

# ALL ABOUT EATS



*Food and the American imagination in Chicago*

By Laura Beach

*Decorative arts, painting, menus, and recipes describe four centuries of American appetites at the Art Institute of Chicago*

Not so long ago you could learn how to cook an opossum by consulting *The Joy of Cooking*. If you can stomach it, you may still watch an all too vivid demonstration on YouTube or read a historical account in *Art and Appetite: American Painting, Culture, and Cuisine*, which advises feeding the trapped animal, a traditional southern delicacy, milk and cereal for ten days before blanching, skinning, roasting, and serving it with turnip greens. This is by far the least appetizing bit of information contained in the sprawling catalogue to the delectable, even ravishing, exhibition of the same name at the Art Institute of Chicago, which explores Americans' engagement with food and drink. The omnibus display of approximately 120 examples of fine, decorative, and graphic arts communicates a not so simple fact: we are what we say we eat.



The show, billed as a look at American life from the colonial kitchen to Costco, is on view in Chicago through January 27, 2014. The museum drew exuberant crowds and critical acclaim with the recent exhibition *Impressionism, Fashion, and Modernity*, which similarly explored art through the wider, more accessible lens of culture. Judith A. Barter marshaled the team that organized *Art and Appetite*, which, following its close in Chicago, travels to the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas. The Art Institute's Field-McCormick Chair and Curator of American Art, Barter had been thinking about such



Fig. 1. *Shake Hands?* by Lilly Martin Spencer (1822–1902), 1854. Signed and dated “Lilly M. Spencer / 1854” on the stool at lower left. Oil on canvas, 30 1/8 by 25 1/8 inches. *Ohio Historical Society, Columbus.*

Fig. 2. *Vegetable Dinner* by Peter Blume (1906–1992), 1927. Signed and dated “Peter Blume / 1927” at lower left on the table. Oil on canvas, 25 1/4 by 30 1/4 inches. *Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.*

Fig. 3. Teapots, Staffordshire, c. 1765 (top) and 1750–1760 (bottom). Press-molded cream-colored earthenware, glazed; heights 4 3/8 (top) and 5 1/2 inches (bottom). *Art Institute of Chicago, gifts of Harry A. Root Jr. in memory of Curtis Chapin Palmer.*

an undertaking for years. Redressing past oversights in its collections, the museum busily acquired notable examples of American still-life and trompe-l'oeil painting. Furthermore, there had been few comprehensive examinations of the subject since William H. Gerds and Russell Burke published *American Still-Life Painting* in 1971.

It interested Barter, who loves to cook, that these genres tend to incorporate food, drink, and their accouterments. She began her inquiry into American cuisine at Harvard's Schlesinger Library, whose estimable holdings on culinary history and etiquette include, among others, the papers of Julia Child.

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Drawing from the collections of major museums and more modest historical societies, she assembled works that sample the complex stew of art, politics, class, race, gender, and commerce with an eye toward the ever mutable American character.

Fourteen paintings and all the decorative arts in the show are from the Art Institute's own holdings. The foresighted museum acquired the indelible *Nighthawks*, the centerpiece of a gallery in the show devoted to early modernism, soon after Edward Hopper completed the nocturnal portrait of a diner in 1942. The original diner, we learn, was a horse-drawn wagon in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1872 that served meals to evening laborers. Not interested in food, Hopper provokes curiosity in the after-hours activities of mute strangers who conspicuously consume nothing but coffee and cigarettes.

Hopper's asceticism is at odds with the abundant sensuality of much of *Art and Appetite*. From John Singleton Copley's 1771 portrait of Mrs. Ezekiel Goldthwait (Fig. 4), whose plump hand reaching for ripe fruit suggests the unsettling nexus of food, sex, wealth, and power, to the insipid allure of *Salad, Sandwiches and Dessert* of 1960 by Wayne Thiebaud (1920–), paintings of food have often advertised a voluptuous prosperity. It is no accident that the first American still-life painters looked to the Dutch masters and that both catered to a rising middle class that frankly savored its pleasures. Organizers contextualize paintings such as Raphaelle Peale's 1822 *Still Life—Strawberries, Nuts &c.* (Fig. 6) by showing them alongside the worldly goods that helped inspire such canvases.

