

LARGE PRINT

CHAIM SOUTINE

FLESH

Please return to the exhibition
entrance when finished



Chaim Soutine: Flesh is made possible through support from Barbara and Ira A. Lipman, Linda and Ilan Kaufthal, Jeanine Parisier Plottel and Roland Plottel, Dr. Claude Ghez, the Neubauer Family Foundation, and the Family and Friends of Sally Lindenbaum.

Exhibition design: Galia Solomonoff, Adriana Barcenas |
Solomonoff Architecture Studio
Graphic design: Topos Graphics
Lighting: Clint Ross Coller
Hand lettering: Jon Bocksel

Blanksteen Intern: Jacob Middlekauff
Interns: Dana Green, Minghui Huang, Elizabeth Kandel,
Emily Knapp, Michael Neumeister

A printed family guide is available at the admission desk in the museum lobby.

#ChaimSoutine

Nonflash, noncommercial photography for personal use is permitted in this exhibition except where this symbol appears:



CHAIM SOUTINE

FLESH

INTRODUCTION

Chaim Soutine (1893–1943) is one of the twentieth century's great painters of still life. In the Paris of the 1920s, Soutine was a double outsider—an immigrant Jew and a modernist. Guided by his expressive artistic instincts, he both embraced the traditional genre of still life and exploded it.

Still-life painting offers an opportunity for an artist to display technical skill and to explore aspects of color, composition, and brushwork. At the Louvre, Soutine studied the canvases of the Old Masters: careful and elaborate arrangements of flowers, fruit, and other food, including hunters' trophies of game. He transformed such precedents into contorted and turbulent paintings of dead animals, imbued with suffering and anxiety.

Soutine was born in a Jewish village in the Lithuanian part of western Russia (now Belarus). The region was plagued with anti-Semitic violence—thousands of Jews were killed in pogroms during his childhood. At age twenty, after studying art at the academy in Vilnius for three years, he moved to Paris, the artistic and intellectual center of Europe in the twenties. There, he lived and worked alongside other Jewish emigré artists, including Moïse Kisling, Ossip Zadkine, Jacques Lipchitz, and Amedeo Modigliani, who became a close friend.

Soutine's harsh and wrenching portrayals—of beef carcasses, plucked fowl, fish, and game—create a parallel between the animal and human, between beauty and pain. His still-life paintings, produced over a period of thirty years, express with visceral power his painterly mastery and personal passion.

Stephen Brown

Neubauer Family Foundation Associate Curator

Esti Dunow and Maurice Tuchman

Consulting Curators

**TO THE RIGHT OF THE INTRODUCTION,
MOVING CLOCKWISE**

Still Life with Rayfish, c. 1924

Oil on canvas

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls Collection, 1997

Soutine animates the components of this still life with a dynamic composition and energetic brushstrokes. The rayfish (a fish similar to skate and fit for human consumption) presides over a table with its mouth agape, as though caught in a cry. The exposed flesh and spilled tomatoes imply an unsettling violence.

The work's motif was inspired by The Ray, a masterpiece by Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. Rather than copying Chardin, Soutine set up similar objects in his studio and painted them from life, creating four versions in varying formats. Compared with Chardin's painting, Soutine reduces the number of objects in the scene and crops the background to emphasize the expressive features of the ray.

Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin

The Ray, 1725–26

Oil on canvas, 44⁷/₈ × 57¹/₂ in. (114 × 146 cm)

Musée du Louvre, Paris

The Artist's Studio, Cité Falguière, c. 1916

Oil on canvas

Collection of Barbara K. and Ira A. Lipman

In 1913, Soutine left Russia for Paris, settling in Montparnasse, the artists' district. In 1916, he moved to Cité Falguière, a complex of ateliers, where Paul Gauguin had worked in the 1870s. Soutine's neighbors included Amedeo Modigliani and Jacques Lipchitz. The bold color and brushwork of this painting, produced soon after, reveal the quickness with which the artist established his style.

MOVING CLOCKWISE TO THE NEXT ROOM

Flowers and Fruit, c. 1918

Oil on canvas

Private collection



Still Life with Artichoke, c. 1916

Oil on canvas

Kunsthaus Zürich, Legat Gustav Zumsteg, 2005

Still Life with Herrings, c. 1916

Oil on canvas

Collection Larock-Granoff, Paris

In this confrontational image, the view is from above, with a tabletop that is almost level with the picture plane. The tilting of the composition suggests the influence of Paul Cézanne. The reductive simplicity of the elements depicted—an empty bowl, three herrings, and forks that look like grasping human hands—evoke the artist's poverty during this period.

