

GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release



Opening on April 12

A Backward Glance: Giorgio Morandi and the Old Masters

Sponsored by





It gives me great satisfaction to present the exhibition *A Backward Glance. Giorgio Morandi and the Old Masters* at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, one more material example of Iberdrola's firm commitment to the promotion of culture. The show draws the visitor into the work of this great artist through a variety of prisms, ranging from direct contemplation of his productions to a full survey of his pictorial influences.

The Museum has thus succeeded in gathering a fascinating set of works by this 20th century Italian painter, together with creations by some of the artists of other periods who captivated him and influenced his work. In this way, tribute is paid both to Giorgio Morandi and to the Old Masters he admired.

Visitors to the exhibition will find themselves traveling through time as they move through the galleries of the Museum. Morandi's celebrated still lifes, to which his production was virtually devoted, are threaded together through the history of art with great works by the 17th century Spanish School, the Bolognese School, and the magnificent 18th century French painter Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin.

It is especially interesting to examine the way in which Morandi's painstaking compositions are in fact inspired by sources from the past. Timelessness definitively becomes a key concept for any consideration of his works, so proper to his time yet with such a profoundly classical air. Through its collaboration with one of the most internationally prestigious art centers, Iberdrola is responding to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11, whose initiatives include the conservation and restoration of the artistic and cultural heritage with the aim of helping to achieve more sustainable cities.

This is one of the 17 targets proposed in the SDGs defined by the United Nations for the year 2030, which the company has incorporated into its business strategy and its Statutes as part of the so-called Social Dividend, a concept that encompasses all the initiatives we launch with the aim of creating value for society.

I am sure this new exhibition will attract many art lovers and prove a new success for the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, which has now become a leading cultural institution both in our country and around the world. I should therefore like to congratulate its organizers, who have done a magnificent job in turning this project into a reality.

Ignacio S. Galán
Chairman of Iberdrola

A Backward Glance: Giorgio Morandi and the Old Masters

- April 12 – October 6, 2019
 - Curated by: Petra Joos, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, in collaboration with Giovanni Casini, and in consultation with Vivien Greene, Senior Curator of 19th- and Early 20th-Century Art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.
 - Sponsored by: Iberdrola
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- The Bolognese painter Giorgio Morandi represented everyday objects in his still lifes, distilling the mundane subject matter to its pure, essential form in his compositions.
 - This exhibition brings together, for the first time, Morandi's signature paintings and a selection of Old Master works that informed his artistic practice throughout his career.
 - Each of the three galleries creates a dialogue between Morandi's paintings and specific Old Master works and highlights prominent qualities the Italian artist absorbed from these precursors: the theatricality of 17th-century Spanish painting; the naturalism of the Italian *Seicento*; and the intimacy and geometry of Chardin.
 - Morandi concentrated on discrete details in the Old Master canvases that he admired, such as El Greco's flowers; Zurbarán's use of light to evince form; the humble details in the compositions of Crespí, an 18th-century Bolognese artist; and Chardin's houses of cards.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents *A Backward Glance: Giorgio Morandi and the Old Masters*. This survey of a great 20th-century Italian painter explores the relationships between his still lifes and some of his main art historical sources. Sponsored by Iberdrola, this exhibition brings together, for the first time, an extensive selection of Morandi's exceptional paintings and works by the Old Masters who impacted his artistic practice, which spanned over four decades, from post-World War I to the early 1960s.

"I felt that only an understanding of the most vital works that painting had produced through the past centuries could guide me in finding my own way." Giorgio Morandi

Morandi was an insightful student of art history who had multiple referents in mind when developing his artistic practice. The exhibition explores historical influences, all of which precede the 19th century, from three different European countries: 17th-century Spanish painting and the tradition of the *bodegón*; the Bolognese school of painting from the late 16th to early 18th centuries; and the 18th-century, French painter Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin. Each section examines a feature prominent in Morandi's works: the theatricality of the Spaniards, the naturalism of the Italian *Seicento*, and the intimacy and geometry of Chardin.

