



GIORGIO MORANDI: LINEAR IMPULSE

DICKINSON



Moscow 1966

GIORGIO MORANDI: LINEAR IMPULSE

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'One can travel this world and see nothing. To achieve understanding it is necessary not to see many things, but to look hard at what you do see.'

- Giorgio Morandi

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INTRODUCTION

‘Morandi’s etchings are based on the same subject matter as his canvases and other works on paper. We recognize the same still life objects and the same places, the same sensitivity to subtle differences and revealing nuances that we have learned to expect from the paintings, drawings, and watercolors, but they are presented in terms of a visual language very specific to their medium. Morandi’s etchings appear to be driven entirely by linear impulse. Their complex orchestration of tonalities is achieved by hatching and repeated fragments of line. The shapes from which the etchings are constructed are often more complicated than in Morandi’s works in other media, while their edges are often more nervous, created as they are by frayed cross-hatching. Clearly, a sharp etching needle on a copper plate elicited a different kind of mark than a stiff brush loaded with oil paint, a soft watercolor brush dragged across rough textured paper. or a blunt pencil on a sheet torn from a drawing pad.’

- Karen Wilkin, *Giorgio Morandi*, Milan, 2008, p. 12

The familiarity and simplicity of Giorgio Morandi’s compositions, his bottle still lifes and unpeopled landscapes, can obscure both their intellectual intensity and their place in the development of the Western tradition. He was intensely focused rather than monkishly cloistered, and maintained close contact with the wider *avant-garde*. Roberto Longhi, among the most influential Italian art historians of the 20th Century, declared that Morandi was ‘one of Italy’s finest living painters’.

Morandi was born in 1890, and so was one of the pivotal generation of artists who came of age in the first two decades of the 20th Century, the crucible of Modernism. He studied at the *Accademia di Belle Arti* in his native Bologna, but

rejected the prevailing 19th Century Academic tradition. Instead he turned to reports coming from Paris, particularly the articles of Ardengo Soffici, later a close friend, and exhibitions of contemporary art at the Venice *Biennale*. As he declared, 'if anyone in Italy, in my generation of young painters, was passionately aware of new developments of French art, it was I. In the first two decades of this century, very few Italians were as interested as I in the work of Cézanne, Monet and Seurat.' (quoted in M.C. Bandera, 'Giorgio Morandi today', in *Giorgio Morandi, 1890 – 1964*, exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna, 2008, p. 22). Soffici wrote the first article in Italian on Cézanne in *Vita d'Arte* in 1908, following up with four articles on Impressionism in *La Voce* in 1909, and it seems likely that these were a formative influence on the young Morandi. In 1910 he made his first visit to Florence, and spent long hours in the Uffizi studying the *Quattrocento* masters, especially



Fig. 1: *Natura morta con bottiglia e brocca*, 1915 (Vitali 3)

Massacio and Piero della Francesca. An understanding of the latter's arrangement of space and compositional depth is apparent throughout Morandi's work.

In his last years at the *Accademia*, Morandi taught himself etching from 18th Century manuals found in the library, experimenting on recycled copper plates. Only five prints survive from the period 1912-20, so he almost certainly edited the record of this most formative period. The present exhibition includes *Natura morta con bottiglia e brocca* (1915), the third print in Vitali's chronological catalogue raisonné, which shows his response both to the Cubism of Braque and Picasso and to the Futurism of his compatriots (fig. 1). Morandi was singled out for praise by Boccioni and Marinetti and exhibited with the Futurists in 1913-14, but his pared down statements were the antithesis of the latter's noisy manifestos and he was unhappy with their disparagement of the Italian tradition. By 1917 he moved closer to the

