitable.

From what we have already seen, it seems clear that *food photography* is one of the most complex of photographic genres. That effect of the lettuce's crispness mentioned earlier depends on the way in which the light hits the salad, making its slightly moist surface shine a little, rendering the green brilliant. But it is also the use of focus, which presents the edges of the leaves in a perfectly vivid way whilst the parts inside the sandwich are slightly obscured. This means that the dish must be prepared using devices that have nothing to do with food. The dark lines left by the grill on a piece of meat are not, for example, made during cooking but after, using a red-hot skewer so that they are perfectly in parallel with one another and the meat is not excessively burned. Even the moisture of the lettuce is simulated by spraying on miniscule drops of water and even chemical products, making the food being photographed inedible. The food that looks perfect ends up being unfit for human consumption.



Fig. 11. Food offers an extraordinary selection of shapes and colours for the visual arts to draw on. While we can see ice creams in this picture, we do not think of them as a more or less appetising food, but of the overall aesthetic effect that plays on contrasts between shapes and colours. One of the great masters of photography in the 1930s, Edward Weston, used to photograph mushrooms, lettuce leaves and other vegetables in black and white, making them seem like pieces of fabric or even lunar landscapes. All sense of what the subjects of the photographs originally were would be lost.



Fig. 12. *Risotto oro e zafferano*, risotto with saffron and gold, one of the most famous dishes of one of the best known chefs in the world, Gualtiero Marchesi, seems to have been created in order to be photographed rather than eaten. The perfectly square shining gold leaf contrasts with the perfectly round black plate, making a traditional dish such as risotto alla milanese something new, something for social media if nothing else.



Fig. 13. Here we have another *risotto alla Milanese*, albeit with an unexpected addition of prawns. Here, however, the photograph produces an entirely different meaning. More than the consistency of the rice or the beauty of the plate, what counts is the story that this kind of *mise-en-scène* implies. The two glasses, the pieces of parmesan (an ingredient used in the dish), even the fork that has taken a few mouthfuls from the saucepan before being laid down on the table, still laden with food, seem to suggest a story of seduction, one of a couple who have made this delicious delicacy, which did not make it to the table.

These photographic techniques, however, must also bear in mind that food is a product that already carries many meanings with it, it has its own *imaginary* connected to each culture, and so each time it is photographed, that very act is adding messages to something that already has them in abundance.

6. FOOD PORN

The modern phenomenon of 'food porn' is the exclusive predilection for the visual aspects of food to the detriment of those other sensory channels that, in principle, should be more important, such as taste, smell or touch. A great many restaurants at all levels – from humble *trattorias* to those with Michelin stars – seem to favour the appearance on the plate over flavour, the dish's aesthetic aspects to those regarding taste. So, simultaneously, a great many people today photograph food rather than eating it, in order to share the photographic image on the Internet, but in doing so they deny a moment of real conviviality. Food porn is the photographic image of the dish taken to nth degree.



Fig. 14. A.B.C.D. A few examples of Food Porn, from millions of possible images.

Furthermore, with food porn there are no specialist photos or professional photographers, but amateurs, normal people. The communicative aim of these photos is rather evident: to stim-

ulate the appetite, to predict the taste, to give an idea of a flavour. To take the synesthetic work to the nth degree, by removing any artistic value or cultural weight.

What's more, in the majority of these photos we see no one. No one is eating, there is no one with the person taking the photograph eating, chatting or doing anything else. Not only is conviviality missing, so is the very act of ingesting, least of all savouring. It is not just people that are absent, there is nothing else in shot. The dish is alone, with no context, no environment, no laid table. If sometimes, rarely, we catch a glimpse of a wine glass or a fork, their appearance in these photos is clearly pure coincidence. They are in the background, in partial view, out of focus. Dominant is the modern myth of media cuisine, the maximum and minimum unit of culinary signification that is neither immeasurable nor measurable: the dish without a meal, without any textuality. Where paintings showed us overflowing tables, joviality, still life, pornographic culinary photography excludes and isolates, it hypostatizes.

