

ARTS

Italian artist Evaristo Baschenis' works at Galerie Canesso are an unusual window on to 17th-century craft. By Susan Moore

A fine layer of dust veils the backs of musical instruments left on a table. The music has stopped, the musicians departed: the lutes, cittern, mandola and guitar are streaked by marks of recent touch. In the surrounding darkness, these artfully lit abandoned instruments loom large. Their representation could almost be described as portraiture.

"Still Life with Musical Instruments" is one of three canvases that make up the Agliardi Triptych, the masterpiece of the enigmatic and highly original 17th-century Italian painter-priest Evaristo Baschenis. It forms the centre-piece of the first monographic exhibition of his work in France, at the Galerie Canesso in Paris.

There are no paintings by this little-known artist in French museums; in fact, very few exist outside Italy; even there, the nucleus remains in private collections in his hometown of Bergamo. It was the gift of a painting to the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in 1908, and the subsequent discovery of his signature, that launched a re-evaluation of Baschenis – just at the time when Braque and Picasso were also turning to the violin, mandolin and guitar as inspiration for their Cubist works.

While Baschenis can lay claim to having invented the genre of the still life of musical instruments in the 1640s, the questions of why he did so, and the real subject of his rich but allusive art, continue to intrigue art historians. We know Baschenis was a passionate amateur musician: his estate sale reveals that he owned some 14 instruments and numerous scores. His sole self-portrait appears as one canvas in the Agliardi Triptych and shows him playing the spinet alongside Count Ottavio Agliardi, who plays an archlute. The third painting of the triptych depicts the other Agliardi brothers. Figures are rare in Baschenis' work, portraits even rarer, and even here the instruments remain the real protagonists, not least the elaborately figured guitar played by Count Alessandro, clearly signed by the



Venetian maker Giorgio Sellas. Such makers deserved their due.

Cremona, Brescia and Venice, all close to Bergamo, produced the greatest stringed instruments in Europe. It was probably also no coincidence that many of the artist's tabletops were covered with silk damask, the source of Bergamo's wealth. In his most theatrical canvases, such as that on loan from the Accademia Carrara (another "Still Life with Musical Instruments"), tasselled swags of drapery open to reveal the whole gamut of intellectual pursuits

engaging the town's refined and cultivated elite. A statuette by Alessandro Vittoria and richly patterned "Lotto" carpets suggest their collecting interests, spines of books reveal the poetry they read, their interest in law, science, philosophy and mathematics.

In this sense the works are not so much allegories of the liberal arts as cultural portraits. Baschenis's own study of geometry and mathematics is evident in the mastery of his perspectival foreshortening and the almost architectonic volume of his full-bodied lutes. He may



Evaristo Baschenis' sole self-portrait (circa 1665), with the artist at the spinet and Count Ottavio Agliardi with an archlute

'Still Life with Musical Instruments', circa 1660

well have used a perspective viewfinder device, such as that described in the previous century by Dürer.

Yet these paintings are not exercises in illusionism and fidelity alone. The melancholic, almost metaphysical Agliardi still life, for instance, is an invitation to contemplate the inexorable passage of time, the ephemeral nature of pleasure and life itself. Dust gathers, the corners of the vellum-bound sheet music curl as they are exposed to the atmosphere, apples slowly rot. This is the stuff of northern European vanitas paintings, but the candles, skulls and hourglasses are absent here, as is any obvious moral message.

Fruit and a cut carnation may have been included to make this also a symbolic representation of the five senses: sight, touch, hearing, taste and smell. Baschenis might also have delighted in verbal and visual puns

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in various languages. The dish of apples – *mela* – is close to *melos* (melody), the trompe l'oeil fly – *musca* – alights on another score, *musica*. Conceits of this kind were common in texts of the period which relished the unlikely juxtapositions of opposites.

Perhaps this partly explains why Baschenis set up shop in 1643 as a painter of still lifes of musical instruments and kitchen scenes. The musical still life in the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam even has a representation of fish and dead game as its pendant. Food for the body and the soul.

Baschenis's paintings have long drawn the attention of musicians, musicologists, instrument makers and conservators captivated by the painter's attention to detail – the grains and hues of different woods, the ribs on the cases, the restorations, the signatures, the inscriptions and notes of musical scores for various instruments. Research for this exhibition has identified the precise score on the spinet stand in a work on loan from a private collection – a variant to the composition borrowed from the Museo Teatrale alla Scala in Milan. It belongs to a 1568 edition of a book of madrigals by Orlande de Lassus, a setting of 14th-century verses taken from Petrarch's collection of poems, *Canzoniere*. They must have had a particular meaning for the artist's learned patron.

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