long northern winter be without squash, the base of the wintertime food pyramid of the hundred miler? Poor’s painting of autumnal abundance—basically, a cornucopia-type image in which the particular suggest the many available—celebrates not only the present moment of fresh grapes, crisp apples, and mature squash, but also the future promise, of wine, cider, and a well-stocked root cellar for Thanksgiving. Looking at this arrangement full of literal “raw material,” one cannot help but think “I wonder if those are wine grapes,” or “would those apples make a good pie?” or even “squash just always says November and Thanksgiving.” In acknowledging that these all count as “somethings,” the subversion that Bryson describes comes to the fore. There’s nothing particularly heroic about a squash or an apple or a bunch of grapes... but in the right hands, there is everything of lasting importance in them.

And that importance is what the artist wished to express in his Autumn Still Life, and in his art in general, that the natural world, and the life and things in it, are worthy of our attention. The catalogue for a 1961 retrospective exhibition of Poor’s work, held at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, provides a fitting conclusion at the end of its commentary: “[Poor] himself sums up his aims more briefly: “The only message that I may have is that I find the world exciting and beautiful”... which is the message that most of us want to get from a work of art.”

Lisa Heldke, Professor of Philosophy and Raymond and Florence Sponberg Chair in Ethics
Donald Myers, Director, Hillstrom Museum of Art, and Instructor, Department of Art and Art History

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Bowell, Peyton, Jr., Varnum Poor, New York, 1941.
Malaguzzi, Silvia, Food and Feasting in Art, translated by Brian Phillips, Los Angeles, 2006.

Lisa Heldke and Donald Myers

Hillstrom Museum of Art

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It might be interesting to speculate on what would happen if one were to attempt to consider Henry Varnum Poor’s Autumn Still Life in light of Beyron’s concepts of “meagalographic” versus “chrographographic.” In other words, if the painting of an abundant full harvest were viewed as an instance of the “lavishing of attention” on some seemingly prosaic foodstuffs, or as an instance of renouncing “normal human priorities.” Such a reading of the painting no doubt seems more plausible today than it would have a mere five or ten years ago.

ALTERNATIVE AGRICULTURE AND THE STILL LIFE

The last decade has seen an explosion of alternative agricultural activity in the United States. This is an era in which invitations to “eat local” spread through all the new farmers’ markets emerge almost daily, as organic garden grows on the White House lawn, and locally-grown foods are the fastest-developing sector of the retail food market. In such an atmosphere, many eaters are, in fact, reversing the “worldly mode of seeing,” as they turn their careful, nearly-worshipful gazes to the contents of the grocery bag they just picked up from the local organic vegetable farm, the CSA (“community-supported agriculture”) farm from which they purchased a vegetable share.

It is not possible to look at a painting of squash, apples and grapes today the same way as five years ago. Not now, after Barbara Kingsolver’s Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life (2007), Michael Pollan’s The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A True Story of Foraging and Fish Farming in the American West (2006), Frances Moore Lappé’s Down to Earth: The Next Diet for a Small Planet (2002) and Barbara Kingsolver’s Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life (2007). Not after cutting open a pale, white “Beauty Heart” radish to reveal the gorgeous crimson-pink flesh that gives it its name. Not after receiving a basket of heirloom tomatoes—a riotous abundance of patterns, shapes, colors and textures, from Black Krim to Green Zebra, or from Prudens Purple to Caspian Pink. And not after luxuriously inhaling the sweet perfume of bunches of Concord grapes at the local food co-op.

Poor, given his lifelong interest in being a naturalist, would certainly have been sympathetic to the ideals of the CSA, of organic food, and of locally grown produce. His son Peter notes the many kinds of fruit and flowers that Poor and his family tended at Crow House. And an article by Harry Salpeter, published in Esquire Magazine in 1938 and titled “Henry Poor: Art’s Robinson Crusoe,” noted of Poor, “He has a definite farming instinct in his background!” stating further that “Poor is not at war with his world. As for his farming instinct, that gets itself expressed in the raising of flowers, in the growing of grapes and the making of wine. He used to keep a garden....” And Poor’s attentiveness to the importance of locale is evidenced in his comments about clay in his book From Mud Into Immortality. He noted, “whenever I drive and find clay exposed in roadside cuts I gather it, carry it home and, when I find time, make some simple bowls. Then in my imagination I can see the beautiful and useful things which could come from that region, could uniquely characterize the place....” Poor continued in this vein, “This sort of regionalism we have unfortunately left behind, and in doing so have lost more than we have gained. Who with a sense of taste would not gladly exchange our packaged and universally marketed bread, properly “vitamin enriched,” for the loaves from ovens of any French or Italian town, made from the villagers’ own wheat?”

