

ART HISTORY PAPER

THE MAGIC OF SILENCE IN THE VISUAL ARTS

Submitted by

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LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure</u>		<u>Page</u>
1	Giorgio Morandi. <i>Bottles and Pitchers</i> , etching.	5
2	William Baziotas. <i>Dawn</i> , painting.	6
3	Antoni Tàpies. <i>Spanish Arch</i> , painting	7
4	Mark Rothko. <i>Orange and Yellow</i> , painting.	8
5	Charles Burchfield. <i>Solitude</i> , watercolor and charcoal	9
6	Charles Burchfield. <i>Moonrise in November Woods</i> , watercolor	10
7	Charles Burchfield. <i>Early Spring</i> , watercolor and charcoal	11
8	Antoni Tàpies. <i>Large Painting</i> , painting	12
9	Antoni Tàpies. <i>White and Finger Prints</i> , painting.	13
10	Gabor Peterdi. <i>Spring is Coming</i> , etching and engraving.	14
11	Giorgio Morandi. <i>Still Life</i> , etching.	15
12	Giorgio Morandi. <i>Still Life</i> , etching.	16

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THE MAGIC OF SILENCE IN THE VISUAL ARTS

Silence is perceived as an illusory cessation of all sounds. In reality, silence only exists within the context of a relation, as a counterpart of sounds and noises, as a *contrasting* element: our sense of hearing is always apprehending something, if only the pounding of our own hearts. Nevertheless, by sheer contrast, silence can take the shape of a real 'presence,' with an 'individuality' of its own: when noises stop, for instance, silence gives us an enjoyable sense of relief; in a dialogue, a suspended word conveys to us a sense of expectation; within a melody silence is part of the music, enhancing it, punctuating it. Therefore, the power and the magic of silence is subordinated to its contrasting elements. By either negating them, suspending them or interrupting them it becomes significant in itself and also modifies the significance of its opposites.

In the visual arts, within the articulation of shapes and empty spaces, in the immaterial light that either shapes objects or dissolves their contours, a light that can reveal details or hide them, in a blank area that attracts our attention precisely because it is not providing any obvious or fixed conventional meaning, we can perceive inexhaustible analogies with those miraculous properties of silence. What I mean by miraculous properties is precisely the vagueness or

the multiplicity of meanings that the concept of silence, when inserted in different contexts, can bring to our perception.

Within the complexity of a discursive language, separate words have a conventional fixed reference, but when arranged into a sentence they can convey to us a totally different impression. This *arrangement* is the abstracted form which expresses the order of our ideas and feelings.

In the visual arts, however, the elements alone, such as lines, shapes, rhythm, color, do not possess a fixed meaning or a conventional reference: only when they are articulated into a structured whole in which we can perceive order and internal connections, we will be able to recognize, *in that order*, some similarities with the order of ideas and feelings. This relationship is always *abstract and symbolic*, and like all symbolic relationships between the symbol and the object symbolized, it is symmetrical, i.e., it works both ways.

I want to emphasize here, though, that the notion of silence can be only apprehended in the visual arts in a metaphoric sense: as stillness and serenity in the works of Giorgio Morandi (Fig. 1); as slow-motion lines and subdued color in the paintings of William Baziotis (Fig. 2); as opaqueness and impenetrability in Antoni Tapies' paintings of walls (Fig. 3); in the suppression of "literal" meaning or in the 'timeless content' in the works of Mark Rothko (Fig. 4). In these examples, the primary characteristic of silence is stillness or very subtle or slow motion.

The analogy between stillness and silence is easier to perceive than the analogy between silence and slow motion. For one thing, silence brings immediately to our minds the primary idea of 'arrest.'

However, silence also provokes an exaltation of our capacity of attention. And it is here that the relation between silence and slow motion can be perceived: an attentive look at something is a 'slow-motion' look. Whenever we are paying attention to something, the awareness of all our sense perceptions is increased, and the visual experience is enriched with impressions from the other senses as well. When we are paying attention to our sense of hearing, we hear 'more,' when we are paying attention to what we are looking at, we see 'more.'

