

Losing the Empty Feeling

“What is the literature of food?” asked my undergrad poetry professor, some twenty years ago.

“A Moveable Feast!” I blurted out.

“No... That’s a social history of a bunch of artists and writers. Try again.”

To which I should have replied: “Tomato tomato, Professor Hart. Tomato tomato.”

The idea being that then and now (and earlier than then, and probably until forever) ideas—visual, verbal, and otherwise—are forged around a table. And they require nouriture if anything is to be expected of them.

Still lifes: stuff of country house collections and art school exercises. Still lifes: fodder for the materialists out there, happy to denigrate them as simply representing the bourgeois accumulation of wealth. (Look at all those lobsters!)

And since vegetables have more patience than humans when it comes to braggarts and half-starts, the still life has become the arena of virtuosity (Weston’s peppers) or experimentation (Cezanne’s napkins that resemble Mont Sainte-Victoire).

All of the above rings true, but the true value of the still life rests in the middle, and how that connects to the people gathered around. The artists in this group show represent an ideal, impossible dinner party. Studiomates break bread with the long deceased. What emerges is the temporal magic of the genre. Want to keep your fish fresh? Paint a picture.

Our desire to hold on to fleeting life is the tablecloth on which every still life rests. It’s also the emotion core to the formation of artist communities, if not the formation of art itself.

In our time, many of us have Brooklyn. Earlier artists had other places where they worked and ate together.

In the opening chapter of *A Moveable Feast*, which IS about food, an aged Hemingway looks back on his younger self as he looks across a Parisian café table at a young woman.

I ordered another rum St. James and I watched the girl whenever I looked up, or when I sharpened the pencil with a pencil sharpener with the shavings curling into the saucer under my drink. I’ve seen you, beauty...

That would be enough for most of us, but his appetite remained.

As I ate the oysters with their strong taste of the sea and their faint metallic taste that the cold white wine washed away, leaving only the sea taste and the succulent texture, and as I drank their cold liquid from each shell and washed it down with the crisp taste of the wine, I lost the empty feeling and began to be happy and to make plans.

The still life is the wine and the oysters, and it’s the person across the table, who might not even know it yet.

-Hunter Braithwaite, May 2025