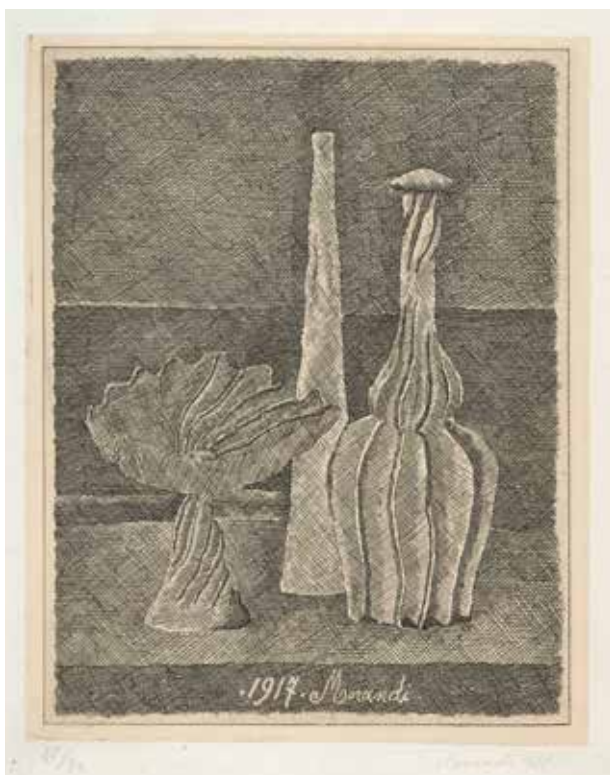


Fig. 2: *Natura morta con compostiera, bottiglia lunga e bottiglia scannellata*, 1928 (Vitali 50)

Metaphysical movement, and especially to Carlo Carrà and Giorgio de Chirico, whom he met in 1919. In this exhibition *Natura morta con compostiera, bottiglia lunga e bottiglia scannellata*, printed in 1928 but dated 1917 in the plate and related to a painting in the Mattioli Collection, shows his mastery of the elevated vantage point, glancing planes and conflicting light sources of *Pittura metafisica* (fig. 2). By 1920 Morandi was responding to the values espoused by the journal *Valori Plastici*, the Italian response to the French *Rappel à l'Ordre*. His self-taught printmaking reflected the return to craftsmanship that this Return to Order championed. After this period of apprenticeship and emulation he found his own voice, and henceforward followed a 'taut trajectory', in Longhi's phrase, that carried him through the twists of mid-20th Century artistic development with remarkable consistency.

In the 1920s Morandi was working as a peripatetic art teacher in elementary schools in the region around Bologna, and his compositions carry the steady, unhurried rhythm of a world observed at a walking pace. The settled mass of the Basilica of San Petronio, the angled towers of the Bologna skyline and the porticoed streets find echoes in his stately still lifes, while even the solids and voids of his landscapes appear as tabletop arrangements (although some were made *en plein air*, many were viewed from the frame of his window, often with the use of a telescope). The relationship between Morandi and architecture is a close one. The critic Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti called him 'a painter of architectural structures', and in his lifetime he was much admired by Marcel Breuer, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius, while Frank Gehry took inspiration from Morandi's compositions for his own house in Wayzata, Minnesota. Three of the drawings in the present exhibition are kindly loaned from the collection of the noted architect Michael A. Rubenstein, who worked with Louis Kahn.

Morandi famously prepared his compositions with tremendous care, arraying a limited line up of objects on a table in his studio-bedroom over several months, even drawing a line around his feet to ensure he kept the same viewpoint throughout the process. He had begun collecting the familiar group of bottles in about 1914, painting or covering them with gesso to neutralize them, rendering them into pure form. The

objects are signifiers not sentimental artifacts, stripped of individual significance. As Cézanne had retreated to Provence to pursue his mission, Morandi restricted himself to his Bologna studio to investigate the relationship between the objects reduced to 'the sphere, the cone and the cylinder'. Morandi also saw himself in the long history of still life painting, looking especially to Chardin, which allowed him to root his work in tradition, limiting his subject matter to free himself to explore more modern concerns. By making the subjects anonymous he could ignore anything that was rhetorical, descriptive or decorative.

Etching, like painting, is a slow and laborious process. By working at the prepared plate Morandi was able to extract the image with a painstaking network of cross-hatched lines, a probing and meditative process that gives the etchings their power and intensity. The technique is perhaps not best suited to the tonal range that he sought, but this self-imposed difficulty, like the equally restrictive subject matter, allowed him to focus on the spatial problems that most interested him. In this perhaps the closest of his contemporaries was Alberto Giacometti, whose near total concentration on the human figure and still life after about 1936 allowed an intense exploration of the actuality of forms and their relationships with one another.