The elegant botanical paintings of Raphaelle Peale and his uncle James Peale constitute the first great wave of American still-life painting and spill



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Fig. 4. *Mrs. Ezekiel Goldthwait (Elizabeth Lewis)* (1713–1794) by John Singleton Copley (1738–1815), 1771. Oil on canvas, 50 1/8 by 40 1/8 inches. *Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, bequest of John T. Bowen in memory of Eliza M. Bowen.*



Fig. 5. *Wrapped Oranges* by William J. McCloskey (1859–1941), 1889. Inscribed "W. J. McCloskey, N. Y. COPYRIGHT" at lower right. Oil on canvas, 12 by 16 inches. *Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, acquisition in memory of Katrine Deakins, museum trustee.*

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Fig. 6. *Still Life—Strawberries, Nuts, &c.*, by Raphaelle Peale (1774–1825), 1822. Signed and dated "Raphaelle Peale/1822" at lower right. Oil on wood panel, 16 3/8 by 22 3/4 inches. *Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Jamee J. and Marshall Field.*

Fig. 7. *Melons and Morning Glories* by Peale, 1813. Inscribed "Raphaelle Peale Painted/Philadelphia Sept TK 1813" at lower right. Oil on canvas, 20 3/4 by 25 3/4 inches. *Smithsonian American Art Museum, gift of Paul Mellon.*



over more than one gallery of the exhibition. That the Peales embraced the genre is unsurprising, argue Barter and her colleague Annelise K. Madsen, given Philadelphia's reputation as a horticultural hot spot and center for scientific inquiry. By 1813 Raphaelle Peale was filling the annual exhibitions of the Pennsylvania Academy with works such as *Melons and Morning Glories* (Fig. 7). Characteristically, his treatment of the halved watermelon, a domesticated plant and popular American food by the colonial era, is both a cool-headed appeal to reason and a seductive invitation to partake.

Cities renowned for great dining, Chicago among them, have often been transportation hubs. As early as 1803 Thomas Jefferson recognized the importance

**If one painting sums up the transition from nineteenth century to twentieth, it is William J. McCloskey's *Wrapped Oranges***



of the port city of New Orleans in feeding the populations of the southern and western territories. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 and improving rail connections created new markets for regional specialties, from pineapples to terrapin soup. In 1876 William Emerson Baker, the mildly eccentric sewing machine magnate and hygienic farming enthusiast, captured the spirit of the age in *The Porcineograph*, a pig-shaped map of the United States promoting pork for every reason and season (Fig. 9).

Oysters, too, have long been something of a national obsession. At GT Fish and Oyster in Chicago's gentrifying River North district today, the smart set pairs crisp white wines with evocatively named bivalves airlifted from the coastal waters of British Columbia, Prince Edward Island, and Virginia. Like wine tasting, sampling the mollusks has become a form of travel, a far cry from the days when oysters were sold from carts with salt and vinegar on the side. A series of engaging paintings, prints, and objects considers the oyster's progress from street fare to bar food to First Lady Lucy Hayes's table (see Fig. 15).

More durable still is the fish painting. Attracted by their shimmering scales and sinuous forms, William Merritt Chase, represented by *An English Cod* of 1904 (Fig. 10) and *Still Life, Fish* of 1912, made a specialty of aquatic vertebrates, painting them to acclaim between about 1900 and his death in 1916. As Ellen E. Roberts relates, American museums rushed to acquire bravura works by the man who, following European precedent, was considered a master of the *nature morte*. Marsden Hartley rejected his teacher's overt aestheticism, infusing *Banquet in Silence*, his spare still life of three plated fish, with symbolic overtones (Fig. 11).

