

Thiebaud's treasures

Artist explains his love for eight works from SFMOMA's collection



Katherine Du Tiel / © Richard Diebenkorn Foundation

By Charles Desmarais

In a time when the arts and humanities are less and less respected, because those essential fields are so little understood, "Wayne Thiebaud: Artist's Choice" is the kind of exhibition we need more of. It's on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art through March 10. Take a brilliant artist who is also wildly popular, and ask him to share what he loves about pictures many people might not give a second glance. Here, we look at eight of his choices. The texts, the museum says, are selected from discussions with Thiebaud on visits to his studio, in April and July. All the works are in SFMOMA's permanent collection, which is to say that they are Bay Area treasures, preserved for their own sake but also for just such a lesson in the impact of art history on the working artist.

Richard Diebenkorn
(American, 1922-93) "Still Life With Orange Peel" (1955)

"Diebenkorn's pictures are dirty sometimes. And that's a positive thing. He was very interested in anomalies and things which were not quite clean and shaped and so on to give that contrast between what he knew so well, a kind of French elegance, and then filth."

Thiebaud continues on E3

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Looking at art through artist's eyes

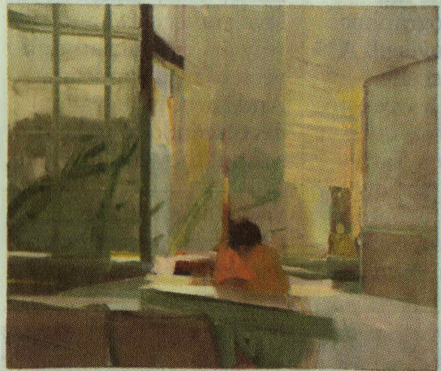


Katherine Du Tiel / © Artists Rights Society / VG Bild-Kunst Bonn

“Die Landschaft, Cannes,” by Max Beckmann, is “sort of a paradise.”

Max Beckmann (German, 1884-1950), “Die Landschaft, Cannes (Landscape, Cannes)” (1934)

“This is sort of a paradise that he’s painting, in a way. Beckmann is so heavy most of the time. This looks like he wanted an escape. It’s a terrific painting, although for me, pretty atypical, especially that central space that he’s got. Usually I find his paintings almost uncomfortably crowded, to great effect. You’re a part of his crowd. But this — I could take a walk with him. He’s managed to do his own garden there, with his own palm trees.”



Ben Blackwell / © Estate of Elmer Bischoff

Elmer Bischoff’s “Orange Sweater” depicts light from many directions.

Elmer Bischoff (American, 1916-91), “Orange Sweater” (1955)

“You can almost feel, since it’s a library, that it’s a very quiet place. Beautiful light coming in from several directions. There is a nice color relationship between the green and the little tiny bit of orange shadow over her sweater. But it’s also a very good geometric abstraction: the way those horizontals and verticals work and that terrific angle. This is really beautiful — the way this pattern of light coming down from the top and across in a nice L-shape forms one illumination.”



Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

Wayne Thiebaud provides his take on selected paintings.

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Katherine Du Tiel / © Estate of Joan Brown

Brown’s “Green Bowl” uses flattening.

Joan Brown (American, 1938-90), “Green Bowl” (1964)

“You got this enormous amount of felt pressure. There is a lot of flattening or planometric pushing, and that’s really satisfying to me, when planes are comfortably flat. All painting is cubist because the picture plane is so important, even in a totally illusionistic, volumetric space, like (Johannes) Vermeer’s. His pictures also have a lot to do with that wonderful flattening that I like so much. That funny business of painting being flat.”



Ben Blackwell / © Willem de Kooning Foundation / Artists Rights Society

“The Springs” is a work by Willem de Kooning, one of Thiebaud’s heroes.

Willem de Kooning (American, born the Netherlands, 1904-97) “The Springs” (1955)

“Simply stated, one of my heroes — I was very much influenced by de Kooning. He was probably the best trained artist in all of New York. He taught me about rigor; he always had trouble getting something that he called ‘right.’ Here, you see this nice warm golden pink light up high and from the right, like Rembrandt (van Rijn). He was a wonderful draftsman.”



© Artists Rights Society / ADAGP

“Nature morte aux fruits” is by the French painter André Derain.

André Derain (French, 1880-1954) “Nature morte aux fruits” (“Still Life with Fruit”) (c. 1937-39)

“This painting is actually a little landscape, isn’t it? Derain brings in the light and an almost cloudy background. He just makes the light come and go. Marvelous the way he’s built that sculptural shape at the center of the axis. If turned upside down it hangs like a chandelier. ... Looking at a painting upright, it’s either a pleasant or unpleasant surprise when you turn it upside down. It helps to qualify how the space is working because we as painters tend to rationalize space.”

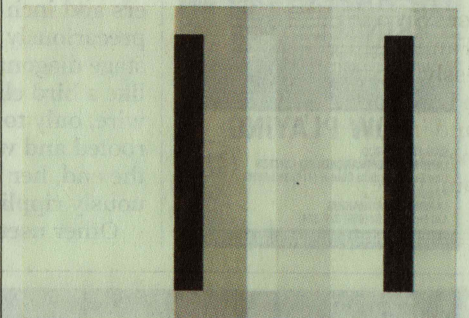


Ben Blackwell / © Succession H. Matisse / Artist Rights Society

Henri Matisse uses drawing techniques in “La conversation.”

Henri Matisse (French, 1869-1954) “La conversation” (“The Conversation”) (1938)

“I like this drawing that he does, introducing a kind of mixed media. It says something to remind me how important drawing is — to the point when some artists never leave drawing. (Vincent) van Gogh would be an example. He would just draw those paintings, as far as I’m concerned. This is so nice because it’s so beautifully decorative. All those nice flat shapes and then that linear description I find really captivating.”



Katherine Du Tiel / © Estate of John McLaughlin

John McLaughlin’s “#6-1959” shows off a purist aesthetic.

John McLaughlin (American, 1898-1976) “#6-1959” (1959)

“McLaughlin wanted you to look a certain way. There’s a sort of secondary and third vision you get when you stare at this. It’s the kind of work, if you lived with it at home, every time you play music and look at the painting there would be a new kind of cantata. It’s so fundamental, that purist aesthetic. That theoretically eternally correct relationship was always impressive, particularly for me because I didn’t go to art school. McLaughlin, one of the few working in that vein, was sort of the grandfather of it.”