

COMPOSITION TECHNIQUES FOR STILL LIFE PHOTOGRAPHY PART II

NANCY MACK



In our last session, I noted that the still life journey takes time and patience. It may not be for everyone.

Most often, you must create the scene, using your own idea or vision. You must use your own objects. How can you arrange them? What do they mean? Do they have special significance? Are they just “stuff”?

In addition to creating your own still life, there exists the amazing possibility of the “found” still life - the existence of everyday objects that are just there...waiting for your creative eye! Possibilities!

This session will touch briefly on the “found” still life, but will focus mostly on the “art of arranging.”

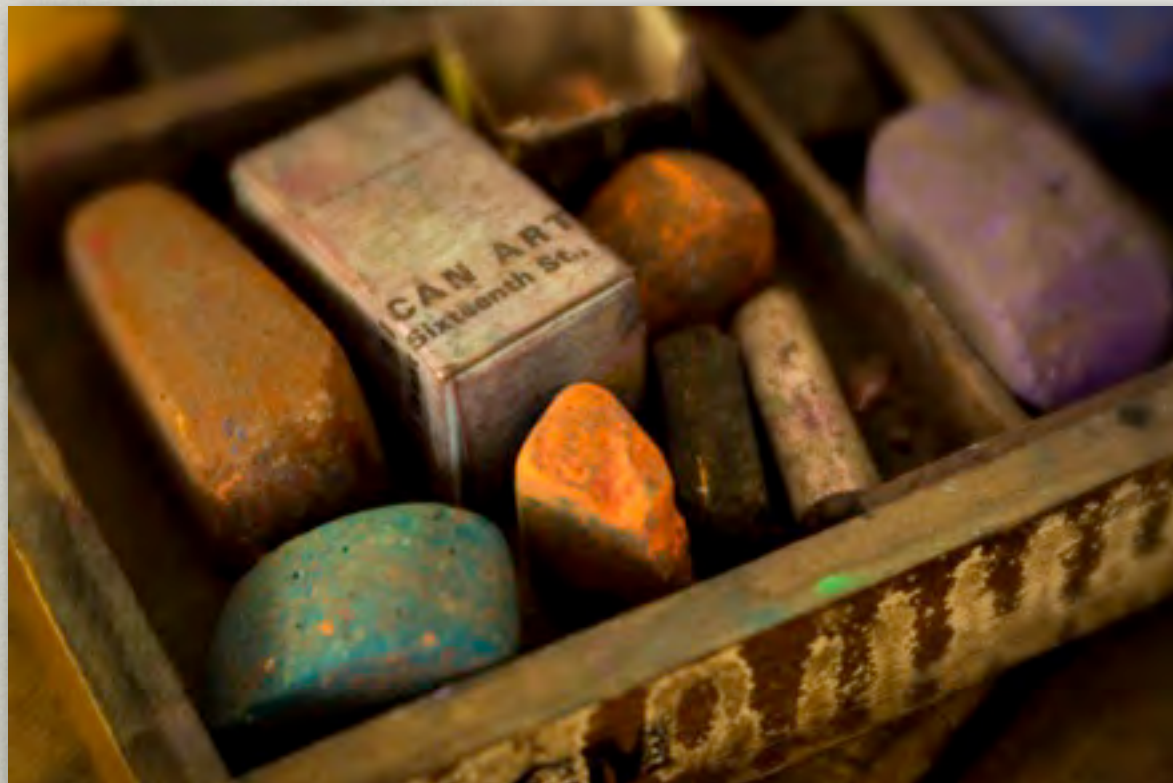
LET THE JOURNEY CONTINUE



TABLE OF CONTENTS

SESSION I: FLAT LAY COMPOSITION

ALL ABOUT
HOW TO
SETUP
EXAMPLES
ELEMENTS OF DESIGN
COMPOSING
SCANNED COMPOSITIONS
LIGHTBOX COMPOSITIONS
FROZEN FLOWER PHOTOGRAPHY
REFERENCES



SESSION II: TABLETOP STILL LIFE

STILL LIFE IN ART HISTORY
STILL LIFE IN PHOTOGRAPHY
THE “STUFF” OF STILL LIFE
THEME
THE ART OF ARRANGING
THE “STORY”
CLASSICAL EXPERIMENTS
SETTING UP THE STILL LIFE
INSPIRATION
REFERENCES

STILL LIFE IN ART HISTORY

Still Life is one of many genres that is of interest to the artist (and photographer). Derived from the Dutch word *stilleven*, it is the study of everyday objects.

It is unique in that the subject matter itself is usually not terribly interesting and often is simply an arrangement of readily available everyday objects. The selection of objects, their arrangement, the lighting, the point of view, the framing, all create a story for the viewer.

Still life choices can be tabletop arrangements or “found” in the immediate environment. Man-made items and natural objects and combinations provide subject matter.

That subject matter can be food, objects, nature, dead animals – as evidenced in art history. Egyptians documented objects or offerings on tomb walls. The Greeks and Romans also documented objects, flora and fauna in scenes, murals and mosaics. Color was important; dimension was not.

The Medieval Guilds produced art for church purposes. Even in the beginning of the Renaissance most painters and artists produced under wealthy patronage, again for religious purposes. Biblical scenes were most popular, but gradually arrangements of objects crept into the composition. The Flemish painter, Jan Van Eyck and Italian Baroque painter, Caravaggio are good examples of the more secular movement.

MIDDLE AGES TO RENAISSANCE

500 - 1600



St. Jerome in his Study, 1432, Jan Van Eyck

Before the 1600s, inanimate objects were merely additions or window-dressing. Objects were incidental or used to illustrate the technical skills of the artist. No painter actually used the still life as a premiere art form.

Although this painting features St. Jerome, the arrangement of objects in the room not only have deep symbolic meaning, they also reveal an interest in subject matter not necessarily of religious significance.

THE GLORY OF STILL LIFE

The Dutch Golden Age (1588 to 1672) was the epitome of sheer painterly technique exhibited in still life painting.

“Through the skill of artists both male and female, the textures of metal, feathers, glass, petals, rind, fur, and fish scales, were brought vividly to life through oil and canvas. The audiences of the day bought them in droves, for they did not take for granted the sheer skill and craft of painting.

At times these works also conveyed messages. The flesh of ripe fruit often bulged and curved invitingly. A somewhat subtle metaphor for the fleetingness of youth, of the ephemeral nature of beauty, and the vitality of young love. Holland was also an early pioneer of international trade and colonisation. This adventurous nation had the means to bring together flowers, fruit, vegetables and animals from different continents and place them together on a table in the Netherlands. For the Dutch, still life painting often served as a proud declaration of curiosity, of cosmopolitan tastes, and of growing wealth and influence.” (Jake Kendall)

DUTCH

1600 - 1725



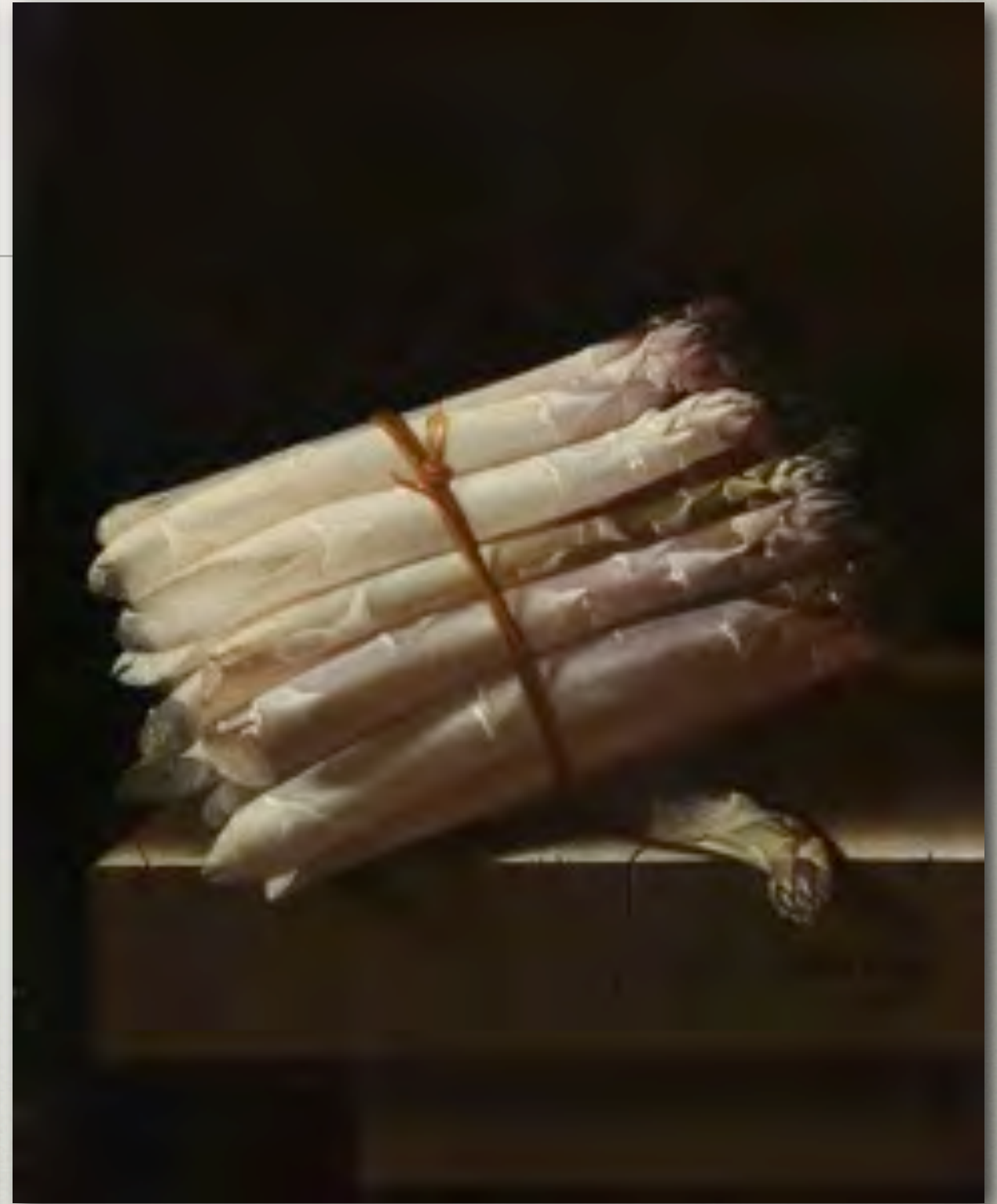
Still Life with Cheese, c. 1615, Floris Claesz van Dijck

Fruit, bread, and cheese are set on a table covered with costly tablecloths. The illusion of reality is astounding; the pewter plate extending over the edge of the table seems close enough to touch. The Haarlem painter Floris van Dijck ranked among the pioneers of Dutch still-life painting.



Floral Still Life, Hans Bollongier, 1639

The Dutch obsession with the tulip has been the subject of countless still life compositions.



Still Life with Asparagus, Adriaen Coorte, 1697

Something as simple as the asparagus provides a dramatic study in light and darks.



Banquet Still Life, Adriaen van Utrecht, 1644

The riches and wealth of the Dutch and their colonies are depicted in opulent room size still life paintings. This particular painting is 8' x 6'.

ITALIAN BAROQUE 1585 - 1730



Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge 1605, Caravaggio

This painting shows luscious fruits, some fresh, some rotting, - all symbolic of life and death - arranged on a ledge. These items have no apparent religious significance or patronage. The painting shows the first attempts at crafting light and shadow (chiaroscuro) and almost photographic hyper-realism. It evokes an emotional response.

FRENCH STILL LIFE 1720 - 1760

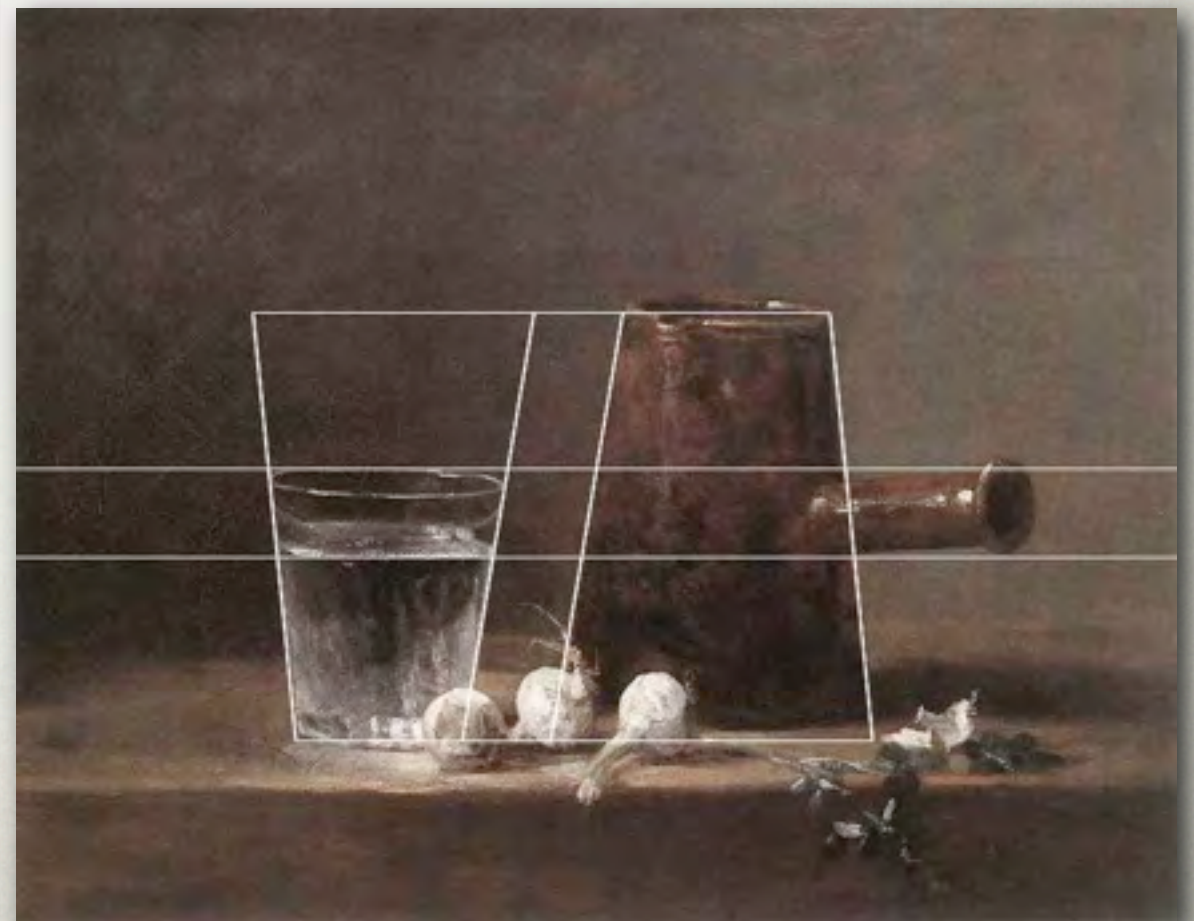


Glass of Water and Coffee Pot, JEAN BAPTISTE SIMÉON CHARDIN, 1760 (oil on canvas)

“Chardin always looks at the world as if he is seeing it for the first time. The intensity of his vision focuses on the beauty of the everyday objects that surround us - a beauty that we take for granted as we are often too close to see it.”