Sharply topical social commentary characterized much genre and trompe-l'oeil painting in the second half of the nineteenth century. Popular if not critically acclaimed, Lilly Martin Spencer has grown in stature since her rediscovery in the early 1970s and is today seen as a trailblazer who supported a family while pursuing a career. Madsen calls *Shake Hands?*, Spencer's 1854 painting of a cheerfully industrious cook pausing to offer the viewer her floury hand, "a sort of etiquette lesson," offering myriad clues to changing social customs (Fig. 1).

*Art and Appetite* is at its best when its two subjects fully merge, as they do in its consideration of trompe-l'oeil painting. Barter sees a parallel between Mark Twain's plainspoken preference for American people and places and the plucked fowl and peanuts of artists William Michael Harnett and John Haberle. Current events spill corrosively onto the canvas in the *The Irish Question*, which depicts two potatoes, none too subtle surrogates for the Irish themselves, dangling by their necks (Fig. 18). The painting by De Scott Evans dates to around 1888, when Britain's Parliament was debating Irish home rule and Irish-American immigrants were crudely caricatured in the popular press.

Still, food has had a way of bringing Americans of diverse backgrounds together. Thomas Jefferson and Nathaniel Hawthorne were partial to pasta, then called macaroni. Promoted by New York restaurants such as Delmonico's and Mouquin's, the latter de-



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**Fig. 8. *Plucked Clean*** by William Michael Harnett (1848–1892), 1882. Signed and dated "TK/1882" at lower left. Oil on canvas, 34 by 20 inches. *Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., museum purchase, William A. Clark Fund.*

**Fig. 9. *The Porcineograph*** printed by Forbes Lithograph Manufacturing Company, Boston, 1876. Color lithograph, 28 1/8 by 21 7/8 inches. *William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.*

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**Fig. 10. *An English Cod*** by William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), 1904. Signed "Wm. M. Chase" at lower left. Oil on canvas, 36 1/4 by 40 1/4 inches. *Corcoran Gallery of Art.*

**Fig. 11. *Banquet in Silence*** by Marsden Hartley (1877–1943), 1935-1936. Inscribed "Banquet in Silence / Marsden Hartley / 1935-6," on the back. Oil on canvas board, 15 7/8 by 19 7/8 inches. *Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Alfred Stieglitz Collection.*



