

STILL-LIFE PORTRAITS:
The Book-Filled Art of
Ephraim
Rubenstein

This oil painter finds that his ongoing series of paintings depicting books allows him to venture into a number of themes—including self-portraiture. | **by William Chapman Sharpe**

Brooklyn-born painter Ephraim Rubenstein is a master of several genres, including figure painting, landscapes, and portraits. But in the course of a 30-year career he has kept returning to still life, and to one subject in particular: books. For Rubenstein, who teaches drawing and the literature of art at the Art Students League of New York and the National Academy School of Fine Arts, both in New York City, books are not simply inanimate objects but eloquent containers of meaning imbued with lives of their own. In his oil paintings they appear in many guises, as inspirations and guides as well as documents of personal and family life. One of his earliest successes was *Self-portrait With Books*, purchased by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York City. In it, the artist defines his own personality by making his image

emerge between a foreground of art books open on his desk and a background featuring stacks of books and artistic props that visually echo his torso and head. In recent years Rubenstein has continued to explore his evolving sense of life and mortality in an open-ended series of still-life paintings that portray books in a variety of poses. He arranges them casually, stacked or spread in small groups, or in combination with lenses and other optical devices. Sometimes he gets more aggressive, representing them haphazardly piled, spread open, disintegrating, even nailed to the wall or burnt.

"I grew up in a time," says Rubenstein, who was born in 1956, "when still life was supposed to be largely formal; treating objects as having emotional meaning was completely discounted." But Rubenstein admired the content-laden art of the past,



Rubenstein





RIGHT

**Self-portrait
With Books**

1984–1985, oil,
36 x 54. Collection
The Metropolitan
Museum of Art,
New York, New York.

OPPOSITE PAGE

**Still Life With
Discarded Books II**

1996, oil, 24 x 20.
Collection Sasha and
Bill Anawalt.

and he found in still life a rich vein of artistic ore worth mining. A meticulous realist, he delights in participating in a tradition dating back to the Renaissance. "I'm thrilled to be involved in a way of painting that connects me not only to the artists of earlier times but also to the objects that define my own life in the real world," he says. "The greatest artists I know are humble in front of nature. The world is so beautiful and complex it seems arrogant to presume to improve on what we see; I just do my best to capture the richness I find in the world around me."

As Rubenstein suggests, still life has often been regarded as a genre in which intellectual or emotional significance takes a backseat to formal concerns. Whether the subject is a bowl of fruit, a vase of flowers, or a table loaded with flagons of wine and just-killed game, still life allows the artist to explore design, texture, volume, color, and light. In the past century or so, still life has acted as a sort of seismic indicator of artistic upheaval. It would be hard to imagine modern art without Van Gogh's sunflowers, the fruit-laden tables of Cézanne, the fractured and reassembled guitars of Picasso and Braque, or the soup cans of Warhol.

Still life as we know it springs from the Dutch paintings of the 16th and 17th centuries in which artists displayed, often literally, the fruits of new knowledge and wealth—with some moralistic reflections on the spiritual underpinnings of

their culture mixed in. A cluttered tabletop with its food, dishes, and household items, such as those painted by Willem Claesz Heda, speaks volumes about the everyday life, global trade, and evolving science of perception in his day. Yet also on display are his society's attitudes toward these objects, as emblems of transience that remind people of their short stay on earth—the elements of *vanitas* compositions. Whether depicting a laid table, musical instruments, flowers, or weapons, nearly all underlined the very transitoriness of the goods that the painter memorialized. For them, painted

books indicated frivolous distraction rather than a refuge from it. And true enough, although books pretend to give lasting knowledge, their physical being is subject to the depredations of time just like the human body.

Rubenstein delights in working with such conventions, then turning them on their heads. Rather than depicting a life soon to be lost, his painting *The Great War and Me* transforms the genre by bringing a lost life back to consciousness. Inspired by the discovery of his grandfather's wartime diary, the canvas portrays the experience of an infantryman in World War I through the careful arrangement of army relics Rubenstein found in his parents' attic. Rubenstein reanimates the traditional elements of the *vanitas* scene by thrusting them into the deathly context of 20th-century trench warfare. A wristwatch stands in for the pocket watch of the Dutch

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The Art of the Portrait/Still Life

Thinking of his own relationship to books, Rubenstein says, "Any object can be as much of a portrait as a human face." In fact, the first Dutch still lifes emerged from portraiture. In the late 15th and early 16th centuries, Hans Memling and Barthel Bruyn the Elder painted skulls on the back of portraits, forecasting the grisly future of their sitters' flesh. The first floral still lifes were also painted on reverse sides of portraits, emphasizing the fleeting quality of earthly beauty. By the mid-1600s most of the now-familiar types of still life had appeared as "stand-alone" subjects, including a food-filled table, musical instruments, and books or other objects for study. But nearly all offered clues, such as a fallen petal or a peeled fruit, that hinted at the brevity of the human pleasures memorialized on canvas.