There is another aspect of the act of looking which I want to mention here: a look that is combined with concentration or that exalted capacity of attention is a 'questioning' look, a 'stare.' It is the opposite of a 'fleeting' glance that takes for granted what it sees, or accepts old interpretations of the thing that is viewed. A 'stare' is a contemplative look at things as they are, as if seen for the first time. It is a look that rejects second-hand interpretations about the things that we see, it is a look that demands an effort from the viewer, in other words, it is a *creative* look. The works of Charles Burchfield (Figs. 5, 6, 7), for instance, present to our imagination a new vision of nature. Looking at his paintings and watercolors we can empathise with his enjoyment of nature's color, feel and scents and perceive that he was experiencing an exaltation of all senses at the same time.

A work of art is a work born out of such a creative and intense way of seeing. It is a symbol of a creative vision and embodies not only the ideas but also the feelings and the sensuous emotions of the artist who produced it. What is important to notice is that the

aesthetic quality of a work of art lies not in ideas, feelings or emotion considered *in isolation*, but rather in their *connections* with the physicality of the work of art which is given to the appreciation of our senses and imagination.

What is true for the artist is also true for the viewer of a work of art: in order to see creatively, we must be aware that our mind has the tendency to make immediate associations with past visual references; only then we can avoid the blinding effect of habit, routine, familiarity or prejudice, and begin to 'relook' at things, or look at things with 'new' eyes and maybe experience the world around us in its full intensity.

It is my belief that there are works of visual art that stimulate this kind of creative vision in the viewer more than others. Those are the ones that have in themselves, in one way or another, those magic properties of silence which demand from the viewer either a slow-motion look, an attentive look, a meditative look, or else 'shake' the 'mechanization' of vision, giving the viewers a series of new insights.

Silence in the visual arts is a call for a new vision, is a 'suspension' of literary meanings, is an unanswered question.



Fig. 1. Giorgio Morandi. *Bottles and Pitchers*, etching.

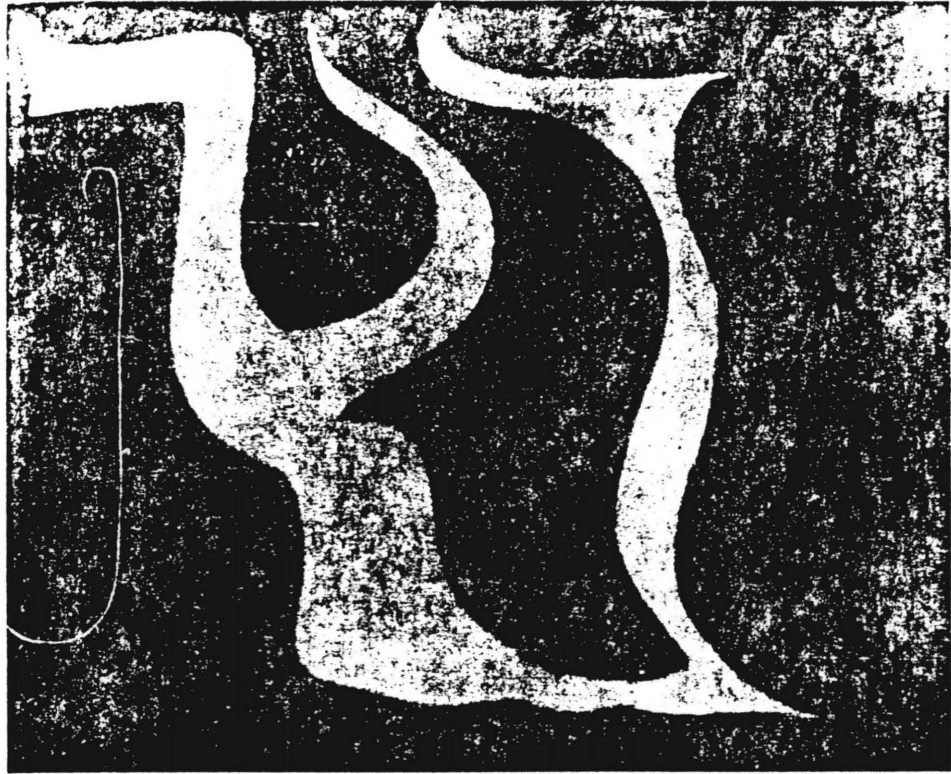


Fig. 2. William Baziotès. *Dawn*, painting.

