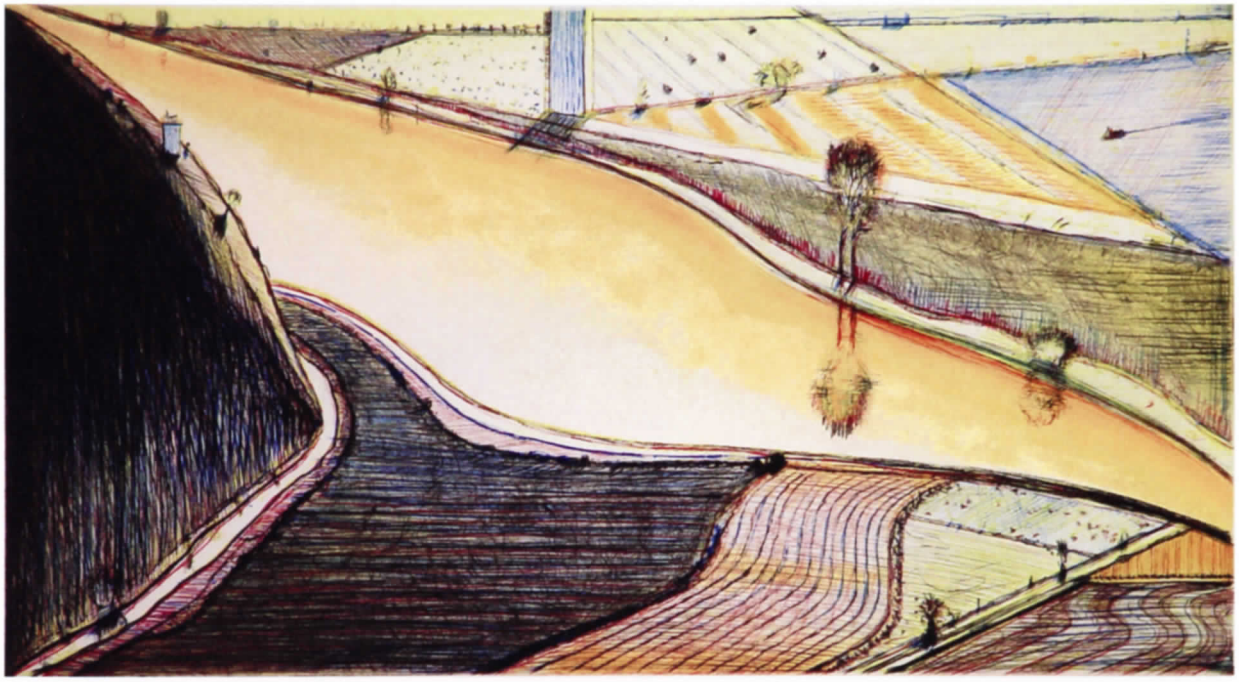
Crown Point Press
Newsletter
Fall 2002

Overview



Wayne Thiebaud, *Hill River,* 2002. Color drypoint with direct gravure and spit bite aquatint. Paper size: 21¼ x 30½"; image size: 12 x 22¼". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

Wayne Thiebaud

Wayne Thiebaud's first one-person show in New York in the spring of 1962 at the Alan Stone Gallery was enormously successful. The Museum of Modern Art purchased a painting, and articles appeared in *The New York Times, Time, Life, The Nation, Art News,* and *Art International.* Thiebaud was forty-two, and had been a practicing artist and teacher in Sacramento, California, since 1951. This kind of success is the dream of thousands of artists working here and there across our country, wondering if the only way to get noticed is to move to New York and try to round up some "connections." Thiebaud proved it is not necessary. His success had nothing to do with connections. It had everything to do with investigation and invention.

