

Wayne Thiebaud (Mesa, Arizona 1920)

Ice Cream Cone

Black (India) ink and black wash, over traces of a pencil underdrawing.
Signed and dated Thiebaud 1964 at the lower right.
320 x 355 mm. (12 5/8 x 14 in.)

The present sheet is a superb example of Wayne Thiebaud's undoubted skill as a draughtsman. Divorced from the colour that one associates with most of his work in oil and pastel, this bold pen and ink drawing is a testament to the artist's genius for composition and line. Of the artist's monochrome drawings, Carter Ratliffe has recently written, 'Thiebaud's light and the colors that produce [sic] are so well known that it is easy to overlook something obvious: he is a brilliant draftsman. Rendered in black and white and all the intervening tones, his drawings lay bare the formal architecture that endows even his most lushly chromatic images with their startling clarity.'

The artist himself has said that 'Drawing is very central...Drawing, to me, is a kind of research tool, that painting rests upon...I've drawn all my life. For a lot of painters I admire, that's been central to their work as well – people like Degas, who talked about making the same drawing once, twice, ten, a hundred times, if necessary.'

Ratcliff's comments on a pen and ink wash drawing of Candied Apples of 1964 may equally be applied to the present sheet, drawn the same year: 'an image made of stark white and nearly unmodulated black...[the] harsh tonal contrast invites us to see the apples bathed in the flourescent light that fills so many of Thiebaud's paintings of food. Subtlety is to be seen in nuances of the quick, improvisatory brush marks...'

The subject of ice cream is one that Thiebaud has treated throughout his career; indeed in a recent essay, the American art historian John Wilmerding dubbed the artist 'The Emperor of Ice Cream.' Among the earliest and most significant treatments of this subject is the painting Girl with an Ice Cream Cone of 1963, in the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC., and, closer in composition to the present sheet, the painting Four Ice Cream Cones of 1964, today in the Phoenix Art Museum in Arizona. Thiebaud has continued to produce paintings of ice cream cones well into the present century, as well as on a cigar box and in several etchings.

Provenance:

Allan Stone Gallery, New York
Acquired from them by a private collector
Private collection, New York, until 2013.

Literature:

James Tarmy, 'Are Drawings the Best Deal in 20th Century Art?', Bloomberg Business, 8 February 2016, illustrated; New York, Dominique Lévy Gallery, Drawing Then: Innovation and Influence in American Drawings of the Sixties, exhibition catalogue, 2016, illustrated p.91.

Artist description:

The American painter Wayne Thiebaud is perhaps best known for his colourful still life paintings and landscapes, painted with thick layers of heavy pigment. He began his career as an art teacher in Sacramento, and in the late 1950's spent some months in New York, where he became friends with Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, and was also influenced by the work of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. Thiebaud had his first solo exhibitions in San Francisco and New York, but it was not until he met the New York dealer Allan Stone in 1961 that his work began to be brought to wider notice. Stone championed Thiebaud's work, and mounted a series of exhibitions in his New York gallery over the next few years that firmly established his reputation.

Thiebaud is, as he freely admits, a traditional artist. When he began to paint still life subjects in 1953, however, he chose not to depict the more traditional artistic motifs of flowers or fruit, but rather the humble, often mass-produced foods of everyday American life; pies, hot dogs, cakes, candy and ice cream. Thiebaud's lifelong interest in such ostensibly banal subjects can be understood at its essence in a comment he made in an interview in 1968: 'If you pick any food and isolate it, and if you look hard and long enough at it then it can become very revealing.'

Thiebaud's still life paintings of food were his first mature works, and made his name following his breakthrough exhibition at the Allan Stone Gallery in New York in 1962. As has been noted of the artist, 'In his still lifes of food, Thiebaud approaches a venerable artistic tradition with a fresh eye. Instead of recording an artfully constructed grouping of dissimilar objects, Thiebaud presents his pies and cakes and ice cream cones in a familiar orderly arrangement, as they might be displayed in a sweet shop counter. Moreover, in some of the paintings, he has reduced the still-life objects to just one or two or three items, isolated from any discernible setting.'

Since Thiebaud first came to public attention in the early 1960's with his bright and bold paintings of food, he has sometimes been labelled a Pop artist. Indeed, his work was included, alongside that of Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Jim Dine, Ed Ruscha and others, in the exhibition New Painting of Common Objects at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1962, considered one of the first exhibitions of Pop Art in America. Yet his earliest still life paintings predated some of the Pop artists, and Thiebaud's work remains somewhat apart from the usual Pop idioms. As one scholar has noted, 'Thiebaud's paintings are quiet, like those of some of the artists he admires: Vermeer, Chardin, Morandi, Eakins and Hopper. They are, in fact, essentially the reverse of the clamor of advertizing [sic] pitches proclaimed in Warhol's soup cans or the melodramatic comic strips that form much of Lichtenstein's early imagery.'

Thiebaud often treated the same subject in a range of different media; in oil, pencil, charcoal, ink and pastel, as well as in the form of prints. As one scholar has written, 'Thiebaud has always been curious about how an image is transformed in different media as well – how images change when rendered in color versus black and white or with a textured rather than flat surface...Thiebaud is married to the traditional idea of working compositions out slowly and coming to know his subjects with some depth and care.'