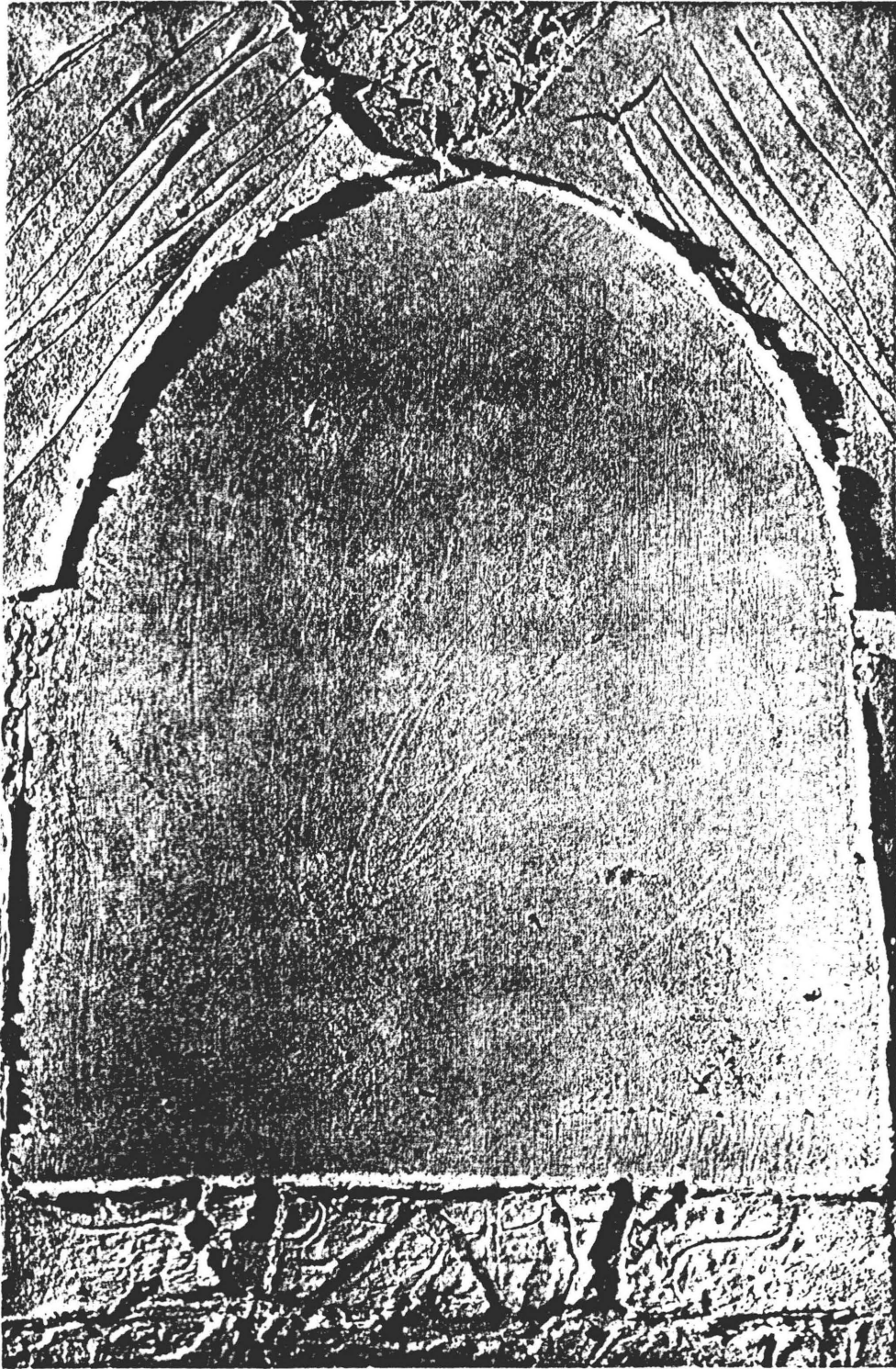


Fig. 3. Antoni Tàpies. *Spanish Arch*, painting.

