

The Sensational Still Life

Do you avoid still life projects because you are afraid they will be boring? Here's how you can build a lively still life that will inspire your students to create artwork with dynamic compositions.

Choosing the objects and setting up the still life:

- Choose objects with a variety of interesting shapes, both organic and geometric, natural and man-made, with varying sizes and orientations (some horizontal, others vertical)
- Make sure the objects are not so complex that your students will be intimidated by them.
- Consider items based around a specific theme. A theme could be items of all one color family, or all geometric shapes, or all toys, or sports-related, etc, or in homage to a certain artist's work.
- Consider the colors and shapes of the objects; will they work together?
- And consider what media your will students use to represent the still life.
- To find interesting objects, silly toys and oddball knick-knacks for 25 cents or less, go to yard/garage sales or flea markets. Check out the \$1 store for fake flowers and plants. Or look around your home!
- An object like my grandfather's old violin case is wonderful in a still life, because it can create some negative space, and set up some environmental boundaries. You can drape fabric through or over it, and tuck objects inside it.
- Pick fabric remnants, tablecloths or papers to use for creating negative space (background) of the still life. Consider using scarves, necklaces, rope, etc to create vertical or diagonal lines.
 - For example, with beachy objects, use fabrics that are shades of blue, turquoise, peach and tan. To create directional lines, drape strings of 'pearls', resting into and over seashells. A pail turned on its side can have sand-colored fabric spilling out, with shells on it. Add toy boats and sea critters, an anchor, sunglasses, a pair of flip-flops, and more.
- Pick a good place to put the still life, preferably where it can be left set up. This can be on a counter-top or windowsill, or a central place, where it can be viewed "in the round". A good option is to put the still life on a rolling cart, so it can be moved when not in use. I 'rescued' a little cart from an old obsolete overhead projector with a fold-down shelf; I put the shelf up to create more surface area to use. I also had a larger cart in my classroom that was used for large complex still life arrangements. I could roll these in and out of the center of the classroom as per need. Another idea would be a laundry cart with a board across the top. The nice thing about a dynamic in-the-round still life is that every child who draws it will find a completely different composition, so no two pieces will look alike!
- Create a background (negative space) that enhances the still life.
 - If your still life will be on a counter, this can be as simple as tacking a piece of construction paper or some fabric to the wall behind the still life, as above.
 - Or put the still life on a windowsill to incorporate the window in the compositions. Remember if you are using live plants in your still life, to water them and make sure they get enough sunlight. And don't use live flowers if the still life needs to last for a while!

- For an 'in the round' still life, cut open the edges of one side of a large cardboard box, and place it in the middle of the cart or table to create a backdrop for both sides of the still life. Tape the box to the surface to secure in place.
- A still life where all the objects are lined up on one level can be boring. Create levels with various sizes of boxes or objects that can be draped with fabric or paper. Tape, staple, or hot glue the boxes in place, and then drape them with fabric or cover with paper (such as construction paper or wallpaper). Think carefully about the lines you are creating with your drapes, and make sure any patterned fabric doesn't overwhelm the objects you've selected. Stay away from white or black fabric, unless there's a good reason for it. Make sure, if it will be viewed 'in the round', that all sides of the boxes get covered/draped. Attach the fabric so it doesn't come down! Use paper clips, masking tape, sticky-tack, or even hot glue, as appropriate.
- Once you've gotten your backgrounds anchored and draped as desired, arrange objects on top or in front of the boxes, or in the crook of the angles where created where the boxes meet the surface of the table. Pay attention to the angles and lines you create. For example, if all the fabric falls in vertical lines, you might want to start by adding a large horizontal or diagonal object to break up the space. Then begin filling in with the other objects you have gathered. Also note any directional lines in the patterns on the fabric and contrast them with object placement. Drape items such as fibers, rope, chains, or jewelry to create contrasting directional lines.
- Make sure, if you are using objects with eyes (dolls, stuffed toys), you consider which way they are looking. You don't want the objects to all be looking out of the composition, though you have to remember they will likely be viewed from a variety of angles, so you might need to vary.
- Where possible, put loops of tape or sticky tack on the bottoms of the objects to keep them in place (or hot glue, when possible). And if you are using a rolling cart, I suggest marking the floor with tape, so that each time you bring out the cart, it goes into the same location.
- How you light the still life is up to you. If you are doing a lesson in shading to create volume, you'll want a uniform light source. You can use anything from a gooseneck desk lamp to battery powered lanterns – whatever works for you! Working with elementary students, you may decide the lighting is unimportant; the assignment can be more about composition, contour line, color, and various elements of design. Again, it all depends on how you plan to use the still life.