The concepts expressed in these statements indicate a philosophy akin to the ideals of locally produced foods that are characteristic of their particular region. Poor might have been writing for a twenty-first century locavore audience when he later noted, “If you can’t dig clay in your own backyard, try to get it locally.”

The alternative-agriculture explosion has encouraged alternative ways of eating, ways that reconnect palates to the seasons of the year (strawberries in June, not January), to the soil and climate of one’s locality (apples, not oranges as the daily snack of Minnesotans), and to the lives and livelihoods of the people who actually grow the food (CSAs, farmers’ markets, fair trade cooperatives). One need not sign on to the “hundred mile diet,” eschewing all coffee and tea, oranges and chocolate, in order to find something appealing and exciting in this movement for eaters. In inviting one to rethink how one eats, it also invites a reconsideration of how what is eaten is seen, and how one “sees” what role eating has in one’s life, and it also expands the possible aesthetic meaning and significance that food can carry.

One need not move to the level of the symbolic or allegorical in order to find meaning and importance in the images in Poor’s painting (not would he wish it). One might wisely suggest that “sometimes an acorn squash is just an acorn squash,” but, after all, being an acorn squash is no trivial thing. Autumn Still Life is all about fall in rural New York, where the apples and grapes are world-renowned. And what would a
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Few forms of art invite museum visitors to engage in attempts at symbolic interpretation more readily than does the still life. The symbolic potential of the average still life is nothing short of epic, as is shown by reference tools such as Silvia Malaguzzi's encyclopedic guide to food in art, which documents the historical iconography of all manner of foodstuffs used in paintings, from grapes (the Passion of Christ, autumn) and apples (the fall of humankind and other meanings) to vegetables in general (Nature, seasons, divine providence and health). As the philosopher of art and food Carolyn Korsmeyer notes in her 1999 study Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy, foods in still life paintings often come freighted with any number of kinds of meaning. They may denote the sense of taste, as in allegorical paintings of the five senses that warn of the dangers of gluttony, or they may carry spiritual meaning, as when bread and wine appear in a painting to illustrate the union of “the communicant with God.”

The common tendency to approach all still life paintings as if they were mirrors, aimed allegories for life, death, and the passage between, is no doubt both one of the causes and one of the consequences of a tendency Korsmeyer identifies—namely, the “bulldozing assessment” of the genre. She notes that still life “does not traditionally occupy a place of high esteem in art theory,” and “paintings wholly devoted to the depiction of items of the kitchen or the dining room have come in for their share of derogatory analysis.” Korsmeyer understands this designation as arising in no small part from the very hierarchy of the senses so artfully depicted in some of the allegorical still life paintings she cites, such as the seventeenth-century Still Life with Chocolate (The Five Senses) by French painter Lubin Baugin (c.1612-1668). On that hierarchy, taste is far beneath the elevated senses of sight and hearing. Tasting connects directly with bodies—and paintings that remind one of taste remind viewers that they are bodily.

Indeed, bodily nature underpins a second hierarchy, to which that of taste is intimately connected, namely the gendered hierarchy of masculinity and femininity. Korsmeyer observes that everyday world associations of kitchens, cooking and food with women find artistic expression in works that link food with femininity. Associations between food and femininity can take many forms, including overindulgence, sensuality, and the erotic—but perhaps even more interesting is the way in which still life painting, as a genre, refers to a space that is coded feminine because of nothing more than its association with the food, and the mundane. Korsmeyer quotes art historian Norman Bryson and his theoretical study Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting (1990), which distinguishes between “megalographic” paintings—which those depict subjects of unusual, high significance such as wars, coronations, death and transfiguration—and “botographic” paintings—those that attend to the mundane, the minute, the ordinary everyday. Korsmeyer notes that rhopographic works, of which still life paintings are a prime example, are “feminine [which is not to say feminist] in the sense that [they] subvert the claims of masculine heroes to break free from routine and the daily grind in order to achieve something of lasting importance.” The genre is feminine “in the sense that the polarity between masculine and feminine describes the polarity between individual heroic achievement and the domestic or caretaker maintenance.”

