

At Tea With the Legendary Painter Wayne Thiebaud

By Hettie Judah | May 24, 2017



Wayne Thiebaud at afternoon tea in London, at the Corinthia hotel. India Hobson

The artist Wayne Thiebaud renders everyday delights strange and vibrant. Long celebrated for his peppy still life paintings and fantastical landscapes, the 96-year-old California native is currently in London for a survey show at the city's White Cube gallery.

It is the week of the Chelsea Flower Show, and the pale pink check of Thiebaud's shirt echoes the vases of hydrangeas and other blooms displayed in the dining room where the artist sits for afternoon tea, in the Corinthia hotel, where he is also staying. Food is a subject Thiebaud returns to often: That same pink also recalls the fondant fancies, wedding cake frosting, cotton candy and gumballs that he has painted with preternatural geometric discernment across many decades.

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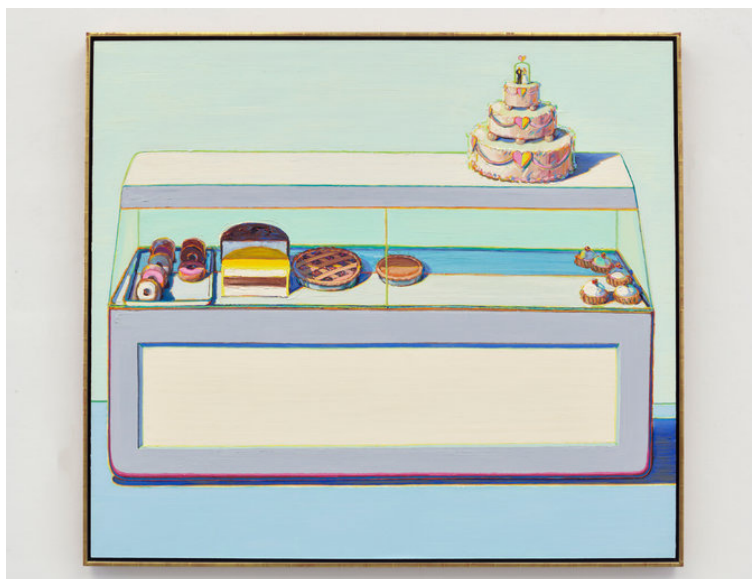
A keen tennis player, Thiebaud is no longer tempted by bright-toned calorific confections, but it was not always thus. A teenager during the depression, he developed a yearning for unattainable foodstuffs, which explains why the artist so often presents views of cakes and lunch counters through the reflective glass of shop windows and display cabinets. As a kid he used to sell papers on the street and recalls going into stores to ogle “big bins of candy, but they were encased, so you couldn’t get at ’em.”

Thiebaud worked as a cartoonist and commercial illustrator before serving in the U.S. Air Force during World War II. It was only at the end of the 1940s that he turned to study fine art. While influenced by the work of turn-of-the-century European artists as well as the artistic conventions of the Middle East and Japan, his graphic sensibilities and cartoonist’s wit informed his engagement with the aesthetic of everyday postwar America.

“I think I’m lucky – when I started painting food I thought it would be the end of me. I take it very seriously: I didn’t know if anyone else would,” he recalls. “Most good painters that I know always question their work. It’s a wonderful, enduring and lifelong challenge.”

Thiebaud taught, passionately, until retiring aged 70. He still refers to exercises he would assign his students when explaining the dynamics of his own works. On occasion he would even enlist their judgment: “I make my students criticize the work! At first they’re very hesitant to do it, but people know more than they think they do about criticism. Our bodies tell us empathically what is or is not ‘good space’, that something feels bad or does not belong.”

A look at the works on view in the 96-year-old Wayne Thiebaud’s new show at London’s White Cube. Here, “Bakery Case,” 1996.



He also counseled students not to judge their own efforts too quickly: “It’s difficult to see the work with any clarity until years later.” Thiebaud followed his own advice: The exhibition at White Cube features a number of paintings that the artist has returned to over the course of decades. Striking among these is “Green Dress,” a 1966 portrait of his daughter, the noted artists’ model Twinka Thiebaud. Thiebaud returned to rework the painting earlier this year.

He remains prolific, if self-critical, and recalls an anecdote about the great Japanese artist Hokusai, who proclaimed at the age of 90 that he might really learn to draw if given another 10 years. Does Thiebaud likewise feel that as an artist he continues to learn with age? “I often feel that I’m always starting over, in a way,” he says, on reflection.

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