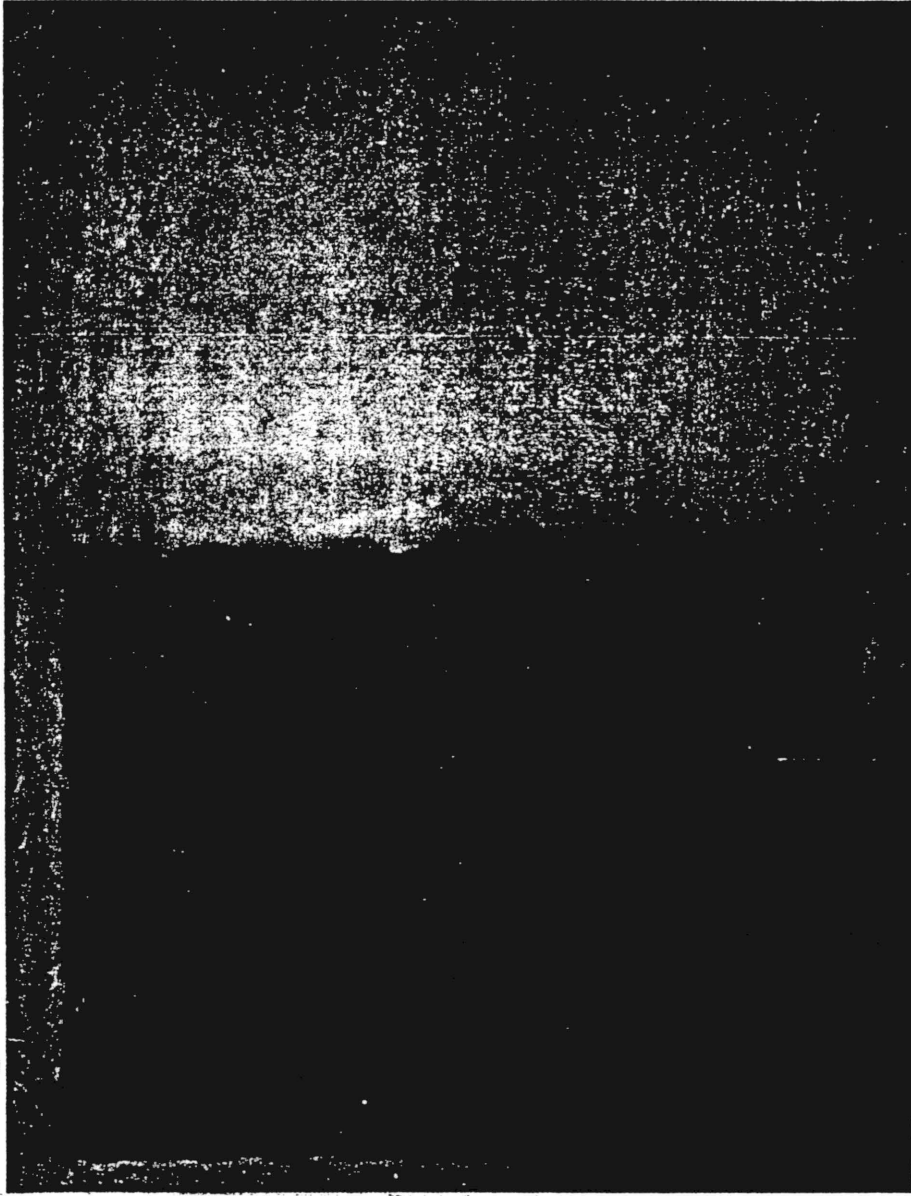


Fig. 4. Mark Rothko. *Orange and Yellow*, painting.



Fig. 5. Charles Burchfield. *Solitude*, watercolor and charcoal.



Fig. 6. Charles Burchfield. *Moonrise in November Woods*, watercolor.



