

# Still Life as a Model of Spacetime

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## Time and transience



Joris van Son, "Still Life of fruit", 1663.

- Still Life as a genre in art history: especially XVII and XX century, same time when science developed new notions of space and time
- First theme: philosophical representation of time as transience

## Time as a collection of instants



Margareta Haverman, "Still Life: a vase of flowers", 1716.

- *impossible* floral compositions (flowers from different seasons): representation of time as a collection of different instants

- Capturing a single instant in time:  
frozen time



Ori Gersht, “Exploding Floral Composition, N.4” .

- Transience represented through the presence of perishable (seafood, oysters, flowers, fruit): instant without duration



Cornelis de Heem, “Still Life with oysters, lemons and grapes”, circa 1660.

A modern take on the same theme:



Roy Lichtenstein, "Still Life with oysters, fish in a bowl and book", 1973.

## Linear time as a process



Pieter Claesz, "Tabletop Still Life", 1625.

- Time in the process of becoming:  
time as transformation
- half eaten mince pie, a half peeled and sliced lemon, a partly sliced loaf of bread, a half empty glass

## The flow of time

- music



Pieter Claesz, "Still Life with musical instruments", 1623.

- *tempus fugit; Vanitas*

- Time and music in cubism



Braques, "Still Life with violin", 1914.



Picasso, "Still Life with mandolin", 1924.

- Music no longer purely temporal: also embodiment of movement, as a change of observer viewpoint through time and space.



Juan Gris "Still life with Guitar", 1920.

## Decay and thermodynamic time

- time as consumption and decay, and irreversibility of the arrow of time (entropy)
- *Vanitas*: reminder of death and transient nature of life (skull: ultimate pointer to the irreversibility of the time arrow)



Pieter Claesz, "Still Life with skull and writing quill", 1628.



Cézanne, "Still Life with skull".



Picasso, "Still Life", 1945

## Algorithmic time: sea shells

- Pattern of growth, information (opposite of entropy)



Adriaen Coorte, "Still Life with seashell", 1698.



Max Ernst, "Sea Shell".

## Flow of time as flow of knowledge

- books as the symbol of permanence, memory, and knowledge transmission



Adam Bernaert, "Vanitas", 1660.

- Collections of books, partly opened, in the process of being read, accompanied by writing instruments: process of transformation, creation and transmission of knowledge



Unknown Dutch Master, "Still Life with Books" .

## From space and time to spacetime

- End of XIX century: curved spaces (Riemannian manifolds), non-Euclidean geometries
- End of XIX century/early XX century: Poincaré and Einstein, relativity, spacetime



Boccioni, “Development of a bottle in space”, 1912

- Early XX century: Futurism, dynamical properties of space

- XVII century Dutch still life paintings: spatial relations between displayed objects, absolute background frame (tabletop, walls)
- XVI and XVII century: space and measurement, Cartesian coordinates, instruments of geodesy



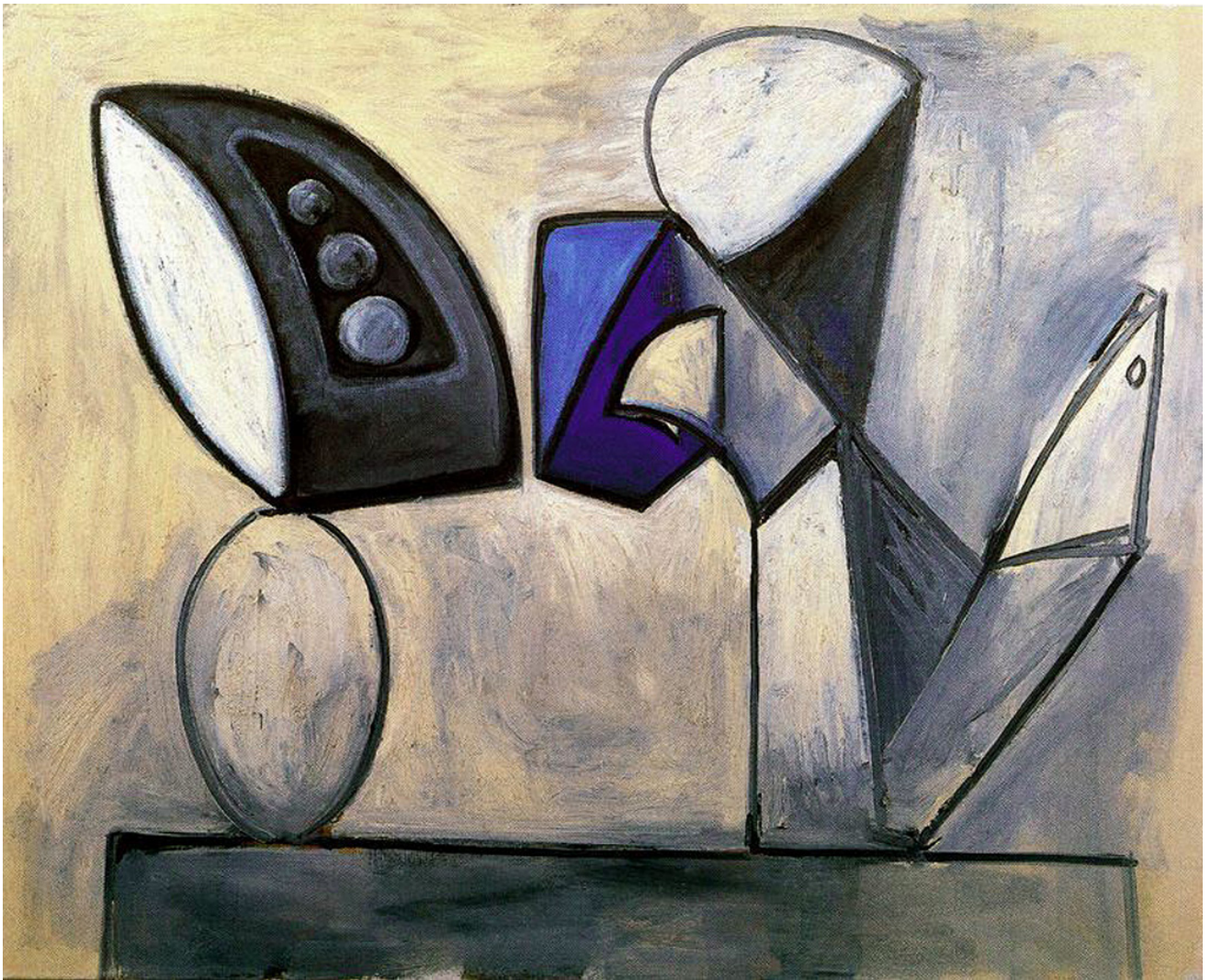
Hans Holbein, "The Ambassadors" (detail), 1533.

