

Creating and Sketching a Still Life
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Takeaway 1: Keep it Simple To Start With.

- Warm up with sketching individual shapes and then forms.
- Warm up with directional mark making, gesture drawing or other “doodling.”
- Try selecting 3 or 5 objects as a starting point. Vary shapes and heights and orientation to ground plane.
- Select a simple formation such as “l”, “t” or “s”. Or try a simple circular arrangement.
- Try sketching just basic shapes at first. Progress to forms such as cubes and spheres. Build on those to create greater detail.
- Ignore color and pattern, working in 3 values-white gray and black.
- Keep background simple: ledge and window or ledge and corner, fairly centered arrangement.
- Rather than striving to create multiple setups using different objects each time, focus on one set of objects but arrange them in different ways. This will strengthen the concept of how the same objects can relate in different ways to one another and improve your skills of composition.

Takeaway 2: Add some interest and complexity.

- Add more objects that are similar versions of same shape; switch up orientation of those objects.
- Experiment with different lighting and backgrounds.
- Develop the forms via shading and greater value range.
- Vary the focal point.
- Vary the view.
- Add simple color selections. (Or begin to paint color from life.)

Common Areas of Opportunity: Many of these things are subjective in my opinion but a traditionally trained painter or photographer might say otherwise☺ It’s best to experiment and see what pleases your eye and figure out why you like or dislike something.

- All objects are of the same size or shape- width and height and length.

- Not enough attention is paid to positive and negative space. Every empty space and object carries some type of “weight.” Everything relates to everything else.
- All objects are placed on the same area of plane, all in a row.
- Touching forms create unusual tangents.
- All forms are aligned in the same direction or some forms point awkwardly to other forms.
- Confusion created by using several focal areas.
- Not creating a clear path for the eye to follow.
- Missed opportunity of using the edges of the canvas/paper as part of design.
- All objects don’t relate to each other in *some* way. Can relate through subject, line, color, touching, size, shape, etc.
- When painting shadows, forgetting that the shadows themselves can become forms and as such, part of the composition.
- Less can be more and more can be just more or can be better!
- Overlooking unusual subjects that could be interesting.
- Conflicting light sources, particularly if you want to paint or sketch definitive and consistent shadow patterns.
- Objects appear to be bunched up. Try to view objects from overhead position in order to understand how each individual base occupies its own space. As you change your view from looking at the tops of things to looking at the fronts of things, keep in mind that the base of each object is still present and will appear to “overlap” with the bases of the other objects. The trick is to allow for a full expression of that base.
- Try angling square objects with edges rather than sketching head on; it’s easier to “see” their bases and to create the forms. Plus, it adds depth.
- Creating depth of space through progression of size, height, overlapping, and moving front to back through the plane.
- Missing an opportunity to link the foreground to the background. Consider interlocking shadow shapes, values or patterns.
- Distinct groupings of objects are created with nothing to link them.

Creating a Background:

- Formal backgrounds: can include regular horizontal or vertical lines, expected ledge and window orientation, expected table orientation, regular patterning, classical drapery folds.
- Informal backgrounds: off center window frames, off center table arrangements; irregular patterning of drapery or “wallpaper”, varied patterning with lines and other marks.

- Include textures, mirrors, brightly or darkly covered materials, wood, Masonite, or even just plane solids.
- Utilize side lighting if possible. It tends to create easily understood objects and shadows. Top lighting, back lighting and front lighting provide different types of views that illuminate the forms in different ways. Side lighting provides the best of everything: a clearly illuminated set of forms with shadows that are clearly understood.
- As you progress, consider other types of lighting such as spotlight lighting, strong natural light or fluorescent light.

Tips:

- All shapes/forms can be reduced to squares and circles, cubes and spheres. Squares and circles lack dimension and cubes and spheres can suggest “form” or “volume.” Squares and circles can be turned into rectangles and ovals. Circles can form the bases of cones or cylinders. Don’t forget other sorts of shapes like triangles or parallelograms. Don’t overlook irregularly formed shapes.
- Use camera to get a “second opinion” of the setup. Pay attention to positive and negative space.
- Break down objects into basic shapes: a pitcher might become a tall rectangle with a half circle for a handle. That can morph to a tall cube with a tubular handle.
- Use a standard formation to set up a still life. Try a “t” or an “h” or an “s” formation. Circular is good too.
- Try sketching from different viewpoints: dead center, top or bottom. Close up or mid distance or farther away.
- Use some objects to “point” to other objects; direct the eyes with your objects.
- Use a camera to “shoot” a still life. Crop and edit resulting pictures to experiment with composition.