Fig. 7. Charles Burchfield. *Early Spring*, watercolor and charcoal.

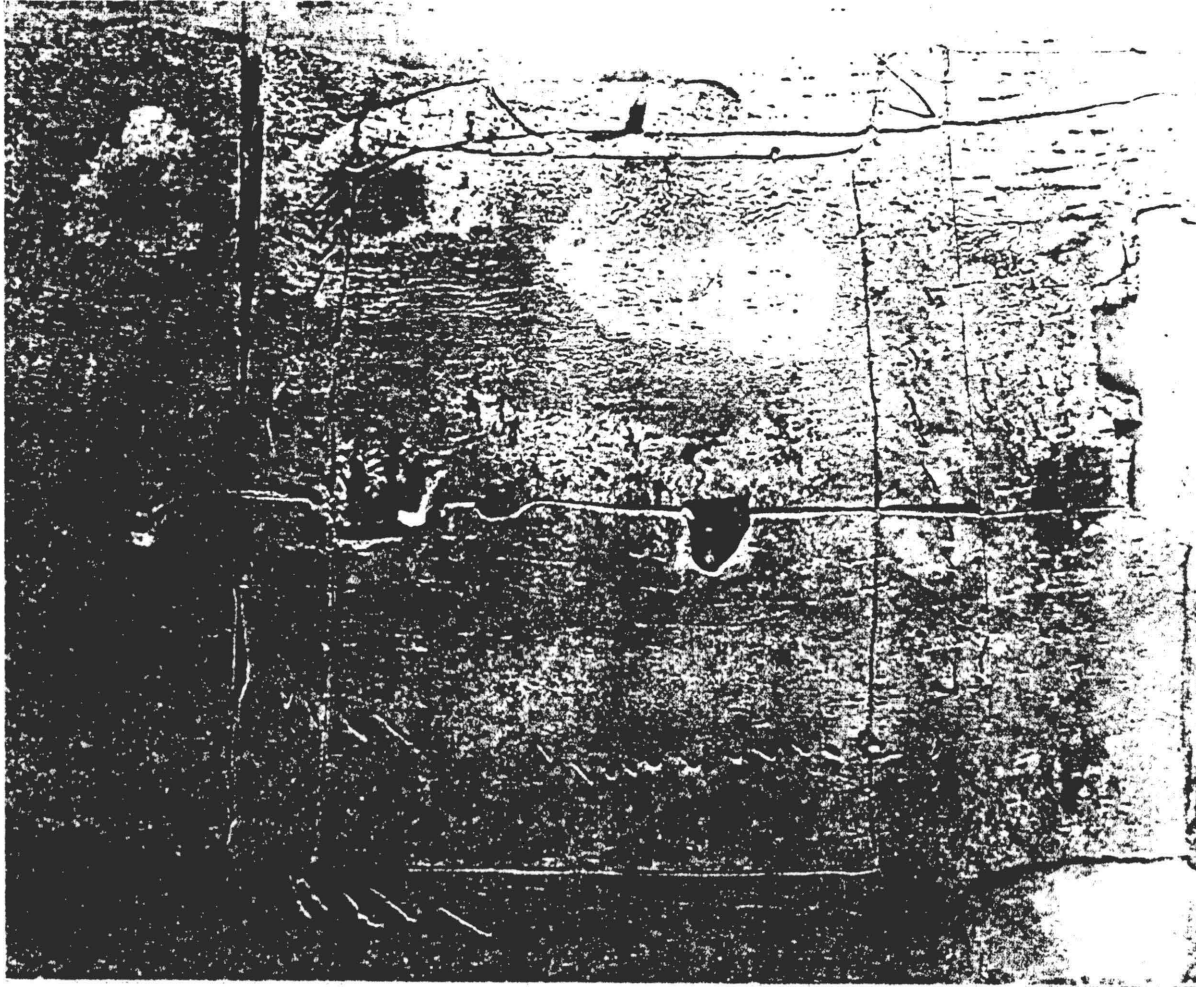


Fig. 8. Antoni Tàpies. *Large Painting*, painting.