Beginning in 1920 Giorgio Morandi (b. 1890, Bologna; d. 1964) devoted himself to the analysis of objects (bottles, flower vases, boxes, tins) and landscapes, which he reduced to their essential forms. The artist rendered his favorite objects again and again arranging them in subtly different ways, focusing on the infinite pictorial possibilities these trivial, domestic items provided. His figurative works stand out from other 20th-century paintings for their unique intensity, beauty, and timelessness. Representing the most mundane objects, Morandi's still lifes, which are extraordinarily personal in terms of composition and the use of color and light, reveal the artist's pursuit of pure and concentrated forms.

Throughout his career, Morandi looked to several European schools of painting. The still lifes that he created between the 1920s and the early 1960s evidence the power of the art he studied. However, Morandi only saw a few of the actual paintings that inspired him in person at museums or in exhibitions. Primarily, he discovered Old Master works through reproductions in books and journals or through art historical scholarship.

THE EXHIBITION

Gallery 305. Morandi and the Still-life Tradition

Morandi's awareness of Spanish Golden Age painters dovetails with the rediscovery of these masters in Italy. Morandi's friend, the art historian and critic Roberto Longhi drew attention to Diego Velázquez and Francisco de Zurbarán in his writings. In the early 1910s, Florentine artist and critic Ardengo Soffici revived Zurbarán, describing him as avant-garde in an article published in his modernist magazine *La Voce*, a publication that Morandi read. In 1930, Longhi curated the exhibition *Gli antichi pittori spagnoli della collezione Contini-Bonacossi* at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome, the largest collection of Spanish Old Masters in Italy; this included an impressive group of paintings by El Greco (Doménikos Theotokópoulos), Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, Velázquez, and Zurbarán. The location of the exhibition was important, since the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna was the leading Italian museum of 19th- and 20th-century art. Thus, presenting these paintings there automatically characterized them as "avant-garde." In the introduction to the Contini-Bonacossi exhibition catalogue, Longhi stressed the importance of the presentation for contemporary artists, and he stated that Zurbarán was the "greatest builder of form with light, after Caravaggio and before Cézanne," describing him as a proto-modernist artist.

A particularly illuminating episode regarding El Greco, which occurred in ca. 1918–19, testifies to Morandi's interest in Spanish Golden Age art. Morandi's friend, the literary critic Giuseppe Raimondi, recalled a visit he made to the painter's house, where he saw a small book on El Greco. Pointing to a reproduction of an Assumption or an Annunciation the size of a postage stamp, Morandi directed his friend's attention to the flowers at the feet of the angels and stated: "No modern painter has painted flowers like these. Perhaps only Renoir..." The attention he paid to El Greco's flowers is evident in some of his own flower paintings. In the first gallery, Morandi's vases are juxtaposed to a 17th-century copy of El Greco that evidences the Old Master's virtuosity in depicting plants, ivy in this particular case. This gallery also includes some of Morandi's still lifes, which echo the harmonious compositions by painters such as Zurbarán and Meléndez.

Gallery 306. Morandi. A New *Incamminato*

In 1935, Robert Longhi published a history of the Bolognese School entitled *Momenti della pittura bolognese*. He articulated that the overarching characteristic of Bolognese painting was an immediate expressive interpretation of naturalism. Significantly, he concluded his account with Giorgio Morandi, describing his work as that of a new “incamminato” (someone on the right path). According to Longhi’s narrative, after the *Trecento* and the anticlassical, expressionistic art Vitale da Bologna created, the “heroes” were the three Carracci brothers, Annibale, Agostino, and Ludovico, Baroque painters active in the late 1500s and early 1600s. The Carraccis’ tenets lived on in the art school they founded around 1582, the “Accademia degli Incamminati,” where they taught a modern pictorial style grounded in established artistic traditions. Likewise, Longhi noted that Morandi mined the past to find his way through the “most troublesome droughts” of modern painting.