But what kinds of dishes does food porn use most? It tends to favour traditional, everyday dishes that are in no way refined. At first glance, the most popular seems to be pizza, and not its vast number of national or international variants but its most banal, albeit extraordinarily appetising and (most importantly) eternally stringy incarnation with tomato and mozzarella. Hot on its heels is a series of filled sandwiches, then meat, whilst fish, pasta and risotto are less common. But the winner is without doubt desserts, sweets of all shapes and sizes that best lend themselves to that deeply attractive universe that is food porn. Pies, meringues, babas, patisserie, cream puffs and doughnuts, biscuits – the more the merrier!

Enticing the photographer's gaze are not the foods in themselves but their chromatic combinations, often bold if not incongruous. As such, sandwiches are displayed whilst open so we can glimpse their fillings, and rigorously rare hamburgers are covered in sauces and other multi-coloured garnishes. In biscuits what counts is the ratio between dough and chocolate chips; the fillet steak is surrounded by orange slices, the top-side is accompanied by emerald-green vegetables and pink potatoes, whilst the patisserie oozes with a brilliant white cream and spaghetti drips with tomato sauce.

If those dishes most favoured by food porn are simple and everyday, the artificiality comes from the eye that looks at it, and therefore the formal composition of the photographic text, its merely visual aspect. It would seem that greatest attention is paid to the chromatic dimension and more generally to light. The hues are saturated and uniform, with very few shading disparities, reflections, or see-through areas.

Sometimes pastels dominate (baby blue, light pink, light green), whilst at others it is the *chiaroscuro* contrast that is rendered more intense. Exposure to light is very high, something that creates a stereotypical Caravaggio-esque play on areas that are entirely in shadow and others that are lit to

provide perspective. The aim is to highlight within the unit of each dish those gastronomic features that are held to be essential, or those features that are considered to be indicative of added flavour. Although the object is often centralised, the object's form goes beyond the implied frame, the borders of the camera's lens, for the simple reason that the gaze looking at material details and their contrasts is in extreme close up. We could describe this gaze as *haptic*, tactile, synesthetically capable of causing the emergence of the supposedly 'pure' material of the food, thanks to this hypertrophy of the visual.

It must be said, however, that this tendency is changing somewhat to make way for that which is usually referred to as 'food style', in which the dish is no longer pictured alone but tends to be inserted within a wider **context**. Progressively, it is as if the camera were slowly moving backwards, broadening its visual field and introducing more and more elements to it; from those present on the table to an entire landscape. In this way the food finds its own setting without ever managing to move away from those stereotypes that reduce it to a pure sign of itself. Now, the stereotype is no longer simply the substantiality of the food but the **context** in which it is consumed, if it is even consumed at all. Rather, food becomes part of the *mise-en-scène* as a decorative element within a broader environment in which it loses all gastronomic value. It now signals an 'atmosphere', a 'mood', a personality, a vague emotion.



Fig. 15. A.B. Examples of food styling.



Fig. 16. A.B. Dishes with a view

FOCUS 1

The Last Supper

If the history of Western art is abundant with paintings depicting the Last Supper it is because it deals with one of the central moments in the Evangelical story, captured, as we know, in the ritual of the Mass by Consecration and Communion. It is the mystery *par excellence* of the Catholic faith: the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ (known as transubstantiation, the changing of substances) that leads the good Christian not only to blindly believe but also to preach the word of God starting with this act ("Do this in memory of me"). This is where the sacred value of this pictorial motif comes from. The religious significance of this precise moment in the story of Jesus, rivalled only by the Crucifixion, has meant that painters (followed by photographers and artists of all kinds) have considered it a motif to repeat over and over.

Now, as is always the case when moving from a written **text** to its visual incarnation, something inevitable happens: we must consider the issue of rendering in the painting that which is present in the **text** and of adding something to the painting that perhaps is not present in the **text**. In our case we know that when it comes to food, the Evangelical **text** barely mentions bread and wine (substances destined, by faith, to become sacred). There is no mention whatsoever of any other dish, or of how the protagonists were distributed at the table, or the setting, or the presence of anyone other than Jesus and the twelve apostles. The painter is therefore forced to expand upon the scene, deciding for instance where to set it, how to distribute the characters over the canvas, how to lay the table and, lastly, what to give Jesus and his disciples to eat on that Maundy Thursday eve.