Giuseppe Arcimboldo, the Italian Renaissance painter well known for his fruit-composed faces, dealt with the still-life por-



Self-portrait With Vanitas Symbols

by David Bailly, 1651, oil, 25½ x 38%. Collection Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal, Leiden, the Netherlands.

trait idea literally. In *The Librarian* Arcimboldo comically showed how books can make a man. Weighty tomes make up his bulk; bookmarks form fingers and hair; the feathers of a book-duster compose his beard.

The portrait/still life can also mix the two genres, a tactic that also harks back to 17th-century Dutch painting. David Bailly's *Self-portrait With Vanitas Symbols* presents the artist's own image amid typical still-life items: books, statues, a pocket watch, and a just-extinguished candle. However, the 67-year-old artist has depicted himself as a young man, while the portrait he holds represents him as he looked in 1651, when he actually painted the picture. On one side, completing a series of oval shapes that spread across the canvas, is a skull. The picture thus shows us the past, present, and future of the artist's body. Bailly reveals the painter's life as a still life, a life that has already been stilled (by art) and will soon be stilled forever (by death). But in Rubenstein's *Self-portrait With Books* we see a book-filled life that is not so much fleeting as still being forged: the book-piles show how much the young artist must master in the course of his growth.

masters; gas mask, helmet, and shovel play the role of sword and breastplate; a greatcoat and maps emulate the folds of satin drapery; photographs fill in for painted portraits. There are even flowers, in the form of red-paper Remembrance Day poppies, while the elaborate silver tableware of Holland's glory days is replaced by a tin mess kit, with a bullet-dented canteen acting as wine bottle and goblet.

His grandfather's diary takes pride of place in the center of the composition. Of the little book that sparked this substantial artistic statement, Rubenstein says, "with its Bible-thin pages, it's like my whole endeavor, bringing back to life objects and experiences that had remained stored away for many years." The diary magically pulls together the mute artifacts clustered around it: the knapsack and shirt with Medal of Honor lying on it become the soldier's back and chest; the gas mask and helmet make up his face, lungs, and head. Together they build what Rubenstein calls "a portrait of my grandfather, attributes without a body." The open cardboard box below the table is not just the source of the painting's memorabilia; it also functions like an open grave out of which the resurrected soldier rises. With the background screen folded into three parts, Rubenstein turns the still-life portrait, with its pieces on an altarlike table, into an altarpiece, a veneration of its subject. The whole equals a scrupulously assembled sum of emotionally moving parts, a disassembled soldier's life restored for the contemplation of the modern viewer.

Although the discovery of a book led Rubenstein to ponder war, in recent paintings he has found that war can lead back to books. Many years ago he was commissioned to paint a picture for a group of Holocaust survivors. As they talked, one story particularly affected him, Nazi soldiers threw a bookcase and its contents through the window of a Berlin family's home. Nothing could be worse, thought the future inmate of a concentration camp, than seeing the books trampled and lying there in the street. Deeply moved, Rubenstein went home and assembled a pile of old books he had been carting around with him over the years, unable to bring himself to dispose of them. He forced himself to throw them repeatedly against the wall, until he came up with the compositions recorded in *Still Life With Discarded Books I, II, and III*.



ABOVE
Still Life With Discarded Books I
 1996, oil, 36 x 46. Collection Deloitte & Touche, Washington, DC.

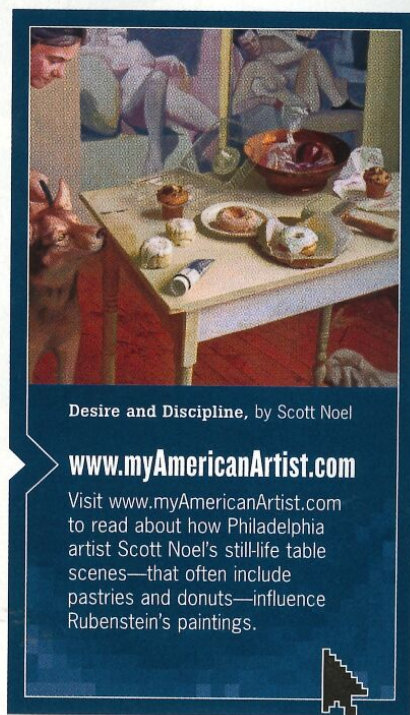


LEFT
Still Life With Discarded Books III
 1997, oil, 18 x 25. Collection Lori and Roland Pease.



LEFT
**Still Life With
Destroyed Books I**
1997, oil, 40 x 32.
Private collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE
**Still Life With
Burned Books**
1997, oil, 39 x 50.
Private collection.



