

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

November 6, 2020

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WEEKEND CONFIDENTIAL

## Wayne Thiebaud's Vision of American Beauty

As he turns 100, the California artist's  
paintings of cakes, pies and other  
ordinary diner fare have become iconic



In 1960, when Wayne Thiebaud was turning 40, he had what he sensed was an artistic breakthrough. After years supporting himself and his family in California as an illustrator, sign painter, teacher and commercial art director, he still aspired to be a fine artist. His early paintings had earned him some attention and got him his first solo museum show at age 30, but these works were largely derivative. He borrowed flat shapes from cubists and energetic gestures from abstract expressionists and was otherwise “making the signs of art” without actually making something of his own, he says.

After spending a year in New York “kind-of copying” his abstract expressionist heroes, such as Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning, Mr. Thiebaud had returned to Sacramento in the late 1950s with advice from de Kooning, who told him to pay less attention to fads and find something he felt strongly about and loved to paint. For Mr. Thiebaud, who turns 100 on Nov. 15, this marked a return to more basic compositions, and he began exploring the fundamental properties of ovals,

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rectangles and triangles. Recalling how food was laid out in the cafes where he once worked as a busboy or dishwasher, he found himself turning his stacked shapes into rows of pies.

‘It seemed ridiculous. But I found them beautiful.’

“I thought, this will probably be the end of me as a serious artist,” Mr. Thiebaud says over the phone from his studio in Sacramento. But he couldn’t stop himself. He grew preoccupied with subjects he hadn’t seen painted before: Coke bottles, ice-cream cones and sturdy diner mugs of coffee. “It seemed ridiculous,” he says. “But I found them beautiful.”

Sixty years on, these wistful visions of everyday Americana have helped make Mr. Thiebaud (pronounced “Tee-bow”; it’s Swiss) one of the country’s most celebrated artists. Although his oeuvre would later include landscapes, cityscapes, some unsettling portraits and, most recently, pictures of clowns, his still-life paintings of comestibles—with their thick, icing-like brush strokes—have become iconic and can be found in most major modern collections.

Now, to mark Mr. Thiebaud’s centenary, the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento has arranged a survey of 100 of his paintings, prints and drawings, many of which haven’t been shown publicly before. Another exhibition of 50 works is now on at the Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco.



Wayne Thiebaud’s *Three Half Cakes*, 1966.

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In 1961, when Mr. Thiebaud first brought these paintings to art dealers, he remembers that they thought, “This guy must be nuts.” He traveled to New York City in search of a supportive gallery and was summarily rejected up and down Madison Avenue. The art dealer Allan Stone ultimately agreed to present Mr. Thiebaud’s cupcakes and pinball machines in his eponymous gallery in 1962 but felt it was risky. The show sold out.

Mr. Thiebaud’s timing was perfect: Abstract expressionism, with all its virile sincerity, was suddenly on the wane, and pop art’s wry commentary on postwar American consumer culture was on the rise. Many saw in Mr. Thiebaud’s rows upon rows of identical slices of cake a critique of the country’s tasteless excesses.

That misunderstands his intentions, says Mr. Thiebaud. These quotidian objects were emblems of his past and the country’s evolving present, and he tried to paint them “as plainly and directly and hopefully as beautifully” as he could. The images may be playful, but “there’s no sardonic wit or irony,” he says.

His paintings are distinctly American. Mr. Thiebaud says he found himself moved, in his drives across the country in the 1950s and ’60s, by the sameness of the food from diner to diner. Sandwiches were cut diagonally and secured with olive-bearing toothpicks, and overstuffed pies beckoned from glass display cases. He notes that lemon meringue—his favorite dessert, which his late wife Betty Jean Thiebaud often made—looks especially stunning in the sharp light of a lunch counter: “The white top, with its burned edges, is like a snow bank with the sun shining through.”

As Scott Shields, a senior curator at the Crocker Art Museum, puts it:

**‘I always felt Andy Warhol didn’t much care for soup, but Wayne Thiebaud really likes pie.’**

— Scott Shields, Crocker Art Museum

Mr. Thiebaud never formally studied fine art. The Great Depression forced him to be practical. Born in Arizona and raised by working-class parents in Southern California, he found work that harnessed his gifts as a draftsman. He was a teenage apprentice at Walt Disney Studios in 1936 but lost his animating job after he tried organizing a union, he says. He learned to paint signs and design ads at a trade school in Los Angeles and held a variety of odd jobs before enlisting during World War II. He hoped to be a pilot but spent most of his time making posters and drawing cartoons for a military newspaper. “You could probably say I missed the war,” he says.

Like many postwar artists, Mr. Thiebaud was a fan of cartoons, particularly George Herriman’s “Krazy Kat.” He tried selling his own strips and gags to magazines in New York in the mid-1940s but had little luck. (Years later, he and John Updike commiserated over not getting any cartoons into

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the New Yorker.) Mr. Thiebaud found more success in advertising in Los Angeles, first at Universal Studios, then at Rexall Drug Company, where all sorts of “wonderful people” taught him everything from how to create evocative shadows to how to paint a nose in one stroke. “All of that was my art school,” he says.

Mr. Thiebaud filled the gaps in his art education by becoming a teacher himself, first at Sacramento Junior College (now Sacramento City College) and then at the University of California, Davis, in 1959. The job forced him to become fluent in art history, and the salary freed him to experiment in his work. A legendary figure on campus, he retired at 70 but continued unpaid for more than a decade and still occasionally works with students. He says that he “loves” teaching for the way it forces him to rethink what he knows.

“All painting is both cumulative and collaborative,” Mr. Thiebaud says. When he is working, his memories of a display of candied apples or an intersection in San Francisco mix with his understanding of the properties of light and his appreciation of what came before—everything from ancient Islamic painting to the Bay Area landscapes of Richard Diebenkorn—to create something that he hopes “hasn’t been quite seen before, a new visual species.” The whole enterprise is “greatly communal,” he says, with everyone borrowing from each other: “You work with and against other painters.”

Mr. Thiebaud isn’t quite as spry as he used to be. He still plays tennis several times a week, but it is mostly doubles now. Yet he continues to paint nearly every day. “I just feel so fortunate to be part of the community of painters,” he says. “It’s been a wonderful life.”

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Appeared in the November 7, 2020, print edition as 'Wayne Thiebaud.'