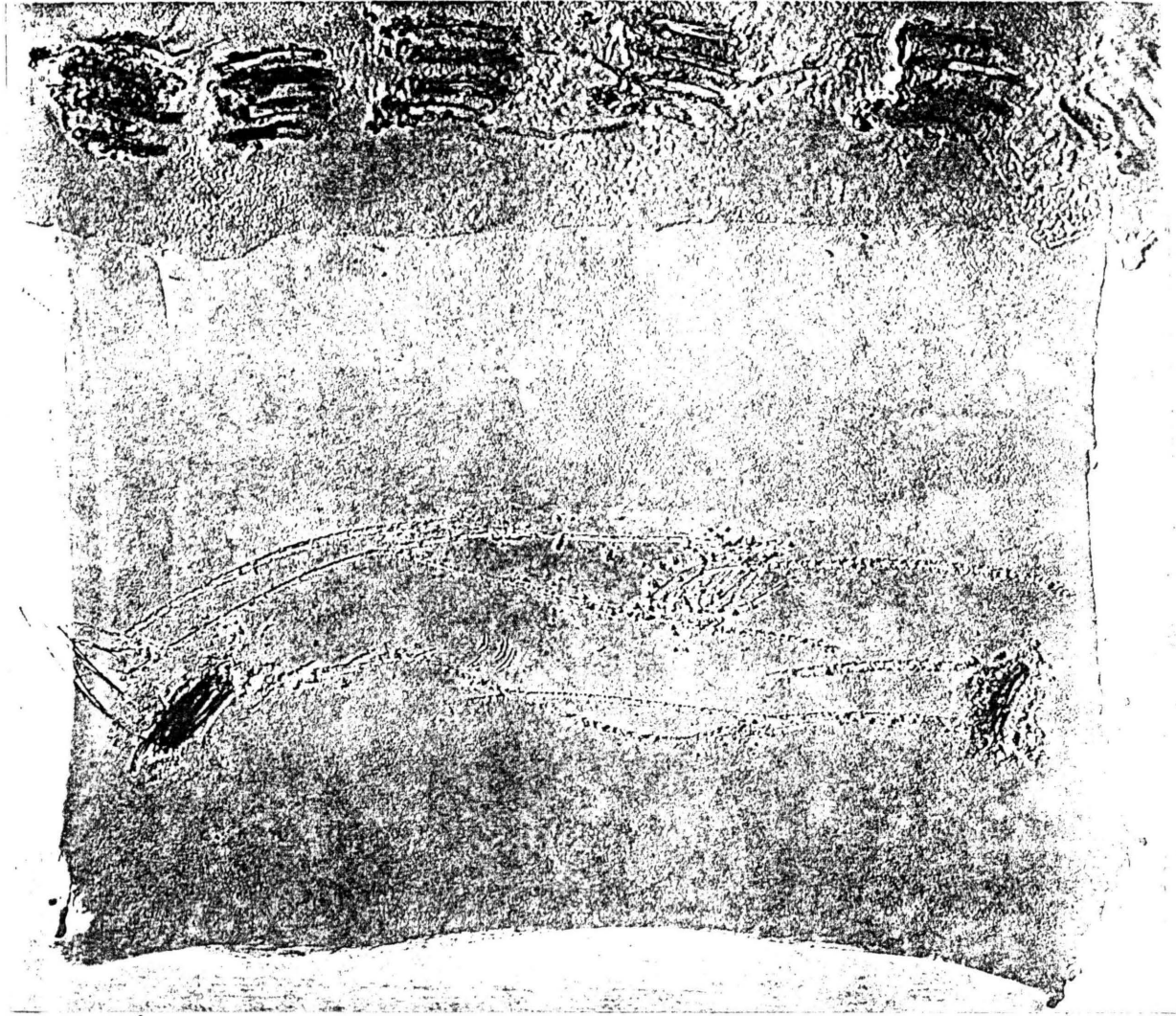


Fig. 9. Antoni Tàpies. *White and Fingerprints*, painting.



Fig. 10. Gabor Peterdi. *Spring is Coming*, etching and engraving.

