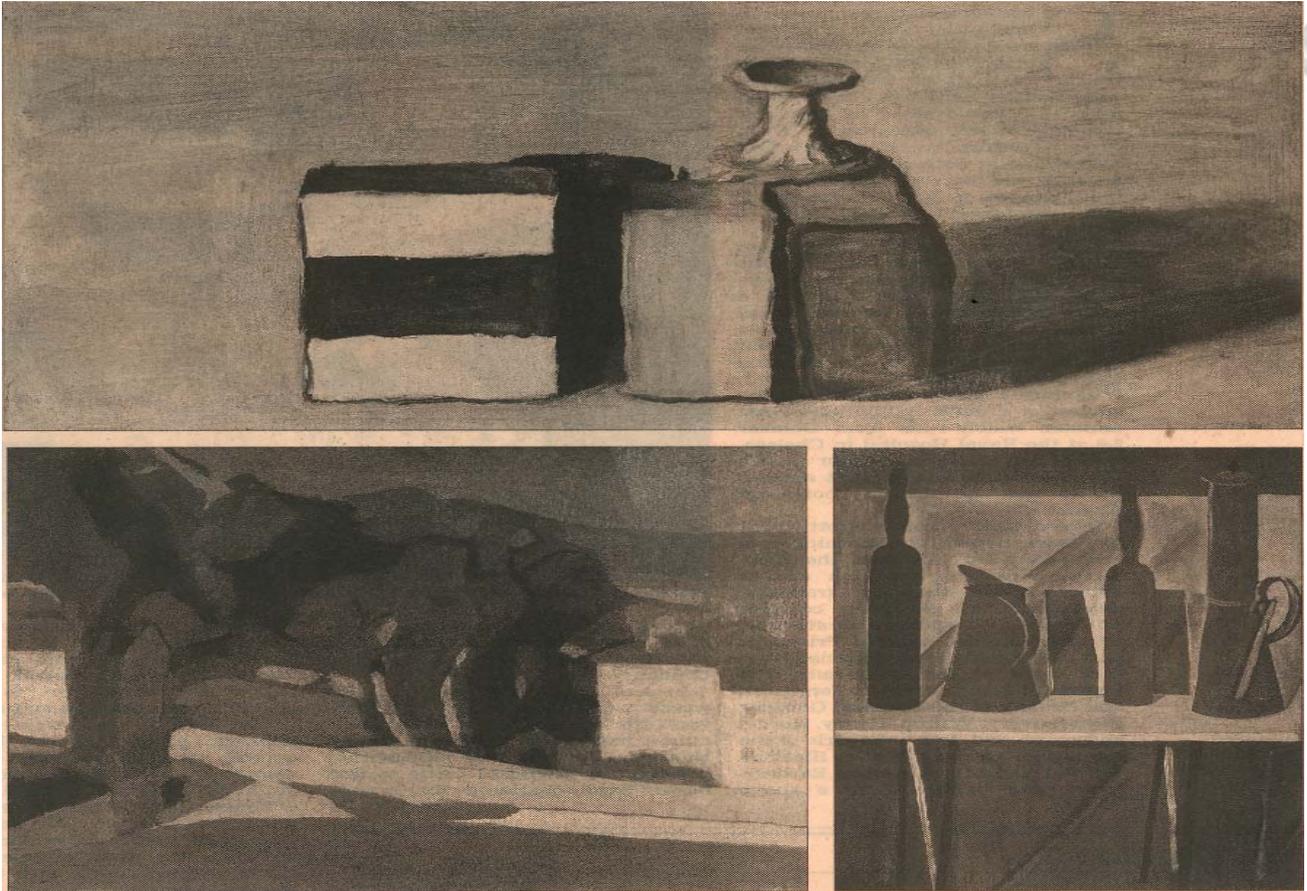


A life too narrow

Try as she might, Arietta Budick could not respond to Giorgio Morandi's obsessively repetitive images



Giorgio Morandi painted the same rows of bottles for 40 years. Well, maybe they weren't exactly the same bottles, and here and there he did throw in a vase, a pitcher or an urn, but seen through the scrim of his implacably earth-toned palette, the vessels in his hundreds of paintings look more or less interchangeable.

