

A Feast for the Eyes

Your mouth is not the only organ with great taste. Savor the museum's buffet of visual flavors as this gourmandizing guide explores how artists throughout the centuries and across the world have transformed the edible into the artistic.



GALLERY 136

Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) (1991)

by Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Go ahead. Take a piece of candy. No buzzers will buzz. No museum guards will stop you. The artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres actually intended his audience to share in this unique installation produced in memory of his partner, Ross Laycock, who died of an AIDS-related illness in 1991. Every day the candy pile starts at 175 pounds, corresponding to Ross's ideal body weight, and every day the pile shrinks as visitors consume the candies, simulating Ross's weight loss from his illness. Yet this work is not only about loss. The plentiful pile of brightly colored sweets incites ideas of abundance, sweetness, and happiness—feelings the artist associated with Ross and wished to share with his viewers.



GALLERY 131B

Food Vessel (Fangding) (c. 1700–c. 1050 B.C.), Chinese, Shang dynasty

Considering the stately grace and ornate decoration of this bronze food vessel, it is probably not surprising that this container was no ordinary cooking pot. Used to prepare and present food at ritual banquets, such elegant cauldrons often bore inscriptions indicating their owner's social status and statehood. While many ritual food containers imitated the rounded shapes of prehistoric ceramics, this austere rectangular form, known as *fangding*, was a unique invention of Shang bronze artisans. This *fangding* presents the fullest development of late Shang-dynasty style. Bold high-relief designs of birds and round bosses decorate each side; ogre masks top each of the four sturdy legs, and carbon-rich material defines the sunken areas of fine squared spirals.



GALLERY 155

***Fish Plate* (400–350 B.C.) Greek, Attica**

Fish held a unique place in the ancient Greek diet. Unlike the meat of pigs, sheep, and cattle, which had to be sacrificed before it could be eaten, fish could be enjoyed as a simple secular pleasure. Accordingly, potters and vase-painters in the fourth century B.C. prolifically produced fish plates that celebrated these delectable ocean delights. Here the artist depicted four species—a bream, a red mullet, a lettered perch, and a scorpion fish—with great anatomical accuracy, all of which might have been served on such a dish. The central well in the middle would have held sauces and reserved juices so that diners could savor every last drop of their succulent seafood.



GALLERY 173

***Wine, Cheese, and Fruit* (1857) by John F. Francis**

In the mid-19th century, opulent still-lives were highly popular with a growing middle class since they held both decorative potential and symbolic significance. The elaborate meal portrayed in *Wine, Cheese, and Fruit* served as an indication of wealth, especially with the inclusion of expensive imported wine and cognac. Yet the liquor also had other implications as the painting dates from a period when the temperance movement was particularly active, especially amongst the artisan class. The middle-class, on the other hand, generally believed their own superior restraint allowed them to enjoy alcohol without passing over into excess. This painting, in which the liquor is present in moderate amounts and water is included as an alternative beverage, would suggest its owner's middle-class standing as well as his “temperate” status.



GALLERY 247

***Figure with Meat* (1954) by Francis Bacon**

In the late 1940s, Bacon became obsessed with Diego Velázquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1649/50) and painted over 25 versions of it, transforming the celebrated masterpiece into grotesque, almost nightmarish compositions. In *Figure with Meat*, the prelate's elegant hands become gnarled with terror, and his sternly composed expression becomes smeared in an anguished scream. Most notably, the luxuriant red curtains flanking Velázquez's pope become two grisly sides of beef, an allusion to Rembrandt's haunting images of raw meat. The disturbing juxtaposition of pope and carcass can suggest the pope as a depraved butcher or as a victim like the slaughtered animals hanging behind him. Regardless of the interpretation, this painting is not likely to encourage anyone to fire up the barbecue.



GALLERY 216

***Are They Thinking about the Grape?* (1747)**

by François Boucher

Inspired by an 18th-century play, this Rococo pastoral illustrates a scene in which a love-struck shepherd and shepherdess feed each other grapes. Boucher's tongue-in-cheek title, *Are They Thinking About the Grape?*, pointedly undermines the apparent innocence of the encounter. The scene's theatricality becomes evident as the figures are too elegantly dressed for their supposed rustic origins. Yet rustic themes were quite en vogue at this time as Rousseau and other Enlightenment thinkers advocated a return to the purity of nature. The fashion for emulating peasant life even permeated the royal court, where Marie Antoinette donned country garb and strolled through the grounds of Versailles.

Now that your visual appetite is satisfied, how about attending to that rumbling in your stomach? The 28th Annual Taste of Chicago offers mouth-watering samplings from over 70 local restaurants June 27–July 6 in Grant Park. For more information, visit cityofchicago.org, click “Things To Do” and then “Festivals.”