In 1930 Morandi was elected unopposed as Professor of Etching at the *Accademia*, a position he held until 1956. Although he was self-taught, his technique was rigorous and masterful. He usually worked with only one state, rarely reworking the plate with the burin after it had come out of the acid bath, and leaving little leeway for the printer. As the present exhibition shows he experimented with different papers, using applied sheets of different shades, Chinese, Japanese or Indian papers with varied surfaces. He often also reused old papers retrieved from secondhand bookshops to take advantage of their warm tones. The irregular or shaped border of the etched field tends to fall short of the hard edge, allowing an interplay with the generous margins of the chosen sheets, as is beautifully demonstrated in this exhibition.

The period 1926-32 was Morandi's most prolific as a printmaker, resulting in 50 of his 136 surviving plates. From the mid 1930s his greater financial security meant he could work in oils, although he returned often to etching with compositions often evolving first on the plate before they were translated to canvas. From the 1940s onward he also made more drawings and watercolors (or at least more have come down to us). Drawing is quicker and more immediate than etching, allowing a brilliant elucidation of formal and spatial relationships but without the tenebrous intensity that the etching needle delivers. Working on the prepared plate involved a canted, 'extractive' instrument, while he seems to have made his drawings with the pencil held vertically in his fist to build the image additively. These two very different approaches present an equal but very different power.

The considered approach by which Morandi explores the stillness of his subjects, their relationships and the negative space between them draws him into a nearly abstract world. As he declared, 'I believe that nothing can be more abstract, more unreal, than what we actually see' (quoted in E. Roditti, *Dialogues on Art*, Santa Barbara, 1980, p. 51). It was this approach that has ensured Morandi's continuing power and relevance. As the artist Robert Irwin notes, '[..] Giorgio Morandi was the only truly great Abstract Expressionist in Europe', continuing, in a discussion of the paintings that fits as well with the etchings, 'so, jettison "bottles" from your mind's eye and enjoy the tactile feast of what Morandi does with a single stroke of paint ... This is the incredible economy of means that marks the essence of a master painter of the real.' (R. Irwin, in *Giorgio Morandi*, exh. cat., Tate, London, 2001, p. 65).

ETCHINGS

Natura morta con compostiera, bottiglia lunga e bottiglia scannellata,
1928 (Vitali 50)

dated and signed, in the plate lower center .1917. Morandi;
numbered in pencil, in the margin lower left 45/50; and signed and
dated in pencil, in the margin lower right *Morandi 1928*
etching on Chine collé on wove paper
Plate: 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 7 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (23.4 x 18.8 cm.)
Sheet: 12 x 9 in. (30.5 x 22.9 cm.)



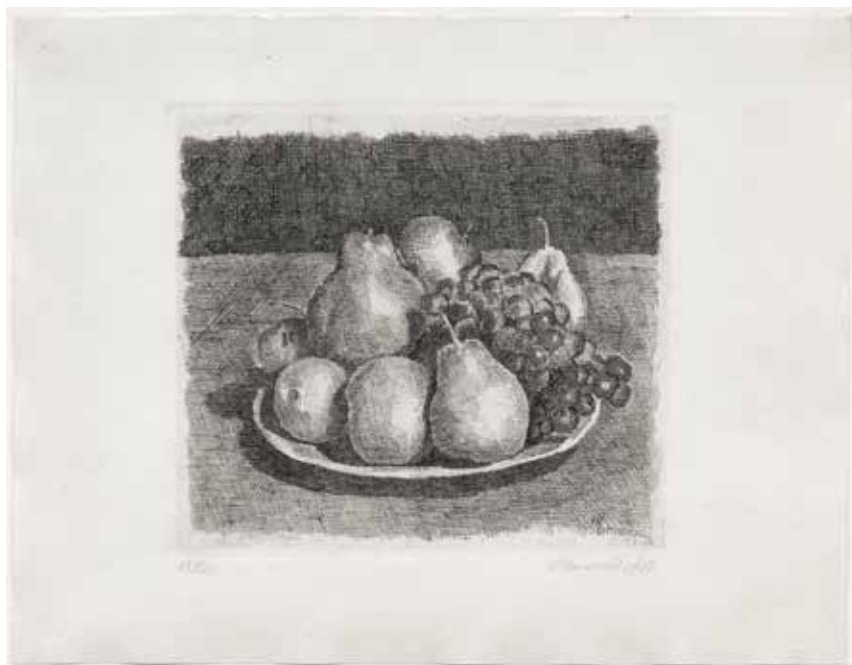
Natura morta con pere e uva, 1927 (Vitali 36)