Fig. 17. Leonardo, *The Last Supper* (1495-1498), Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan.

This is what interests us about this motif: the imagination the painters have used to depict the Last Supper that goes beyond its sacred value, often inserting into it elements that are not described in the Gospel, from the dishes eaten to the table manners of those enjoying the meal, the architectural context in which they find themselves and so on. Here at the sacred table we find so many variations. If the most important painting in this long series is undoubtedly the fresco by Leonardo da Vinci in Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan – in rather poor condition but still entirely representative (just look at the number of imitations and parodies on the internet) –, an example in which we see very little of the food, there are many others in which the dishes served at the table are highly visible and feature shrimp, fish, suckling pig, chestnuts and so on. It would appear to be fairly evident that, if in those ages or for those artists most concerned with poverty the scene of the Supper is simple, frugal (few dishes, very little table dressing, no other characters), in those times and for those artists who were more inclined towards luxury, wealth or even simply the sumptuous decoration of the setting, the Supper is filled with many more details and flashes of artistic inspiration. We can also assume, albeit without any philological certainty, that foods from the sea would be present in towns by the sea, whilst those inland would be more inclined towards meat. It seems that with the passing of time, depictions of the Last Supper grow increasingly complex in terms of the sheer number of details present in them, and richer when it comes to quality of the elements found on the table. Let's consider a few examples.

One of the first representations of this motif can be found in a mosaic in Ravenna, in which Christ is not seated at the centre of the image, as we are used to seeing him, but to the right-hand side, which acts as the head of the table. This is a sign of how the place of honour at the table changes according to the era and culture. The table here is covered by a white tablecloth with many folds and some decorations that seem to be oriental. On the table are a few loaves of bread and two enormous fish that are entirely out of proportion for the scene. There is no wine. Rather than depicting a realistic situation, the image seems to refer above all to the divine nature of Christ and his miracle, the only one in all four Gospels, of the multiplication of



Fig. 18. Maestranze ravennate, *Last Supper*, Sant'Apollinare nuovo, Ravenna.

the loaves and fishes.

In the celebrated *Last Supper* by Duccio da Boninsegna, Jesus and the disciples are instead eating a suckling pig (a cinta senese perhaps?). Again we have a white tablecloth and a sparse table setting. There are no liquid foods, so no spoons. The knives, each with a squared off blade, are carefully distributed one per three or four people. The crockery is in a simple ceramic, and in the clear glasses red wine can be seen. The only food accompanying the pork is the bread, in round forms, which the apostle without a beard on the left is trying to cut. The scene is well framed architecturally, and the characters are well distributed throughout it: five in the foreground, almost with their backs to us, and two groups of three on the other

side of the table with Christ in the middle, on whom the youngest apostle is leaning.



Fig. 19. Duccio da Boninsegna, *Last Supper* (1308-1311), Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena.



Fig. 20. Giovanni Canavesio, *Last Supper* (1491), Notre Dame des Fontaines, La Brigue.

It almost seems as if, whilst the most lauded artists such as Giotto or Leonardo were fairly uninterested in the food on the table during the Last Supper, for those middle-range artists things were very different. For example, the table depicted by Giovanni Canavesio is abundant, filled with food of all kinds. On an elegantly decorated white tablecloth

we find bread rolls scattered in threes over the table, two salt cellars, glasses and jugs of wine in which we can see red wine, wooden plates and, in the centre, a large dish from which what seems to be a leg of lamb protrudes.

No less abundant and with much more movement, is the Last Supper by Jacopo Bassano, filled with various iconographic elements as well as a dog in the extreme foreground. On the table are a bottle and one single glass, both half full, a large loaf of bread, an orange, an open pomegranate, and a metal place carrying a lamb's head and a pair of hooves.