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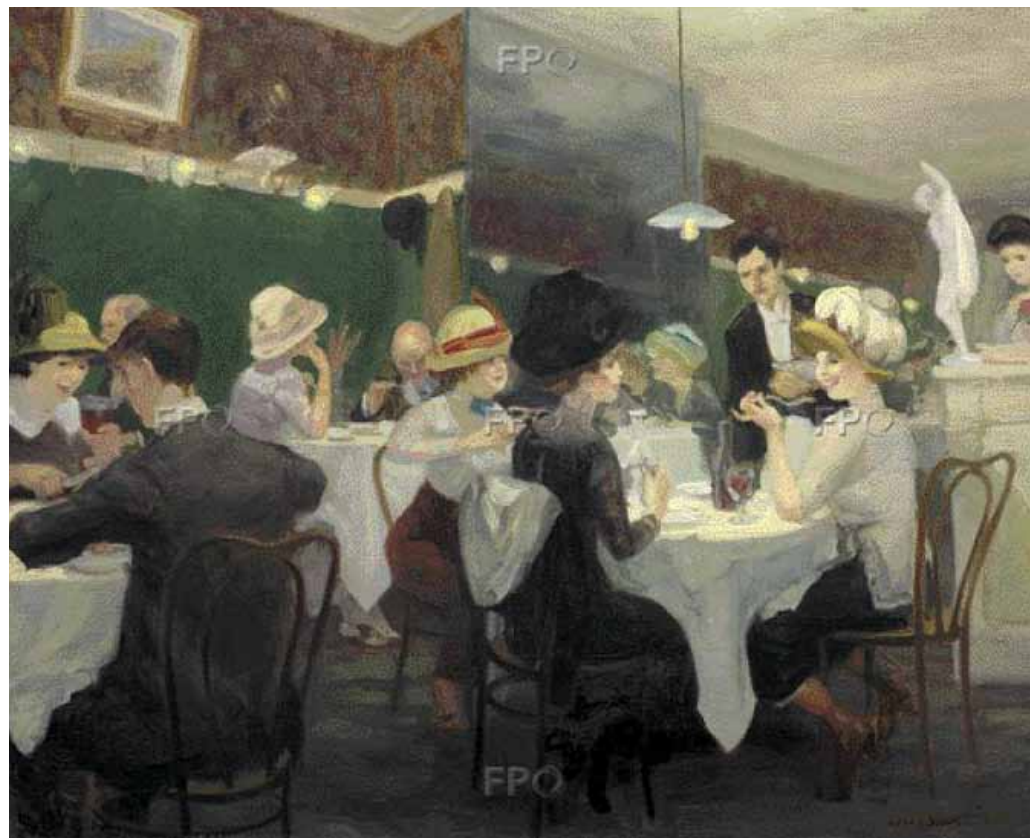
Fig. 12. *Nightlife* by Archibald John Motley Jr. (1891–1981), 1943. Signed and dated “A. J. Motley / 1943” at lower right. Oil on canvas, 36 by 47 ¾ inches. *Art Institute of Chicago*, restricted gift of Mr. and Mrs. Marshall Field, Jack and Sandra Guthman, Ben W. Heineman, Ruth Horwich, Lewis and Susan Manilow, Beatrice C. Mayer, Charles A. Meyer, John D. Nichols, and Mr. and Mrs. E. B. Smith Jr.; James W. Alsdorf Memorial Fund; Goodman Endowment.

Fig. 13. *Renganeschi’s Saturday Night* by John Sloan (1871–1951), 1912. Signed and dated “John Sloan 1912” at lower right. Oil on canvas, 26 ¼ by 32 inches. *Art Institute of Chicago*, gift of Mary Otis Jenkins.

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Fig. 14. *At Mouquin’s* by William Glackens (1870–1938), 1905. Signed “W. Glackens” at lower left. Oil on canvas, 48 ⅞ by 36 ¼ inches. *Art Institute of Chicago*, Friends of American Art Collection.

Fig. 15. Oyster plate designed by Theodore Russell Davis (1840–1894), 1879, produced by Haviland and Company, Limoges, France, 1880–1887. Porcelain, enamel, and gilding; diameter 8 ¾ inches. *Art Institute of Chicago*, through prior gift of Joseph L. Block, Leigh B. Block, Mrs. Oscar Serlin, and Mrs. Daniel Saidenberg in memory of Mr. and Mrs. L. E. Block, Chicago; American Art Purchase Fund.



Jr.’s pulsing 1943 view of an African-American nightclub in swing era Chicago (Fig. 12), and *Cocktail*, a 1927 pastiche of the high life by expatriate artist Gerald Murphy (Fig. 16).

If one painting sums up the transition from nineteenth century to twentieth, it is *Wrapped Oranges* (Fig. 5) The restrained formalism of William J. McCloskey’s 1889 oil on canvas speaks to an earlier era of still-life painting but with one significant difference: the oranges are packaged for travel. The invention of the refrigerated rail car in 1868 followed, one year later, by the completion of the transcontinental railroad, led ultimately to agribusiness and to a standardized, national market of which wrapped oranges were just the start.