signed in the plate, lower right *Morandi*; numbered in pencil, in the margin lower left *38/40*; and signed and dated in pencil, in the margin lower right *Morandi / 1927*
etching, the first state of two, with the drystamp for Libreria

Prandi, Reggio Emilia

Plate: 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 8 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (18.4 x 20.7 cm.)

Sheet: 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 13 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (26 x 33.4 cm.)



Grande natura morta con la lampada a destra, 1928 (Vitali 46)

inscribed in pencil, in the margin lower left *prova di stampa*,
and signed in pencil, in the margin lower right *Morandi*
etching on Japan paper, eighth state of eight, one of 3 proofs aside
from the edition of 75

Plate 9 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (25.2 x 34.9 cm.)

Sheet 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 25 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (47 x 64 cm.)



Natura morta con oggetti bianchi fondo scuro, 1931 (Vitali 82)

signed and dated, in the plate lower centre *Morandi / 1931*;
numbered in pencil, in the margin lower left 7/30; signed in
pencil, in the margin lower right *Morandi*
etching on wove paper, the only state
Plate: 9 ½ x 11 ½ in. (24.4 x 29.2 cm.)
Sheet: 14 x 18 ¾ in. (35.6 x 46.7 cm.)



Natura morta con vasetto e tre bottiglie, 1945 (Vitali 112)

signed in the plate, lower centre *Morandi*; numbered in pencil, in the margin lower left *19/30*; and signed and dated in pencil, in the margin lower right *Morandi 1946* [sic.]

etching on Japan paper

Plate: $6\frac{3}{4} \times 5\frac{1}{4}$ in. (17.3 x 13.2 cm.)

Sheet: $9\frac{7}{8} \times 6\frac{3}{4}$ in. (25 x 17 cm.)



Natura morta con cinque oggetti, 1956 (Vitali 116)

signed in the plate, lower left *Morandi*; and dated in the plate, lower right 1956; numbered in pencil, in the margin lower left 16/150; and

signed in pencil, in the margin lower right *Morandi*
etching, third state of four, from the edition of 150 for the
Associazione Amatori d'Arte, aside from the edition of 15

Plate: 5 ½ x 7 ⅞ in. (14 x 19.9 cm.)

Sheet: 14 ¾ x 17 ⅛ in. (37.6 x 68.8 cm.)

