

Week 2: Still Life

Vocabulary:

Medium

Mosaics

Cubism

Negative space

A still life is a group of objects an artist looks at to draw or paint. The objects are usually groups of fruit, flowers, or animals that are still. Artists would paint anything that was once alive, which is why it was called still life. A still life can be done in any medium (what the artist uses to make the picture) but were most commonly done as paintings.

People have been making still lifes (note the spelling of the plural of “life” is different in this context from the usual spelling) for thousands of years, as far back as Ancient Egypt. Egyptians were not concerned with making things look realistic but with being able to tell what the objects were.



Various foods depicted in an Egyptian burial chamber, including fish, c. 1400 BC

Romans and Greeks made still lifes that were somewhat more realistic. They are best known for their still life *mosaics* (tiny pieces of marble laid out in such a way that when looked at far away create a picture). If you look closely at the picture below you can tell that it is made from a lot of small pieces of glass or marble.



As time went by, artists were able to make paintings that were more and more realistic. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the goal of paintings was to make them look as real as possible. The camera had not yet been invented, so this was the best way to record what life was like.

The painting below is titled *The Supper at Emmaus*. It was painted by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. This painting depicts Christ and two disciples eating dinner together. Do you see the fruit and meat on the table?



The Supper at Emmaus by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio

During this period, artists typically painted scenes from the Bible. Though still life paintings like the one seen below were still done, they weren't as popular. This painting is by Pieter Claesz and is called *Still Life with Herring, Wine and Bread*.



Still Life with Herring, Wine and Bread by Pieter Claesz

After photography was invented in the nineteenth century, the purpose of a still life was not so much to make it look like a photograph, but it became more about color, shape, and the actual paint that was applied. Before this time, the paint was not supposed to be noticed, but after this it was the main focus of the paintings. The actual way it was applied to the canvas and the emotion it carried was very important. Perhaps the best known artist for this is Vincent van Gogh. Some of you may recognize his painting called *Sunflowers*. Can you see the brushstrokes and the vibrant colors?



Sunflowers by Vincent an Gogh

In the twentieth century, paintings broke down even more, going from less realistic to not being able to tell what the artist was looking at . . . at all. Artists started exploring what is known as *cubism* (a period of art in early twentieth century where everything was broken down into geometric shapes and painted from several points of view at once). Pablo Picasso and George Braque are two of the best known for this style. You can hardly tell what objects were used for the still lifes.

Follow the links to two of Picasso's works of cubism.

1. Picasso, *Still Life with Basket of Fruit* (1910–1912): [https://arthive.com/pablocicasso/works/376476~Still life with basket of fruit](https://arthive.com/pablocicasso/works/376476~Still%20life%20with%20basket%20of%20fruit)

2. Picasso, *Still Life with Fruit Dish on Table* (1914–1915): [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pablo Picasso, 1914-15, Nature morte au compotier \(Still Life with Compote and Glass\), oil on canvas, 63.5 x 78.7 cm \(25 x 31 in\), Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pablo_Picasso,_1914-15,_Nature_morte_au_compotier_(Still_Life_with_Compote_and_Glass),_oil_on_canvas,_63.5_x_78.7_cm_(25_x_31_in),_Columbus_Museum_of_Art,_Ohio.jpg)

So, there is a brief history of still life. I hope you can see how art at large has changed over time as has the subject of painting a still life. Art is not always about making things look exactly as you see them. Now, I would like you to try making a still life for yourself. Here is a short video from the National Gallery of Art that looks at a still life from Paul Cezanne. It is less than three minutes long. Enjoy and have fun learning how to look.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0SrEiEcpRM>

SchoolhouseTeachers.com note: Parents should closely monitor children's use of YouTube and Wikipedia if you navigate away from the videos and articles cited in these lessons. We also recommend viewing the videos on a full-screen setting in order to minimize your students' exposure to potentially offensive ads and inappropriate comments beside or beneath the video.

Activity: Still Life

Items needed:

Gather a group of objects. It does not have to be fruit, flowers, or meat. It can be anything from a group of toys to pots and pans or vases, anything that looks fun to draw. What you choose to make your picture with is up to you as well. You can use pencil or colored pencils; you can paint it or use pastels; whatever you have on hand and is easiest.

Also make sure to have either a pad of drawing paper or a canvas. I would suggest starting with a drawing pad and then, if it turns out really good, do another one on a canvas or bigger paper as a final copy.

How to:

Arrange the group of objects so that it is interesting to you. Try to put them in a place where you can keep them up for a couple of days so you can come back to draw them again if you don't get it all done in one sitting. Please ask for help from a grownup if you need it, especially if the objects are big or breakable.

Find a comfortable place to sit where you can lay your pad of paper flat. Pay attention to lighting as well and adjust if needed. Can use a spotlight like a lamp or just the overhead lighting. It is best if you can control lighting so each time you come to draw your group of objects it looks the same.

Then just start drawing. If you are using something other than pencils, still start with a pencil and go back over it with the other medium. Look at the shapes the objects make, not the actual objects themselves. Also, look at the shapes in between the objects; this is called *negative space*.

If you need further assistance, there is a great deal of information about drawing online. *Please ask an adult to help you before surfing the web.*