The Art of Still Life

A Contemporary Guide to Classical Techniques, Composition, and Painting in Oil

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A Dedicated Space for Painting

If at all possible, you should dedicate a space for your still life painting. It can be a room in your home, a separate studio, or even a studio space you share with another artist—anywhere you’re able to focus solely on your art. I strongly suggest that your studio have a door that can be closed to help you stay focused on the task at hand. I like to think of my studio as similar to a meditation or yoga space. Painting can be frustrating, since you’re solving problems over and over again. The more focused you are, the more productive you will be.
FISH, BIRDS, AND GAME

Dead animals—fish, birds, and game—have also been subjects for still lifes for centuries. In the days before meat came prepackaged and refrigerated in the supermarket, these subjects were things the artists would have seen on a daily basis. The great American painter William Merritt Chase once wrote of game as “an uninteresting subject to inviting and entertaining by means of fine technique that people will be charmed at the way you’ve done it.”

Clockwise from top left: Emil Carlsen, Still Life (Minkbird, Goose, Small Game Birds and Copper Pot), 1897, oil on canvas, 57 × 29 inches (145.1 × 73.6 cm). Courtesy of Emil Carlsen Archives (emilcarlsen.org).


COMMON NARRATIVE THEMES

Because some objects carry symbolic weight, they can suggest a story, especially when juxtaposed with other objects. Thus some still life paintings can possess a narrative theme.

The so-called Vanitas theme was very popular among seventeenth-century Dutch still life painters. Vanitas is Latin for “vanity,” and this narrative theme emphasizes human mortality and the vanity—emptiness or meaninglessness—of human life. Vanitas paintings are dominated by objects that symbolize death, such as skulls, bubbles, and perishable objects, echoing the idea that life is fleeting.

Above, left: Pieter Claesz (Dutch, 1597-1660), Still Life with a Skull and Writing Quill, 1630, oil on wood, 9 1/4 × 14 1/8 inches (23.4 × 35.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The objects in this painting by Pieter Claesz are symbols of death, with the skull being the most prominent and obvious.

Below, left: John Roger, Vanitas with Gold Teeth, 2012, oil on canvas, 12 × 12 inches (30.48 × 30.48 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

Some contemporary artists have also explored the Vanitas theme, as shown by this painting by John Roger.
Wood can have an obvious or a broken-up highlight, depending on whether the surface is dry, polished, or wet. On dry or unvarnished wood, the highlight will be broken up because of the rough or matte surface. If the wood is polished, lacquered, or varnished, a clear, defined highlight will appear on the surface.

In Still Life with a Glass and Oysters, the fabric appears more like silk because of the shiny highlight.
HIGH KEY VERSUS LOW KEY

Just as musicians can decide what key to set their music in, artists can decide to render an image in a high or a low key. High key means that the value structure of the image is predominantly light, and low key means that the painting’s values are predominantly dark. Higher key images tend to feel fresh and modern, while the lower key images tend to have a traditional, classic look.

LEFT: Joseph Bail (French, 1848–1923), Still Life with a Decanter and Travel Fork and Spoon, 1882, oil on canvas, 17 9/16 inches (44.2 x 24.2 cm). Photo courtesy of Sotheby’s.

The range of values in this still life by Joseph Bail is predominantly light, so the painting is considered high key.

BELOW LEFT: William Clarke, Heda, 1659, deer with Oysters, A Silver Tazza, and Glassware, 1635, oil on wood, 31 9/16 x 31 9/16 inches (80.8 x 80.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from the collection of Rita and Frits Markus, bequest of Frits Markus, 2005.

This classical seventeenth-century Dutch still life is a low key painting in which the dominant values are dark.

ABOVE, LEFT: Todd M. Casey, Octoberfest, 2016, oil on panel, 8 x 10 inches (20.3 x 25.4 cm). Courtesy of Rafe Contemporary Galleries, New York.

ABOVE, RIGHT: My painting Octoberfest has both hard and lost edges. The contrast of the white napkin against the cast shadows a very definite hard edge. The edge of the beer glass, by contrast, disappears into against the background darkness. A variety of edges makes a painting more interesting.
WORKING OPTICALLY: THE POSTER STUDY

Just as we work both optically and conceptually when drawing, we use the same two approaches when painting. The optical way of working is to paint what you see in front of you. It’s a very two-dimensional way of thinking, in which you copy the information as you see it. Think of it as abstractly recording the two-dimensional shapes of light, shadow, and contour and also how the shapes interlock with one another. Essentially, it’s copying what you see without thinking about what it is you are painting.

The poster study—the first step toward a final painting—is a purely optical experience. The aim is to observe how light falls on your setup and also work out your composition. Poster studies are small and slightly abstract—done with much less detail than the final painting. I like to think of them as the dress rehearsal before the big performance.

When working on a large painting, you can get wrapped up in the experience of modeling form with paint and lose track of the big picture. The poster study is intended to provide you with a reference to keep you in check throughout the larger final painting. It helps you stay in the correct range of values so you don’t make your tonal transitions progress too fast or too slow.

The first two values I locate on a poster study are the lightest light and the darkest dark (normally the highlight and the crevice shadow or a black object in shadow). The reason for this is that there is usually no guessing as to what each of these colors will be. They are the lightest and darkest pigments I have: black and white. Then, every other stroke of paint I put down will be darker than white and lighter than black.

TIP
While it is not imperative, I highly recommend that you tone your canvas rather than working on a white surface. It can be hard to gauge any values off a white surface because every other color appears darker than the surface, which is the lightest color. The same thing happens if you work on a black surface; every color you apply appears white in contrast.
A direct approach, by contrast, means that you are working directly on the canvas, often without a preparatory drawing or underpainting. A common term for this is alla prima, which is an Italian phrase meaning “at the first try.” Whereas in indirect painting you allow each layer to dry at least somewhat, before applying the next, alla prima painting is a wet-into-wet technique.

A lot of the Impressionist painters adopted the alla prima approach. Their goal was to capture the light and its quickly changing effects, leading them to sometimes mix colors directly on the canvas. At the time, flat brushes had just become popular, so you see a lot of mark-making in Impressionist paintings.

One mistake that students commonly make with this technique is putting too much paint on the canvas and then trying to paint on top of it. The trouble is that they then have to add a lot more paint to cover the layer below. This can create quite a mess. To avoid this, consider washing in a quick underpainting or layer of color to map out your composition and drawing.