“The glass and coffee pot are both truncated cones, but the shape of one is an inversion of the other. The balance of these two opposite forms creates a dialogue between their shapes.”

Reference.



VANITAS

The *vanitas*, a type of still life painting that is meant to illustrate the meaninglessness of earthly life and the transience of all earthly pursuits, became very popular in 17th century Flemish painting. The name refers to a passage in the Bible in Revelations, which says 'vanity of vanities - all is vanity'. The idea was that people love their pleasures in life, the things that make them feel important or wealthy, and yet it all means nothing because time soon passes and we die. Each item was purposely included and had a specific meaning. There were hidden symbols. "Dust to dust" is inherent in each item, despite the opulence depicted.



Vanitas Still Life with the Spinario, Pieter Claesz, 1628



Still Life with a Turkey Pie, Pieter Claesz, 1627

THE 19TH CENTURY

Romanticism, which idealized emotions, feelings, and moods of all kinds including spirituality, imagination, mystery, and fervor characterized the paintings of the 19th century. Both the American and French Revolutions occurred. The subject matter varied widely including landscapes, religion, revolution, and peaceful beauty. However, a great many still life paintings are in existence.



Flowers, Eugene Delacroix, 1840?



Still Life with Golden Bream, Francisco de Goya, 1808 - 1812

IMPRESSIONISM

Impressionism (1865 - 1885)

Monet, Manet, Renoir, Pissarro, Cassatt, Morisot, Degas captured the fleeting effects of natural light, often outdoors.



Water Lily Pond, Claude Monet, 1899



View of Saint-Valéry-sur-Somme, oil on canvas, Edgar Degas (1896-98)

But they also produced some impressive still life compositions.



Still Life with Carafe, 1892, Auguste Renoir



Still Life with Bottle, 1894, Paul Cezanne



Still Life with Bottles, 1862, Claude Monet

POST-IMPRESSIONISM

Post-Impressionism (1885–1910) saw a bit of a revolt against Impressionism. Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne, Seurat represent this movement. Their works take different paths of execution, but all embrace landscape, outdoor scenes, and still life.



Two Cut Sunflowers, Vincent Van Gogh, 1887



Still Life with Japanese Print, Paul Gauguin, 1888

- 1 [A Short History of Still Life Painting](#)
- 2 [A Short History of Still Life Painting](#)
- 3 [A Brief History of Still Life Painting](#)
- 4 [Art History Timeline](#)

STILL LIFE IN PHOTOGRAPHY

The art of the 1800s and 1900s and photography collided in an unprecedented way. In a parallel universe, Louis Daguerre, 1787 - 1851, a physicist and French scene painter for the Paris Opera invented the first practical photographic process, known as the daguerreotype. He was not alone in developing these processes. Sir John Herschel, and Henry Fox Talbot were also working to invent a process to create a lasting image...or at least competing, fiercely to do so! It is thought, but not certain, that the first still life photograph was taken by Daguerre in 1837. It is a simple arrangement of plaster casts on a windowsill, probably always there with no intention of being a still life photo.



Daguerreotype of Interior, Louis Daguerre, 1837

In Focus: Still Life

The History of Photography in Pictures

A Short History of Photography

Still Life Photography

WILLIAM HENRY FOX TALBOT

Around the same era, William Henry Fox Talbot (1800 - 1877) was experimenting with fixing images permanently on paper. He created *The Pencil of Nature*, the first commercially published book to be illustrated with photographs.

“How charming it would be if it were possible to cause these natural images to imprint themselves durably and remain fixed upon the paper.” H.F. Talbot/1833.



A Fruit Piece, William Talbot, 1844

PAINTING OR PHOTOGRAPHY?

As with painting, photography covered every possible subject matter; however, it took years for photography to be accepted as a bona fide artistic medium. It is said that when the French painter Delaroche saw a daguerreotype for the first time he moaned: "From today, painting is dead." The debate raged in public for years. In private, painters actually made use of photographic techniques to create the compositions for their paintings.

Roger Fenton (1819 - 1869), created over 40 photographic studies of still life compositions.



His still lifes were modeled on contemporary paintings of his time. He deliberately selected fruits and set up the scene, much as a painter would, but did it in front of the camera.

Still Life of Fruit, Roger Fenton, 1860

EDWARD STEICHEN

1879 - 1973

Many of the first photographers were scientists who developed chemistry, techniques, and lenses which gave birth to modern photography. A fact not often known, is that many photographers were also painters. Besides technique, the elements of design and composition as well as light and shadow were key components of a photograph.

Photography

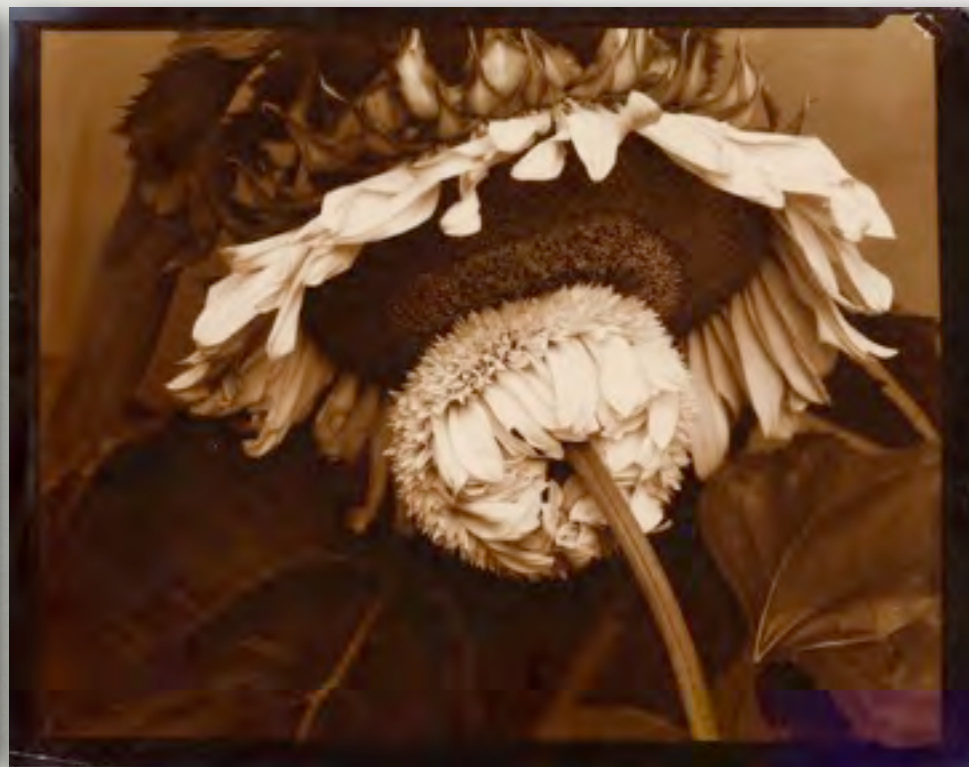


Pear on a Plate, Edward Steichen, 1920

Painting



Sunflower (Le Tournesol),
Edward Steichen, 1920



Sunflower (Le Tournesol), Edward Steichen, 1920



Diagram of Doom - 2, Edward Steichen, 1922

ANSEL ADAMS 1902 - 1984



Still Life, Ansel Adams, 1932



Eggs in Bowl, Ansel Adams, 1932



Rose and Driftwood, Ansel Adams, 1932



Untitled Still Life, Ansel Adams, 1929



Calla Lily, Ansel Adams, 1931



Ansel Adams, 1932

PAUL STRAND 1890 - 1976

1 [Paul Strand](#)
2 [Paul Strand](#)

FOUND STILL LIFE



Porch Shadows, Paul Strand, 1916



Wire Wheel, Paul Strand, 1920



Untitled (Twin Lakes, Connecticut), Paul Strand, 1916



Double Akeley, Paul Strand, 1922



Window, Red River, NM, Paul Strand, 1931



Pears, Paul Strand, 1916

EDWARD WESTON

1886 - 1958



Shells, Edward Weston, 1927



Shells, Edward Weston, 1927



Pepper, Edward Weston, 1930



Egg and Slicer, Edward Weston, 1930



Striped Squash, Edward Weston, 1932



Cabbage Leaf, Edward Weston, 1931

[Edward Weston, Still Life Photography Project](#)

[Edward Weston, Still Life Photography](#)

[Edward Weston, Fifty Years](#)

JOSEF SUDEK

1896 - 1976

Josef Sudek did a variety of dreamy, soft light still life photographs.



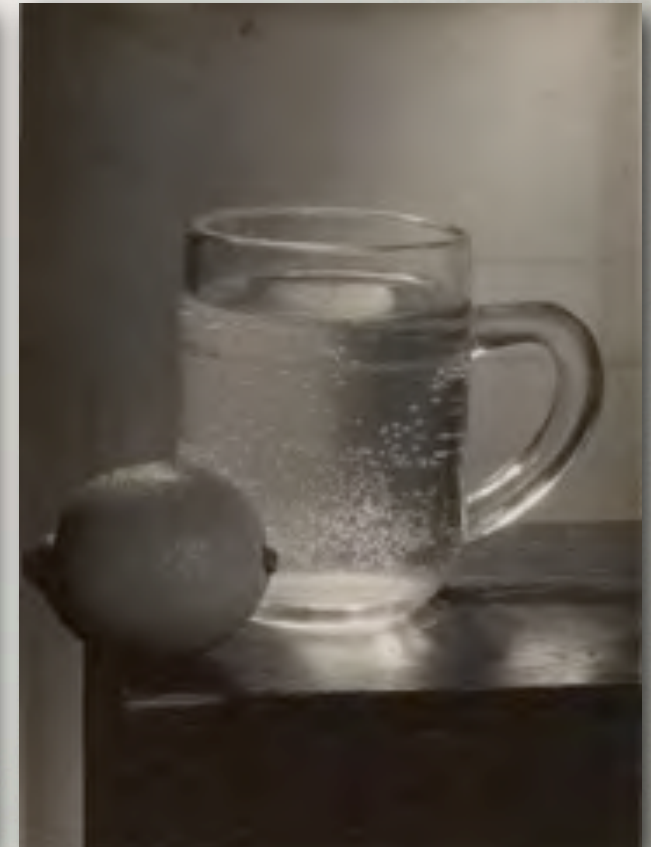
Untitled, Josef Sudek, 1950 -1956



Glasses and Eggs, Josef Sudek, 1951



Carafe and Egg, Josef Sudek, 1950 - 1956



Still Life, Joseph Sudek, 1950 - 1954

Sudek once stated, "I believe that photography loves banal objects...I like to tell stories about the life of inanimate objects, to relate something mysterious. If you take photography seriously you must get interested in another art form."

1 Josef Sudek

2 Josef Sudek

3 Jeu de Paume gallery

4 Josef Sudek, Christies
(video about Sudek)

ANDRE KERTESZ 1894 - 1985



Mondrian's Pipe and Glasses, Andre Kertesz, 1926



Bowl with Sugar Cubes, André Kertész, 1928



Fork, Andre Kertesz, 1928

Andre Kertesz is said to be the father of modern still life. In the early days of photography, still life images were modeled after the still life paintings of the period. It was only in later years that the images began to mirror the modern movement in art. Reference.

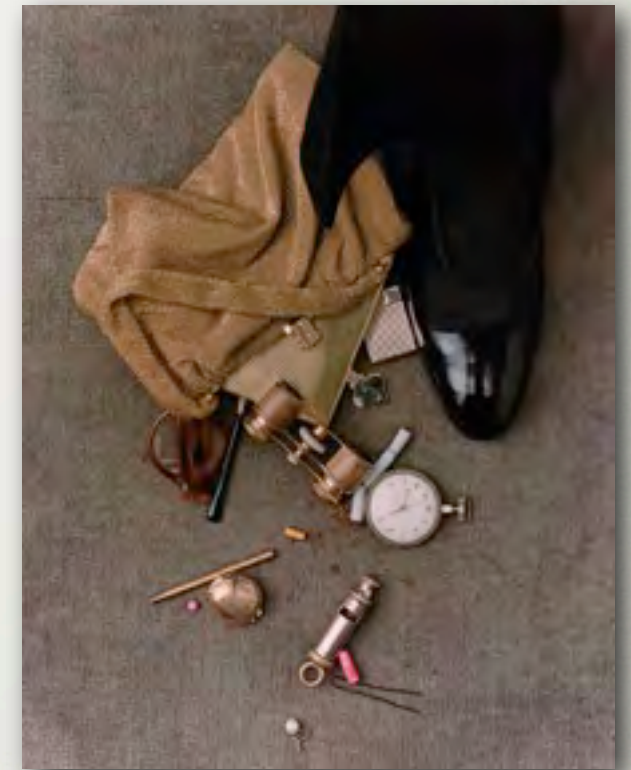
IRVING PENN 1917 - 2009



Still Life with Watermelon,
Irving Penn, 1947



New York Still Life, Irving Penn



Theatre Accident, Irving Penn, 1947

Irving Penn

Irving Penn began his art career as a painting student in 1938, but found no success. As a photographer, he relied on that early training to constantly sketch out his compositions before taking photos. He returned to painting many years later and sometimes scanned drawings and photos and painted over them. The Irving Penn Foundation.

Still Life

“Underpinning all of Penn's work as a photographer is his special talent in the still life genre, to which he applied his signature resolve to prune away anything that did not contribute to the picture. From his earliest work at *Vogue* to his latest series of personal work, this resulted in powerful images that invite contemplation of Penn's acute awareness of objects and their placement.

Penn frequently included elements of *memento mori* and selected subject matter that could, at first glance, seem unworthy of close examination, which give his images a "bite" that lingers.” The Irving Penn Foundation

ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE 1946 - 1989



Parrot Tulips, Robert Mapplethorpe, 1988



Apples and Urn, Robert Mapplethorpe, 1987



Leaf, Robert Mapplethorpe, 1986

Robert Mapplethorpe

is another photographer who started his career studying painting and drawing. He also explored working with collage and mixed media. He eventually started experimenting with a Polaroid camera and then large-format cameras. His work covers a range of subjects, both personal and commercial. The flowers have been interpreted with many complex meanings, but they are powerful still life studies in their own right.

Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

“The (flower) photographs draw on a rich and storied history of artists depicting flora – from the Dutch masters, whose gloomy reimaginings placed wilting blooms next to preying insects and glazed shells...AnOther

Mapplethorpe says: “My whole point is to transcend the subject... Go beyond the subject somehow, so that the composition, the lighting, all around, reaches a certain point of perfection. That’s what I’m doing...AnOther

SHARON CORE

1965 -



Pies, Pies, Pies, Wayne Thiebaud, 1961 (oil painting)



"Thiebauds – Pies, Pies, Pies" Sharon Core, (2003) (photograph)

Sharon Core

is but one of very many contemporary photographers who use past still life styles to portray contemporary relevancy. She “appropriates.” Core has re-created the paintings of Wayne Thiebaud’s painted pop-art desserts as photographs. She has also modeled her photographs on other earlier painters, always growing her own flowers and foods to do so.

“How many “lives” does a still life have? Still lifes traditionally serve several functions: representations of commodity-based status; reminders of our mortality; and principles of arrangement and aesthetic taste.”

“Core’s work invites us to consider these and many other questions.”
“Is the “content” the same if the “copy” was made many years after the original (which, in turn, had no “original” to contend with)?
What is content?”

A Poetics of Appropriation: On Sharon Core



Watermelon and Apple Gourd, Sharon Core, 2007

FOUND STILL LIFE

A topic we will not explore here, but that does deserve mentioning, is the “found still life” which is exactly that. When you create a still life, you carefully arrange objects into a composition. With “found” still life, the images are random collections of things that you “happen upon” but do not move or arrange.

COMPOSED - I arranged it



My Yarn Stash

FOUND - it was just there



It's Not Easy Being Green...

SAM ABELL

1945 -

Sam Abell

Abell learned photography from his father, a geography teacher in Sylvania, Ohio. His dad ran a high school photography club.

“..my father's injunction to 'compose and wait.'

I was 14 years old at the time he enjoined me to 'wait.' What he meant was to settle on a committed composition and wait for a subject to appear and animate the scene. That is easy enough to remember when little is happening. It's harder to remember when there is the dramatic appearance of a subject. Such appearances give one every reason to chase the subject instead of waiting for it to complete the established composition.”



Pears Ripening on a Moscow Windowsill, Sam Abell, 1983-4



Japan, Sam Abell, 1980



Japan, Sam Abell, 1980

STEPHEN WILKES

1957 -

Stephen Wilkes, Ellis Island, was the first photographer to document this decaying place. He did not touch or move anything. His photographic “story” is more poignant because his mother passed through, escaping the Nazi’s in Austria. He also documented Hurricane Katrina.



Administrative Office, Ellis Island, Stephen Wilkes, 1998 - 2003



In Katrina's Wake: TV in Sand, Bay St. Louis, Stephen Wilkes, 2006

FOUND STILL LIFE

Google and Flickr have millions of examples. But I thought it would be interesting for this group to visit the “found” images of some of its own members for inspiration!

Hugh Adams



Hugh Adams, hughadams.net

Steven Evans



Steven Evans, stevenevansimages.com

Dennis Fritsche



Dennis Fritsche, dennisfritsche.com

FOUND STILL LIFE

Frank Richards



Frank Richards, frankrichards.photography

FOUND STILL LIFE

Alan Whiteside



Alan Whiteside, <https://alanwhiteside.zenfolio.com>

Larry Petterborg



Larry Peterborg, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/lpetterborg/page88>

THE “STUFF” OF STILL LIFE

It is important to repeat:

After all this art history, suffice it to say, there is nothing new. Man has been creating images since cave markings. He still has similar flora, fauna and objects to work with. How he depicts all this varies with his vision.

MOST OF ALL, none of these early painters or photographers had the opportunity to pop over to Trader Joe's or Central Market or Hobby Lobby or Tuesday Morning to grab beautiful flowers, fascinating tchotchkes, fresh fruit, vegetables, fish or furry dead rabbits. They did not mourn the absence of tantalizing objects. They mostly photographed what was available in their immediate environment...and made amazing images!

Today's photographer has more opportunity, better cameras...

NO MOANING!

STILL LIFE COMPOSITION

The difference between photographing landscape, wildlife, portrait or scenes and still life...is that you might own the items and you might arrange the items. “Found” still life is also a possibility. A still life is usually arranged in an indoor or stable environment with natural or artificial light.



Images from Google Search

ALL ABOUT STILL LIFE

A still life is simply a composition of objects arranged on a surface, captured straight on, at a 45-degree angle (tilted above), or from the left or right side.

Still life compositions are very popular with both artists and photographers. Like flat-lay, food features prominently. Flowers are popular as well as a variety of old, odd, strange, antique, and modern objects and props.



DECIDE ON A THEME

A still life photo has a **theme** or **subject**.

The objects often have a variety of heights - but may not. You are “telling a story,” through a combination of movement, lighting, item arrangement, layering, color and texture and they need to work together. Objects should vary in size and shape and follow some color palette. More is not necessarily better. Build a basic structure: add; subtract; arrange; rearrange. Make multiple arrangements.

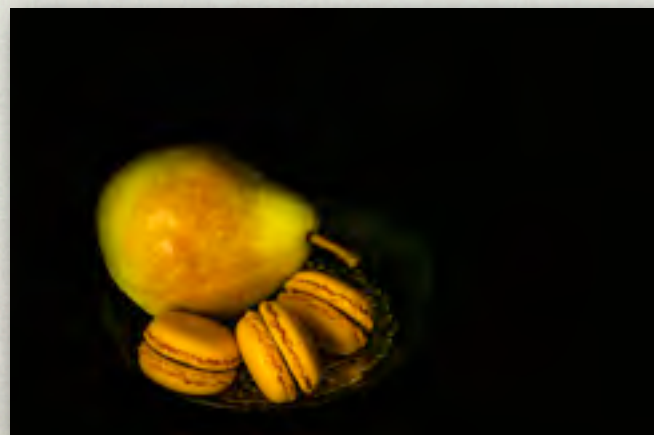
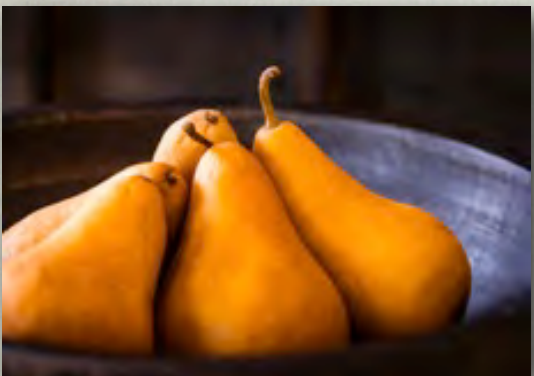
The examples here are not finished - they are “sketches” - ideas. The subject is “persimmons”. One or more? Alone or with similar round fruits of different colors? On a surface? Straight on? At a 45-degree angle? How arranged? In a line? Overlapping? Grouped? Single? Stacked? In a container? On a plate, tray, board?

And what f-stop? Selective focus? All in focus?



Persimmons and pomegranates are seasonal - plan ahead!

Nancy Mack

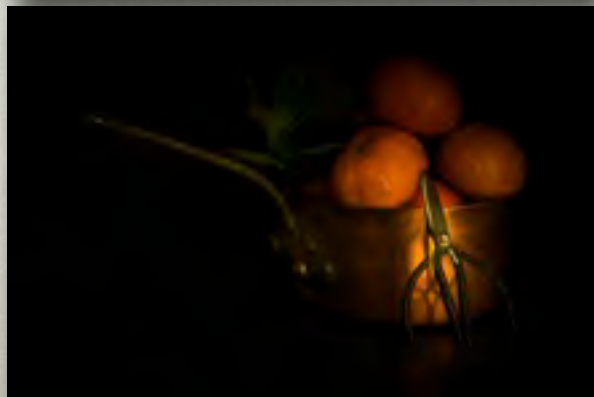
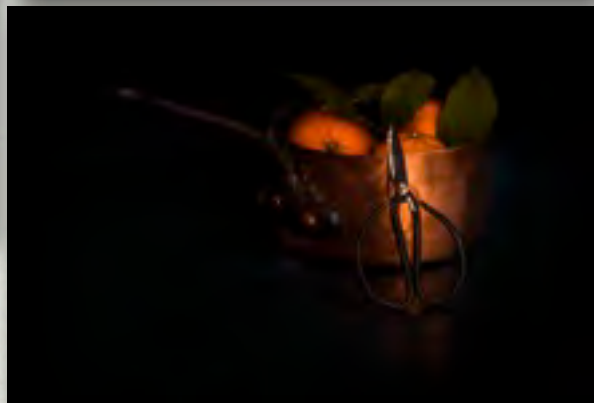


Pears are always favorites. They are readily available, usually in the fall, and come in green, red, brown and a golden orange at times. Most grocery stores are not nice to the stems, so you need to select ones with stems intact. Rotation of pears / placement of stems is important.





Oranges are always available. January and February have the most varieties. I have small trees and so blossoms and leaves are available.



Nancy Mack



Arranging, re-arranging, modifying, changing surfaces and containers, moving leaves, blossoms, peeling - these are all part of the composition process once a "subject" has been selected.

Looking at cookbooks and cooking blogs will give an idea of how a particular fruit or vegetable might look photographed. Some are more "interesting" than others.

Nancy Mack

THE “HOW-TO”

1) Find a flat surface: table, desk, counter. Add wooden chopping blocks, cookie sheets, large sheets of paper, poster board, flooring, etc. If using a colored or textured surface, see that it works with the selected objects, i.e., contrast, color family, subject matter. Set the stage.

2) Unlike a flat-lay composition, a still life also needs an upright back board. This can be a wall, a board, paper, cardboard, poster-board. Both the surface and back need to work within the color family.

3) Place the surface near a light source, i.e., window and make sure that it can remain undisturbed for the period of time that you are working on the still life. A window provides nice, natural light and can cast shadows which create dimension. If the light is too bright, diffuse with a scrim or sheer curtain. Bounce the light back with white foam core or darken the scene with black foam core. This depends upon the “light and airy” or “dark and moody” effect you you want to convey.

SET-UP EXAMPLES



Spare bedroom. Back wall. Desk. Tripod with boom arm and clips to hold different backgrounds. Fabrics can be draped over the arm. The tabletop has surfaces of black or white poster board; chopping blocks; wood flooring; found and purchased surfaces. I have black reflectors, white reflectors, scrims, uncovered window light which can be diffused with sheer curtains.



I have collected a variety of backgrounds/surfaces from antique shops; sellers of photo surfaces; chopping blocks; old metal salvage.

Not pictured here, but extremely useful, are “blocks” which include anything - boxes, risers, overturned bowls; etc. so that objects are at different heights.



This space is small, but has a desk that can be moved nearer/further from window; window that can be covered or diffused as needed; neutral wall that can be covered with background materials.

SAMPLE SET UP



Bowl of garlic and an onion on a chopping block with antique metal background. Right side is darkened by a black poster board and left side has scrims for diffused window light. The final composition was taken from a 45-degree angle and framed so that none of the extraneous items are visible.



Here an old wooden cheese box is used to elevate the objects so that the edge of the wooden chopping block is seen in the final composition.



THE ART OF ARRANGEMENT

Select objects of interest. **Love your objects.** “Audition” your items. You will be working with them for a long time! Fruits, vegetables, flowers, food utensils, small tools, toys, favorite small objects or keepsakes. Fruits, vegetables or flowers tend to age (and rot). This may be part of your story, or not.

A good starting point is with 3 objects:

- all the same; all the same size; all the same color; all the same shape
- vary with 1 different color, 1 different size, one different shape
- vary surface; vary background - add a container or second smaller surface
- try placing items in a line; on a diagonal; in a triangle; as an L-shape, stacking, moving off of or onto the surface
- vary camera angle: shoot straight on; shoot at a 45-degree angle above; shoot from either side, point of view
- use diffusers and reflectors to vary the light
- add objects; take away objects
- horizontal; vertical

Camera on a tripod. Start with 35mm, 50mm, zoom 24-70mm, 90 / 105mm macro; vary f-stop: selective focus with wide-open; all in focus stopped down.

(sometimes, frustration is a given!)

PROPS

What props add to the story? Macarons are tasty, but alone do not say much. I have added boxes, plastic containers, tissue paper, doilies, ribbons to build the composition. This depends upon personal taste - for some, it is “fussy,” to others interesting. This is easy to start with:

Shapes / sizes are the same.
Colors are the same or can mix colors.
Vary the surface, background, container.
Add props.
Vary placement: horizontal, vertical, stack.
Vary camera angle.



For more on macarons and desserts, “[Douceurs et gourmandises](#).” Any bakery has cupcakes and pastry items that make good subject matter.



Nancy Mack



Shapes / sizes are the same.

Colors are the same.

Vary the surface, background, container.

Add props.

Vary placement: horizontal, vertical, stack.

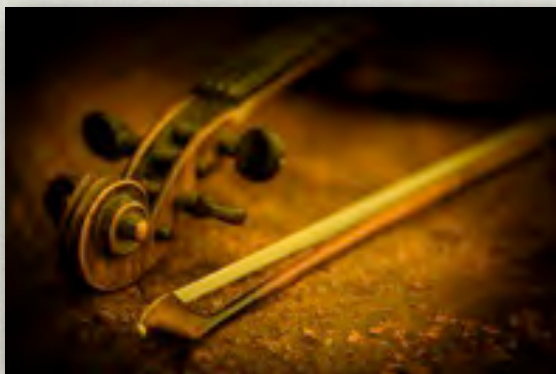
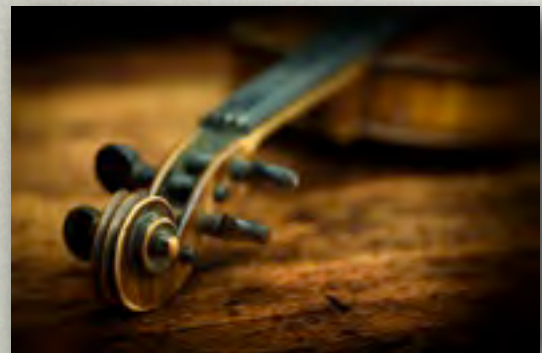
Vary camera angle.

Nancy Mack



WHAT IS THE STORY?

Our family possesses an old violin. It has special significance, despite its need for restoration. My “story” is that the violin is old, but I did not want to emphasize its need for repair. What else could I emphasize about it? How could I convey a mystery about the instrument while still showing that it was special? What part of the violin says this best? Parts or whole? These are my “sketches”. I culled and edited in the same way that we do for any series of photos. Landscape, portrait, nature exist. We mostly find the best view. Still life presents more of a challenge. We must also arrange. We have more control - and that control can be challenging!