Still Life with Fruit, c. 1919

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Still Life with Fish, c. 1921

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Fish, Peppers, Onions, c. 1919

Oil on canvas

Barnes Foundation, Merion and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

In 1922, the Philadelphia collector Dr. Albert C. Barnes bought this painting and more than fifty others by Soutine to add to his copious collection of Cezannes, Matisses, and Renoirs—a purchase that established the artist's reputation and his financial security.

The rich play of warm, earthy tones is an established tradition in the still-life genre, yet here the effect is jarring: while the peppers and spring onions are identifiable, other objects are difficult to interpret. The fluid unity of the composition and its painterly handling are rendered strange by the presence of the hanging fish and green crockery in the shape of a duck, upside-down and with its neck broken.

SECTION TEXT:

A MODERN STILL LIFE

Expression is in the touch of the brush.

Chaim Soutine

Chaim Soutine's still lifes embrace the modernist notion that gesture, material, and color are as much the subject of art as the objects depicted. He pares down his compositions to concentrate on just a few elements. Replacing descriptive line with strokes of bold, raw color in rhythmic movement across the canvas, he translates emotion into writhing, activated form. The artist creates an expressive space in which the subject becomes one with pigment and touch.

Still life has a long history dating back to antiquity. In the seventeenth century, it was a common artistic theme, but was regarded as a lower genre, lacking the didactic and moral messages of religious, mythological, and historical topics. Still life nonetheless attracted great painters from Rembrandt to Pablo Picasso. The genre allows for celebration of the senses and appreciation of the everyday.

At the same time, it can be endowed with meanings for philosophical contemplation, notably the beauty of life and the transience of all things.

Flowers and Fish, c. 1919

Oil on canvas

Private collection

IN THE NEXT ROOM

STARTING ON THE LEFT AND MOVING CLOCKWISE

Chicken Hanging before a Brick Wall, c. 1927

Oil on canvas

Kunstmuseum Bern, Legat Georges F. Keller, 1981

In the mid-1920s, Soutine became obsessed with the motif of dead fowl, especially chickens and turkeys. More than twenty such works are documented in his oeuvre. They were painted in Paris or in the French countryside at the vacation home of the artist's art dealer, Leopold Zborowski.

Here, the yellow torso of the fowl hangs before an undefined dark space, beyond a roughly broken brick wall at left. Soutine's paintings of deceased animals are not soberly analytical, but confront the spectator with a keen sense of life's violence.

Soutine with a chicken in front of a broken brick wall, Le Blanc, western France, 1927. Image provided by the Klüver/Martin Archive

Chicken on a Blue Ground, c. 1925

Oil on canvas

The Lewis Collection

SECTION TEXT:

FOWL

Once I saw a butcher cut the throat of a goose and bleed it out. I wanted to cry out, but his look of joy caught the cry in my throat. I always feel it there It was this cry that I was trying to free. I never could.

Chaim Soutine

Although paintings of dead game birds are a staple of still life, the fowl that Soutine painted in his studio is transformed in a way that departs from tradition: he isolates the figure of the bird and sets it against a ground of abbreviated notations, vague and disordered. From his childhood in the shtetl, Soutine recalled the kosher laws of butchery and the ritual slaughter of beasts. The artist's numerous canvases of chickens and turkeys ready for the cooking pot have sometimes been interpreted as a memory of the kapparot, a ritual in some Jewish communities in which sins are transferred to a chicken before it is sacrificed during Yom Kippur.

In Soutine's paintings devoted to this theme, the body of the bird hangs, pendulous, perhaps in motion. In some, the

pose and turbulent treatment of paint suggest that the animal may still be alive and struggling. These aspects imbue the fowl paintings with a disturbing sense of the tragic and the impenetrable.

Turkey, c. 1925

Oil on canvas

Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris, Collection of Jean Walter and Paul Guillaume

Against a warm brown ground, the golden flesh of the plucked fowl emerges from the deep blue tones of the wing feathers and ruff. The bird is suspended from a skylight brace, which intrudes into the composition, disorienting the viewer. The turkey seems to be energetically swinging, an ambiguity that is amplified in its ruddy head: the beak gapes open, but the eye is closed, blinded in the ecstasy of the instant of passing.