Still life paintings, in short, can teach about what matters in the deepest sense, by using the most ordinary of objects. Korsmeyer observes that Bryson’s understanding of still life painting “refers not to the appetite of hunger at all, but to its...
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Still life had nearly always been a crucial genre for Poor. His earliest known extant work is a still life drawing of chrysanthemums in a vase, recently acquired by the Birger Sandzén Memorial Art Gallery in Lindsborg, Kansas. The first painting Poor ever exhibited was a still life done while a student at Stanford. It was only his third painting ever, and his instructor thought so highly of the depiction of a copper pan, a jug and two pears (unlocated), that he sent it to an exhibition in Los Angeles. Poor described the creation of that painting in a letter to his parents, noting that he did not apply the paint with just brushes, but also a palette knife and even his fingers. He frequently employed such unusual applications, he would also scratch lines in wet pigment with the end of his brush, to emphasize forms. The Hillstrom Foundation has preserved some of this unorthodox handling of paint, as in the thick passages of tan paint near the grapes on the left and the acorn squash on the right, spread on with his palette knife.

Poor was very interested in the tension between implied depth in an illusionistic painting and the actual flatness of the painting’s surface. He discussed this idea in an article titled “Boots That Grow,” published in December, 1940 in the Magazine of Art, where he praised the “tension between flat and deep” to be found in the work of his artistic hero Cézanne. Some of that tension is evident in the Hillstrom painting, as in the way its grapes vacillate between having depth and mass, and being flat, purple-colored circles circumscribed by the artist’s characteristic painted lines. That tension is enhanced by the contrast of the relatively flat grapes with the more modeled shapes of the apples, which the artist, Cézanne’s influence in their faceted and form-defining handling of color. The characteristics of the Hillstrom still life rank it with other important works by the artist in that genre. Among the museums that acquired Poor’s still life paintings was the
POOR'S PHILOSOPHY OF ART AND STYLE

An Artist Sees Alaska was Poor's 1945 travelogue of his experience in the War Artists Unit, and it contains numerous insights into his philosophy of art. Two other publications are also key documents for understanding Poor's attitude toward art. One is the short-lived Reality a Journal of Artists' Opinions, which appeared in the early 1950s as a response by Poor and like-minded artists to museums and critics who felt favored Abstract Expressionism at the expense of realist art. Another publication from the 1950s was A Book of Pottery from Mud into Immortality (1958), his technical guide to wheel-thrown ceramics that also contains general comments on art in general.

Poor's philosophy of art was remarkably consistent over his career, and its most basic tenet was that art should be based on nature. While he did not favor veristic realism, he felt the best art arose from an artist's enthusiasm for something seen in the real world, and that when the artist conveyed that excitement through a personal vision, the best art resulted. Poor had encountered non-representational art such as that of Russian Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) when he was first abroad, and he considered such work to be only decorative; and while the decorative element was important, it needed to be coupled with a basis in reality. In Poor's view, a degree of abstraction was acceptable and even necessary, but complete abandonment of imagery was not good art.

Poor endorsed the image of the artist in an ivory tower. He did not think art should have an expository purpose (even though in his personal life he was concerned with social justice). In a passage on his artistic credos from a 1941 monograph on Poor by Peyton Bower, Jr., he discussed art's "Messianic" function, which for him did not mean challenging injustice but, rather, conveying to viewers an artist's love and excitement for the visible, natural world. Several passages in Poor's writings can be cited to illustrate this attitude. The Spring, 1953 issue of Reality, included his article "Painting Is Being Talked to Death," which appeared in the early 1950s as a response by Poor and the likes of artists to museums and critics who felt favored Abstract Expressionism at the expense of realist art. Another publication from the 1950s was A Book of Pottery from Mud into Immortality (1958), his technical guide to wheel-thrown ceramics that also contains general comments on art in general.

