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Master who made the mundane magical

EXHIBITION

GIORGIO MORANDI: LINES OF POETRY

ESTORICK COLLECTION,
LONDON N1

There is a case for describing Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964) as the most curious artist of the 20th century. Born in Bologna, he led a monastic existence, sharing an apartment in the Italian city with his mother until her death in 1950. Reserved and unusually tall, he never married and rarely travelled. He visited Florence, where he studied the Old Masters, and the village of Grizzana, outside Bologna, where he passed his summers painting landscapes.

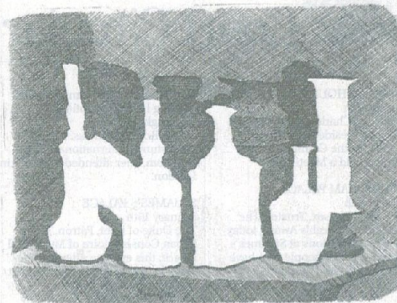
Although in his twenties he flirted with Futurism and Cubism, and was drawn to the Metaphysical paintings of Giorgio de Chirico, he became famous for poetic, idiosyncratic still lifes that ran counter to the prevailing tendencies of modern art. His quiet, small-scale compositions feel as secluded from the outside world as he was in private.

On paper, then, he could be written off as an oddball. Certainly it is tempting to imagine him as isolated and ascetic. Yet he won a prize for painting at the 1948 Venice Biennale, and has a reputation as the quintessential artist's artist.

His best-known canvases present domestic objects such as bottles, tins, coffee pots, jugs, pitchers, and sundry ceramic vessels arranged variously on table tops. I was lucky enough to see a retrospective of his work at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2008: what stayed with me was the contemplative intensity and subtle sensuousness of paintings that might have felt infinitely repetitive, but didn't. Morandi's art has a timeless, monumental quality – which is surprising, given the homespun modesty of his subject matter.

There aren't any oil paintings in *Giorgio Morandi: Lines of Poetry*, a new exhibition at the Estorick Collection in north London, but similar qualities are evident in the 80 or so works of art that are on show – predominantly etchings, as well as four late, almost abstract watercolours.

Split across two galleries, the exhibition is arranged chronologically, offering a balanced account of the artist's career as a printmaker. To begin with, we see a couple of Cézanne-inspired landscapes from 1912 and 1913, each one full of vigorous vertical marks. It isn't long, though, before we encounter a still life. In two tiny prints from 1921, Morandi presented



Heaven-sent messengers: 'Still Life of Vases on a Table'

first a dappled, spiralling seashell (volute-like forms would become important compositional motifs), and then a lemon to the left of a half-cut loaf of bread. Neither piece is major – the lemon is barely bigger than a thumbnail. But each one catches and holds the eye. *Still Life with Bread and Lemon* establishes several important concerns, which the artist would later elaborate: an interest in the relationship between light and shade, as well as the dialogue between mute objects, animated by the space between them.

Still Life with Basket of Bread of the same year involves more objects – a bottle, a cup or tankard, an open tin box with a flapping lid, and a basket

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with a hooped handle containing a semi-abstract shape denoting a hunk of squidgy bread. Accordingly it receives more substantial treatment: the variety of marks representing shadow and brightness is remarkable, while the background contains subtle bands of heavier cross-hatching, like the manifestation of a force field radiating from the central players. The dark areas appear velvety and tactile.

The years between 1920 and 1933 were blessed for Morandi's printmaking. As well as etchings of flowers, often arranged in a striped vase, he produced many landscapes featuring sunlit hillsides speckled with thickset villas and tapering trees. There is a clear analogy between the composition of these latter works and that of his still lifes, which relish the interplay between contrasting forms such as attenuated bottles, or jugs

and vases with spouts like swans' necks, versus squat, blocky boxes.

In the second room of the exhibition, though, it is the still lifes that are most memorable. The compositions become more complex – indeed, in the context of what has come before, they start to feel baroque. They are also pregnant with metaphor. Spend a few minutes looking at *Large Still Life with Paraffin Lamp* (1930), for instance, and the tall, clustered forms will start to appear like the towers of a sparkling city.

In the foreground of another striking image, from 1931, Morandi presents a row of vases in inverse silhouette: the vessels appear flat, blank and bright white, their outlines defined by dark forms behind. They have an ethereal quality, like heaven-sent messengers materialising before our eyes.

By the Forties, Morandi was achieving an extensive array of alluring greys.

He could summon sharp, silvery radiance, and thundery gloom like smudged charcoal. He also became a master at conveying the properties of different materials: in *Large Circular Still Life with Bottle and Three Objects* (1946), light glints on the translucent glaze of the ceramic bowl in the foreground just so. That said, he also occasionally threatened his images with abstraction, offering up groups of wraithlike oblongs, lozenges and cylinders suspended in a grey mist. As a result, despite similar subject matter, each print has its own distinct personality.

Why was Morandi so obsessed with everyday bric-a-brac? And how did he manage to make it so magical and mysterious? I don't have ready answers to these questions, but I'm glad that the Estorick's delightful exhibition made me consider them afresh.

Until April 7. Information:
020 7704 9522;
estorickcollection.com

Ⓒ RATING *****
Alastair Sooke