Nancy Mack



Final Image

Violin, Nancy Mack
Second Place, Advanced Division,
Plano Photography Club,
November 2019

GIORGIO MORANDI

After experimenting for awhile, take a look at Giorgio Morandi's (1890 -1964) work. He was an Italian painter who focused on simple subjects - vases, bottles, bowls and flowers and tonal subtlety in his palette. We are not here to discuss the deeper meaning of the objects - only to look at the compositions.



Natura Morta, 1919, Giorgio Morandi



In these two paintings and a drawing, Morandi used the same objects, adding, subtracting, re-arranging, re-coloring. The same exercise as described earlier.

Photographer Kevin Best has done an extensive study of Morandi in photographs. He acquired many of the same type objects, arranged and photographed them.

CLASSICAL STILL LIFE

PHOTOGRAPHY

Kevin Best has written "[How to Create Fine Art Still Life Photographs](#)." A few years ago, the Plano Photography Club offered a class using this book and techniques. It was a wonderful introduction to creating still life images. Best discusses both the arranged still life and the found still life. It is an e-book and well worth the \$20. It is my go-to reference.

The first exercise the class did was to arrange simple objects:





There is not a great deal of time spent on lighting or focus, just composition. These are “sketches” - I own the objects and can go back and develop a final composition if any are of more interest. They were a good practice in arranging and answering the earlier composition questions. You have to try, and continue trying. It is the only way to learn.

BEYOND SIMPLE ARRANGING



Here you see the pullback of the arrangement and the “stacks of stuff”, reminiscent of the laden tables of Dutch Masters.

However, I got carried away with objects and had no real “story” or focal point. Too many items!



Nancy Mack

Again, there are too many things going on.

That is why this exercise in arranging objects and asking questions is so important.

The photographer has an opportunity to learn from a variety of “trials”.

Although I like my objects, I suffer from combining too many and the eye begins to tire and lose interest.



THE KEVIN BEST EXERCISE



I selected my favorite [Kevin Best photos from Flickr](#) as well as those that had objects I could duplicate and tried to re-create them.

This exercise gave me a better understanding of placement, lighting and old world composition.

In this composition, I built a “box” of black and white poster board around the food scene to minimize reflections from objects in the room. Light comes from a softbox behind a scrim.

There is black tape on the diffuser in an attempt to cast window panes on the wine glass. It did not work in this composition, but was successful in others.

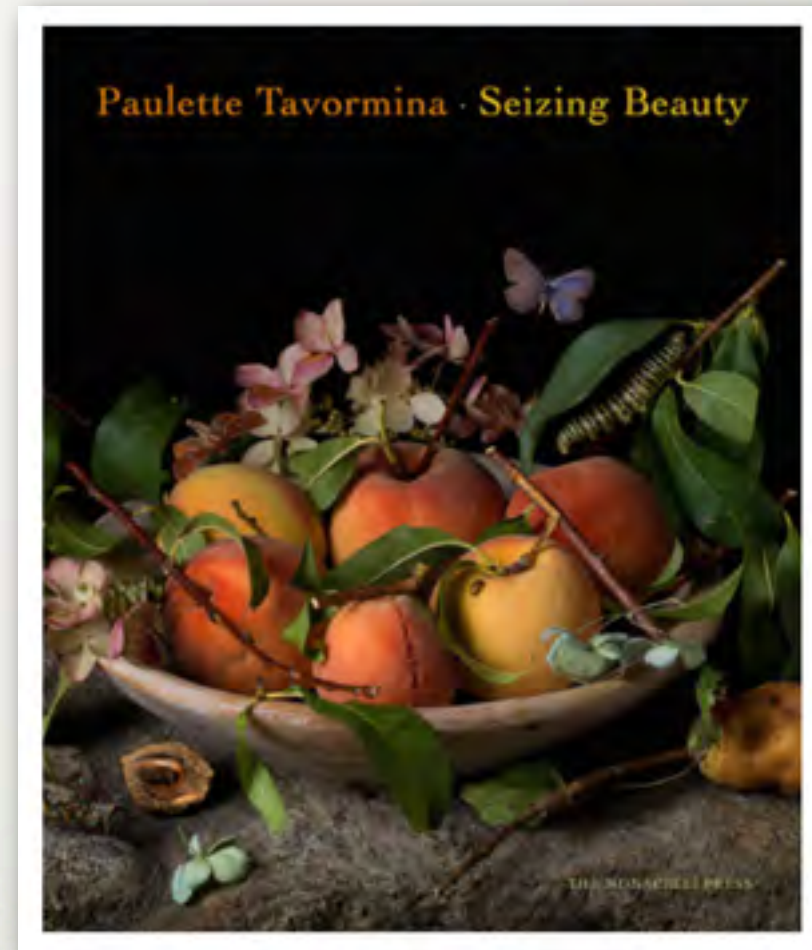


These are additional recreations of Kevin Best still lives. I paid particular attention to recreating window panes on the wine glasses and how reflections from the objects appeared realistic in the wine glasses.



This one was the most difficult to set up because of multiple glasses and reflections. A softbox was used for lighting and I built a poster board box around the still life to eliminate any room reflections. Another suggested technique is to cut a hole in a piece of poster board big enough for the lens, which blocks any reflections.

CLASSICAL STILL LIFE



The best references for anyone wanting to design / photograph in the classical Dutch master style, are Kevin Best, for technique and Paulette Tavormina for luscious photographic renditions of food / flower / object / animal still life compositions.

A SET-UP EXAMPLE (FOR GARLIC SHOTS)



Diffused window light to the left



Pullback from garlic shots - dark poster board to the right

A spare bedroom with north light; no trees outside near window to cast moving shadows; set-up can be left for periods of time undisturbed; sheer curtains, scrim; camera on tripod with plastic level in hot-shoe; lens suggestions: 35mm, 50mm, 90mm / 105mm macro or 24-70mm zoom for more flexibility; old metal ceiling panel and blue wooden shiplap for surface; starting to arrange objects.



A variety of “sketches” for garlic shots: black reflective surface, on blue wall boards, on wooden chopping block, on a scale.

Sometimes ideas need to marinate for awhile - sit on the back burner. Sometimes they need to advance to the ridiculous. Eventually an idea takes shape.



Nancy Mack



These two images were taken on two different days with the same setup. I used window light and emphasized more background and a wider composition in the first and a close-up in the second. This is my final garlic “story”.



THE ONION DIARY



12/28/2020

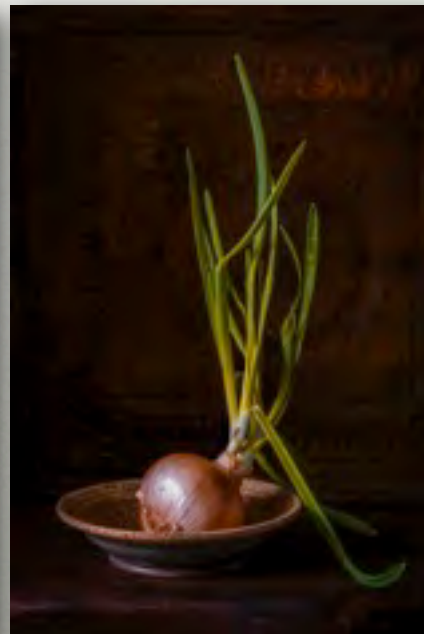
we have been locked up for months; I had tried some light paintings with an antique scale. I also noticed an onion sprouting on the kitchen counter.



01/01/2021 The onion is growing. 01/03/2021



01/05/2021



01/10/2021



01/12/2021

THE ONION DIARY



12/28/2020

Here I have superimposed composition diagrams to analyze my own images.

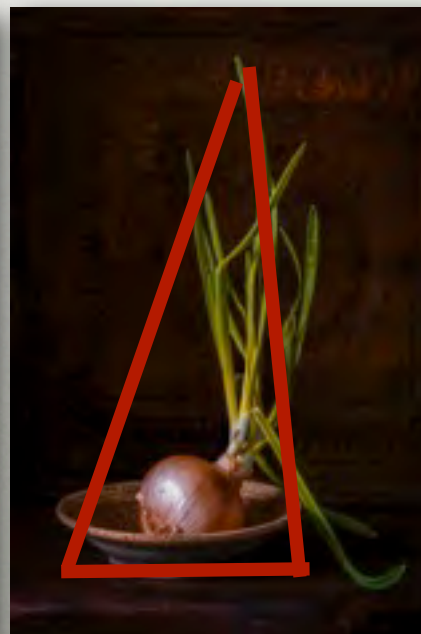


01/01/2021 The onion is growing.



01/03/2021

01/05/2021



01/10/2021



01/12/2021



01/13/2021



01/14/2021



01/17/2021



01/18/2021



01/22/2021



01/25/2021



01/24/2021



01/23/2021



01/24/2021



01/25/2021



01/28/2021



01/30/2021



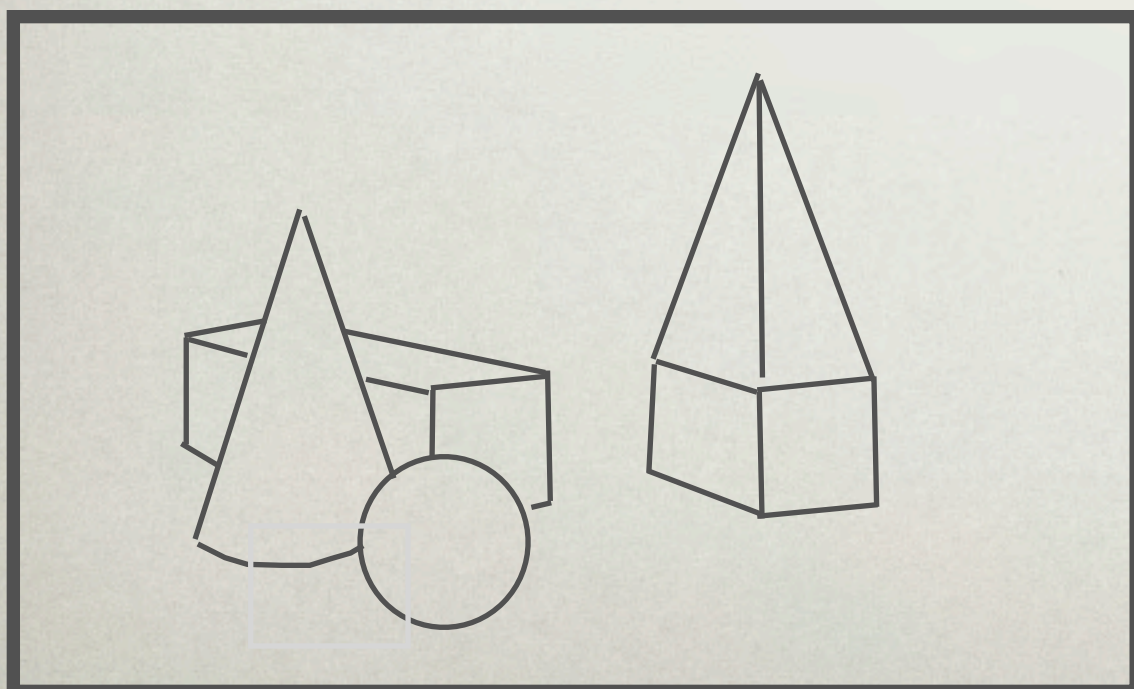
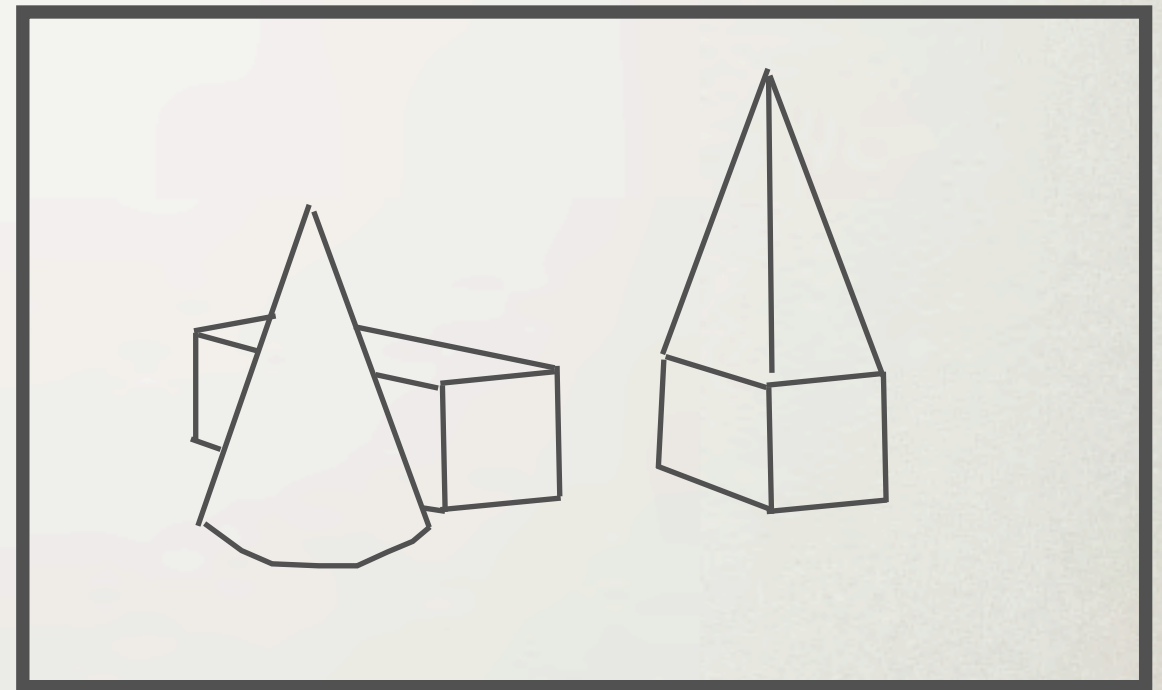
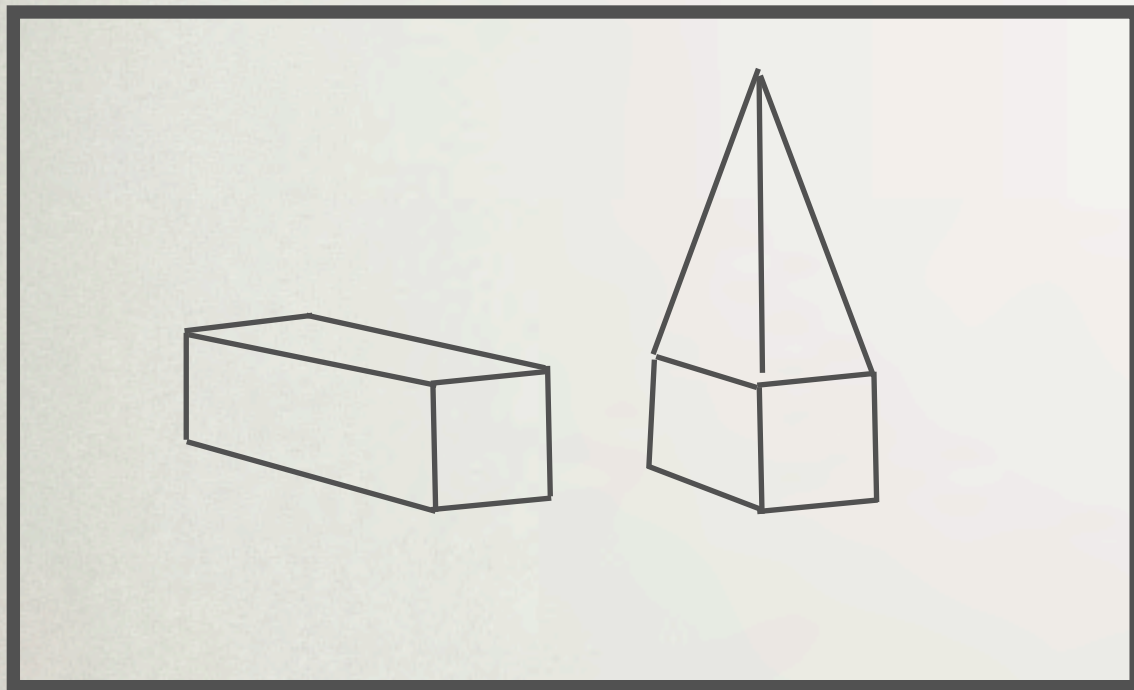
02/01/2021



02/05/2021

As mundane as these images are, the onion was an available object that changed over time and I was able to follow it to demise. I tried different placement, different props, different ideas, different aspect ratios. Most of the compositions are based on a triangle. The onion is the “story” and gives me ideas for future compositions.