The first chapter of Poor's pottery manual: "Art is an expression of each person's rediscovery of the universe. To produce a living and vital art this discovery must begin close to the beginning, or the result is only a synthetic art." His beliefs were also presented in lectures at Skowhegan, some of which were transcribed in an unpublished biography by Monte Stearns (an author who had edited Poor's book on pottery). Poor did not think art should explore the psychology or psyche of the artist instead of the natural world around him. Stearns recorded him as stating, "Self analysis has added a new element to art—but too much of one. Interior reality is now more in the limelight than it should be." And Stearns repeated Poor's quotation of French painter Gustave Courbet (1819-1877): "Imagination in art lies in finding the most complete expression of the existing thing, never in creating that thing. Beauty is in nature, and it is found in reality under many different forms. Once it is found, it belongs to art, or, rather, to the artist who is able to see it. The beauty given by nature is superior to all the conventions of the artist." Poor's article "Painting Is Being Talked to Death" expressed related ideas: "For an artist's business is not to paint pictures of his own complicated insides. The whole growth of man is a growth in the ability to see and comprehend something outside and beyond himself, to understand himself through an understanding of his fellows and of the world. I think the commonest and the most sadly wrong advice to a young painter is to look inward, to express himself. Most of all, he needs to look outward, to understand, to see the world and its multiple personalities with understanding.

For Poor, drawing was fundamental to this process of recreating the natural world in art. In his article "Notes on an Education," in the Spring, 1953 issue of Reality, he wrote, "Drawing, endless drawing, continued through the years, is the first essential in an artist's training. It is the start of the young artist's endeavor to recreate the world, and to find the basic realities." In An Artist Sees Alaska, he analyzed fine drawing as a fusion of two points of view. He termed the first of these "structural," a form of drawing that explains how things are made. The second mode he called "visual," which entails putting down, with directness and simplicity, what an object looks like to the eye, without regard to what the intellect suggests. Poor's belief in the importance of drawing was supported by his constant sketching. Even when he worked almost exclusively in pottery during the 1920s, he was always drawing, as he noted in his book on ceramics: "I drew constantly the birds, beasts, flowers, fruits, all the things around me…"

POOR AND STILL LIFE

Some of Poor's thoughts on still life painting, which he taught as early as his days at Stanford, and on which he lectured at Skowhegan, have been recorded. He is quoted in the Stearns biography, "In putting a still life on your canvas, design by seeing the spaces around the objects as of equal importance to the objects… In simplifying, or introducing any element of style, be sure that your style is drawn from a profound regard for the character of your subject—not imposed on it. Every time you look at your subject try to see it fresh as a total, and always be ready to re-do it. Never let it get frozen and finished. Scrape off and redraw it whenever you feel its freshness is getting lost… Remember, it's not an imitation of the object that you want, but an interpretation in paint and canvas." Still life had nearly always been a crucial genre for Poor. His earliest known extant work is a still life drawing of chrysanthemums in a vase, recently acquired by the Birger Sandzén Memorial Art Gallery in Lindsborg, Kansas. The first painting Poor ever exhibited was a still life done while a student at Stanford. It was only his third painting ever, and his instructor thought so highly of the depiction of a copper pan, a jug and two pears (unlocated), that he sent it to an exhibition in Los Angeles. Poor described the creation of that painting in a letter to his parents, noting that he had applied the paint with just brushes, but also a palette knife and even his fingers. He frequently employed such unusual applications; he would also scratch lines in wet pigment with the end of his brush, to emphasize forms. The Hillstrom painting, which contains in some of this unorthodox handling of paint, as in the thick passages of tan paint near the grapes on the left and the acorn squash on the right, spread on with his palette knife.

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as a leave replacement. He was soon hired on a more permanent basis, but in 1916 his department was reorganized under an administrator unsympathetic to his modern style. He lost the Stanford position and began teaching at a San Francisco art school. After being interned in World War I, Poor spent several additional months in France in 1918 and early 1919. There, he became a regimental artist, drawing portraits of officers and enlisted men. He remained abroad after his discharge, to spend additional time in Paris studying art.

