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Be Fruitful and Multiply: Food, National Expansion, and the Art of Empire

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Still-life representations of fruit have been historically dismissed as facile dining room decoration or modest exercises designed to mimic nature, but their interconnectedness with national ambitions to expand the country into fruit-growing “frontiers” demand that they be taken more seriously as political devices for understanding American imperialism.¹ Still-life pictures, in fact, are some of the most useful tools we have to investigate systems of “empire,” which scholar Eric T. Love defines as “a system of colonization . . . driven by the occupation of land, pursuit of a ‘civilizing mission,’ economic exploitation, and political intervention reproducing differentiation and inequality” among the people and places the empire aims to control.² With this understanding, the economic exploitation embedded in the cultivation and artistic representation of fruit can also be recognized as another form of empire-making in the United States.



Fig. 1. Hannah Brown Skeele, *Fruit Piece*, 1860. Oil on canvas, 20 × 23 in. The Art Institute of Chicago; Restricted gifts of Charles C. Haffner III, Mrs. Harold T. Martin, Mrs. Herbert A. Vance, and Jill Burnside Zeno; through prior acquisition of the George F. Harding Collection, 2001.⁶

Artists portrayed picturesque images of grapes from the American West, oranges from the American South, bananas from Central America, and pineapples from the Pacific region, flaunting the edible rewards of colonizing landscapes that were sought after by US boosters

and expansionists. Indeed, many still-life artists depicted fruits arriving from far distances in real time, mirroring their growing availability in American markets. The pervasiveness of these fruits in dining-room prints created for the masses helped naturalize this agenda and promote the incorporation of fruits and the lands upon which they were grown. Imperialism, in this way, does not just describe a nation’s physical conquest of a place but also its commercial conquest through visual and consumer expressions that stimulated, supported, and naturalized US territorial expansion. This essay demonstrates the need for more scholarly consideration of how still-life representations of fruit are productive artifacts for studying the histories of US imperialism.³

Still-life representations of tropical foods are especially useful for examining the relationship between art, fruit, and empire because they often reflected US ambitions to expand commercially into the Tropics. A painting from 1860 by artist Hannah Brown Skeelee (1829–1901), for instance, shows a basket holding an orange, a pineapple, a lemon, and two bananas—fruits that came from climates and geographic regions far outside St. Louis, Missouri, where Skeelee painted this canvas (fig. 1).⁴ This collection of tropical fruit is accessorized by a bowl of strawberries at left and a filigree bowl at right, filled with cubed sugar—another product of tropical lands. While Skeelee may have witnessed a vibrant food trade in St. Louis, a city located along the Mississippi River and at the nexus of the North and the South, the artist’s depiction of foods from far-flung regions was also a symbol of US achievement in importing these foods from Latin America. The yellow and red bananas flanking Skeelee’s composition, in particular, reflect the commercial reach of the United States into Central America and the Caribbean and the beginnings of the US banana trade. By the first years of the twentieth century, US entrepreneurs directed a complete transformation of regions from Costa Rica to Guatemala by clearing trees, constructing villages, and installing railroads to haul the fruit across long distances from jungles to coasts. Workers on railroad cars then rushed banana bunches to air-conditioned cabins on ships to avoid the rotting of fruit during the three-week journey to the United States. The banana’s consumption in the United States, and subsequent depiction in still-life representations, was made possible by an intricate system of labor and technological innovations that ushered in a new era in food production.

Horticultural manuals and fruit advertisements celebrated US intervention in Latin America, using the long-standing rhetoric of national expansion to praise banana entrepreneurs for taming the savage wilderness and civilizing the tropical frontier. By 1914, manuals saluted American businesses like the United Fruit Company for having “awakened the slumbering nations bordering on the Caribbean with the quickening tonic of Yankee enterprise.”⁵ This language specifically harkened back to the patronizing rhetoric of Southern Reconstruction, when Yankee farmers in the North moved south after the Civil War to “civilize” the South’s perceived primitive landscape and people. American farmers had long used fruit-growing as a strategy to colonize land and subjugate people; in the earlier nineteenth century, many claimed it was their destiny to take land and civilize it by establishing orchards and orange groves on what was stolen Indigenous territory. Fruit cultivation also triggered conversations about who should have the privilege of cultivating US fruitlands, oftentimes scrutinizing immigrant laborers and laborers of color. Methodologies from the Environmental Studies discipline look closely at agriculture through the lens of empire, demonstrating how the mere act of sectioning off land and planting food on it is a colonial and territorial exercise that benefits some people and disenfranchises others.⁶ Locating still-life representations within the greater context of

horticultural and political attitudes toward fruit reveals how systems of food were colonial enterprises that enforced dominion over people and landscapes.

