This spring, the National Gallery graciously allowed its friends to give it a lot of art works in order to celebrate the museum’s fiftieth birthday, and then it hung some of them up and called the exhibit "Art for the Nation." Of the five hundred and fifty works the gallery received, it chose to spend a lot of energy publicizing Wayne Thiebaud’s 1963 painting "Cakes," which shows thirteen layer cakes displayed in late-afternoon light. The curators put "Cakes" on many of the handouts and leaflets and other ephemera that went with the exhibition. It is a bright and seemingly uncomplicated painting with a melancholy undercurrent, and it has become an instant favorite in the museum--the "Nighthawks" or "Christina's World" of the national collection. Serendipitously, a new book of Thiebaud’s graphic work is due from Bedford Arts this summer. (Right now, not a single book about Thiebaud is available in the National Gallery bookstore; the fine, though somewhat stiff, museum catalogue, by Karen Tsujimoto, of Thiebaud’s 1985 retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is very hard to find.) All this attention may perhaps lead to a new fame for this masterly, slightly underloved American painter.

Thiebaud is hardly unknown. His work has been around for thirty years, and in California, where he was born seventy-one years ago, and where he has spent his whole life, he holds an almost legendary reputation as a teacher. He has had his share of honorary doctorates and one-man shows, and nobody is giving his pictures away. ("Cakes" is rumored to have cost the friends of the National Gallery about a million dollars.) Yet even people who try to keep up with contemporary American art and who have a taste for the more "conservative" realist fringe--where Thiebaud would, at least superficially, seem to belong--may not immediately recognize his name, or place him in the first rank of American painters, and this requires some explanation.

People began to pay attention to Thiebaud around the time of Pop, and because he painted ice-cream cones and -club sandwiches and lipsticks and jars of cold cream, all isolated against bare backgrounds and casting long blue shadows, he was for a while thought of as a Pop artist. But his virtuoso gifts as a descriptive painter and his commitment to an art mediated through the eye and the mind rather than through the pervasive cliches of advertising quickly made him look retardataire--like a charming
provincial who didn't really get it. Then, as the various "traditionalist" reactions against Pop set in, Thiebaud's commitment to the American vernacular--to the cakes and gumball machines and soda fountains and coffee-shop pies that he takes as subjects, and to the cake-counter and coffee-shop come-ons and displays that he uses as starting points for compositions--seemed to put him outside the winter-mud-and-autumn-leaf pieties of most American realist painting. Thiebaud is unclassifiable. He is too devoted to tradition to be a Pop artist, too lighthearted and unpretentious to be a traditionalist in the more obvious manner of Wyeth, or even of William Bailey, and too tenderly regarding of his subject matter to be thought of as a pioneer "commodity" artist. (But no downtown puritan has ever looked as precisely as Thiebaud has at the way American abundance is packaged by its merchants, and if the theme of Thiebaud's sunny and rapt pictures had to be summed up in a phrase it would be "commodity fetishism.")

If Thiebaud cannot be classified, he can at least be characterized. He is, first of all, a painter with an unequalled ability to register an object seen as a thing enjoyed. He is, in a way, a literary painter, with an eye for the tiny, trivial thing that can be charged with meaning, and he has a writer's gift for making objects into symbols without betraying them as objects, so that they carry their little frosting of significance lightly and painlessly; a Thiebaud pie manages to suggest a world of longing--a serene abundance that is always a windowpane away--and yet remain a perfectly painted pie. Thiebaud is also one of the very few American painters to have a meaningful illusionistic technique; what he does with a brush demands a high degree of accumulated knowledge and savvy, and would be difficult or impossible for most other painters, but it is never merely showy or rote or conventional.