Viewfinders:

- Do I expect every student to draw every object? No way! Certainly not on a complex arrangement. Use viewfinders, cut to correspond to the proportions of the paper you will be using. So for example, for 9"x12" paper their viewfinder could be cut to 3"x4". These can be cut out of scraps of tagboard. You might want to let your students choose whether to use it horizontally or vertically. Let students move about the room to find the composition they like best. Teach them to 'squint like a pirate' while using the viewfinder, and hold it away from their face. What they find in the viewfinder should fill the space of their paper. I usually set a minimum, such as "you need to have at least 3 objects in your composition". As the viewfinder is moved closer and farther away from the face, they will create totally different compositions.
- And yes, now's the time to discuss the Principles of Design as they relate to your still life.

A few other tips:

- Should you expect the kids to copy the pattern on the fabrics? Not necessarily. I explain the fabric is there to set a color mood for the still life. They can eliminate or simplify fabric patterns in their drawings, and even change the color if it suits the artwork (using their “artistic license”).
- What about glassware and metallic objects? Both can be challenging / scary. Keep it simple! For a fun idea, arrange brightly patterned scarves under and behind glassware, and then put water inside the glassware. Zoom WAY in to discover lovely abstraction!
- Or what about trying a white-on-white still life? Use objects like eggs, a roll of toilet paper, and so on. Put them all on a white draped background, and illuminate for shadows. Have students explore the values with charcoal, or white conte or chalk on black paper.
- When selecting objects, pick things that the kids will have fun drawing. Toys are terrific. If it looks boring to you, you can bet it will be boring for them.
- Try a still life using just geometric shapes on solid draped fabric. How about using Legos or Lincoln Logs other geometric building toys? Or use all geometric solids stacked for the students to re-imagine them as buildings in a landscape.
- Which brings me to setting up a still life to represent a fake landscape: It is not always possible to bring kids outside to draw landscapes, so create a landscape still life! This is fun when the weather keeps us indoors. Use layers of fabric to represent mountains, water, etc. Use toy trees, boats, cars, and trains. Use little boxes to represent buildings. Hang sky-colored fabric for your backdrop, and add some cotton stuffing on the sky for clouds if you'd like. Maybe you even want to throw in a toy Godzilla or just-landed alien spacecraft! Or, does the landscape have to be the surface of earth? How about unusual colored fabrics draped over odd shapes to create the topography of another planet?
- Can't set up a still life as I've described because of space issues? Create mini-still life arrangements using cutaway shoe boxes; one per table. In them, drape some fabric, and add Matchbox cars, or Happy Meal toys, sea shells, the little plastic animals you buy in bags in the dollar store, or other trinkets. Stack them all on top of a cabinet or counter to store between uses.
- You may want to consider having students bring in little items for a more personal still life. I always worry about damage and theft, so I've never done this, but if you feel it will be safe in your classroom, go for it!
- Use artists for reference, depending on what you are doing. Using glassware? Look up Janet Fish. For some gorgeous still paintings, look up the work of Rachel Ruysch, and consider adding some little bugs or lizards in your still life, as did she. Or of course Cezanne, or Matisse, or van Gogh, or anyone else as suits your need.