Hanging Turkey, c. 1925

Oil on millboard

The Henry and Rose Pearlman Foundation, on long term loan to the Princeton University Art Museum, New Jersey

This image is difficult to read. Certain details, however, are depicted precisely, including the louvered awning at top, the turkey's extended wing feathers, and the cord tying its legs. The plucked flesh becomes a centrifugal force that spreads out in every direction, suggesting violent struggle and the anger and horror of entrapment.



Dead Fowl, c. 1926

Oil on canvas

The Art Institute of Chicago, Joseph Winterbotham
Collection, 1937

This bird sprawls on a chair with legs and wings akimbo. Deep brown and blue tones provide a ground for the intense play of light and dark in the flesh, feathers, and head. The upended creature plunges downward, suggesting the acceptance and inevitability of death.

Soutine creates a powerful statement through the handling of paint in his depictions of fowl. The abjection and horror of blood-spattered meat makes us uneasy, but an expressive beauty is integral to the overall conception. The artist's intense and novel vision of the still-life tradition conveys sacrifice and tragedy.

Hanging Turkey, c. 1925

Oil on canvas

Private collection, courtesy of McClain Gallery, Houston

IN THE NEXT ROOM

STARTING ON THE WALL AHEAD AND MOVING COUNTERCLOCKWISE

Beef, c. 1925

Oil on canvas

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

The artist once said that the beef paintings exorcised his memories of a harsh childhood. Trussed with a green cord that contrasts with its fleshy colors, this carcass pulsates with brutality.

Kosher law, which the artist may have had in mind, prescribes that animals be killed efficiently, without pain or delay: the beast must be decapitated and drained of blood immediately. In the studio, Soutine repeatedly poured blood onto the decaying carcass to enhance its colors, lending the meat a fresh appearance and preserving the image of slaughter.



Flayed Ox, c. 1925

Oil on canvas

Kunstmuseum Bern, Legat Georges F. Keller, 1981

Soutine restaged Rembrandt's famous painting The Flayed Ox in his studio, working from direct observation rather than copying the masterpiece in the Louvre. He reduced Rembrandt's realistic setting to a single object on a ground of contrasting hue, creating both an intense perception of quivering, decaying flesh and an abstract surface of tone and texture.

This painting was oriented incorrectly at some point and signed by another hand—thus, the signature in the lower right corner is upside down.

Rembrandt van Rijn

The Flayed Ox, 1655

Oil on beech panel, 37½ × 27⅞ in. (95.5 × 68.8 cm)

Musée du Louvre, Paris

Side of Beef with a Calf's Head, c. 1923

Oil on canvas

Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris, Collection of Jean Walter and Paul Guillaume

In this composition, the display of meat is curiously prosaic: a rack, pegs, hooks, and a chain in the upper register provide a note of naturalism. At the same time, using sumptuous facture and high-keyed tones, the artist envisions the carcass as an organic silhouette. The head looks on reflexively, a savage meditation on life transformed by death.

Carcass of Beef, c. 1925

Oil on canvas

Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, Room of Contemporary Art Fund, 1939

Soutine obsessively painted carcasses as many as ten times in 1925 and 1926, each with a different visual result. This beast, hung by its hind legs and gutted, dominates a closely cropped composition empty of other objects. The striking contrast of deep red and yellow against the cooler blue of the background presents butchery as a dramatic spectacle.



SECTION TEXT:

FLESH

They say Courbet could give in his nudes all the character of Paris. I want to show all that is Paris in the carcass of an ox.

Chaim Soutine

The beef carcass paintings have entered the mythology of Soutine's creative process. Anecdotes abound of the artist hauling sides of beef from nearby slaughterhouses and hanging them from the rafters of his Montparnasse studio. There are reports of neighbors vehemently complaining about the stench of rotting meat and the artist's practice of acquiring animal blood to revitalize the decomposing flesh. One tale relates the suspicion of murder when blood leaked under his studio door and into the hallway. On another occasion the police came to confiscate the putrefying flesh, only to be lectured by Soutine on the overriding demands of Art.

In reworking the established still-life tradition, Soutine freed himself from the artistic conventions of the genre, particularly in his use of expressive color and brushstroke

and in his focus on portraitlike images of a single animal. His fixation on capturing the moment between life and death develops throughout the works of the 1920s. The artist uses this motif as an armature to evoke powerful emotion in the viewer.