"Cakes" is mint Thiebaud--a big picture, five feet by six, and the closest that Thiebaud has ever come to a self-conscious "masterpiece," a monumental summing up. The thirteen cakes are set in three unevenly spaced rows, against a steeply pitched, light-aqua background. There is a horizon line about three-fourths of the way up the picture's surface, with a little "sky" of vanilla hovering above. The cakes rest on stands, and the rows are staggered, or syncopated, so that each cake is just looking over its neighbor's shoulder. They are the kind of American cakes that succeed more as
furniture than as pastry—those four- and five-layer towers that spin gravely in their cases at the Carnegie Deli or that sit patiently in the pastry case of a Madison Avenue coffee shop. They don't look edible; instead, they have a hardy, varnished solidity, like old-fashioned toys—wooden tops, or snare drums. We know these cakes by name, and can recite them: Boston cream pie, chocolate layer, coconut layer, angel food, strawberry birthday. (Part of Thiebaud's wit is to touch, like a good comedian, on a knowledge so deep that we hardly knew we had it.)

The environment in which the cakes sit seems at first like an enlarged detail from a Hopper street scene—a lifelike rendering of a bakery window in the long shadows of four o'clock. But a second look suggests that this composition comes from a realm of idealized vision, or from a poeticized memory. The "window" is too big, the spacing too broad; there are too many cakes here to be quite practical or really salable. And the perspective is "wrong" the plane of the picture is improbably tilted up, like the tables in Cezanne still-lifes, so that the perfectly circular tops of the cakes are completely visible, as though each cake were rising on tiptoe to bow at the viewer.

Thiebaud is a supreme orchestrator of intervals, who can transform a standard shopwindow arrangement simply by spacing it a new way. Just by pulling apart the "givens" of a window display—tilting a plane here, bending a shadow there, opening up a seemingly regular interval somewhere else—he can give artless, unpretentious arrangements some of the repetitive rhythm and authority of classical design. "Cakes" is about abundance, but there is no glut in its arrangement, which is decisive and severe. The picture's resonance lies in the tension between the dense and sensual excitement of Thiebaud's descriptions and the austerity of the means employed to discipline them—in the way the cake stands have improbably tall and attenuated spindles, so that each cake is mounted high enough to cast a perfect shadow on the aqua ground, or in the way that each cake has been pushed just off center on its plate, so that the simple repeated circles are set off by an undercurrent of ellipses. The effect of looking at all thirteen cakes one after another is like listening to a whole note scale struck lightly on a vibraphone.

The shapes between the cakes have atmosphere rather than architecture, and sit within an envelope of recognizably American light. It is a light that is at first as familiar--
as typical, as generic—as the cakes it surrounds a chalky, melancholy light, which seems to have been bottled sometime in the nineteen-thirties in a small Midwestern city and to have been spilling into American painting ever since. Thiebaud uses this light so liberally that, through sheer excess, it becomes Californian. It becomes the sudden glare that you experience on the West Coast just after you take off your sunglasses—a light focussed and intensified, it seems, by being bounced off the windshields and chrome-work of an infinity of parked cars, and reflected up from the bare white pavements of countless empty midday streets.

Thiebaud's touch always reminds you of what made oil painting catch on in the first place, some five hundred years ago—not its inherently "expressive" powers (for surely pencils are more immediately sensitive to touch and to nuance, and tempera more naturally monumental) but the way it can record light striking the surfaces of things. Thiebaud catches each bit of icing and decoration passionately the sugar rosette, the pastry-bag swirl the way each Maraschino cherry planted in a circle casts its own shadow. In certain places, Thiebaud jokingly plays the part of confectioner—smearing thick brown paint, for example, to duplicate chocolate frosting. In other places, the paint surface couldn't be more unlike what it represents. The two adjoining angel-food cakes that stand dead center in the picture (and which are the only repeated cakes), for instance, are painted prismatically, as a composite of orange and beige and sky blue and putty. (White is Thiebaud's touchstone. He has said, "From a painter's standpoint, white both absorbs light and reflects light—it's composed of all colors, like Chardin's tablecloths.")

If Thiebaud knows how to use color as a descriptive medium, he also knows how to use it as an expressive halo. The cakes, which seem so honestly and forthrightly described, turn out, when they're seen up close, to be outlined with rings and rainbows of pure color—bright blues and reds and purples, which register at a distance only as a just perceptible vibrato. These rings are Thiebaud's own invention—there's nothing quite like them in any other painting—and they give to his pictures not just a sense of the shiver of light in a particular place but also the sense that the scene has the interior life and unnatural emphases of something recalled from memory.