“What is this place if not a landscape (manmade, it’s true) teeming with plants and animals?” Michael Pollan asks about the American supermarket in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. From the soup cans of Andy Warhol (Fig. 19) to sculptures of green beans, wedding cake, and a fried egg by Claes Oldenburg (1929–), Pollan’s alien terrain of Pop Tarts and Lunchables is charted in *Art and Appetite*’s final gallery. In the end, it is packaging graphics we harvest for supper in Richard Estes’s jumbled *Food City* of 1967 (Fig. 17).

pictured by William Glackens in 1905, French food was embraced as the acme of sophistication in the Gilded Age. Italian food was the down market alternative, as suggested by *Renganeschi’s Saturday Night*, John Sloan’s 1912 painting of young working women, among others, out for a bite (Fig. 13).

In *At Mouquin’s* (Fig. 14), the worldly Madame Mouquin shares a cocktail with a Manhattan man-about-town. Sexual roles and relations are a subtext of much of *Art and Appetite*. Nowhere is the tension more acute than the 1927 painting *Vegetable Dinner*, Peter Blume’s brilliant split-screen juxtaposition of old and new (Fig. 2). Beyond his conflicted portrayal of the modern woman, Blume’s vegetarianism, notes Art Institute associate curator Sarah Kelly Oehler, and Purist style of painting telegraph his radical stance.

Our love of strong drink produced art in many forms, from fine silver by America’s most talented metalsmiths to decorated punch bowls from China. Rum punch, eggnog, and flip (a concoction of rum and beer) helped fuel the Revolution and even after the war, Barter notes, Americans drank early and often, imbibing hard cider or beer at breakfast. Alcohol’s use as a social lubricant is a theme of *Nightlife*, Archibald John Motley

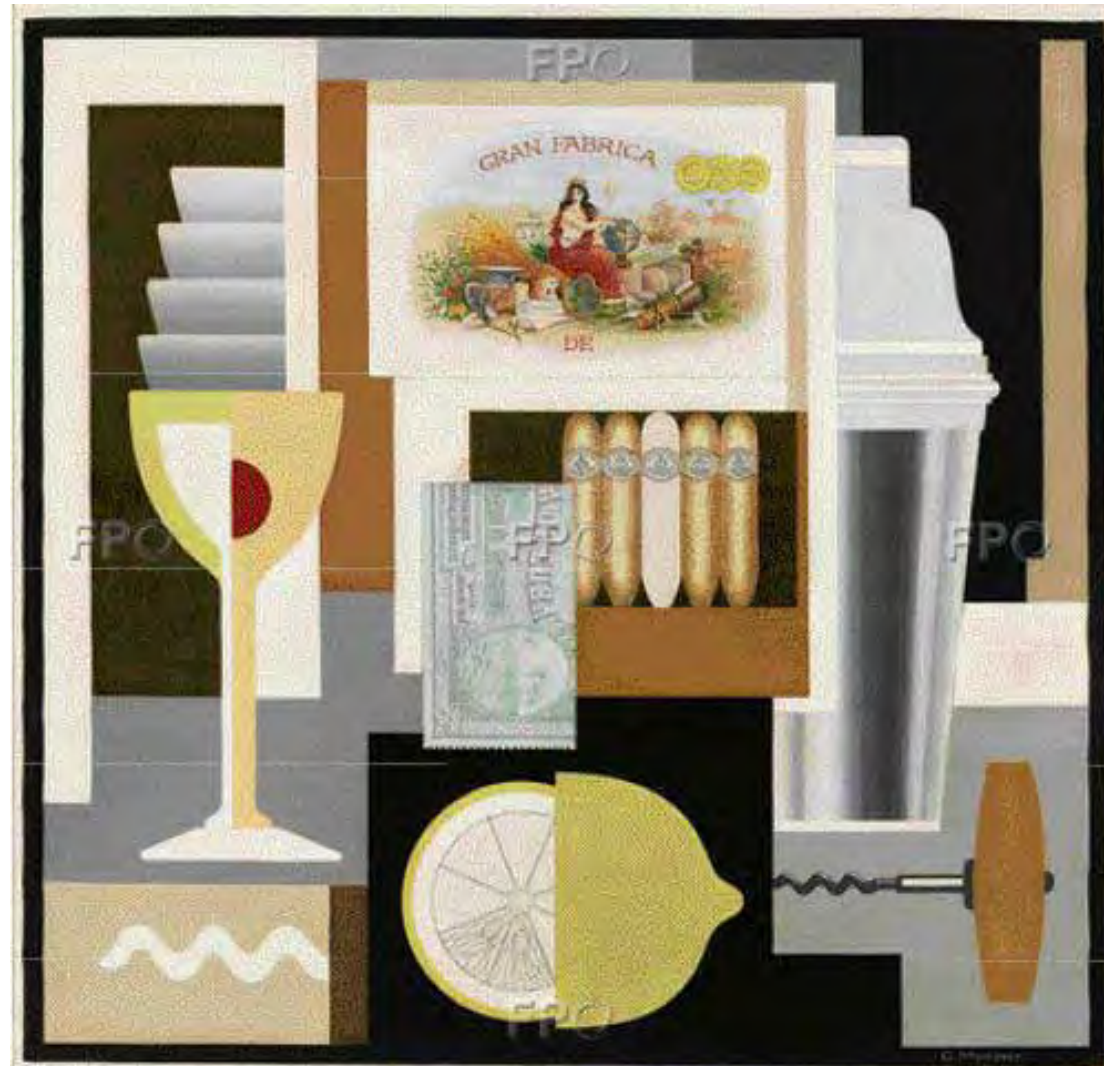
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Fig. 16. *Cocktail* by Gerald Murphy (1888–1964), 1927. Signed “G. Murphy” at lower right. Oil on canvas, 29 1/8 by 29 7/8 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, purchase, with funds from Evelyn and Leonard A. Lauder, Thomas H. Lee, and the Modern Painting and Sculpture Committee.