Fig. 21. Jacopo Bassano, *Last Supper* (1542), Galleria Borghese, Rome. The visual solutions are far more varied, and from each of these we learn the habits relating to food and table manners of the various eras and countries.

FOCUS 2

Disgust

While throughout the history of art the aim has been to exalt the positive visual aspects (the 'beauty') of food, as we have seen in particular with still life, there has also been an opposite trend- that of depicting the negative aspects of food, such as its ugliness, dissonance, monstrosity, degradation, often caused by the deterioration of the food itself, by rotting meat, by decay. This tendency reached its peak with contemporary art where we also find a clear critique of the system for the production and consumption of food within industrial society, from battery farms to the large-scale consumption of fast food. From the pleasure of the senses, magnified for centuries, we move to the 'truth' of the senses, or rather a 360 degree perception of food, encompassing both its positive and its negative aspects. Beyond the images linked to taste we now

have numerous images that provoke disgust. If food brings life, in other ways it can also be death, if not even carry it.

A celebrated work communicating just this is *Slaughtered Ox* (1655) by Rembrandt, which can still be categorised as still life. In this painting the only subject present is the ox's carcass that almost completely fills the artistic space, and which, thanks to the darkness surrounding it, seems to almost pour out of the painting invading the spectator's space. In the darkness of the basement we can however make out the figure of a woman who is facing the flayed animal, looking at it with horror. If on one hand the artist is using this painting to demonstrate his impressive techniques with clearly visible brushstrokes that realistically depict the different shapes formed by the animal's fat, tendons, muscles and blood, on the other the overwhelming sense it communicates is one of the horror of death. What we eat is the result of a living thing being



Fig. 22. Rembrandt Harmenszoon Van Rijn, *Slaughtered Ox* (1655), Musée du Louvre, Paris.

killed. This is, in short, the exhibit of a *sacrifice*, with clear allusions to the crucifixion of Jesus, the very definition of a sacrificial being.



Fig. 23. Chaim Soutine, *Carcass of Beef* (1912), Musée des Beaux Arts, Grenoble.

Rembrandt's painting is so famous that it has been taken up many times by other painters and photographers with almost analogous meanings. Among these, the works by Lithuanian painter Chaim Soutine stand out. Painting in the 1920s, he created some fifteen works entitled *Carcass of Beef* using very bright, almost unnatural colours. Whilst Rembrandt

aimed for realism, Soutine pushes the depiction of the animal's cadaver to such a point that he removes any naturalness from it. It is said that the artist had the habit of bringing an animal carcass to his studio in order to paint it in its various phases of decomposition, and when the meat turned grey, he would spread blood on it to give it its colour back. The animal fills the entire space of the painting; there is nothing in it but the carcass. The materiality of the carcass is rendered brilliantly by the materiality of the oil colours applied in such a way as to cause them to thicken on the painting's surface, giving it a certain depth. Bestowed with an almost three-dimensionality, the figure seems to extend beyond the canvas and touch whoever is looking at it. But this is not a figure deformed simply by its being anomalous in its state of decomposition, but also by its entirely unrealistic rendering in the painting: the vivid red and blue dominate, in contrast with the blackish background. The sense of death is heightened by its multiplication: why so many quasi-identical works? This series of paintings does not tend to represent a specific object but its progressive multiplication. It does not therefore refer to that single carcass before the painter, but to all the carcasses that, in the slaughterhouse, meet the same end. Death here is not an event that inexorably arrives, like destiny, but a planned end, transformed into a routine with the aim of providing food for human beings. The sense of sacrifice that was present in Rembrandt's ox 'on the cross' is entirely lost here: the beast is not sacrificial but pure animal substance destined to produce a meal for the masses. A substance that, however, is destined to decompose, putrefy, decay. Life and death pass back and forth in a perverse fascination with blood, the obscenity of a figure that loses its original form in order to decompose, to become a simple substance with no identity or aim. A sense of inevitability, tragedy and desperation prevails.