Poor had been planning a move to New York prior to the war, intending to study at The Art Students League. Recognizing that he was a "country peasant" (as he noted in the 1964 interview), he settled near New City, a rural town with a strong arts community not far outside New York City. On several acres of land there, he designed and built his own home, "Crow House" (named after the birds in the area). This was the first of many architectural projects for which Poor became known, and he eventually built numerous similar houses based on arts and crafts ideals and styles, including for celebrity friends such as actor and producer John Houseman and playwright Maxwell Anderson.

In New City, Poor met Bessie Breuer, a successful novelist. The two were married in 1925, and the following year their son Peter was born. Poor's daughter from his first marriage, Josephine, was born in 1913, and he also adopted Breuer's daughter Anne (born 1918) after marrying Breuer. Poor encouraged Anne's interest in becoming an artist and she later assisted him on some of his murals—yet another type of art, along with ceramics, easel painting, and architecture, for which he won wide acclaim. Poor was one of the few artists in the US who did not paint in the style of painting water-based pigment onto fresh plaster; instead, he is largely responsible for the survival of fresco in America, since he taught it at the Skowhegan (Maine) School of Painting and Sculpture, which he co-founded in 1946, and where fresco is still taught today.

Poor was involved with other governmental art efforts as well, including his appointment in 1940 as a Commissioner of Fine Arts, one of a group that oversaw decoration of federal buildings in Washington, DC. And in 1943, he was appointed to the War Department Art Advisory Committee. In this capacity, he assisted in selecting artists for the "War Artists Unit," formed to create artwork to be used in military and civilian events, activities and persons associated with World War II. Poor himself served as a war artist, going in 1943 to Alaska (considered crucial because of the possibility of a Japanese invasion through it and because of its proximity to the allied U.S.S.R.).
PHILOSOPHY OF STILL LIFE

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The common tendency to approach all still life paintings as if they were engendered, allegorical images for life, death, and the passage between, is no doubt both one of the causes and one of the consequences of a tendency Korsmeyer identifies—namely, the “belittling assessment” of the genre. She notes that still life “does not typically occupy a place of high esteem in art theory,” and “paintings wholly devoted to the depiction of items of the kitchen or the dining room have come in for their share of derogatory analysis.” Korsmeyer understands this denigration as arising in no small part from the very hierarchy of the senses so artfully depicted in some of the allegorical still life paintings she cites, such as the seventeenth-century Still Life with Chocolate by Claesz (The Five Senses) by French painter Labin Baugin (c.1612-1668). On that hierarchy, taste is far beneath the elevated senses of sight and hearing. Tasting connects directly with bodies—and paintings that remind one of taste remind viewers that they are bodily.

Indeed, bodily nature underpins a second hierarchy, to which that of taste is intimately connected, namely the gendered hierarchy of masculinity and femininity. Korsmeyer observes that everyday world associations of kitchens, cooking and food with women find artistic expression in works that link food with femininity. Associations between food and femininity can take many forms, including overindulgence, sensuality, and the erotic, but perhaps even more interesting is the way in which still life painting, as a genre, refers to a space that is coded feminine because of its connection to the mundane. The painting, as a genre, is shown and the mundane. Korsmeyer quotes art historian Norman Bryson and his theoretical study Looking at the Overlooked. Four Essays on Still Life Painting (1990), which distinguishes between “megalographic” paintings—those that depict subjects of unusual, high significance such as wars, coronations, death and transfiguration—and “topographic” paintings—those that attend to the mundane, the minute, the ordinary everyday. Korsmeyer notes that topographic works, of which still life paintings are a prime example, are “female” (which is not to say feminist) in the sense that [they] subvert the claims of masculine heroism to break free from routine and the daily grind in order to achieve something of lasting importance.” The genre is feminine “in the sense that the polarity between masculine and feminine describes the polarity between individual heroic achievement and the general routine of creaturely maintenance.”