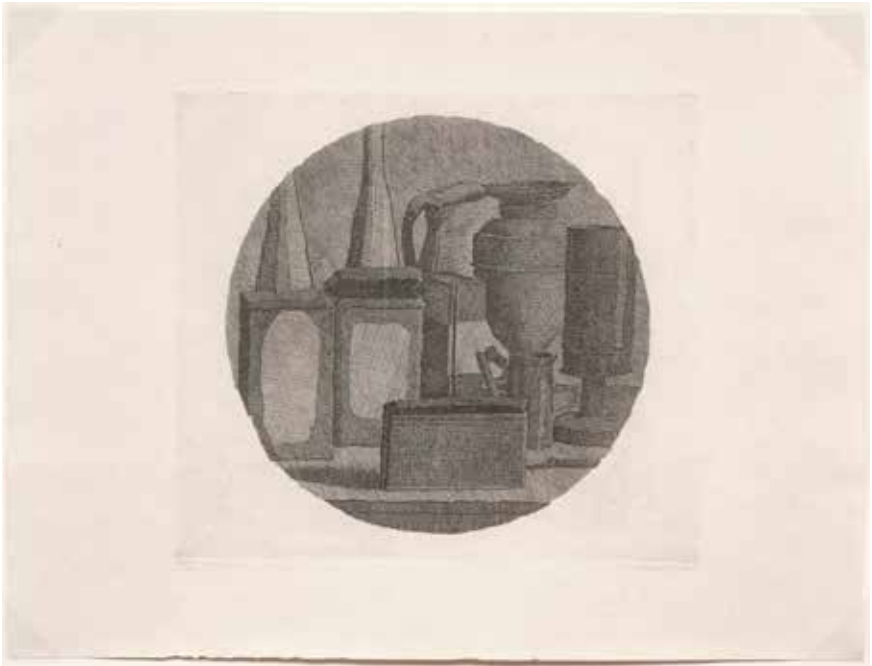


Natura Morta in un tondo, 1942 (Vitali 109)

numbered in pencil, in the margin lower left 15/50; and signed and dated in pencil, in the margin lower right *Morandi 1942*
etching on Japan paper, the second state of two

Plate: 10 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 12 in. (27 x 30.5 cm.)

Sheet: 14 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 19 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. (37.2 x 49.7 cm.)



Natura morta con bottiglia e brocca, 1915 (Vitali 3)

signed in pencil, in the margin lower left *Morandi*;
and dated in pencil, in the margin lower right 1915
etching, the only state

Plate: 6 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 4 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (15.4 x 12.5 cm.)

Sheet: 7 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (18.8 x 14.7 cm.)



Natura morta con vaso conchiglie e chitarra, 1921 (Vitali 7)

signed in the plate, upper centre *Morandi*; signed in pencil,
lower left *Morandi*; and dated in pencil, lower right 1921
etching on Japan, the second state of two

Plate: 3 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 4 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. (10 x 11.8 cm.)

Sheet: 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (24.8 x 30 cm.)



Natura morta con il cestino del pane [Lastra piccola], 1921 (Vitali 14)

signed in the plate, lower centre *Morandi*; signed in pencil, in the margin lower left *Morandi*; and dated in pencil, lower right 1921

etching on Japan, second state of three

Plate: 4 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 6 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (11.8 x 15.4 cm.)

Sheet: 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (20.8 x 24.8 cm.)



Il giardino di via Fondazza, 1924 (Vitali 25)

numbered in pencil, in the margin lower left 5/55; and signed
and dated in pencil, in the margin lower right *Morandi 1924*
etching on Japan paper, third state of four, with the drystamp

for Libreria Prandi, Reggio Emilia

Plate: 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 6 in. (10.8 x 15.2 cm.)

Sheet: 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 12 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (24.9 x 30.8 cm.)



Paesaggio del Poggio, 1927 (Vitali 33)

numbered in pencil, in the margin lower left *48/50*; and signed
and dated in pencil, in the margin lower right *Morandi 1927*
etching on Chine collé on wove paper, second state of two

Plate: 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (23.4 x 29 cm.)

Sheet: 15 x 19 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. (38 x 50 cm.)



Il Poggio al mattino, 1927 (Vitali 35)

numbered in pencil, in the margin lower left 44/50; and signed
and dated in pencil, in the margin lower right *Morandi 1927*

etching on wove paper, the only state

Plate: 11 x 8 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. (27.9 x 21.8 cm.)

Sheet: 21 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 12 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (55.7 x 32.8 cm.)



Natura morta con il lume bianco a sinistra, 1928 (Vitali 47)

signed and dated, in the plate lower centre *Morandi 1928*;
signed in pencil, in the margin lower right *Morandi*; and
numbered in pencil, in the margin lower left *30/50*
etching on Chine collé on wove paper, the second state of two

Plate: 8 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 10 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. (22 x 27 cm.)

Sheet: 13 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 18 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (33.6 x 46.5 cm.)



Natura morta con tazza e caraffa, 1929 (Vitali 56)

signed and dated, in the plate lower centre *Morandi 929*;
numbered in pencil, in the margin lower left 2/40; and
signed in pencil, in the margin lower right *Morandi*
etching on Chine collé on wove paper, the first state of two

Plate: 9 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. (23.9 x 29.4 cm.)