Thiebaud was always adept at inventing himself. As a boy growing up in Utah he admired an uncle who was an amateur cartoonist, and participated in dramatic historical pageants staged by the Mormon Church. In high school in Long Beach, California, he worked on the school's stage crew, and took courses in theatrical production. He was employed briefly by Walt Disney Productions as an "in-betweener" cartoonist, filling in the hundreds of progressive movements needed between key drawings done by others. In Disney's *Pinocchio* movie, there is a scene in which Jiminy Cricket is trying to convince Pinocchio not to go to the island of the bad boys. Pinocchio is smoking a cigar, and when he sets it down in an ashtray Jiminy Cricket, in frustration, kicks the ash. The "pouf" that the ash makes was Thiebaud's contribution to the film.

In the Air Force from 1942 to 1945 Thiebaud worked as a cartoonist and maker of training films. After that, he went to New York, lived at the YMCA for a few months and tried to be a freelance cartoonist. By 1946 he was back in Los Angeles working for the Rexall Drug Company as layout director and cartoonist for the company magazine. There he met his first "real" artist, Robert Mallary, who was working as a typographer. Mallary had studied with the famous Mexican political realists Siqueiros and Orozco. He talked about art, suggested books to read, and encouraged Thiebaud to begin painting. Sixteen years later—after Thiebaud, painting all the while, earned two college degrees, moved to Sacramento, and become a teacher—Mallary recommended that his own New York dealer, Allan Stone, take a look at Thiebaud's slides.

In the meantime, Thiebaud had been to New York. He spent a year there in 1956, frequenting the Cedar Bar where the Abstract Expressionists hung out and visiting the galleries where they showed and the Club where they met to discuss art. Pollock had died earlier that year, but Thiebaud met de Kooning and Kline, both of whom, he remembers, talked about the formal issues of making a painting.

In the year before he went to New York, Thiebaud had been reading a book about Persian art, and had painted some images of

Wayne Thiebaud, *Dark Hill River,* 2002. Drypoint with direct gravure and spit bite aquatint printed in black and blue. Paper size: 21¼ x 30½"; image size: 12 x 22¼". Edition 20. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

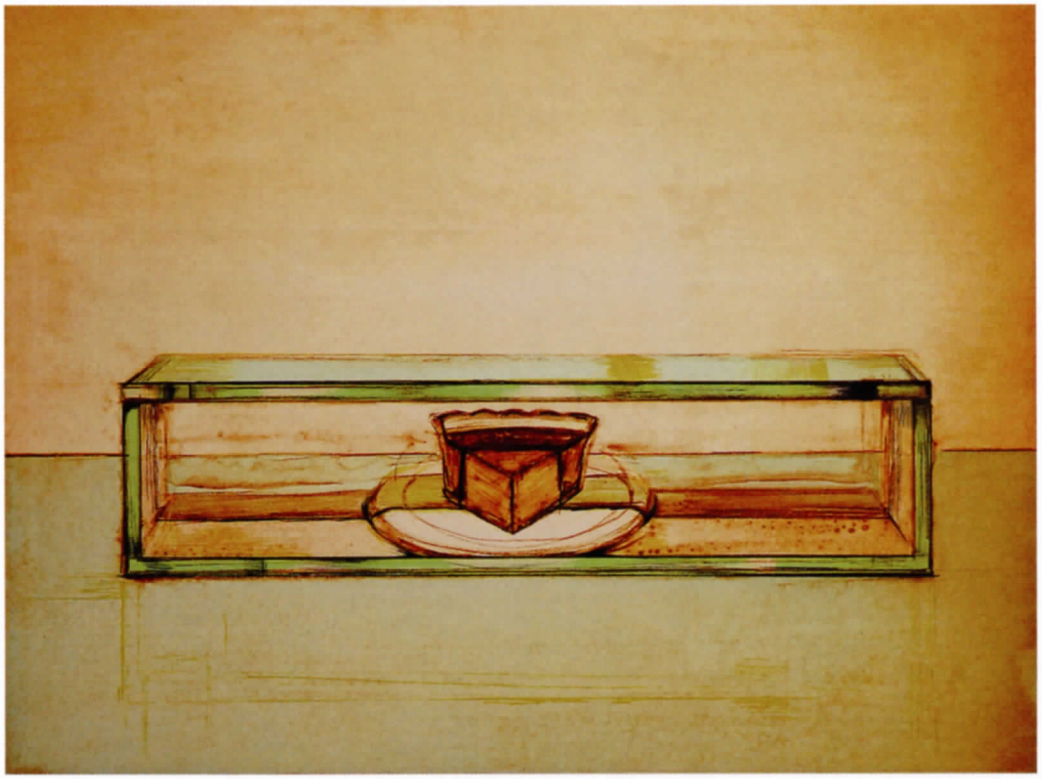
Middle Eastern pageantry, based on old photos of funerals and feasts. He used metallic paints and spiky forms for his rows of foodstuffs, and after that he painted some American food subjects—a table of hors d'oeuvres, a meat market counter—using similar techniques. When he got back from New York he painted "Ribbon Shop" and "The Sea Rolls In" (both 1957), which (apart from their titles) almost could have been Abstract Expressionist paintings. "I felt sort of embarrassed by the fact that I had subject matter in there," he remembers, "so I tried to cover it up with arty strokes."