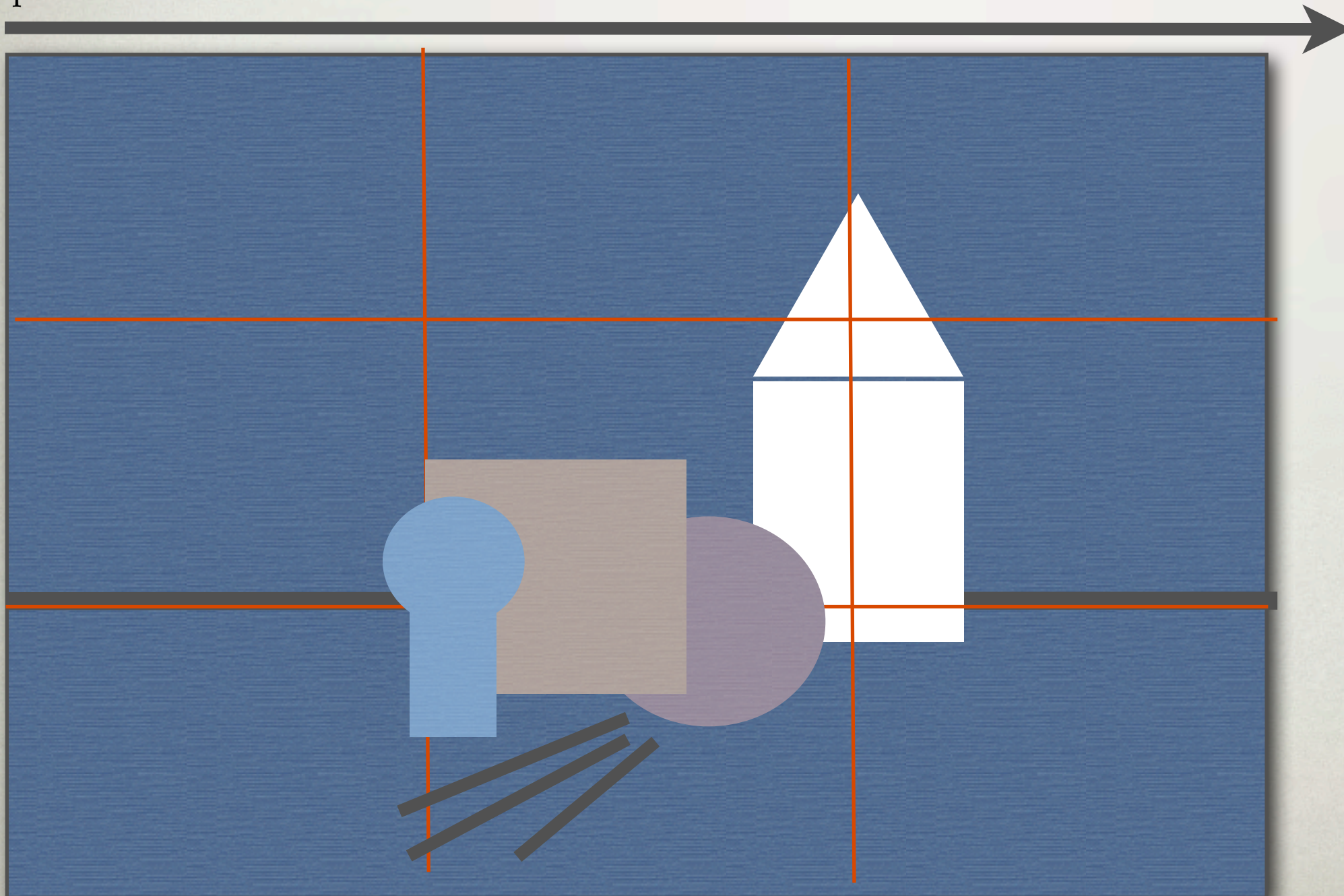
TIPS FOR ARRANGING



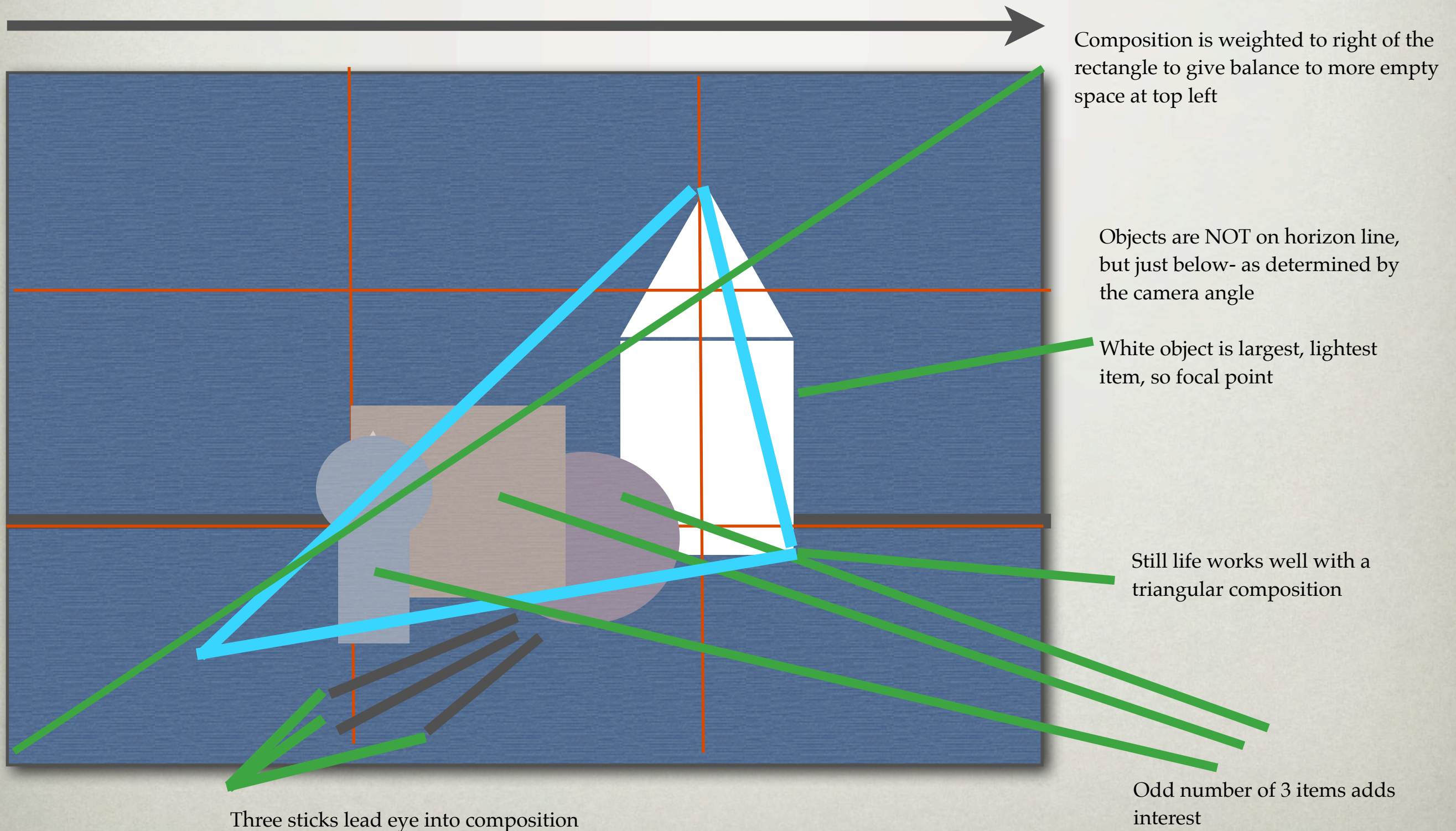
Begin with basic shapes.

SETTING UP THE STILL LIFE

The eye reads left to right (in Western culture), so placing the larger, dominant item to the right leads the eye. It also gives the light a long way to travel across the picture plane to attract attention.

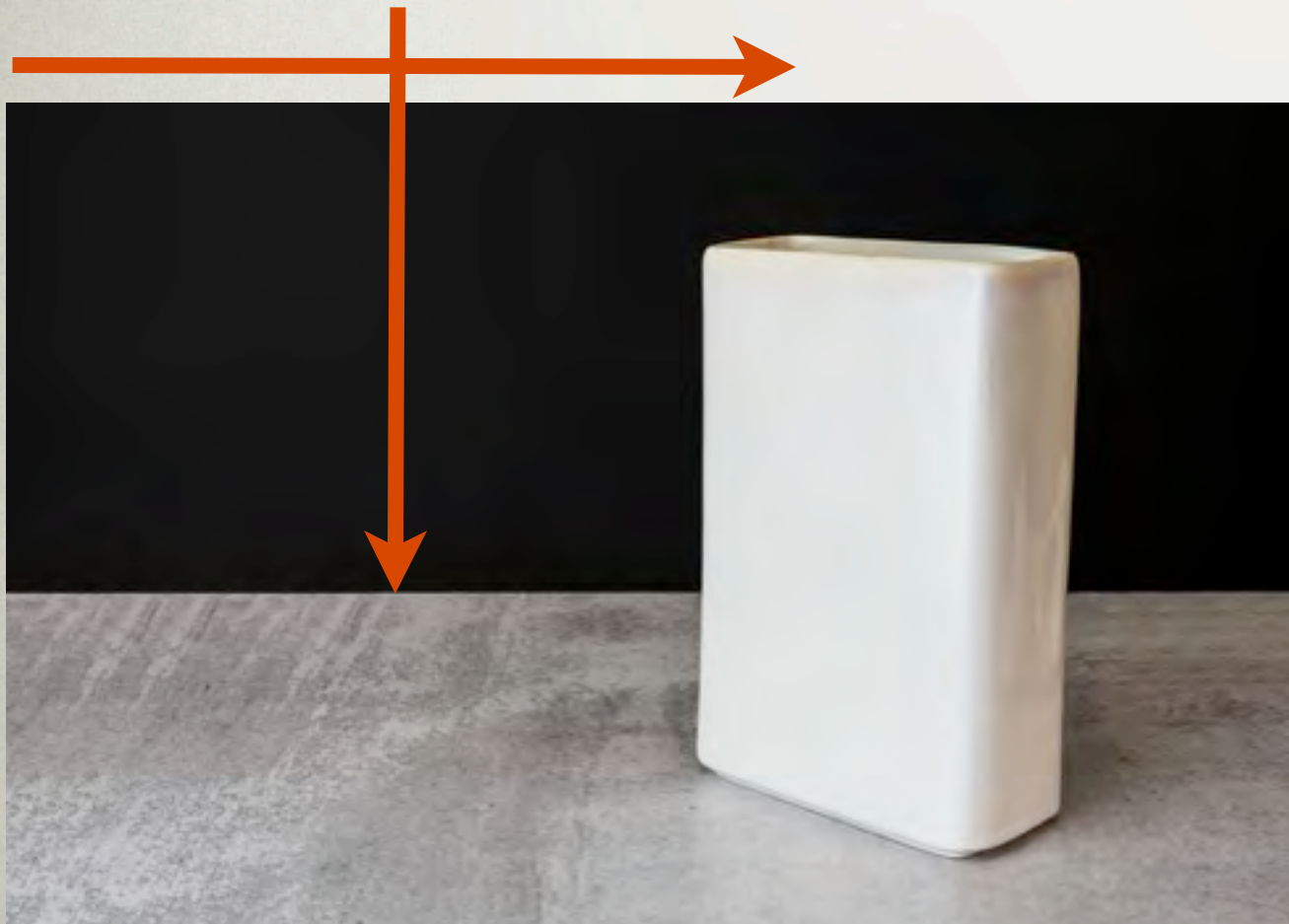


SETTING UP THE STILL LIFE



OBJECTS

Don't place objects on the horizon line like soldiers.
Place them below horizon line, but not at exact half.
Use a 1/3 higher/lower placement best visual proportion.
Do not place objects in the center. Move in about 1/3 left or right.



1 object



2nd object



PLACEMENT

Add additional objects with regard to placement. Objects should overlap or have a reasonable distance to define groupings.





Watch for tangency - it distracts. Objects should overlap or have a reasonable distance to define groupings. Breathing room.





Above: Grouping on a diagonal. Ready to add a smaller, contrasting, different shape element to bottom right.

Below: Composition on a diagonal. Two groups of three + 1 element.