Still life paintings, in short, can teach us about what matters in the deepest sense, by using the most ordinary of objects. Korsmeyer observes that Bryson’s understanding of still life painting “refers not to the appetite of hunger at all, but to its deepest sense, by using the most ordinary of objects. Korsmeyer observes that Bryson’s understanding of still life painting “refers not to the appetite of hunger at all, but to its achievement and the general routine of creaturely maintenance.”

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POOR’S EARLY LIFE, EDUCATION, AND CAREER

He was born in Chapman, Kansas, the third child of Alfred Poor, a successful grain company owner. Poor’s mother Josephine was a crucial influence. She had set up a set of rules, using them to copy book illustrations, and at her son’s encouragement she eventually began to paint directly from people or things rather than just copying images. In an interview in 1946, conducted by Ha先前 Phillips for the Archives of American Art, Poor mentioned a still life of sunflowers by his mother, which he kept throughout his life. His urging of his mother to paint subjects from the world around them was an early indication of Poor’s keen interest in nature, which was always to be the primary source of art for him. In the interview, he told of spending time as a boy with his Grandfather Graham, his mother’s father, learning how to hunt and fish. From an early age, he aspired to be a naturalist.

In school, Poor showed remarkable ability in art. His teacher would sometimes lend him out to make drawings for bulletin boards, and at one point he was suggested that he develop his talent at the school of the Art Institute in Chicago, an idea Alfred Poor did not favor. He wanted his son to join the family business, and when Henry Poor entered Stanford University in 1909, he actually intended to major in economics. However, his continuing interest in art, including enrolling in a drawing class, convinced Poor to go against his father’s wishes, and he switched majors his junior year. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Stanford in 1910, and immediately departed for a tour of Europe with his art professor, Arthur B. Clark. After they bicycled around Europe to see great museums such as the Louvre, Poor remained abroad to study art, first in London, then in Paris.

In London, he worked with prominent artist Walter Sickert (1860-1942), who encouraged his devotion to drawing as the basis for art. In Paris, Poor studied at the popular Académie Julian, with one of its associated instructors, popular French artist and teacher Jean Paul Laurens (1838-1921), who praised his draftsmanship for its facility and its “will” and “power” (according to a letter Poor sent back home to his parents). But the most important aspect of this time was Poor’s introduction to the art of Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), at the famous 1910 exhibition at London’s Grafton Galleries, “Manet and the Post-Impressionists.” Describing the French artist in the 1964 interview as his “idol,” Poor noted that much of his own work, especially his early efforts, was based on Cézanne.

Before his departure from France in May of 1913, Poor received an invitation from Professor Clark to teach at Stanford
transcendence,” and she quotes at length his discussion of the seventeenth century Spanish painter Juan Sánchez y Cotán (1560-1627), whose still life paintings “are conceived… as exercises in the remuneration of normal human priorities… [that] reverse this worldly mode of seeing by taking what is of least importance in the world—the disregarded contents of a laird—and by lavishing there the kind of attention normally reserved for what is of supreme value.”

It might be interesting to speculate on what would happen if one were to attempt to consider Henry Varnum Poor’s Autumn Still Life in light of Bryson’s concepts of “megalographic” versus “rhopographic.” In other words, if the painting of an abundant full harvest were viewed as an instance of the “lavishing of attention” on something prosaic foodstuffs, or as an instance of renouncing “normal human priorities.” Such a reading of the painting no doubt seems more plausible today than it would have a mere five or ten years ago.

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The last decade has seen an explosion of alternative agricultural activity in the United States. This is an era in which invitations to “eat local” spout up everywhere, new farmers’ markets emerge almost daily, as organic garden grows on the White House lawn, and locally grown foods are the fastest-developing sector of the retail food market. In such an atmosphere, many eaters are, in fact, reversing the “worldly mode of seeing,” as they turn their careful, nearly-worshipful gazes to the contents of the grocery bag they just picked up from the local organic vegetable farm, the CSA (“community-supported agriculture”) farm from which they purchased a vegetable share.