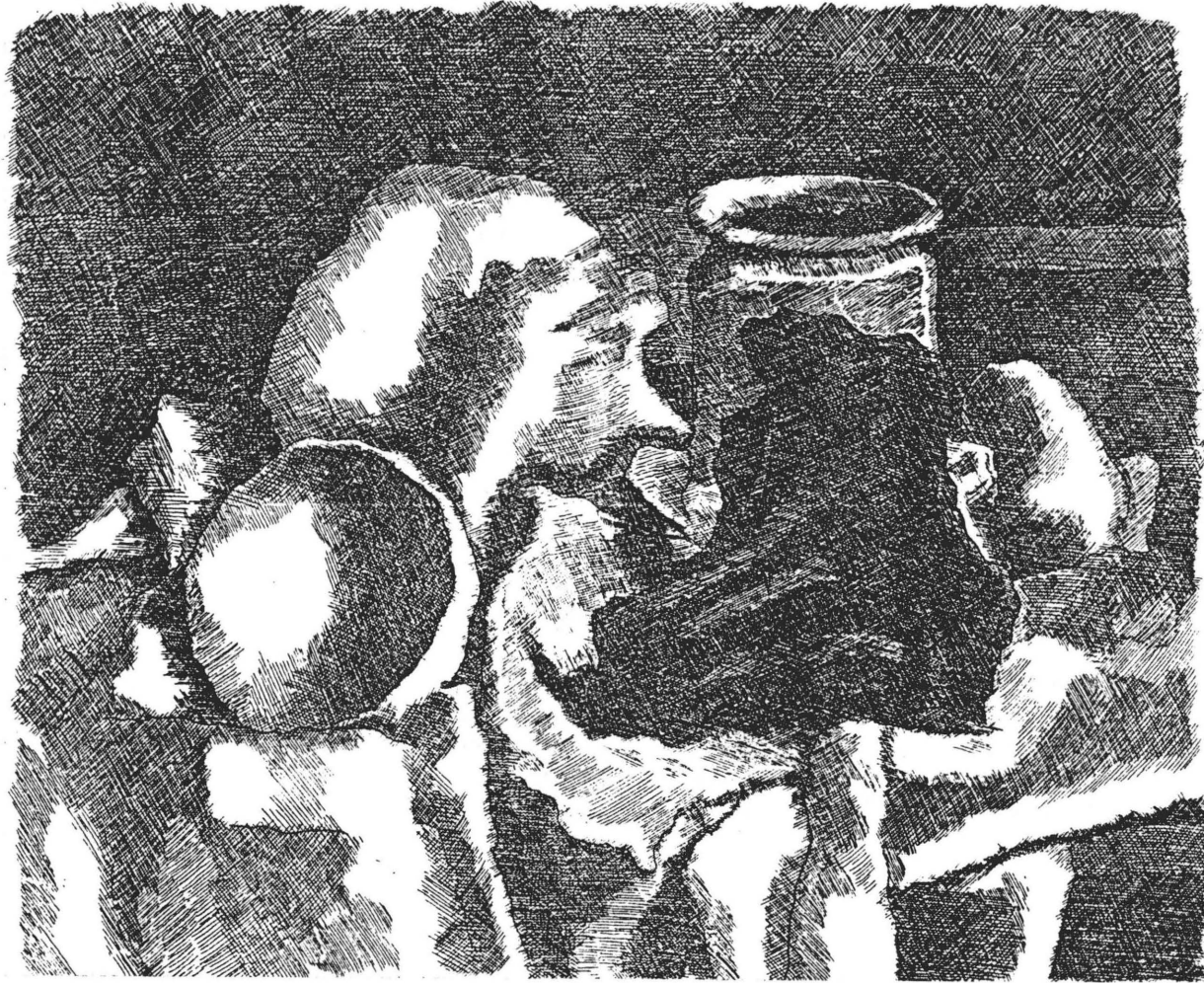


Fig. 11. Giorgio Morandi. *Still Life*, etching.



Fig. 12. Giorgio Morandi, *Still Life*, etching.

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