The strokes continued to be important to him, however, and in thinking about how to combine them with subject matter he became interested in a nineteenth century group of Italian painters, the Macchiaioli, (macchia in Italian means "patch" or "spot") who used thick patchy paint strokes and strong light effects. The Spanish painter Joaquin Sorolla, who also used thick paint and rough strokes, caught his attention. And, in his own backyard, David Park, Elmer Bischoff and Richard Diebenkorn were just starting to switch from abstraction to the figure. "There is a long tradition of painting that I admire in which the paint is obviously manipulated by hand," he has said. "That kind of coding was fundamental to my inquiry."

Wayne Thiebaud, *River and Farms,* 2002. Color direct gravure with drypoint. Paper size: 18⁄x 20"; image size: 9 x 11 ". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

Thiebaud took formal (coding) characteristics of these disparate painters—strong brushstrokes, heightened light and shadow, thick paint, simplified composition—and applied them to the food subjects he had discovered in Persian art. Suddenly he made wonderful paintings which, when they were shown in New York, were identified with the then very new Pop Art movement. They weren't Pop Art, really. I began working with Thiebaud at Crown Point Press in 1963, and I remember his telling me that the piece of pie was a "triangle on a round plate" and at the same time it related to Mom's apple pie, and pie in the sky. It was not about irony. It was formal, with a celebratory flavor. There is nothing detached about Thiebaud's point of view. He likes food, especially sweets—and toys, and people, and landscapes; he likes the subjects of his paintings.

In time, Thiebaud's concentration shifted to figures and then landscapes, but he has never stopped doing still life paintings of food and other common objects. He began working with figures in 1963, immediately after his first success with the still lifes. He began sketching outside with friends as early as 1966, though his full-scale landscape paintings began about 1973. "I don't make a lot of distinctions between things like landscape or figurative painting," he told an interviewer in 1978. "To me the problems are inherently the same—lighting, color, structure, and so on—certainly traditional and ordinary problems."



Wayne Thiebaud, *Pie Case*, 2002. Color direct gravure with aquatint and drypoint. Paper size: 26½ x 31¼"; image size: 17¼ x 23¼". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

Thiebaud's formal problems of the 1960s and 1970s were ordinary for the time, but the artists using them worked abstractly and each artist generally focused on one or two particular problems. Thiebaud tried everything. He would use the flat washes of color field painters on a steep cliff-side, then make some pie rows using the problems of systems art, and after that do a delicatessen silhouette that might have been abstract if it weren't for the sausages.

Asked about his landscape paintings in 1978, he explained to a writer for *Cal Aggie Magazine* that he didn't want to just "see a pretty place and try to paint it." What he wanted was to "manage it, manipulate it, or see what I can turn it into." He thought it would be interesting to try to get rid of the horizon line, "Whether it's up, down, helicopter view, world view, valley view—to try to get some sense of the loss of the convenience or comfort of standing and looking at things." He doesn't work from photographs. He makes sketches in actual landscapes, recording what he calls "visual hunches," then uses them and his imagination to develop plausible landscape paintings. He says he "essentialializes" his subject matter, or reduces it as a sauce is reduced in cooking, and his early work with theater sets and cartoons certainly have helped him see how to do this.