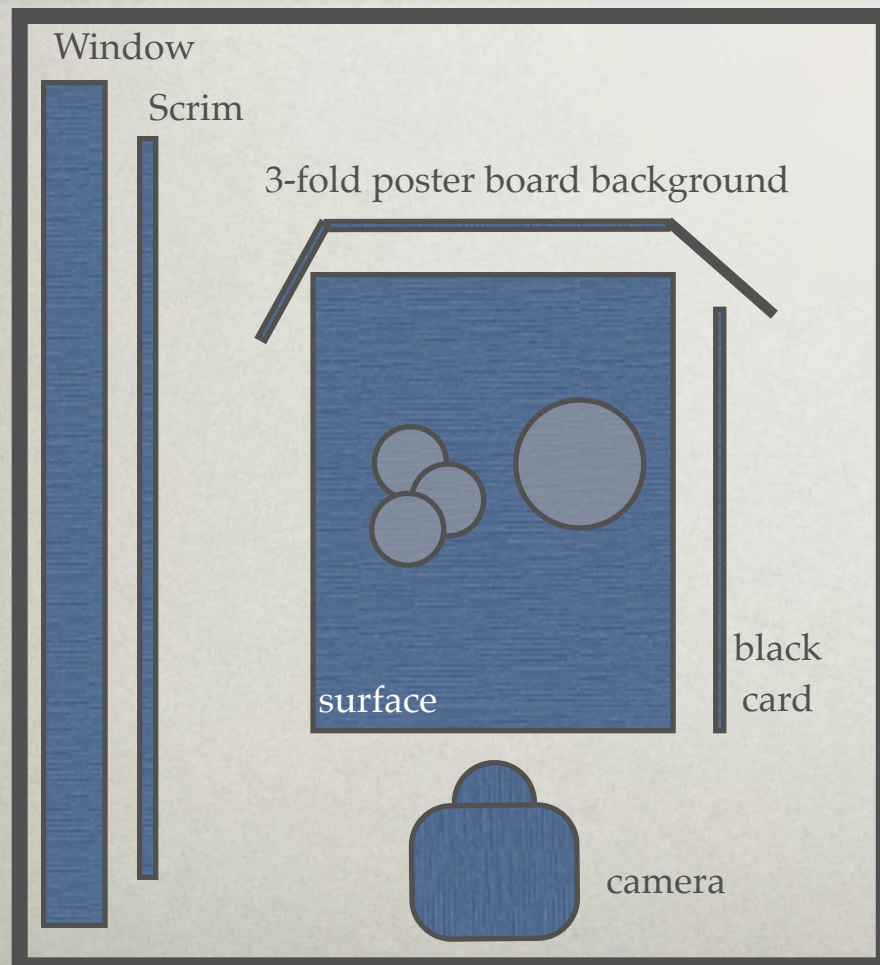




Attention paid to height of objects and placement. Rule of thirds. Diagonals. Different colors and tones. Different textures. Let the objects interact with each other.



A SIMPLE STILL LIFE



A basic still life set up - one large object to the right - where the eye goes. Three smaller items to the left - where the eye might travel next. This is a triangular composition. The pitcher handle leads the eye back into the composition. The small bowls have been turned so that the eye rotates around the circles. The stripe on the board leads the eye in. The background is dark in contrast to the ceramic items. The surface is lighter and textured to contrast with the smooth objects. The bottom of the pitcher is brown and is a transition to the wood surface. The horizon line - where surface meets background - is $\frac{1}{3}$ of the way up and none of the objects sit on the line.

ADDING PROPS

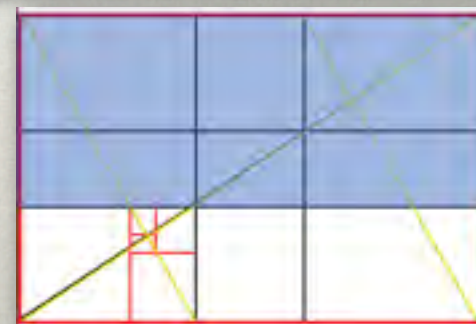


Some additional props were added in this version. The brushes are in the same color family as the board. The bottom line of the brushes repeats the circular curve of the pitcher. The bottom comb is placed on a slight diagonal to lead the eye across to the brushes and up to the pitcher. Silver flowers have been added to the pitcher to lead the eye left. And the circular rhythm repeats.

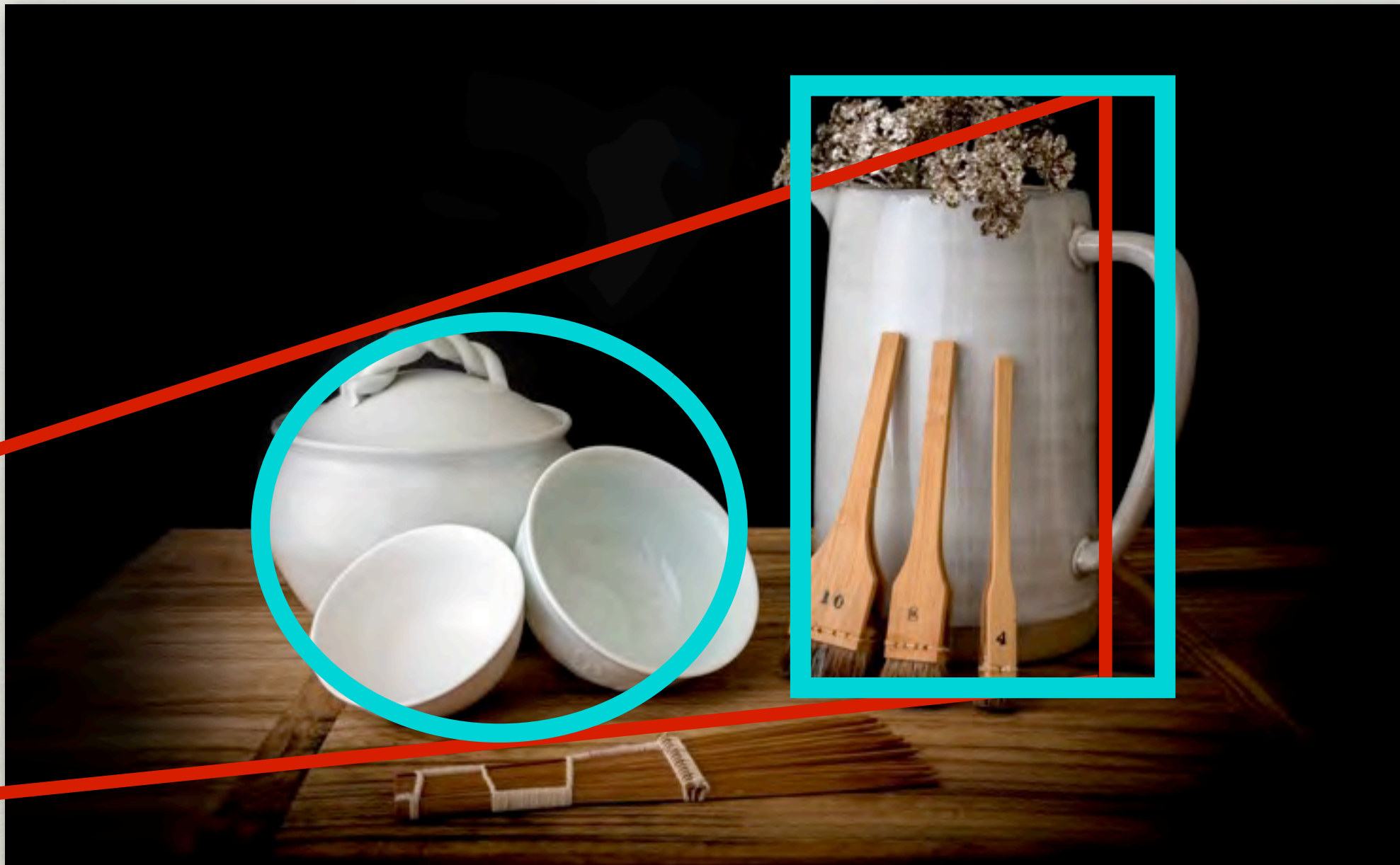
GOLDEN RECTANGLE FORMAT



This image was composed within a Golden Rectangular format.
The squares of the Golden Rectangle can be seen here.



TRIANGULAR FORMAT



The composition also has a triangular format. It also has a rectangular and a circle. Groups of three are repeated. All these elements make for a pleasing composition.

FINAL EDIT



For the final image, I gave more headroom to the top of the pitcher and more space at the bottom of the board. I thought there was too much wasted space at the sides, and cropped it. I also added some ornaments to the small bowls to break up the circular shapes.

I was uncertain as to the “hero” at the beginning of the process, but the brushes, because of their color, attracted the most attention. This is where arranging objects is a difficult decision.

Nancy Mack



Nancy Mack



Try different arrangements, different groupings, different camera angles. This is not for the impatient!

COMPOSING



For this composition, I wanted to work with green and copper items.

I gave myself a problem to solve:

I was simply looking for a color family of objects that I could arrange in a manner that flowed around the composition, keeping the rule of thirds for the frame.



RULE OF THIRDS



In most compositions, particularly landscape, the horizon should not be in the middle. $\frac{2}{3}$ up or $\frac{2}{3}$ down is a more pleasing composition. The same for still life.

Here the objects take up the right $\frac{2}{3}$ of the frame leaving an area at the left for the eye to enter.

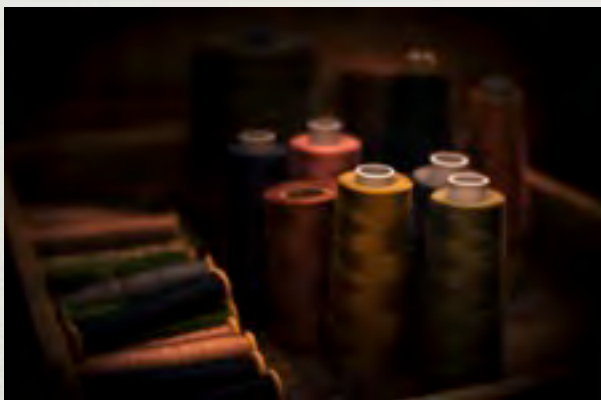
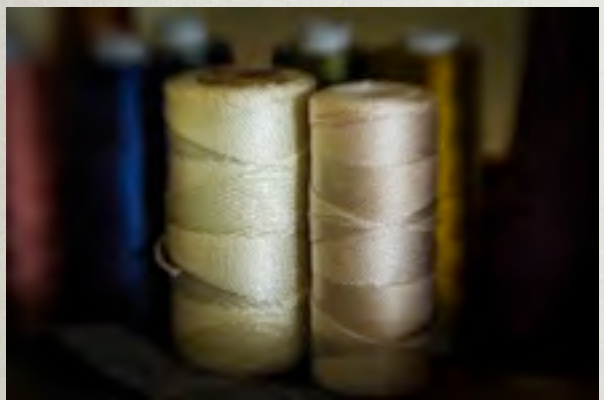
The copper spoon handle leaning on the pitcher leads the eye up. The pitcher handle leads the eye around the lip, around the flowers and into the crown spike. The round base of the crown leads to the bottom objects and back around. There is a definite circular movement.



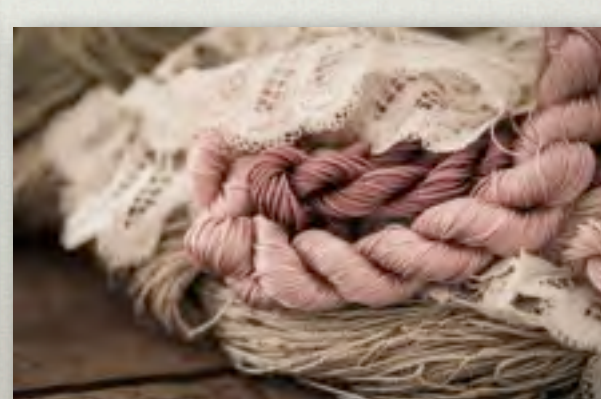
Nancy Mack

Final composition. In hindsight: I like the colors and the idea. It is too busy and the items are squashed to the middle. It would help if some flowed off to the left, creating a leading line.

THE THREAD PROJECT



I have a collection of beautiful silk threads from my mother. These cannot be easily found anymore. I wondered how I could create a still life combining these with other objects.





This final image makes use of my collections, but has a bit more organization.

The background, flowers, and thread cones are deliberately darkened in editing to focus the eye on the threads in the glass box. The curved shapes of the gold and pink twisted yarns create an oval that leads the eye around to focus on the smaller spools. There is a definite focal point.

SPANISH RENAISSANCE

STILL LIFE PAINTING



Still Life With Shells, and a Chipwood Box,
Sebastian Stoskopff, 1620



Still Life with Cardoon, Juan Sanchez
Cotan, 1604



A Cup of Water and a Rose,
Francisco de Zurbaran, after 1600.



Juan Sánchez Cotán, Quince, Cabbage,
Melon and Cucumber, 1602



Still Life with Pottery Jars
Francisco de Zurbaran, 1650

I felt that my images were becoming too full of objects and I wanted to simplify and really define a focal point. I started looking back in art history once again for painters who used fewer items in dramatic ways.

These Spanish examples were not as opulent as the Dutch examples. I wanted some “quiet” inspiration!



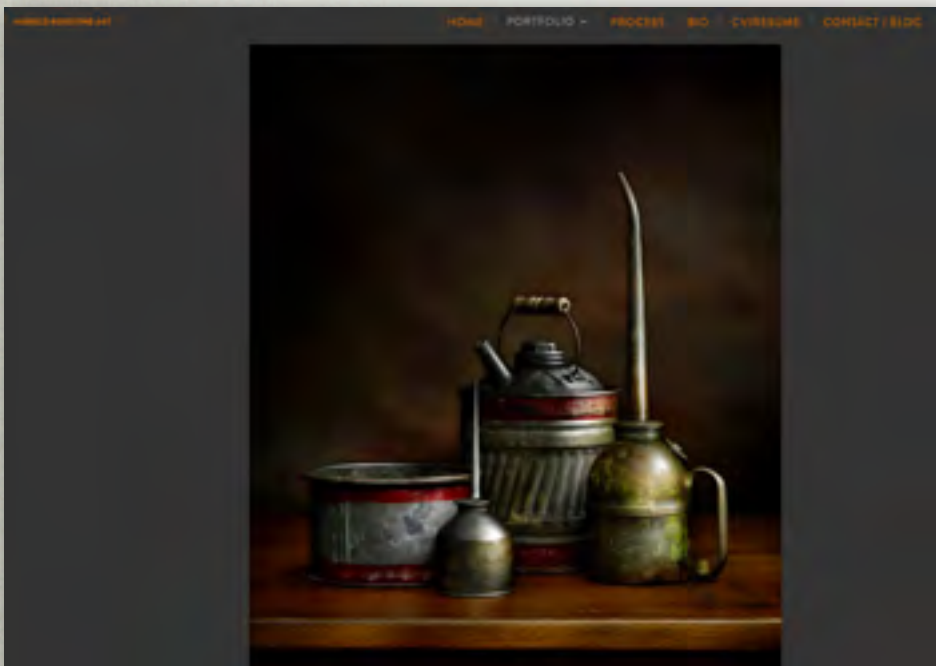
Nancy Mack

These two photos are an attempt at simplifying the number of objects in a composition. I set a problem and limits on myself. A container, flowers, the concept of stillness.