Sheet 11 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (28.2 x 31.8 cm.)



Natura morta con due oggetti e un drappo su un tavolo, 1929 (Vitali 64)

numbered in pencil, in the margin lower left 9/40; and signed and dated in pencil, in the margin lower right *Morandi 1929*

etching on wove paper, the only state

Plate: 9 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 7 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. (23.9 x 19.4 cm.)

Sheet: 13 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 12 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (34.6 x 32.7 cm.)



Natura morta con tazza bianca a sinistra, 1930 (Vitali 70)

signed and dated, in the plate lower left *Morandi 1930*; numbered in pencil, in the margin lower left *11/30*; and signed in pencil, in the margin lower right *Morandi*
etching on Chine collé on wove paper, the second state of two
Plate: 7 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (18.7 x 28.6 cm.)
Sheet: 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (27.4 x 37.4 cm.)



Natura morta con il panneggio, 1931 (Vitali 80)

numbered in pencil, in the margin lower left *15/40*; and signed
and dated in pencil, in the margin lower right *Morandi 1931*
etching on wove paper, the second state of three

Plate: 9 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 12 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (24.6 x 31.5 cm.)

Sheet: 13 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 16 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (34 x 41.3 cm.)



Paesaggio Di Grizzana, 1932 (Vitali 96)

numbered in pencil, in the margin lower left 54/60; signed and dated in pencil, in the margin lower right *Morandi 1932*; and dedicated in pencil, in the margin lower left *con migliori auguri di felicità / Giorgio Morandi / Bologna 15 Ottobre 1960*

etching on wove paper, the only state

Plate: 11 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 9 in. (29.5 x 23 cm.)

Sheet: 18 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (47.4 x 34.2 cm.)



Natura morta a grandi segni, 1931 (Vitali 83)

signed, in the plate lower centre *Morandi*; inscribed in pencil,
in the margin lower left *prova di stampa*; signed and dated in
pencil, in the margin lower right *Morandi 1931*

etching, the second state of two

Plate: 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (24.7 x 34.4 cm.)

Sheet: 15 x 20 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (38 x 51.2 cm.)



Natura morta con quattro oggetti e tre bottiglie, 1956 (Vitali 117)

signed in the plate, lower right *Morandi*; numbered in pencil, in the margin lower left *5/100*; and signed and dated in pencil, lower right *Morandi 1956*
etching on wove paper, second state of two

Plate: 8 x 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (20.3 x 19.9 cm.)

Sheet: 15 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (38.7 x 28.3 cm.)



Natura Morta, 1933 (Vitali 102)

signed and dated in the plate, lower centre *Morandi 1933*;
numbered in pencil, in the margin lower left *17/30*; and
signed in pencil, in the margin lower right *Morandi*
etching on wove paper, the third state of four

Plate: 10 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 12 in. (25.8 x 30.4 cm.)

Sheet: 15 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (39.6 x 49.6 cm.)



Gelsomini in un vaso a strisce, 1931 or 1932 (Vitali 97)

number in pencil, in the margin lower left 21/50; and signed in pencil, in the margin lower right *Morandi*

etching on wove paper, watermark *JWZanders*, the fourth state of four

Plate: 12 ½ x 9 ¾ in. (31.7 x 24.8 cm.)

Sheet: 27 ¾ x 13 ¾ in. (69.5 x 35 cm.)



La strada bianca, 1933 (Vitali 104)

signed and dated in the plate, lower center *Morandi 1933*;
numbered in pencil, in the margin lower left 25/50; and
signed in pencil, in the margin lower right *Morandi*
etching on Chine collé on wove paper, the only state

Plate: 8 x 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (20.6 x 30.1 cm.)

Sheet: 14 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 18 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (36 x 46.2 cm.)



D R A W I N G S

Natura morta, 1946

signed and dated, lower center *Morandi 1946*
pencil on paper, with a study for another still life, verso
9 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 13 in. (24.5 x 33 cm.)



