Six oranges on a tabletop: Two are completely wrapped, the ends of the white tissue paper tightly twisted. Another sits in the middle of the group, its seal undone, its skin barely visible. Next to it a fourth orange lies on its side, delicate paper torn away. Two more remain unwrapped. This is certainly a simple arrangement—no complicated spatial recessions or multiple focal points, no background distractions or foreground intrusions, no dizzying variety of foods or flowers to decipher. There is no clear reference to a domestic space or a market setting. What, then, can be said about these six oranges on a tabletop?

William J. McCloskey’s *Wrapped Oranges* (1889, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas) may be a basic composition, but it is far from passive. This is a painting that quietly seduces the eye, a work that presents a single, ordinary type of fruit but endows each piece with its own persona, a picture that is ultimately a portrait of ecstatic and violated bodies. Finally, this is a painting of six oranges that still manages to speak about the specific cultural and historical moment of its creation.

The painter William J. McCloskey was born in 1858 in Philadelphia and died in 1941 in Orange County, California. He built a career as a portrait painter while also producing many still lifes of fruit, particularly of oranges. There is limited information about McCloskey’s life, but we do know that he studied with Thomas Eakins in Philadelphia, taking his first class at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts during the fall of 1877. From March 1878 until May 1882, McCloskey attended Eakins’s life classes, which, often controversially, involved working from nude male and female models and dissecting human and animal cadavers. Although he does not seem to have taken a still life class Eakins offered in 1882, it is hard to imagine that McCloskey missed one particular piece of the teacher’s advice on the subject, given its striking relationship to *Wrapped Oranges*: “Paint an orange,” Eakins instructed his students. “After you have it done, introduce a white thing.”

Eakins never painted a still life, while McCloskey made many that fit this very description. Yet *Wrapped Oranges* is not merely an academic exercise or a predictable example of still life, art’s traditionally lowest genre. While standing in front of the painting at the Amon Carter Museum, I overheard one woman confidently declare to her companion, “It’s a portrait.” In fact, McCloskey’s painting does seem to have more in common with his teacher’s depictions of men and women marked by a quietly intense interiority than with trompe-l’oeil pictures produced at the time, utilizing elements such as tantalizingly accurate paper currency, dangling game birds, and well-worn doorknobs. Careful distinctions are made between the oranges, each claiming its own space in the horizontal composition, each differently turned, illuminated, reflected, wrapped or unwrapped, hidden or revealed, to form, in essence, its own persona. While the thin folds of tissue do have a remarkably realistic presence, the impulse that defines trompe-l’oeil painting—a technical alchemy that offers the two-dimensional as the three-dimensional, transforming the visual into the tangible—does not comfortably apply to *Wrapped Oranges*. Rather, the painting enacts a kind of reverse alchemy: a still life subject primed for quick sensory deception instead registers as something else, something less illusory. As the woman in the gallery said, “It’s a portrait.” Here is the painting’s first paradoxical move: a still life asserts itself as a portrait while remaining a still life.

All we have to contemplate are six oranges. But this, the painting seems to say, is enough. A strip of nonreflective wood—presumably the table’s edge—constructs a barrier between the painted surface and our lived space, a separation that trompe-l’oeil painting, by its very nature, seeks to breach. The deep blue plush drape acts as a wall behind the fruit; there is no sense of a place beyond this one. The oranges are not part of some familiar domestic routine. And without overt symbolism—peeled rind or decaying flesh as vanitas iconography—the painting denies us any easy moral equivalence.
Norman Bryson, in his excellent book *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, argues that the genre “assaults the centrality, value and prestige of the human subject.” “Removal of the human body,” Bryson contends, “is the founding move of still life.” Yet *Wrapped Oranges* manages both to remove the human subject and to reinstate the language of the body. This is the painting’s second paradoxical turn. Viewing it closely means negotiating the divide between subject and language.

The title immediately asks us to consider what does (or does not) cover the oranges. They are in different states of undress: two cloaked in white tissue, two without any covering, two partially clothed. These last two are the most interesting and the most troubling. The tissue surrounding the orange in the center has come extravagantly undone, the paper flung open as if a seam had burst. This creates the one strong vertical in an otherwise resolutely horizontal composition. The orange seems to hover above the other five, oddly lifted as if in motion. Or perhaps it is raised on a small pedestal, giving this particular fruit a greater importance. Together with the striking contrast between dark background and white wrapper, this orange takes on an ecstatic quality, like a hand thrust upward or a body in flight.

The orange next to it has an even more corporeal presence. Its navel and bright rind have been exposed by a tear in the tissue, a small flap of paper turned back to unveil a bit more mottled skin. What is unsettling about this depiction is not the fact that the tissue is torn but *how* it is torn. With so much crinkled white paper in the composition, the tear that bisects this orange seems remarkably smooth. It reads more like a calculated cut or an incision than an accidental rip. The opening is narrow at the bottom, opens to reveal the clipped, nipple-like stem, and crests at a sharp point, evoking a surgical incision—delicate, pale skin sliced through to disclose bright flesh. The detail has a subtle sexual violence, a disturbing exposure of the body that alludes to both a dissection and a disrobing. Are we meant to read the torn paper—Eakins’s “white thing”—as skin or garment? Should the orange be seen in terms of anatomy—a breast displayed—or as flesh cut open? McCloskey’s painting lures us into considering such questions—about symbolism and personification, context and genre—but it refuses to provide
conclusive answers. Our interpretive moves continually return us to six oranges on a table.

Yet why oranges, specifically? The orange is what defines this painting as a late nineteenth-century American work, and one indebted to William McCloskey’s years in Southern California. At the time he painted Wrapped Oranges, the painter was living in New York City, but his subject seems to look back to Los Angeles, the city he had recently left. The navel orange was first brought to the United States in 1870 and introduced to California in 1873. In 1877 the first railroad car of oranges was shipped from Los Angeles, and by 1889 the state’s crop was worth $2.2 million. California had become an orange empire.5 While McCloskey was living in Los Angeles from 1884 to approximately 1886, the boom was in full swing. Oranges were being shipped in crates with labels depicting California as a lush Eden, the oranges as the pure fruits of this garden.6 The orange became a visual icon of California and the symbol of its abundant promise.

Wrapped Oranges tempts us with the language of certainty while leading us to paradox. A Californian icon is removed from a prodigal landscape of fantasy and reimagined in terms of the pain and pleasure of the physical body. A portrait of bodies remains a still life of oranges. The painting performs an optical and interpretive seduction—promising the fruits of knowledge in order to show us what we cannot understand.

NOTES
2. Moure, Partners in Illusion, 11, and Doreen Bolger, “The Education of the American Artist,” in In This Academy, 66.