

November 5, 2002

art

A Matter of Perspective

BY CATHERINE DORSEY

UNTIL RECENT TIMES, still life centered solely on illusionism. But modern painters, beginning with the Impressionists, began to attempt capturing the essence of an arrangement rather than its exact appearance. Still-life painting has been around since ancient times; wall paintings from Pompeii and Roman mosaics still exist. And the earliest known anecdote centers around the Greek still life painter Zeuxis, born around 464 B.C.

Considered by many of his day to be the most accomplished painter, Zeuxis' *tromp l'oeil* works created a stunning illusion of reality. When he was invited

to participate in a contest with the painter Parrhasius, Zeuxis was sure he had won when the birds tried to peck the realistically rendered raisins from his painting. Then Parrhasius invited him to lift the fabric drape covering his own painting. Zeuxis, upon trying, discovered that the drape was actually part of the painted image. He conceded immediately that Parrhasius was the more accomplished artist: while Zeuxis had been able to fool the birds, Parrhasius had been able to fool a fellow artist.

Though the subject matter of still-life paintings has not changed all that radically over the centuries, the artist's interpretation of his/her subject has. Zeuxis, a group of contemporary still life painters founded in 1994, attempts to present the genre of still life from a unique perspective. A core group of 24 nationally known artists often invite several additional artists to participate in the group's traveling shows.

What makes Zeuxis so successful as a group is not their similarities: it is their won-

derful and absolute diversity. On display at Norfolk's Hermitage Foundation Museum, *Uncommon Perspectives: A Collaborative Still Life Project by Zeuxis* seeks not so much to trick the eye as to engage the mind.

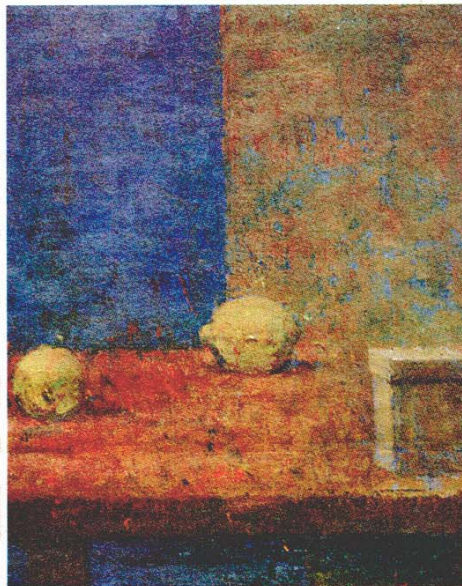
The group's founding philosophy was to offer its artists a forum for comparison — to be able to step back and objectively contrast their own works with those of their peers. Viewers will immediately be swept up in the same pursuit.

Working within identical parameters — a 16-by-20-inch canvas — each Zeuxis member has rendered a unique interpretation. Two works by each artist, hung near but not adjacent to each other, offer the first point of comparison.

Because sizes are uniform there is nothing to distract from each varied approach to surface and subject. The eye traces a path from Anthony Martino's ornate, paint-encrusted surfaces to the sublime calm of Joseph Byrne's *Lemons and Box*, the stripped down, Rothko-influenced abstract expressionist style of Victor Pesce. William Barnes, a professor at William and Mary, offers up a jewel-like tapestry of colorful daubs of paint. Stan Friedman imagines cityscapes at every turn, transforming a dusty shelf of paint cans and caulk tubes into a sultry city skyline.

In the Greek artist Zeuxis' time, it was easy to see that the painter who best tricked the eye was the winner of the contest. It is evident from the painters' group Zeuxis that an artist can inspire us to see beyond the objects in a painting into the atmosphere that surrounds them and the spirit that inhabits them. And that is the mark, today, of a masterful painter.

The exhibit continues through November 17. Call 423-2052. ■



Joseph Byrne's *Lemons and Box* is one of the many interpretations of the still-life genre on exhibit at the Hermitage Foundation Museum.