- XX century still life paintings: displayed objects define space itself (sketched backgrounds, light/shade, closed/open, relational/absolute)



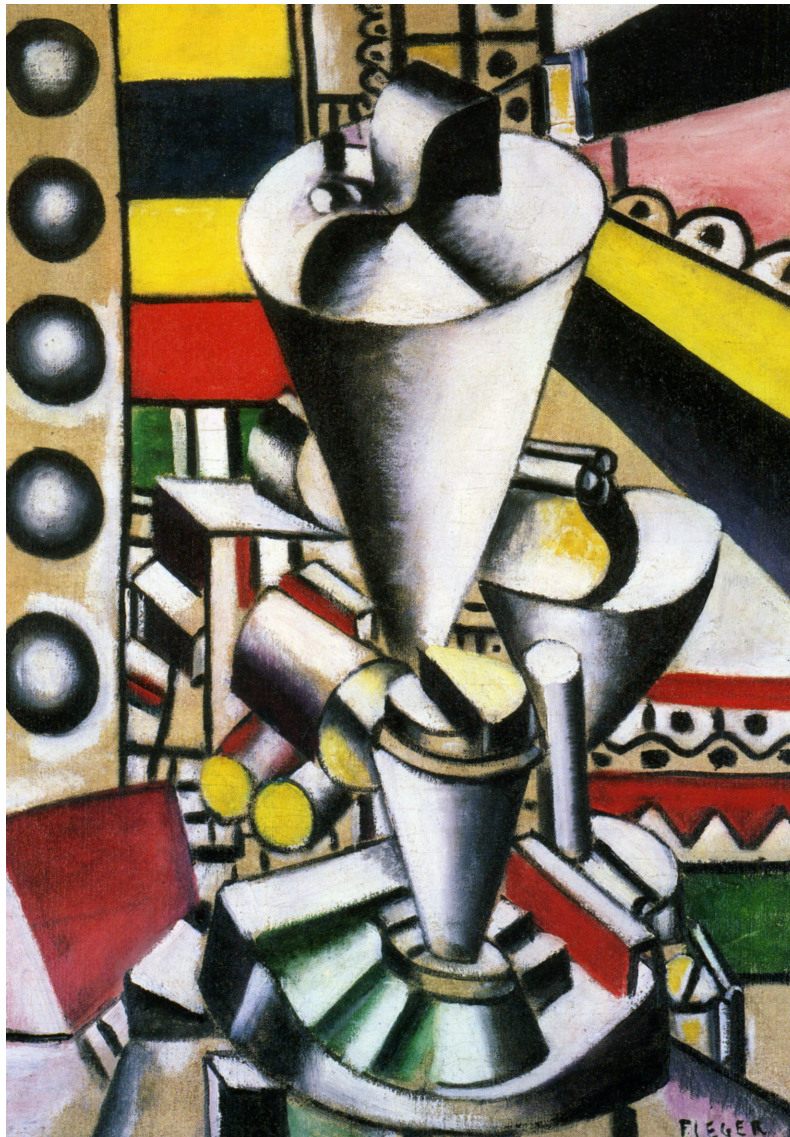
Guttuso, "Still Life with cans"

- depiction of space is goal: objects are unrecognizable volume-shapes whose purpose is the creation of space



Picasso, "Still Life", 1947

- new still life objects: machines (dynamical, space *in* the machine and time set *by* the machine, *ballet mécanique*)



Fernand Léger "Still Life in the Machine", 1918

- Space without time, pure *existence*, indefinite space, *apeiron*, volume and depth reduced, diffused light, ochre tints, stillness



Morandi, "Still Life", 1929-1930

## Cézanne's curved space

- no absolute coordinate system, but created by relations between objects: their volumes and their masses (no longer a background but a volume that curves and bends in the presence of other masses, like the fabric of spacetime)



Cézanne, "Rideau Pichet".