Alcohol's use as a social lubricant is a theme of several works including *Cocktail*, a 1927 pastiche of the high life by expatriate artist Gerald Murphy

*Art and Appetite* leaves us wondering where the twain meet today. A menu from Chez Panisse, the high temple of locavore dining, suggests one direction. Rising up against processed foods and empty calories, a renaissance of farmer's markets and farm-to-table restaurants has restored a segment of our food culture (Cronuts and BLT Quarter Pounders aside) to something like its nineteenth-century countenance.

The pleasure we take in thinking about food and drink is captured by a story about M. F. K. Fisher, the food writer who understood that eating well is one of life's greatest arts. For Fisher's seventieth birthday in 1978, the staff of Chez

Panisse prepared a meal to reflect the gastronome's taste for French-inflected California cuisine. The menu for the celebration, displayed in *Art and Appetite*, follows the titles of four of Fisher's books, beginning with *Serve It Forth*, her first, published in 1937. Pacific oysters on the half shell are a prelude to bitter lettuce salad with goat cheese croutons, the recipe for which is included in *Art and Appetite*.

In an appreciation published about Fisher in 1990, James A. Beard said, "For an art as transitory as gastronomy there can be no record except for a keen taste memory and the printed word." To that, the Art Institute of Chicago has added the visual realm.



Fig. 17. *Food City* by Richard Estes (1932–), 1967. Signed “TK” at TK. Oil on Masonite, 48 by 68 inches. Akron Art Museum, Ohio.



Fig. 18. *The Irish Question* by De Scott Evans (1847–1898), 1880s. Signed with the pseudonym “S. S. David” at lower left. Oil on canvas, 12 by 10 inches. Art Institute of Chicago, restricted gift of Carol W. Wardlaw and Jill Burnside Zeno; Roger and J. Peter McCormick endowments.



Fig. 19. *Campbell's Soup* by Andy Warhol (1928–1987), 1965. Acrylic on canvas, 36 by 24 inches. Milwaukee Art Museum, gift of Mrs. Harry Lynde Bradley.