We should always ask ourselves:
Why am I taking this photo? What is my “story”?
The “why” guides the decisions.
Sometimes the photo itself tells us.



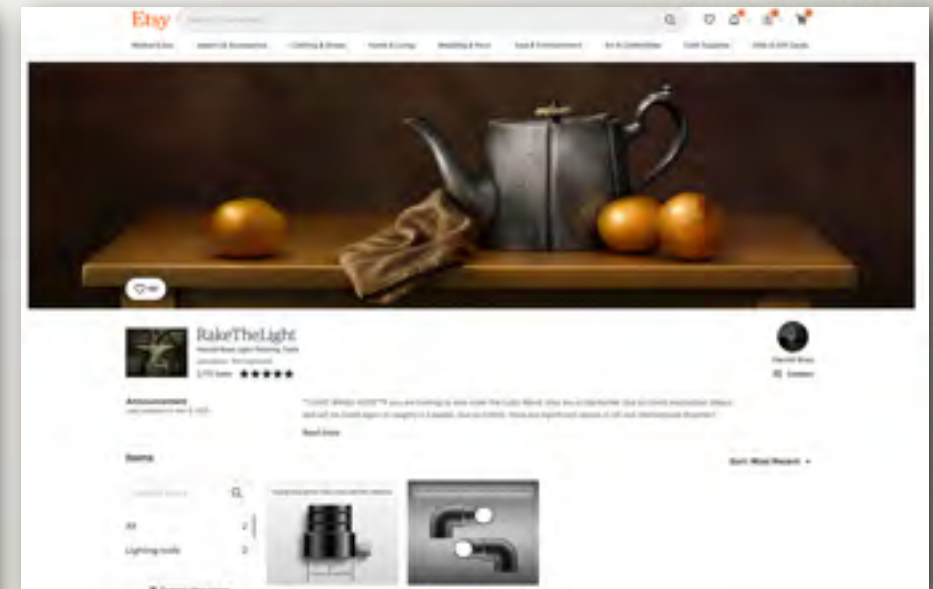
HAROLD ROSS AND LIGHT PAINTING



Harold Ross: www.HaroldRoss.com



Harold Ross Blog:
<https://haroldrossfineart.wordpress.com/>



Harold Ross: [Etsy Shop](https://www.etsy.com/shop/RakeTheLight) for small, handcrafted flashlight modifiers

Harold Ross teaches workshops in light painting both at his studio in PA and online. His blog details techniques and examples which were valuable in learning how to do this. He sells small, handcrafted flashlight modifiers from his Etsy shop.

Recently featured in a [Lenswork](#) monograph, he did a complete [light-painted series of the inside of the Biltmore, NC](#).



Nancy Mack



These compositions represent days of arranging and re-arranging. I bought the scale and shears and oil cans at an antique shop and wanted to feature them. But the scale and other objects competed with each other. I tried lots of variations. All compositions are the result of almost 20+ individual light-painted images combined as layer masks in Photoshop.



Still Life with Shears, Nancy Mack

First Place, Masters Division, & Best of Show, Plano Photography Club, March 2021

Second Place, Gulf States, March 2021

40 images light painted with a small flashlight and modifiers, combined in Photoshop using layer masks. I realize that the shears were the actual focal point all along, but it took many versions to get there.

LIGHTING THE STILL LIFE

Another topic we will not touch on here, but which is crucial, is “lighting”. The Dutch Masters of still life almost always had the light coming in from the top left at an angle that encouraged the shadows to draw the shape of the objects. They normally had a ray of light and shadows on the back wall to give the impression of window light, which was very soft.

All my examples shown in this presentation have used simple window light and an occasional softbox. While arranging, consider lighting possibilities according to your expertise and modifier availability: daylight, window, softbox, strobe to provide drama - cast light, shadows, reflections, highlights, etc. How best to tell the “story”. A [basic lighting tutorial](#) was presented to the Dallas Camera Club in 2020.



Images from Google Search

EDITING THE STILL LIFE

Editing is left to personal preference. Professional photographers can often be identified by their distinctive “style”. I tend to edit darker, but I am a beginner and have not developed a style yet. A study of still life painting up until the 20th century shows that artists in general include everything in the scene. Very rarely do these artists “crop” an image or have any objects running off the frame. It is only contemporary art and photography that make use of the “viewfinder” effect - isolating only significant parts of a scene or framing it.



Apache Still Life, 1907, Edward S. Curtis

Left: Edward Curtis photographed the American West and Native American people. His still life of baskets framed the objects entirely.

Below: Olivia Parker has created still life compositions that leave the viewer wondering what else is happening in the scene. There is a sense of mystery.



Focal Possibilities, 2010, Olivia Parker

ELEMENTS OF COMPOSITION

The vocabulary for composition is endless and overwhelming. Let the items or an idea be the starting point. Then consider words that might describe the arrangement and create a “story” from there:

symmetry

balance

size equals power

leading lines

complimentary elements

find your focus

leading room

repetition

hierarchy

head room

negative space speaks

simplify

depth

reduce clutter

reflect

scale

tension

rhythm

COMPOSITION SCHEMES

rule of thirds



triangles



symmetry



golden spiral

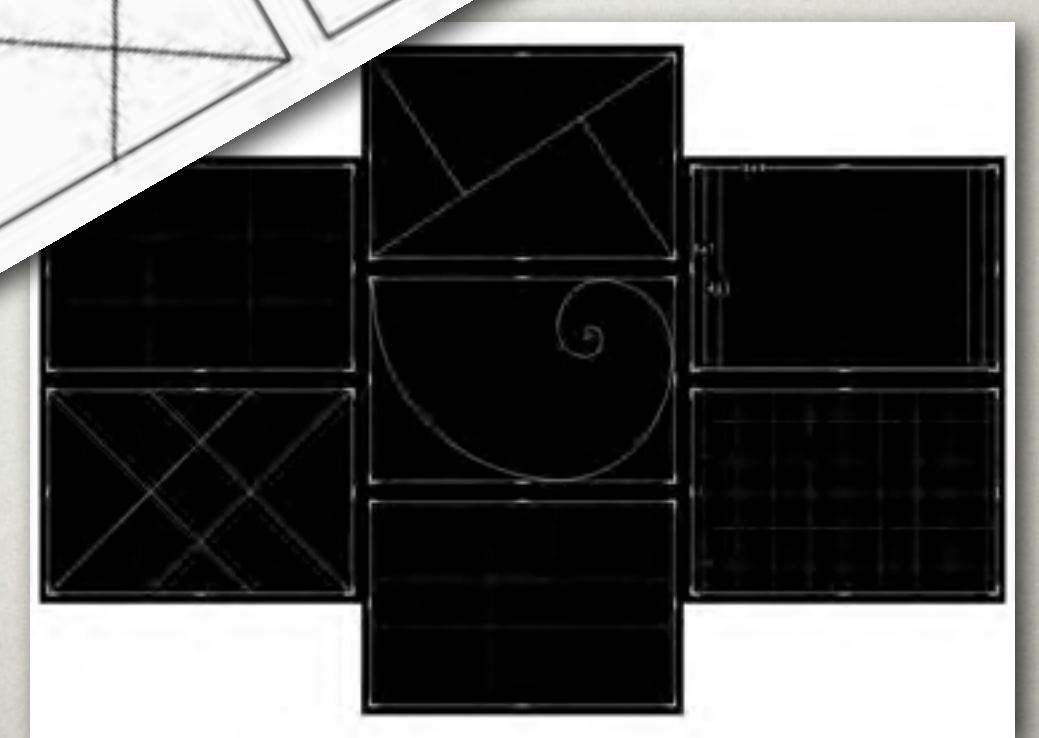
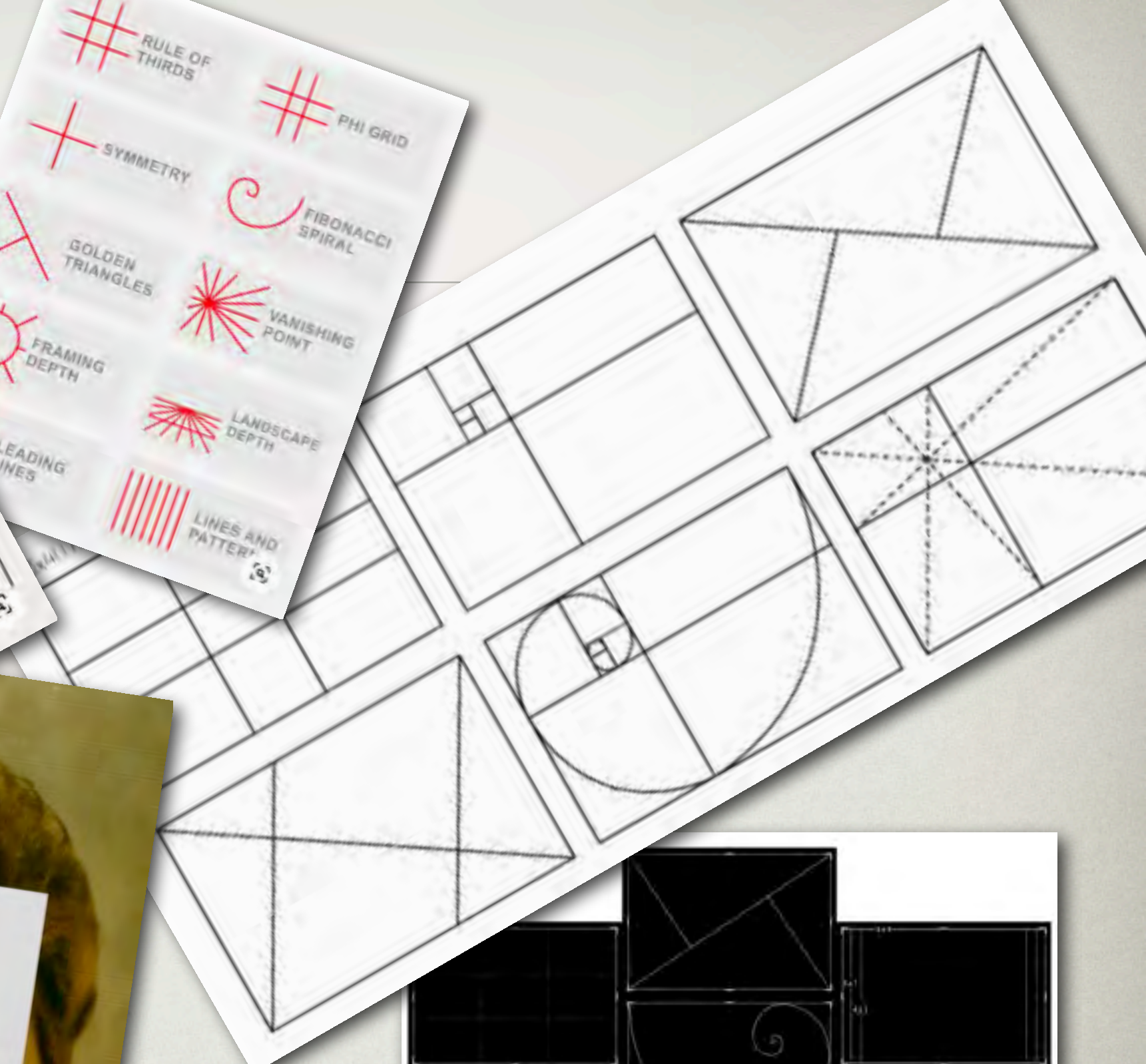
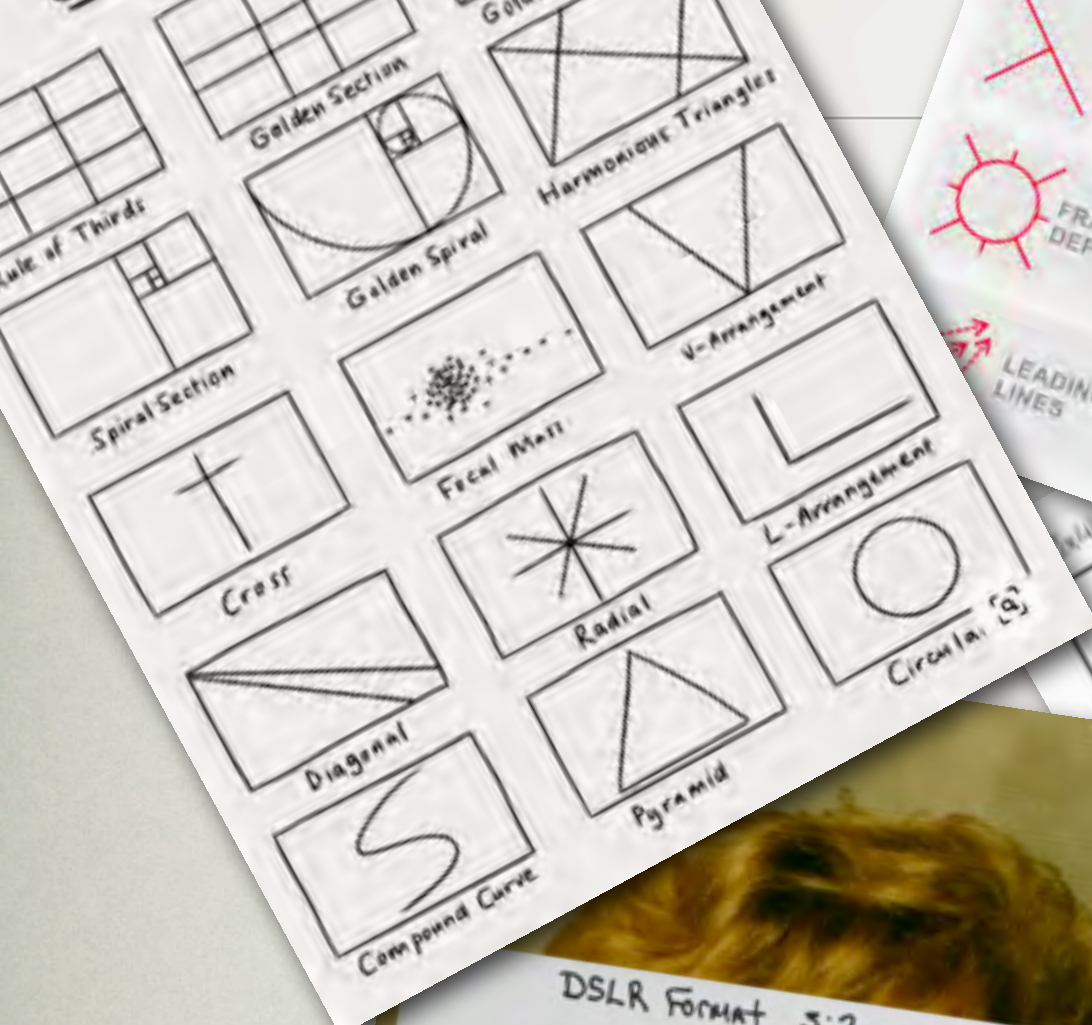


foreground dominate



leading lines

BEGINNERS GUIDE TO COMPOSITION



STUFF TO USE

- black, white poster board or tri-fold poster board used for science fair projects as surfaces and in smaller sizes, for flags, blocking light and reflecting light. (Target, Michael's, Hobby Lobby)
- kitchen chopping blocks, sheer curtains, scrims, reflectors
- various papers, textured surfaces, shiny surfaces (I find that they sometimes reflect the camera and other objects in the room when looking down), matte surfaces
- tiles from home improvement stores
- there are companies that specialize in backdrops and surfaces for photographers; expensive.
- plexi-glass sheets - I bought an inexpensive black sheet and a white sheet, 24x24, gloss on one side; matte on the second side, because I wanted to try reflections. <https://www.eoplastics.com/plexiglass/acrylic-sheets>
- your own floor...
- wood scraps from antique shops or lumber yard (Home Depot has a "free stuff" box)
- your own treasure trove of objects...that you kept for whatever reason
- flowers from your garden; flowers from the grocery store (Trader Joe's has the best and cheapest!); do not poach from public places or your neighbor... spouses and family members can be trained to "send flowers" for different occasions...