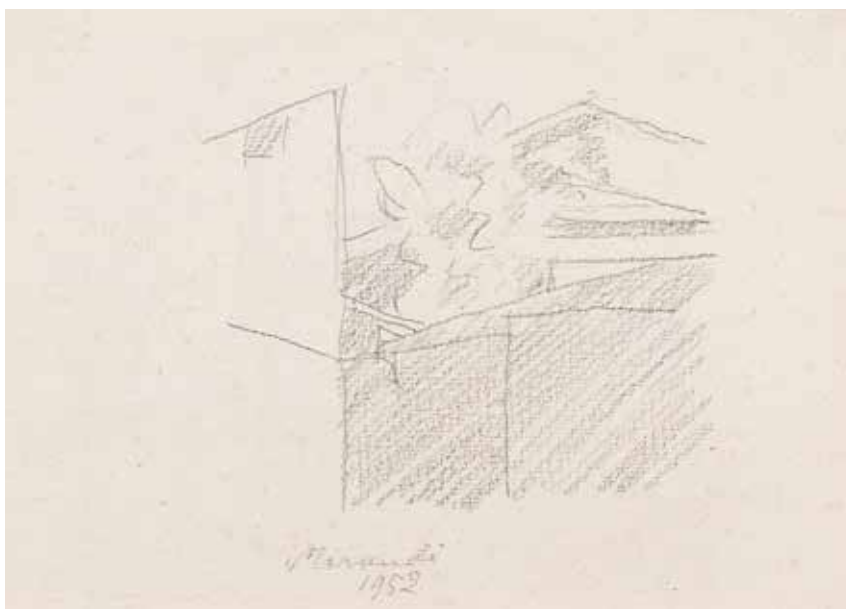
Paesaggio (Cortile), 1952

signed and dated, lower center *Morandi / 1952*

pencil on paper

8 x 12 ½ in. (20.4 x 31.8 cm.)

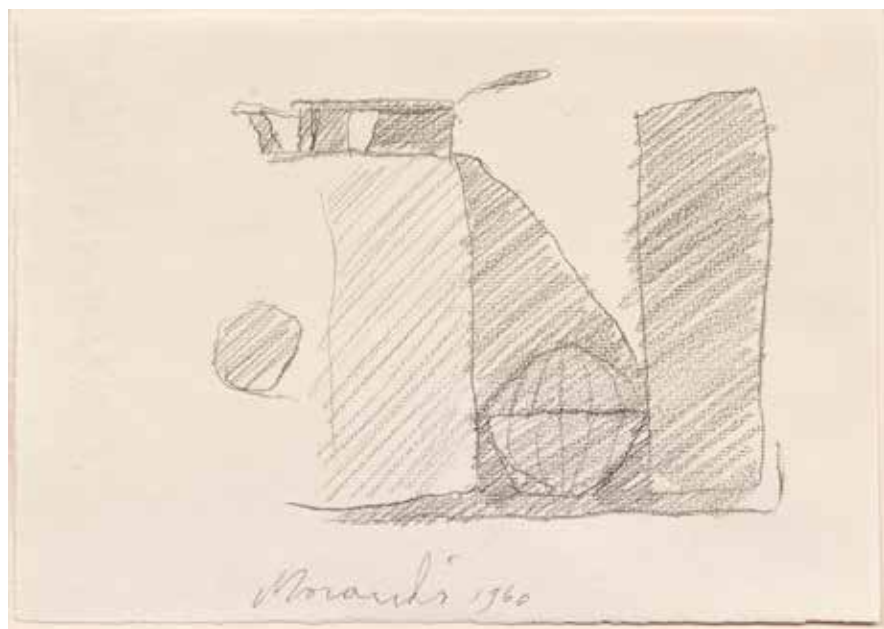
Collection of Michael A. Rubenstein, New York, a promised gift
to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Natura morta, 1960

signed and dated, lower center *Morandi 1960*
pencil on paper, watermark *C.M. Fabriano*
6 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 9 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (16.2 x 23.8 cm.)

Collection of Michael A. Rubenstein, New York, a promised
gift to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Natura morta, 1962

signed, lower right *Morandi*
pencil on paper, watermark *C.M. Fabriano*
7 ½ x 10 ½ in. (19 x 27 cm.)