It is possible for a subtle eye to distinguish among the artist's myriad still lifes, however, and the current retrospective of more than 100 works at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art offers plenty of variations to chew over. But it's a bland meal, all the same. With this show, the Met means to assure the Italian artist's place in the 20th-century canon. But the man was a monomaniac, and his obsessions have a way of arousing the few and irritating the many, including myself.

Devotees of Morandi, who died in 1964, see him as a quasi-religious figure trying, in his own words, "to touch the depth, the essence of things". They mythologise his tireless quest for purity, and aver that his bottle collection represents the profound geometries underlying all creation. Many disciples describe a moment of epiphany when they suddenly saw through the flavourless surface of Morandi's canvas to the mystical programme beyond.

The critic and connoisseur James Thrall Soby, who with Alfred Barr organised an influential exhibit of 20th-century Italian art at the Museum of Modern Art in 1949, described how Morandi initially "seemed to us repetitious, provincial and weak". Only later did Soby realise that he "was not simply a painter of bottles. . . but a man intent on exploring subtle equations of forms, placing and atmospheric effects. . . separating their volumes and colour and then interlocking them again through an alchemy he alone understood".

I had the first part of Soby's experience when I visited the Morandi Museum in his native Bologna some years ago, and this time I prepared myself to have the second. Perhaps I, too, could be admitted to the company of those inspired by all the tepid shades of beige, the dogged rearrangements of the same repertoire of shapes, the relentless, grid-like compositions. No such luck.

Desperate to understand what others feel, I told myself that obsessiveness has a fine tradition in painting. Cezanne, an idol of Morandi's, also returned repeatedly to a narrow range of subjects: ripe apples on a table, decorated jugs and statuettes, the squashed peak of his beloved Mont St. Victoire. Like Morandi, he was an introvert - shy, retiring, engaged in a solitary crusade for disciplined vision. The critic Meyer Shapiro has noted that still life, which is at the core of both Cezanne's and Morandi's careers, can quiver with erotic desire.

This most pregnant of genres is, Shapiro writes, "open to an endless variety of feelings and thoughts, even of a disturbing intensity. It can appeal to artists of different temperament who are able through the painting of small objects to express without action or gesture the intimate and personal.

" It's true: Cezanne's apples cover the full spectrum of emotions, from solemn meditation to serenity, conflict and rapture. Movement is always implied in the gaudy fruits about to spill off the tipped-up table, or the branch poised to ripple in the breeze. The very atmosphere - the stippled backgrounds, the faceted Provencal air - seems to pulse with life. Morandi's still lifes, on the other hand, remain hollow and inert, a set of droning geometries that suggest he took too literally Cezanne's admonition to "treat nature by means of the cylinder, the sphere, the cone".

Morandi's tilt towards abstraction brings to mind another exalted obsessive, Mark Rothko, who spent two decades exploring the possibilities of floating coloured rectangles. A gathering of Rothkos reveals not an impoverished imagination but a boundless appetite for experimentation that provokes an astonishing array of reactions.

When critics called him a formalist who played with colour relationships, Rothko reacted with rage, insisting that he wasn't "interested in the relationship of colour or form or anything else. I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions: tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on." Colour, he claimed, was only a means to an end. "The fact that people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I can communicate those basic human emotions."

It's hard to imagine anyone sobbing before a Morandi, except perhaps out of boredom. His affectless paintings deliberately tamp down passion and reduce the buzz to a bare minimum. One senses, deep beneath the calm, impenetrable surfaces of his pictures, a revulsion toward the unpredictability of existence.

He was a tall man who lived a narrow life. Morandi rarely left Bologna, or spent a night away from the apartment he shared with his three sisters. Some described him as an ascetic sage, but it's hard not to speculate about the mental balance of a man whose closest friends were a bunch of bottles. He was impeccably trained and pedigreed, and he now has the Met in his corner, yet he actually has much in common with the outsider artists whose compulsive works have achieved a certain collectible chic. In his self-imposed confinement, Morandi painted claustrophobia itself.

The best part of the Met's vast yet oppressive retrospective is leaving it. As I emerged from Morandi's fusty indoor realm onto the steps of the Metropolitan Museum, I inhaled deeply, beheld the traffic swirling down Fifth Avenue and wallowed joyfully in the city's invigorating chaos.

Fonte: Financial Times, London, September 20 e 21 2008, Life & Arts, p. 15.