Desire and Discipline, by Scott Noel

www.myAmericanArtist.com

Visit www.myAmericanArtist.com to read about how Philadelphia artist Scott Noel's still-life table scenes—that often include pastries and donuts—influence Rubenstein's paintings.

"There's something very human about books," Rubenstein explains. "They have spines, just like we do." Books, as inanimate objects that speak any time we open them, are a special category of still life—always still, yet always alive. Unlike the Dutch, who would refine their moral message by clearly delineating book titles and literary passages, Rubenstein prefers to let viewers fill in such information for themselves. "I like to keep the identification of the books deliberately vague," he says. Rubenstein also accentuates a different dimension of "shelf life" because his books seem to suffer and die. In Rubenstein's ravaged books, with their innards spilled toward us, we read a visible history of desperate endurance, as if they were victims of persecution or torture. Challenging his own composure, he arranged his images with increasing violence, even nailing one book to the wall. "I disemboweled it," he says of the hanging book-body in *Still Life With Destroyed Books I*.

Finally he burnt books. "It horrified me to do it," he says. "It goes totally against the grain of my upbringing and values." But the resulting painting, *Still Life With Burned Books*, stuns with its reverential simplicity. The

three charred books can be read as a mournful triptych, a burnt offering of sacred objects.

Over the years, Rubenstein has found that working on a series of paintings centering on a single subject gives him a chance to approach change within a fixed format. "What I like about a series," Rubenstein explains, "is that it can act as a means of narrative, a way to defeat the still-life quality of the painter's medium itself." Rubenstein's most extensive series to date deals with what he calls his "pile-of-books" motif. He stacks up books, as few as three or as many as 20, turning them this way and that so that the pages, covers, and bindings form a rich, sensuously glowing sequence of colors, shapes, and textures. Tattered and torn, the volumes in *Books: Pile V* and *Books: Pile XIX* suggest the ominous message of human mortality seen in Dutch *memento mori*, while the beautiful complementary colors of the book edges in *Books: Pile VI* stand out dazzlingly against their black background, like blossoms bursting from dark soil.

Playing the bright-yet-vulnerable covers against the white or yellowing pages they enclose, Rubenstein has



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found a way to treat his still life as an abstract composition, while retaining the allusions to human existence that mean so much to him. Alone in their carefully lit world, the books form and reveal their own architecture. The piles ask us to think about building and balance, and about the forces that could bring down these towers of silent Babel.

Rubenstein uses a viewfinder made of two cardboard L's clipped together to help him arrive at his compositions. "The finder allows me to preview the subject," says the artist, "and gives me a good idea of how what I'm looking at will translate into two dimensions." He usually does a careful drawing of the subject before he begins to paint. "Until I've worked out the drawing, I don't even know what size or shape to make

the canvas," he says. After completing the drawing, he transfers it to the linen using graphite paper, and then proceeds to do a light monochromatic underpainting—a grisaille—using a wash thinned with Turpenoid. "I think about the painting process very much in stages, and each stage helps me solve certain problems," the artist explains. "I work out the design issues—size, scale, and composition—during the drawing stage. The underpainting stage allows me to see the big patterns of light and dark and lets me know that everything is in place. Once that is done, I paint the picture in color very directly. Because I've done all that preliminary work, I can spend my time thinking about the color alone. I don't, for instance, have to worry about whether a particular book is the right size or oriented properly on the pile—I already know it is. Now I can concentrate completely on just what color it is."

Although Rubenstein's still lifes play off sensuality and mortality, his thoughts keep coming back to how books both represent and shape our lives. "Not only are books a part of what we see, they teach us how to see," he comments. One of his most complex pictures is a self-portrait of Rubenstein at

BELOW

**Still Life With
Books, Mirrors,
and Lenses II**

2003, 48 x 92.
Collection the artist.

BOTTOM

Books: Pile V

2004, oil, 8 x 9. Private
collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT ABOVE

Books: Pile IX

2004, oil, 30 x 16.
Private collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT BELOW

Books: Pile VI

2004, oil, 9 x 16.
Private collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE, RIGHT

Books: Pile XIX

2004, oil, 9 x 16.
Collection Lois
Rappaport.



work, though he does not appear directly in it. *Still Life With Books, Mirrors, and Lenses II* focuses in a literal way on the tools of the artist's trade over the centuries, the books that shape our ideas about the world, and the optical devices that help us perceive the world more fully. The oval mirror in the center of the composition suggests the head of the viewer—a head it does not reflect. Instead we see the reflected image of a book and a lens—in essence, a mind and an eye. Through this, another “portrait without a sitter,” Rubenstein links himself directly to the great traditions of still life and to the underlying meaning of the genre. ■

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About the Artist

Ephraim Rubenstein is an artist and faculty member at the Art Students League of New York and the National Academy of Design School, both in New York City. His work is in numerous public and private collections, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York City, and can be viewed at www.ephraimrubenstein.com.