## Matisse's emergent flat space

- space not a primary concept but emerging from other data: flat compositions of *color* and their relation



Matisse, "Still Life with fruit".



Matisse, "Still Life with blue tablecloth", 1909



Matisse, "Blue Still Life", 1907

## Cubist spacetimes

- simultaneity of different observers, shapes broken and superimposed in different simultaneous perspectives (historically no direct relation to Einstein, but influence of Poincaré)



Picasso, "Still Life with bottle of rum", 1911

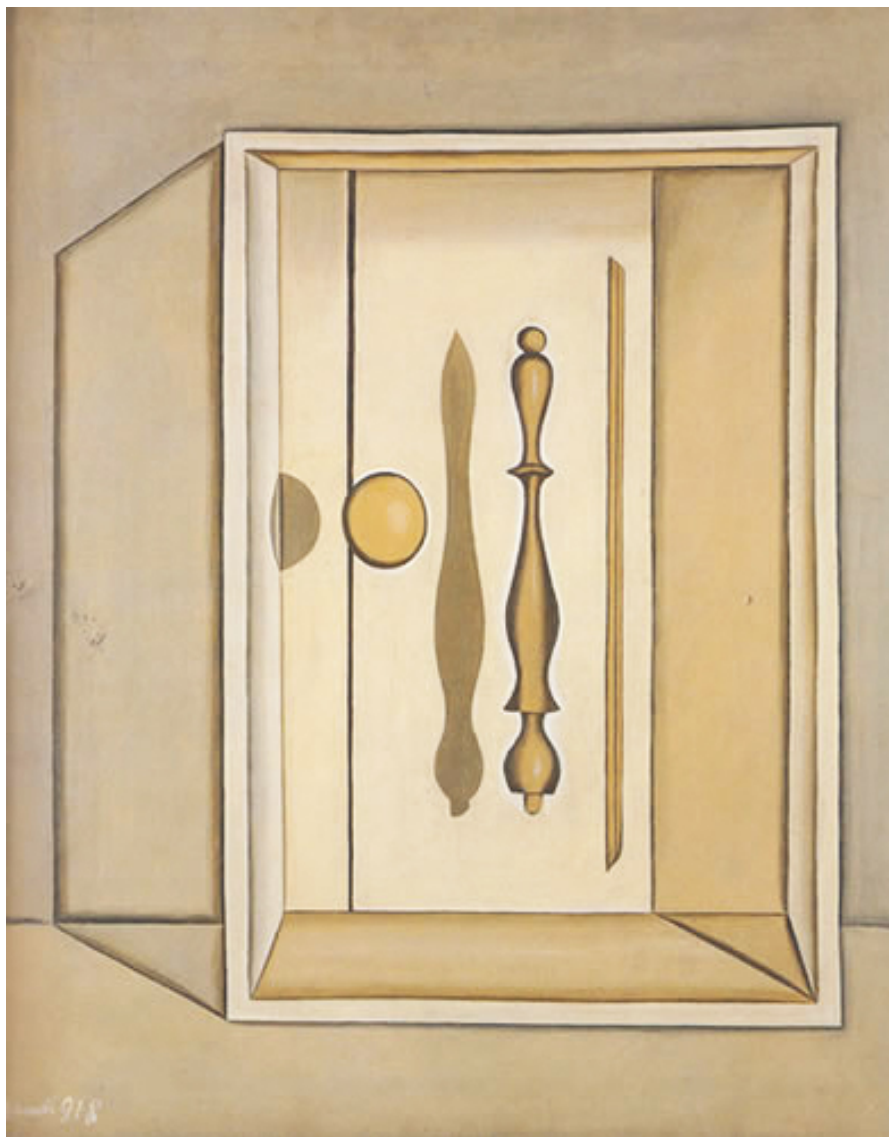
## Dadaism: spacetime as information blueprint

- Still Life becomes *conceptualized* and abstract, informational, removed from everyday role



Man Ray, "Still Life", 1933

- abstract shapes floating suspended inside a frame, thickness, volumes, shadows, curve and flat, relational positions shapes



Morandi, "Still Life", 1918

## De Chirico's "Metaphysics": theoretical spacetimes

- space representation, instruments of mathematical measurement, tilted tabletop, perspective fugue, Dutch and Cézanne type elements (self-referential), second level of conceptualization: representation or representation



De Chirico, "Still Life"

## Cornell's cosmic dioramas

- space in cosmic sense, astronomical distance



Joseph Cornell, "Assemblage"



Joseph Cornell, “Eclipsing Binargy Box” , 1972

- What next? What pictorial Still Life language for spacetime contemporary physics and mathematics? (extra dimensions, spin foams, vacuum bubbles, information, etc.)

A challenge for artists...