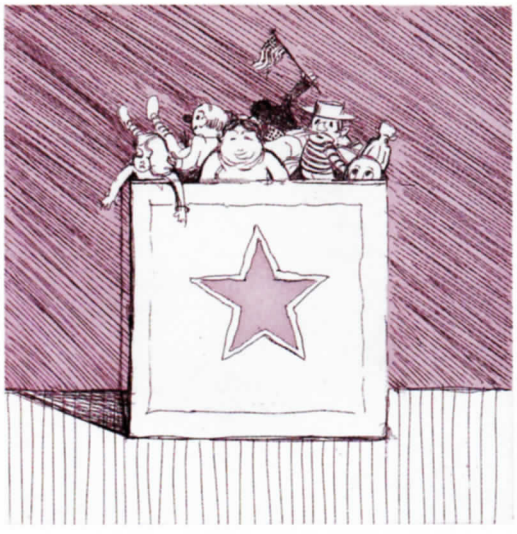
Thiebaud's cartooning past also has helped keep him aware that formalizing a landscape or still life isn't, for him, about finding underlying "eternal" forms. It isn't a search for Truth. He starts with a subject, not a form, and then sets out a formal problem to solve as he works. His solutions may not be perfect, but they are apt. "If you really are a realist painter," he says, "you finally realize that what you are doing is a tremendous amount of adoption, adaptation, and change. And what is vexing is that there's no end to it."

"Adoption, adaptation, and change" are, of course, the bedrock of printmaking, so it is no surprise that this is a medium Thiebaud likes. But printmaking is just as stubborn as painting in presenting one problem after another to solve. When Thiebaud is working on his prints, I always think they are finished before they are. He adds and subtracts, draws and scrapes, adjusts the color minutely. It might be vexing, but he never seems vexed. He has an easy manner and a light touch—even though he keeps going and going. "One of the joys of painting is to make it tough on yourself, to push to an extreme," he has said.

He tells a story of painting outside on an easel in the street, trying to figure out how to get direction signals and street arrows laid out correctly. "One gentleman watched a long time," he relates, "and then asked, 'You ever been to art school?' I had to confess that I hadn't. He said, 'In art school they can teach you that perspective thing very quickly.'"

"That perspective thing," in all of Thiebaud's work, is oddly askew though it seems oddly correct. Thiebaud refers to it as "a diagram of space, in addition to ordinary space." And lately, in his paintings (and in the new landscape prints), he has become interested in "seeing agricultural patterns at different times of the year. Fall is muddy, spring is green. Here orchards are in bloom, there the trees are golden. It's an attempt to totalize the seasons and see the picture as one world." And there is often a different version of the same scene, a dark one. "There is a lifting of the spirit," he says, "And then at sundown a surrender to something other. It's an interesting problem to register the light-dark values in a painting way down and play around with lower contrast."

Thiebaud made this remark in 2000 in a public discussion at San Francisco's Legion of Honor Museum, the beginning of a



Wayne Thiebaud, *Toy Box*, 2002. Hard ground etching with aquatint printed in black and pink. Paper size: 13 x 12"; image size: 6 x 6". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

Wayne Thiebaud, *Beach Group*, 2002. Hard ground etching with drypoint printed in black and blue. Paper size: 13 x 14"; image size: 6 x 8". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

much-acclaimed retrospective tour that ended at the Whitney Museum in New York. In his remark, I noticed that the word "surrender" in conjunction with "light-dark values" is parallel to his 1963 juxtaposition of "pie in the sky" with the idea of a triangular slice on a round plate. His approach to investigating is to move easily from familiar feelings to familiar forms. This he has pursued unflaggingly, and his consequent ever-renewed invention sets an example for artists who continue to work without "connections" here and there across our country.

But let's not make too much of it. We don't need heavy-handed philosophy. One of Thiebaud's favorite quotes is from W. C. Fields: "Anyone who hasn't seen themselves as a cartoon is missing the truth of life."

—Kathan Brown

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New Etchings by Wayne Thiebaud
September 13 - November 2, 2002

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