It is not possible to look at a painting of squash, apples and grapes today the same way as five years ago. Not now, after Barbara Kingsolver’s Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life (2007), Michael Pollan’s Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life (2007), Michael Pollan’s The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals (2006), or Frances Moore Lappe’s Hope’s Edge: The Next Diet for a Small Planet (2007). Not after cutting open a pale, white “Beauty Heart” radish to reveal the gorgeous crimson-pink flesh that gives it its name. Not after receiving a basket of heirloom tomatoes—a riotous abundance of patterns, shapes, colors and textures, from Black Krim to Green Zebra, or from Prudens Purple to Caspian Pink. And not after luxuriously inhaling the sweet-perfume scent of bunches of Concord grapes at the local food co-op.

Poor, given his lifelong interest in being a naturalist, would certainly have been sympathetic to the ideals of the CSA, of organic food, and of locally grown produce. His son Peter notes the many kinds of fruit and flowers that Poor and his family tended at Crow House. And an article by Harry Salpeter, published in Esquire Magazine in 1938 and titled “Henry Poor: Art’s Robinson Crusoe,” noted of Poor, “He has a definite farming instinct in his background,” stating further that “Poor is not at war with his world. As for his farming instinct, that gets itself expressed in the raising of flowers, in the growing of grapes and the making of wine. He used to keep a vegetable garden….” Poor continued in this vein, “This sort of regionalism we have unfortunately left behind, and in doing so have lost more than we have gained. Who with a sense of taste would not gladly exchange our packaged and universally marketed bread, properly “vitamin enriched,” for the loaves from ovens of any French or Italian town, made from the villagers’ own wheat?”

The concepts expressed in these statements indicate a philosophy akin to the ideals of locally produced foods that are characteristic of their particular region. Poor might have been writing for a twenty-first century locavors audience when he later noted, “If you can’t dig clay in your own back yard, try to get it locally.”

The alternative-agriculture explosion has encouraged alternative ways of eating, ways that reconnect palates to the seasons of the year (strawberries in June, not January), to the soil and climate of one’s locality (apples, not oranges as the daily snack of Minnesotans), and to the lives and livelihoods of the people who actually grow the food (CSAs, farmers’ markets, fair trade cooperatives). One need not sign on to the “hundred mile rule,” eschewing all coffee and tea, oranges and chocolate, in order to find something appealing and enticing in this movement for eaters. In inviting one to rethink how one eats, it also invites a reconsideration of how what is eaten is seen, and how one “sees” what role eating has in one’s life, and it also expands the possible aesthetic meaning and significance that food can carry.

One need not move to the level of the symbolic or allegorical in order to find meaning and importance in the images in Poor’s painting (nor would he wish it). One might suggest that “sometimes an acorn squash is just an acorn squash,” but, after all, being an acorn squash is no trivial thing. Autumn Still Life is all about the fall in rural New York, where the apples and grapes are world-renowned. And what would a
long northern winter be without squash, the base of the wintertime food pyramid of the hundred-miler? Poor’s painting of autumnal abundance—basically, a cornucopia-type image in which the particular suggest the many available—celebrates not only the present moment of fresh grapes, crisp apples, and mature squash, but also the future promise, of wine, cider, and a well-stocked root cellar for Thanksgiving. Looking at this arrangement full of literal “raw material,” one cannot help but think “I wonder if those are wine grapes,” or “would those apples make a good pie?” or even “squash just always says November and Thanksgiving.” In acknowledging that these all count as “somethings,” the subversion that Bryson describes comes to the fore. There’s nothing particularly heroic about a squash or an apple or a bunch of grapes… but in the right hands, there is everything of lasting importance in them.

And that importance is what the artist wished to express in his Autumn Still Life, and in his art in general, that the natural world, and the life and things in it, are worthy of our attention. The catalogue for a 1961 retrospective exhibition of Poor’s work, held at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, provides a fitting conclusion at the end of its commentary: “[Poor] himself sums up his aims more briefly. “The only message that I may have is that I find the world exciting and beautiful” … which is the message that most of us want to get from a work of art.”

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Boswell, Peyton, Jr., Varnum Poor, New York, 1941.
Malaguzzi, Silvia, Food and Feasting in Art, translated by Brian Phillips, Los Angeles, 2006.

Lisa Heldke, Professor of Philosophy and Raymond and Florence Sponberg Chair in Ethics
Donald Myers, Director, Hillstrom Museum of Art, and Instructor, Department of Art and Art History