SPECIALITY ITEMS



MUSEUM PUTTY - useful for keeping objects in place

“Museum Putty is a neutral, opaque blended rubber used by museum professionals and antique dealers as insurance against costly damage or loss. Its beige color makes it excellent for securing opaque (as opposed to clear) items such as porcelain, plates, statues, vases, pottery, figurines, antiques, and collectibles. Removable, reusable, non-toxic, and suitable for use on wood, each packet contains enough material for 40 or more items.”

Container Store: \$5.99

NO



KRYLON DULLING SPRAY - spray on shiny, reflective or glass objects to dull them for photography purposes.

- **KRYLON-Dulling Spray - DO NOT BUY MATTE - IT IS NOT REMOVEABLE**
- Krylon Dulling Spray creates a temporary dull finish to reduce glare on items to be photographed or videotaped
- It coats evenly and effectively to simplify lighting arrangements
- The semi-drying finish wipes off easily and leaves no marks
- This package contains one aerosol can with 11oz of spray

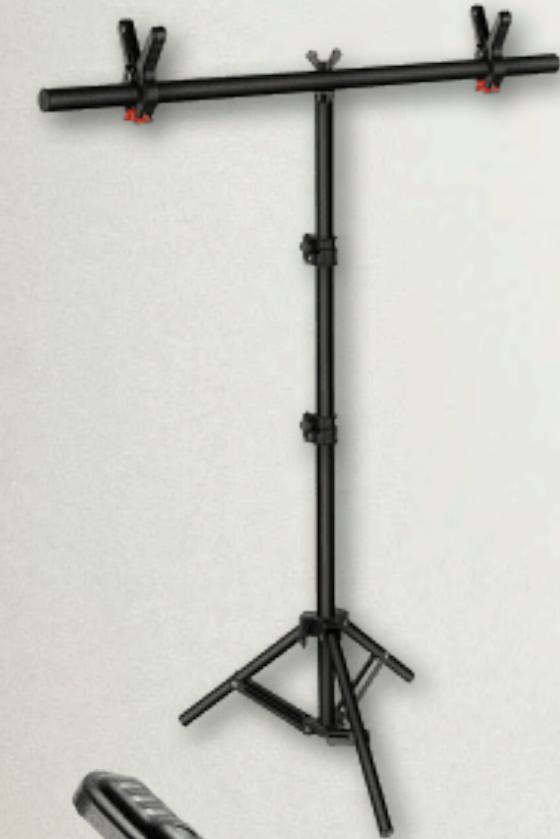
Features

- Provides a removable dull finish for items to be photographed or videotaped
- Reduces shine and simplifies lighting arrangements
- Removable finish wipes off easily Semi-drying formula leaves no marks Reduces shine on items for photography.
- Capacity - 11 oz.

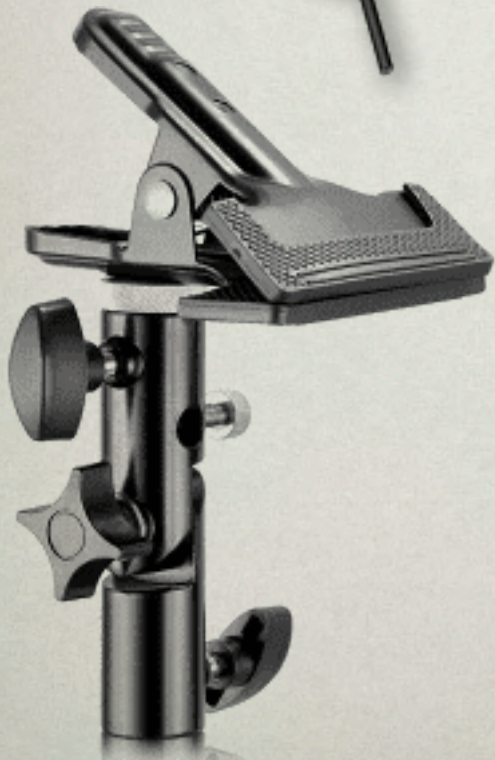
Walmart: \$15.17

EQUIPMENT AND PROPS

Stands, clamps, diffusers, reflectors, etc. are all useful items. They can be purchased at any camera shop or ordered online.



An old window mounted to a stand by braces.



Glycerine can be mixed with water 50/50) to create water drops on flowers or food items in a still life.

STILL LIFE REFERENCES, 1

Some resources cite painting references, but the material about composition is equally valuable

Format Magazine: Still Life Photography: The Complete Guide

<https://www.format.com/magazine/resources/photography/still-life-photography-ideas-and-tips>

Still Life Photography: Royston Photographic Society Jitka Brynjolffssen 21th June 2018

<http://roystonphotographicsociety.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Still-Life-Photography-RPS.pdf>

Top 3 MUST-KNOW ANGLES for Food and Product Photography

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GU_LpIWHYI8

PIXPA: 12 Great Tips to Master Still Life Photography

<https://www.pixpa.com/blog/tips-for-still-life-photography>

Art of Arrangement: Photography and the Still Life Tradition, Science + Media Museum, Bradford, UK

(video of how Fenton took still life photos in 1860)

<https://www.scienceandmediamuseum.org.uk/what-was-on/art-arrangement-photography-and-still-life-tradition>

A Beautiful Mess: Tips for Using Natural Light in Still Life Photography

<https://abeautifulmess.com/tips-for-using-natural-light-in-still-life-photography/>

Expert Photography: 8 Still Life Composition Tips for Beginning Photographers

<https://expertphotography.com/still-life-composition-photography/>

STILL LIFE REFERENCES, 2

The Photoargus: 35 Superb Examples of Still Life Photography

<https://www.thephotoargus.com/35-superb-examples-of-still-life-photography/>

Karl Taylor Education: Still Life Photography

<https://karltayloreducation.com/creative-still-life-photography/>

FLICKRIVER: Still Life Photography Selection

<https://www.flickriver.com/groups/stilllifephotography/pool/interesting/>

WIDEWALLS: Still Life Photographers Who Give a Fresh Meaning to Vanitas

<https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/still-life-photographers>

500px Blog: Still life photography: The essential guide for photographers

<https://iso.500px.com/still-life-photography/>

City Academy Blog: Top 6 Photography Composition Rules

<https://www.city-academy.com/news/photography-composition-rules/>

PHLEARN: 25 Tips for Perfect Photography Composition

<https://phlearn.com/magazine/the-25-best-tips-for-perfect-composition/>

STILL LIFE REFERENCES, 3

PHLEARN: Guides for Great Composition

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqGM0TKeRDc>

SpeckyBoy: 30 Stunning Examples of Still Life Photography

<https://speckyboy.com/still-life-photography/>

Digital Photography School: Tips for Getting Started with Still Life Photography

<https://digital-photography-school.com/tips-for-getting-started-with-still-life-photography/>

Photography Network: Setting Up a Successful Still life

<https://www.artistsnetwork.com/magazine/setting-still-life-composition/>

ArtyFactory: Still Life Techniques: Pencil Drawing

https://www.artyfactory.com/still-life/still_life_pencil.html

Evolve Artist: How to Compose a Successful Still Life Painting

<https://evolveartist.com/blog/how-to-compose-a-successful-still-life-painting/>

Click It Up a Notch: How to Shoot Still Life Photography to Push Your Creativity

<https://clickitupanotch.com/still-life-photography/>

STILL LIFE REFERENCES, 4

J. Paul Getty Museum, "In-Focus: Still Life" Exhibition notes

http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/focus_still_life/

Iceland Photo Tours: Ultimate Guide to Composition in Photography

<https://iceland-photo-tours.com/articles/photography-techniques/ultimate-guide-to-composition-in-photography>

Imperfect Paintings

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0AaT4aeojtY>

Stefan Baumann: Golden Mean Canvas

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

Stefan Baumann: Composition - Eye Movement and setting up a still life for painting

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_k9Tz7pBh5A

FLICKR

Still Lives Curated: <https://www.flickr.com/groups/still-lives/pool/>

The World of Still Life: <https://www.flickr.com/groups/slcgroup/pool/>

Still Life Photography: <https://www.flickr.com/groups/still-life-photo/pool/>

Still Life: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/150147738@N08/galleries/72157716548897157/>

FOUND AND COMPOSED

STILL LIFE EXAMPLES

FOUND STILL LIFE



Homescapes Photos: Reid Callanan



Parking Lots: Larry Petterborg



Still life is not easy. You have to look around - use your mental viewfinder to isolate objects that might tell a story. Or you have to commit to the selection and arrangement of objects. It takes practice. Look at others. Don't copy. Look for inspiration.

Give yourself a problem. Can you tell a new or different story about an object? Can you create a series from your still life arrangements? Can it become a longterm project?

Reid Callanan, Director of Santa Fe Workshops has been on his own journey for many years: Homescapes, is a series that documents his life.

Your photo friends have also been doing this:

Larry Petterborg gave a training class a few years ago: "Defining a Personal Project". He had just completed his own personal project: A Closer Look: Parking Lots.

It inspired my own photo journey: an exhibition of flower photos at Northhaven Gardens Gallery.

Dennis Fritsche defined his own personal project: The Evolution of a Project: Water Dreams.

COMPOSED STILL LIFE

G. Daniel Massad

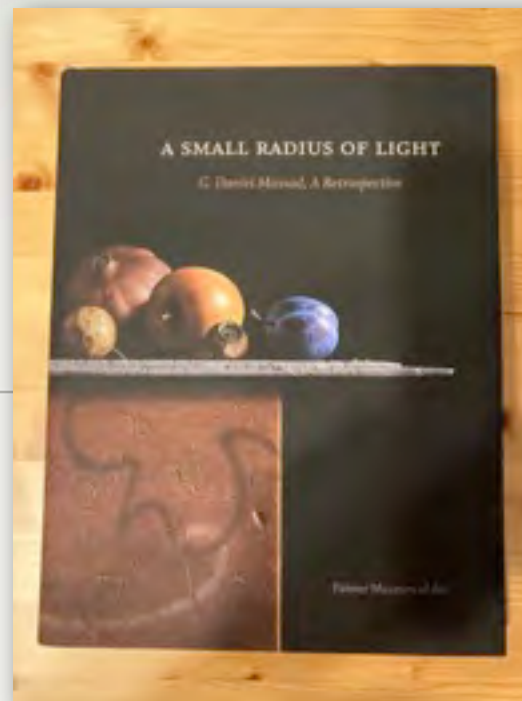
Daniel Massad is a pastel artist who meticulously arranges objects of great personal significance as evidenced in over 40 years of diary entries detailing his journey. At first, I thought his works were photographs. I was amazed to find these meticulous images were pastels.

“Human beings don’t appear in Massad’s still lifes, but oddly humanized—memorable—objects do. Their humbleness is deceptive, for imbued with light they become more than—other than-- everyday...The commonplace becomes uncommon in Massad’s still lifes by reason of the inescapable light that informs them—indeed, they seem formed of light, seem oddly immaterial however obviously material.” Reference

National Gallery of Art Interview:



Yield, G. Daniel Massad 2005



A Small Radius of Light,
G. Daniel Massad:
A Retrospective



Darkness Behind Everything, G. Daniel Massad 1998

COMPOSED STILL LIFE



Radishes, Olivia Parker, 2010



Night Pear, Olivia Parker, 2009

Olivia Parker

“For more than 40 years, Olivia Parker has created alluring, poetic photographs that transform the everyday and enchant the familiar. In deceptively simple still lifes and complex, dreamlike constructions that incorporate a rich variety of found objects, her photographs create unexpected juxtapositions that provoke uncertainty and delight.”

Reference

COMPOSED STILL LIFE



Orchard Pears, Paulette Tavormina 2016



Quince and the Ladybugs, Paulette Tavormina 2021



Anthony and Cleopatra, Paulette Tavormina 2017

Paulette Tavormina

at one time worked for Sotheby's but had been been a photographer off and on. About 20 years ago, she started using her art history background as an inspiration for flat lays and still life, reminiscent of the Dutch Masters.

Her book *Seizing Beauty* is a catalogue of these beautiful, precise creations. The NYC farmer's markets inspire the subject matter. By becoming friends with growers, she was able to select exact items in various stages of ripeness and decay. Her use of light is exacting and haunting.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Arranging objects and making an image is more than just flexing our photography muscles. Looking at the parade of images through art history, there always seems to be a hidden narrative.

The works reveal the personality, the soul, the reflection of what was important at the time, the significance of individual objects - whether it was the Middle Ages, Renaissance, the birth of photography or contemporary art. The artist captures the “soul” of the “stuff” through discipline and thoughtfulness.

That is the real heart of still life. Musicians play scales. Dancers practice. Actors rehearse. As photographers, we must make lots of practice photos first.


“Ask yourself: “Does this subject move me to feel, think and dream?” – Ansel Adams

“Twelve significant photographs in any one year is a good crop.” – Ansel Adams

I encourage you to set a problem or goal and stick with it. The discipline may lead you to surprises about yourself and your photography. The outcome is always rewarding!



Tulip. Alone. 2020 Nancy Mack
Second Place, Masters Division, Plano Photography Club, May 2020



**THANK-YOU FOR JOINING
ME. I HOPE YOU MIGHT
ENJOY TRYING YOUR HAND
AT STILL LIFE
PHOTOGRAPHY.**

A great many images to illustrate composition techniques have been taken from Google searches.

I have tried to include credits.

Please do not share outside of the clubs.

Thank-you!

Be glad I did not include a crossword puzzle...

2021, the year of the Texas blizzard and the vaccine...