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## Photographer Paulette Tavormina on the Art of the Table

By Alexandra Owens

**NEW YORK** – Fine-art photographer Paulette Tavormina, whose work is inspired by Old Master still-life paintings, finds artistry in the details. “Beyond just the beauty, I want the viewer to see as I see, to feel the emotion I feel when a leaf balances just-so and points the eye to the next little narrative that is part of the larger work,” says Tavormina. “This beauty all around us is fleeting, and yet can be embedded forever in a perfect moment that is a photograph.” For Luxe: The Art of the Table, an upcoming auction featuring silver, European ceramics and 19th century furniture and decorative arts, Tavormina applied her expert eye to styling and creating evocative images with these stunning objects. Read on to discover more about Tavormina’s fascinating process and collaboration with Sotheby’s.



PAULETTE TAVORMINA. PHOTOGRAPHER: BETSY PINOVER SCHIFF.

### In a few words, how would you describe your aesthetic?

I think the words that resonate with me are “classically reminiscent.” I think that captures it.

### How did you first become interested in Old Master still-life painters?

It started when I was living in Santa Fe. A close friend of mine Sarah McCarty, a wonderful still-life painter, introduced me to the work of Maria Sibylla Merian, a 16th-century botanist who was one of the first women who painted the metamorphosis of butterflies and flowers. I fell in love with her work. Then I discovered another woman painter from the Renaissance, Giovanna Garzoni. It’s mostly very simple imagery – a bowl of figs with a butterfly or pears and flowers. That was in the 1990s when I became a photographer. You know how something just stays in your memory – twenty years later when I moved back to New York and started working at Sotheby’s again, photographing their auction catalogues, I thought, “I’m going to create this dream I’ve had for

a lot of the scenes I worked on involved food. It was a perfect storm of all those things combined that gave me the education and the confidence to create my own imagery.



PHOTOGRAPHER: PAULETTE TAVORMINA.

**There's almost a trompe l'oeil feeling to your work. What inspired you to respond to the Old Masters with photography?**

I love photography in that it captures a single moment of time in the click of a shutter button. That intrigued me, because I can keep that memory as a visual. To be honest, you cannot get any better than an Old Master still-life painting, because it depicts the life that they led and their personal histories. It displays all the quotidian articles that make up a person's life. The two of those things just seemed to go so beautifully with my interests.

**Do you feel like changing the medium from painting to photography says or adds to the message of these still lifes?**

I think it makes it contemporary. Because I live in the present moment, it's a contemporary image. I'm not creating a painting. I'm creating an essence. I'm creating and telling my own story. The symbolism I put in my photographs are my personal vignettes. It's a way for me to visually express what's important to me.

**I feel like your photographs are so much about light as well.**

One of the reasons I fell in love with the Old Masters is because of their sense of light. There's a mystery about it. Not everything is lit up and perfectly clear. A lot of things are in the background are darkened out, other things are prominently lit. I use different sources of light, primarily strobes, and whether it's a reflector or little spotlights, I place them just so for the highlights. I remember years ago someone told me that there's only one source of light – the sun. But then when I was reading Caravaggio he talks about how he can act as God and have whatever source of light he wants to use. He can light a candle in a certain area in his set-up to paint that light source, but then if he wants to, he can move that candle to paint it another way. So I thought if he can do that, then I can too! As a photographer it is wonderful to be able to direct and have full control of the imagery to tell a story.

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PHOTOGRAPHER: PAULETTE TAVORMINA.

**You mentioned on your website that the process of going to farmers' markets to choose what to include in your images is very important to you. What are you looking for?**

When I work on a photography shoot, I spend a lot of time at the flower market here in New York. I envision what the imagery will be, what the colours and the shapes of the objects will be, and then I have to figure out what is this all about. For instance with the Sotheby's photo shoot – is it a woman's dressing table? We're going to have tea for two, what's in this scene? Who's going to be sitting and drinking the tea? Size is really important, because you can't have gigantic flowers with a tiny little teapot. I'm constantly looking for colours, shapes and sizes that will nestle in with all of the beautiful objects and will help tell a story. If I go to Paris, I'll go to the flea market. The last time I was there two years ago I was creating a Vanitas series, which incorporated skulls and birds and such. I'm always on the lookout for small antique objects that help to tell a story. In Paris I bought a small taxidermy bird, which is in *Vanitas VI*, as well as a tiny scale that's in the same photograph. A year later I went to the National Gallery in Washington, DC, to see the Vermeer paintings, and saw one Vermeer with the identical scale. I also collect butterflies, ladybugs and insects. I have boxes and boxes of those in my apartment. When we were working on this Sotheby's shoot it was really fun, because we wanted to incorporate a little ladybug or butterfly. We have a caterpillar in one and a red butterfly in the gold vignette to add a little drama and pop of colour. It sort of adds to the whole composition. The Old Masters incorporated butterflies and insects to help tell their stories.



PHOTOGRAPHER: PAULETTE TAVORMINA.

**Did you have a story behind the vignettes for the Sotheby's shoot?**

I think the antique pieces tell their own story. They're such beautiful works of art that I was just really just embellishing their history. The beautiful tray lent itself to oysters and a lemon peel. In that scene, we could have a wonderful little story about who is eating the oysters; someone is sitting there breaking

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don't know if they tasted very good, but it's about the visuals. Then for the vanity scene, I knew I wanted to use hydrangeas. I was so happy to find the pale pink ones that went perfectly with a woman's vanity. I was happy to create imagery in my Old Master style, because it lent so beautifully to everything. There's a mystery behind these objects, because they have so much history – you can imagine someone living with that jewellery box. When I worked on my Vanitas series there was an Old Master still-life painting I had seen that had a cartouche, a little piece of paper, that read "Eram quod es," which translates to "I was where you are now." I thought that is the whole crux of this. Imagine a painter painting his still-life, and realising that one day he would no longer be – but his painting would continue to exist. It is the continuum of life.

*To see the full shoot and learn more about the property featured, [click here](#).*

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PAST AUCTION

**Luxe: The Art of the Table**

26 APRIL 2017 | 10:00 AM EDT | NEW YORK

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