While a handful of scholars of American art have recognized the colonial nature of still-life representations, historians of Dutch art have more directly addressed this point. In the 2007 book *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age*, author Julie Berger Hochstrasser describes the histories of slavery and exploitation behind many of the Caribbean comestibles visible in Dutch painting, asking: who consumes what? And at whose expense?⁷ The same questions can be directed to still-life representations in the United States, where artists depicted tropical fruits in dark, shallow spaces without their branches, crates, or packaging, thereby editing out any allusions to the invasive environmental impact or exploitative labor associated with such operations—as described in relation to the US banana trade. Indeed, fruit companies by the late nineteenth century operated like large-scale plantations, treated workers poorly, and furthered Indigenous removal in order to claim land for fruit cultivation. Still-life pictures flaunted the country’s ingenuity and imperial might by depicting fresh fruits that had been transported across long distances. However, they also decontextualized these tropical fruits by glossing over the stressful conditions involved in their growth and distribution and assimilated them to American standards of taste by displaying them on tabletops with dessert knives and silver vessels. The ways in which still-life pictures and dining-room objects helped incorporate tropical foods into American homes and economies warrant deeper consideration in studies on US colonial programs abroad.

In addition to US artists, housewives and homemakers—who are often written out of histories of empire that tend to favor male industrialists and entrepreneurs—played a vital role in the country’s commercial expansion into Latin America. As the directors in charge of maintaining a healthy home and family, housewives were at the center of purchasing and assimilating Latin American products. By baking tropical fruits into American recipes, displaying them on genteel tables, and decorating dining rooms with still-life representations of these foods, women were indispensable to naturalizing foreign imports as valuable products of American culture. In the influential essay, “Manifest Domesticity,” Amy Kaplan urges scholars to consider women’s actions in the domestic sphere as crucial to the empire-making process. Kaplan writes, “When we contrast the domestic sphere with the market or political realm, men and women inhabit a divided social terrain, but when we oppose the domestic to the foreign, men and women become national allies against the alien, and the determining division is not gender but racial demarcations of otherness.”⁸ Put plainly, women were united with men in expanding the American empire by naturalizing “alien” people and objects otherwise deemed unfit for the American home. That still-life painting was historically one of the only genres of art available to women—who were discouraged from depicting more “intellectual” subject matter—further reveals how women used food and its representation to shape national expansion. In this light, dining-room images and objects were a form of soft power that boosted US authority in areas of Latin America where the US sought economic control.⁹

Still-life pictures of food, therefore, are not mere artistic exercises or dining-room dressing; they are often celebrations and reflections of national desires by expansionists and developers to commercially expand the territorial reach of the United States. While attractive tables topped with delicious foods seduced viewers into imagining a dreamy meal, they also helped to naturalize and make appetizing messages about imperialism. The fact that many Americans may have first encountered an “exotic” fruit, such as a banana, by

seeing it in still-life pictures—rather than in markets or in nature—reinforces how vital it is to study the visual representation of fruit. In these instances, sight led the way before taste and whet American appetites for expanding US empire.

Notes

¹ In 1831, an anonymous critic in the *North American Review* wrote, “We would not absolutely denounce what is called still-life painting, but we value it very lightly; and we protest against . . . those works, of which the whole supposed merit consists in an imitation of what is in itself entirely insignificant.” Nearly fifty years later, this notion persisted in a journal article from the *Art Amateur*, which similarly professed, “the painting of fruit and still-life is generally considered a lower and unimportant branch of art . . . as there are less difficulties to contend with in its pursuits and not the opportunities they offer for the embodiment of sentiment and imagination.” “The Exhibition of Pictures at the Athenaeum Gallery,” *North American Review* 33, no. 73 (October 1831): 512; L. Donaldson and A. J. H. Way, “Fruit-Painting in Oils,” *Art Amateur* 16, no. 1 (December 1886): 10.

² Eric T. Love, *Race over Empire: Racism and U.S. Imperialism, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 3.

³ For a longer version of this argument, consult Shana Klein, *The Fruits of Empire: Food, Art, and the Politics of Race in the Age of American Expansion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020).

⁴ Hannah Brown Skeelee was born in Kennebunkport, Maine. She painted her most famous artworks in St. Louis, Missouri, after moving there in 1845. For more information, see Martha Gandy Fales, “Hannah B. Skeelee, Maine Artist,” *Antiques* 121, no. 4 (April 1982): 915–21; Sarah E. Kelly, “Fruit Piece,” *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 30, no. 1 (2004): 12–13, 94; and Lincoln Bunce Spice, “St. Louis Women Artists in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” *Gateway Heritage: Quarterly Journal of the Missouri Historical Society* 4 (Spring 1983): 19.

⁵ Frederick Upham Adams, *Conquest of the Tropics: The Story of the Creative Enterprises Conducted by the United Fruit Company* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1914), 356.

⁶ See the following scholarship from the Environmental Studies Discipline: Frieda Knobloch, *Culture of Wilderness: Agriculture as Colonization in the American West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Philip J. Pauly, *Fruits and Plains: The Horticultural Transformation of America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); and Steven Stoll, *The Fruits of Natural Advantage: Making the Industrial Countryside in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

⁷ Julie Berger Hochstrasser, *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 227.

⁸ Amy Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (September 1998): 582.

⁹ Greg Grandin defines soft power as the “spread of America’s authority through nonmilitary means, through commerce, cultural exchange, and military cooperation.” *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Holt, 2006), 3.