Morandi paid attention to his Baroque forerunners and subsequent influences, although he focused on very specific elements within these images. Art historian Francesco Arcangeli, another friend of the artist, recalled a visit to the Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna. When viewing Guido Reni’s masterpiece *Madonna and Child in Glory with the Patron Saints of Bologna* (also known as the *Pala della Peste* or the *Altarpiece of the Bubonic Plague*, 1630), Morandi concentrated on a small, trivial detail at the bottom of the painting: a depiction of the city of Bologna, the treatment of which he related to his own compositional concerns. Even more telling is the presence in Morandi’s private collection of four small paintings by the Bolognese Giuseppe Maria Crespi. Longhi had addressed Crespi’s brilliance in his *Momenti della pittura bolognese*. Crespi’s genre scenes often feature still lifes. In the second gallery, the Crespi paintings are shown in dialogue with Morandi’s still lifes.

Gallery 307. Space and *Matière*: Chardin and Morandi

Of all the Old Masters, Morandi most admired the French genre painter Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin. Morandi was prescient in his judgement, since the 18th-century artist had largely been ignored in Italy during the pre-World War II era. Initially learning about Chardin through publications, Morandi may have read the article that critic Henri de Prureaux published in 1911 in the avant-garde magazine *La Voce*, in which he argued that Chardin had invented the modern self-referential still life. Morandi saw reproductions of Chardin’s works for the first time in French periodicals from the 1920s like *L’Amour de l’Art*. Around the same time, in 1932, the journal *Valori Plastici* produced and distributed (in Italy) an edition of the richly illustrated Chardin monograph by André de Ridder.

Morandi hung plates from de Ridder’s book on the walls of his studio, keeping these models in constant sight. Even more revealing is his visit to the Kunstmuseum in Winterthur in June 1956. In the Reinhart collection he saw two Chardins: *Still Life with Pomegranates and Grapes* (1763) and a version of *Young Man Building a House of Cards* (after 1735). In the latter, Morandi focused on the “arrangement of the cards,” according to the director of the Kunstmuseum, Heinz Keller, who accompanied the artist on his tour. After, Morandi executed a series of works that echo Chardin’s compositional concerns in *Young Man Building a House of Cards* (ca. 1736–37), emphasizing their shared interest in seriality.

The third gallery presents a selection of Morandi's still lifes together with a Chardin still life containing similar elements, such as a cloth cascading off a table. Even more instructive are Chardin's works of a boy building a house of cards. Morandi emulated the geometric forms of the houses of cards in his arrangements of boxes visible in many works on view in this gallery.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Bologna, Giorgio Morandi (b. 1890; d. 1964) produced his timeless still lifes including those containing vases of flowers, and landscapes in his studio-bedroom in his hometown. Between 1907 and 1913, Morandi studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti of Bologna and had fleeting contact with Italian Futurism, Italy's iconoclastic avant-garde. In 1919-20, he joined artists including Carlo Carrà and Mario Sironi, as well as Giorgio de Chirico, in the short-lived Pittura Metafisica movement. After this interlude, Morandi embarked on a personal artistic quest to explore the genre of the still life; he imbued the inanimate objects in his contained compositions with an almost anthropomorphic presence. Coinciding with the emergence of abstraction, the return to order, and the international heterodoxy which characterized the post-World War II period, Morandi's works defy classification.

DIDAKTIKA

This exhibition's didactic space includes a number of visual games entitled *Morandi's Views*. The experience starts with an analysis of individual Morandi works. These go beyond his still lifes, to include his self-portraits and landscapes, and highlight Morandi's study of great masters such as Giovanni Bellini, Paul Cézanne, Giovanni Costa, Giotto, Nicolas Poussin, and Henri Rousseau. Morandi's forms; his use of light and shadow; the architecture of Bologna; his mediums, which range from oil on canvas to engravings; his visits to museums and galleries in Florence, such as the Uffizi; along with his study of classical works through publications or postcards are all discovered by taking part in this experience.