Thiebaud's investment in his unpretentious subjects seems tinged with a wry and
deliberate gallantry—a sort of cool. Reading what he has to say about his work, and looking at his drawings (a Thiebaud sketchbook was published a few years ago by Abrams), you learn that he is able to achieve this detachment, and keep his pictures from being merely saccharine, by looking at his material primarily as objects, and only secondarily as subjects. "At the end of 1959 or so I began to be interested in a formal approach to composition," he wrote once in an essay. "I picked things like pies and cakes—things based upon simple shapes like triangles and circles—and tried to orchestrate them. Working from memory, I tried to arrange them in the same way that an art director arranges things….My approach was very formalistic, except that I became increasingly affected by the idea of this odd subject matter. I didn't quite know why, but it seemed to me that there are certain objects that contain telltale evidence of what we're about …But I wasn't interested in trying to explain or give answers so much as trying to present these objects so that they might be evocative in an existential sense."

Thiebaud's method demands a Zenlike willingness to empty out one's mind and give a pebble or a tree or a bucket of water—or a cake—its full, unique weight as a thing. It has the effect not of eliminating the Pop resonance of his subjects but of slowing down and chastening the associations they evoke, so that a host of ambivalent feelings—nostalgic and satiric and elegiac—come back later, calmed down and contemplative: enlightened. The leisureliness and length and many-sidedness of his regard are what distinguish it most significantly from Pop proper, where the point was always to insist that object and subject couldn't be pulled apart. (In a Lichtenstein comic-book picture, for example, the graphic clarity and the absurd subject and the Art Nouveau outlines all hit you in one blinding, strobe-lit moment. Thiebaud's pictures, by contrast, unfold.)

Thiebaud was forty when he found his subject and method. Before that he had lived an agreeably pragmatic sounding life in small towns through out northern California, taking up the kinds of work—art direction, cartooning, sign painting—that are still available to people who want to make a living describing things. He absorbed the cartoonist's feeling for scribble, the crosshatched studiousness of the illustrator, the art director's formulas for glamour, and let them inflect his virtuoso, traditional technique.
When he exhibited his first cake pictures and pie pictures in New York in a famous show at the Allan Stone Gallery, in 1962, the result was almost like the Picasso circle's discovery of Le Douanier Rousseau. Thiebaud's dead serious, lyric realism was taken as satire, and his probing isolation of his objects as a way of jeering at them. (Thomas Hess wrote in ARTnews, "Looking at these pounds of slabby New Taste Sensation, one hears the artist screaming at us from behind the paintings, urging us to become hermits: to leave the new Gomorrah where layer cakes troop down air-conditioned shelving like cholesterol angels, to flee to the desert and eat locusts and pray for faith. [He] preaches revulsion by isolating the American food habit.")

Pretty soon, though, even the critics began to see that Thiebaud was not a satirist, or not simply a satirist, and once that was perceived he began to slip, if not from sight, at least from notoriety. Since then, he has painted, in addition to more cakes, pies, and other desserts, full-length, almost life-size portraits of self-contained, imperturbable Californians; overlush flower pictures (when Thiebaud's luxuriant, animating touch is applied to a subject that is itself luxuriant, the effect is overripe); and, best of all, vertiginous views of idealized California streets and freeways, which are like a combination of David Hockney and Piranesi.

It is for the rapt contemplation of a few objects, and for his high-hearted, ambivalent love of them, however, that Thiebaud is most likely to be remembered. The seemingly flat and neutral titles of the pictures that are from the same period as "Cakes" ring equally with affection and with a helpless humor: "Three Cold Creams," "Four Pinball Machines," "Strawberry Cone," "Three Lipsticks," "Pies, Pies, Pies" --a vision of the biggest potlatch there has ever been, which looks at some moments like a garden of earthly delights and at others like a wasteland, depending on the light. Thiebaud paints a bleached-out, glaring, standardized America through which little shimmers of serenity pass as suddenly as breezes. He looks at his cafeteria counters and window displays as though these workaday arrangements of things had been set in order by a god of manufacture, not to be sold or desired but just to be looked at. It seems unlikely that anyone will take inventory of our overabundant mid-century larder with a happier eye, or from a more sober perspective.

--ADAM GOPNIK