Collection of Michael A. and Juliet van Vliet Rubenstein, New York, a
promised gift to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



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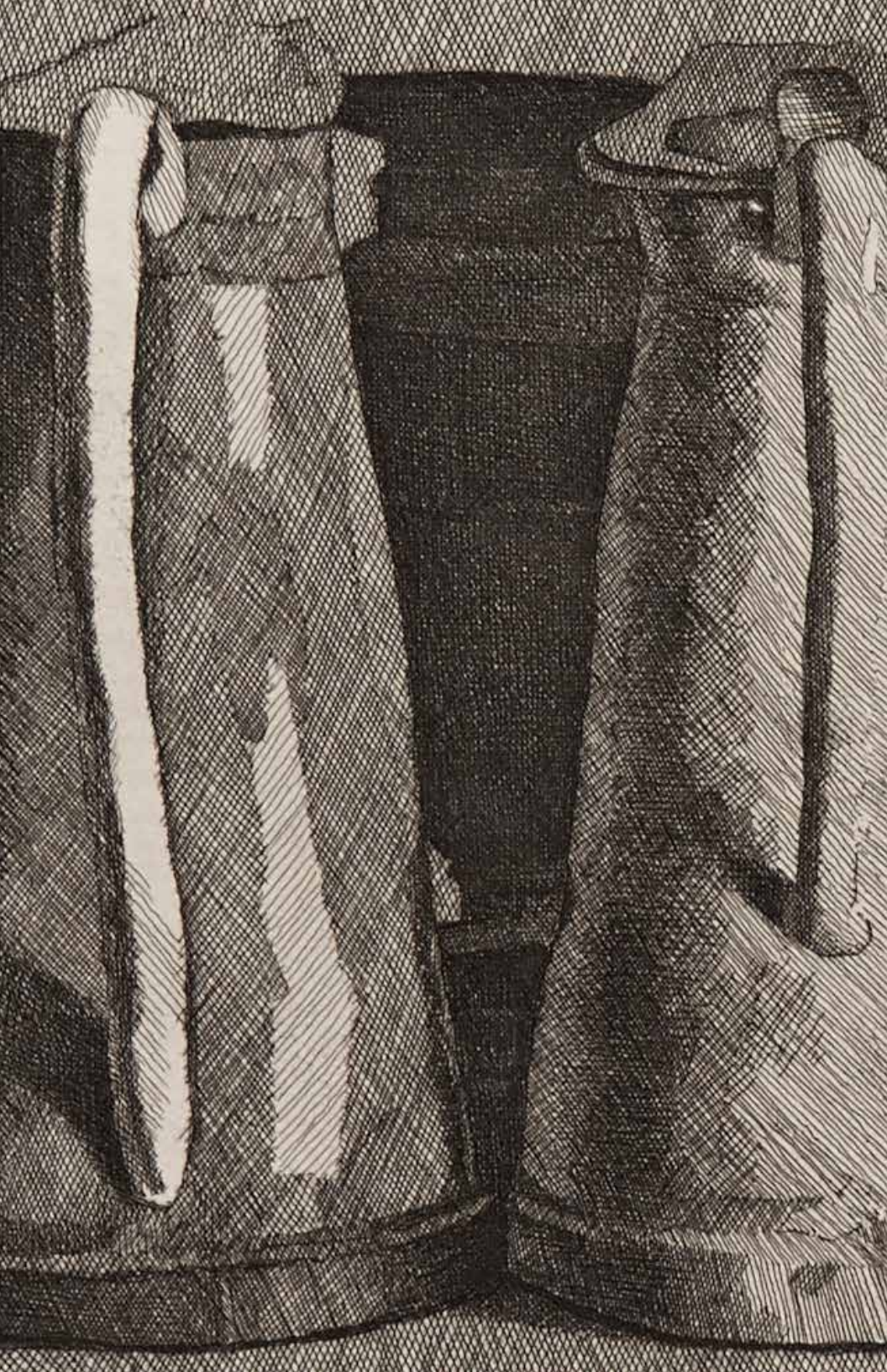
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