Activities

Shared Reflections*

Unique tours led by Museum professionals.

- Curatorial Vision with Petra Joos, exhibition curator (May 8).
- Key Concepts with Luz Maguregui, Education Coordinator (May 15).

*Sponsored by Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre

Film series: *Afternoons of Cinema "alla Morandi"* (May 25-26)

A selection of film masterpieces in which Morandi's imprimatur is clear: from Federico Fellini to Luca Guadagnino and Michelangelo Antonioni.

Creative session: *A Photographic Look at Morandi's Still Lifes* (May 17)

Photography workshop spotlighting the still life. Vases, candles, flowers, fruit, skulls, and Morandi's particular vision led by artist Elssie Ansareo, whose work is in the Museum Collection.

Cover image:

Giorgio Morandi

Still Life (Natura morta), 1956

Oil on canvas

36 x 45.7 cm

Fondation Mattioli Rossi, Switzerland

© Giorgio Morandi, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2019

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1. Giorgio Morandi

Still Life (Natura morta), 1920

Oil on canvas

30.5 x 44.5 cm

Istituzione Bologna Musei/Museo Morandi

© Giorgio Morandi, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2019



2. Giorgio Morandi

Still Life with Fruit (Natura morta con frutta), 1927

Oil on canvas

27 x 38.5 cm

Fondazione Magnani Rocca, Mamiano di Traversetolo (Parma), Italy

© Giorgio Morandi, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2019



3. Giorgio Morandi

Still Life (Natura morta), 1931

Oil on canvas

54 x 64 cm

Fondation Mattioli Rossi, Switzerland

© Giorgio Morandi, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2019



4. Giorgio Morandi

Still Life (Natura morta), 1931

Oil on canvas

42 x 42 cm

Fondation Mattioli Rossi, Switzerland

© Giorgio Morandi, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2019



5. Giorgio Morandi
Still Life (Natura morta), 1936
Oil on canvas
33 x 37 cm
Fondazione Magnani Rocca, Mamiano di Traversetolo (Parma), Italy
© Giorgio Morandi, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2019



6. Giorgio Morandi
Flowers [Fiori (Vaso di Fiori)], 1947
Oil on canvas
29.9 x 35.1 cm
Fondazione di Studi di Storia dell'Arte Roberto Longhi, Florence
© Giorgio Morandi, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2019



7. Giorgio Morandi
Still Life (Natura morta), 1951
Oil on canvas
36 x 40 cm
Istituzione Bologna Musei/Museo Morandi
© Giorgio Morandi, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2019



8. Giorgio Morandi
Still Life (Natura morta), 1955
Oil on canvas
35 x 40 cm
Fondation Mattioli Rossi, Switzerland
© Giorgio Morandi, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2019



9. Giorgio Morandi
Still Life (Natura morta), 1955
Oil on canvas
25.5 x 30.5 cm
Kunst Museum Winterthur, Dr. Heinz Keller Bequest, 1984
© Giorgio Morandi, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2019



10. Giorgio Morandi
Still Life (Natura morta), 1956
Oil on canvas
40.7 x 36.2 cm
Augusto and Francesca Giovanardi Collection
© Giorgio Morandi, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2019



11. Giorgio Morandi

Still Life (Natura morta), 1956

Oil on canvas

36 x 45.7 cm

Fondation Mattioli Rossi, Switzerland

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12. Giorgio Morandi

Still Life (Natura morta), 1949

Oil on canvas

30 x 45 cm

Nahmad Collection

© Giorgio Morandi, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2019



13. Giorgio Morandi

Still Life (Natura morta), 1946

Oil on canvas

25 x 46.4 cm

Nahmad Collection

© Giorgio Morandi, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2019



14. Giorgio Morandi

Flowers (Fiori), 1950

Oil on canvas

35 x 26.5 cm

Fondation Mattioli Rossi, Switzerland

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