Brace of Pheasants, c. 1926

Oil on canvas

Collection of Phyllis and Stanley Getzler, New York

Hare with Forks, c. 1924

Oil on canvas

Private collection

In this painting, the form of the animal is voluptuously modeled in warm colors, set on a golden cloth against a dark upper register. Such imagery recalls the work of seventeenth-century masters of Dutch still-life painting, such as Jan Weenix. His reputation was based on scenes of the hunt and on elegant and exceptionally naturalistic paintings of dead game.

In Soutine's work the view is from above and down onto the table, but without the extreme tilting effect of his Still Life with Herrings in the previous room. Like that earlier still life, this composition has two forks, now foreshortened, which seem to grip the hare with a sense of mastery.

Jan Weenix

Game and Hunting Accessories on a Window Ledge, 1691

Oil on canvas, 42 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 35 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (109 × 90 cm)

Musée du Louvre, Paris

Hare, c. 1918

Oil on canvas

Collection of Ben Ami Fihman

The Rabbit, c. 1924

Oil on canvas

Private collection, New York

Two Partridges on a Table, c. 1926

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Many of the images of fowl communicate struggle, but others are more peaceful and express the stillness of death. Here, Soutine evokes the animals' quiet acceptance of their fate with virtuoso brushwork.

White Duck, c. 1925

Oil on canvas

Private collection

IN THE NEXT ROOM

STARTING ON THE WALL TO THE RIGHT AND MOVING CLOCKWISE

The Fish, c. 1933

Oil on panel

Private European collector

In this detailed depiction of a live fish, Soutine strove for a heightened realism. To achieve this effect, the artist turned for inspiration to his predecessor Gustave Courbet, whose 1872 painting of a trout has a similar composition. Soutine elaborated on Courbet's motif, endowing his own version with a feeling of anguish and passion.

Gustave Courbet

The Trout, 1872

Oil on canvas, 21 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 35 in. (55 × 89 cm)

Kunsthaus Zürich

The Great Pheasant, 1926–27
Oil on canvas
Leopold Private Collection, Vienna

SECTION TEXT:

THE LIFE OF BEASTS

The canvases from this late period of Soutine's life capture the threatening political climate. At the outbreak of World War II, he and his lover, Gerda Groth, a German Jew, found themselves in immediate peril. Groth was arrested and deported to an internment camp in the French Pyrenees, but survived the war. Soutine went into hiding in the countryside to the west of Paris, where he created many of the works on view here.

These small paintings of animals possess a naturalistic quality different from his earlier creations. In them, he continues to develop his still-life concerns: the raw material of human consumption is rendered with a haunting sense of the animals' suffering. This effect reminds the viewer of the fundamental themes of agony and compassion.

Chaim Soutine's art was the result of an exacting marriage of sensual paint to acute observation. From this highly personal style emerges work of great seriousness and grandeur.

Plucked Goose, c. 1933

Oil on panel

Private collection

The broken neck and naked flesh of this goose are presented with precision and sensitivity, in an image at once savage and sublime. There is an intriguing echo of earlier depictions by the artist: in Fish, Peppers, Onions, seen in the first room, the bird is present as a macabre crockery ornament. Through the naturalism of the 1930s, the artist conveys sentiments of vulnerability and pathos.

The Donkey, c. 1934

Oil on wood

Private European collector

The Bull, c. 1940

Oil on board

Private European collector

Sheep behind a Fence, c. 1940

Oil on canvas

Private collection, California

The Duck Pond at Champigny, 1943

Oil on canvas

Shmuel Tatz Collection

In this late painting of the rustic outdoors, the rich blue greens of the woods and pond suggest a yearning for immersion in nature. Its style evokes the tradition of painting landscape outdoors, while its spirited brushwork and sensuality of surface anticipate abstraction.

According to an inscription by Marie-Berthe Aurenche, Soutine's last companion, the work was painted in July, the month prior to the artist's death.

EPILOGUE

In August 1943, Soutine was secretly rushed from the countryside to Paris to receive urgent medical care—his chronic stomach condition had been exacerbated by the stress of hiding during the Nazi Occupation. To avoid detection, he was taken in a hearse, using a circuitous route. He arrived at the hospital more than twenty-four hours later and died during surgery.

Soutine was interred at the cemetery of Montparnasse. Among the few mourners were his companions, Marie-Berthe Aurenche and Gerda Groth, the artist and playwright Jean Cocteau, and Pablo Picasso.

Soutine at Châtel-Guyon in central France, 1928.
Image provided by the Klüver/Martin Archive

