

Watercolor Still Life

Session 1: Positive and Negative, Glazing and Layering, Wet-into-Wet & Charging Color

Consider Your Shapes

One of the simplest approaches to a still life is to reduce the object(s) and the background to simple shapes. When you do this, the “shape of the shapes” becomes critically important. We want to have interesting enough shapes, both in the objects (the foreground or positive space) and in the background (the negative space) to hold the viewers interest, and to give him/her enough information about the objects to suggest what they are.

What you choose to include in your still life setup is always important, but equally important is how you arrange the objects once you’ve chosen them. Look at the two photos at the right. Both are of the same objects, but in the top one, they are placed so poorly that their contour (outside edge) doesn’t give us any information about them. Even their cast shadows provide little information. Think of your objects in terms of silhouette, and use the view that provides the most information and/or the most interesting shape.



Above: Confusing shapes (what are these objects?)

Below: Clear-reading shapes



I used an unusual viewpoint for the three penguins in my painting *In Georgia’s Patio* (left). I placed them on an open book showing a reproduction of one of O’Keeffe’s patio paintings, and then stood over the still life setup to sketch it. The penguins themselves are seen from almost directly above, and would have been hard to identify from that angle, but I used very strong sidelighting (late in the afternoon) to cast long shadows, and the shadows provide enough information to identify them.

Consider Your View Point

One of the first choices you have to make in still life painting, besides your format (vertical, horizontal, square, etc.) is your point of view. You can choose from:

- **Frontal or straight on** - this tends to flatten the space somewhat, minimizing perspective and emphasizing the shapes of your objects
- **Worm’s eye or looking up** - this can make the viewer seem “smaller” and thus give more importance to the objects and their arrangement. Often used in religious works.
- **Slightly downward** - This view allows you to show more of the area surrounding your objects including cast shadows, and provides greater depth of field. This is probably the most “normal” view.
- **Bird’s eye or from overhead** - A point of view that affords an unusual look at the objects because you are looking straight down at them. It also flattens space to the extreme, but you can still use cast shadows, strong contrasts of value/intensity, linear movements and other devices/contrasts to provide interest.
- **Extreme cropping/enlargement** - This point of view is influenced by photography. The cropping and enlarging of objects to fill the picture area can create wonderful positive/negative shapes This is the most “contemporary” view point.



Assignment:

Use this photo, or set up a still life object right in front of you on a relatively plain contrasting background.

When you look at this photo in gray-scale (below), what do you notice? The reds and greens are all pretty much the same mid-to mid-dark value, aren't they?

This is a case where COLOR will define the shapes more than value will.

Underpaint all the shadow areas first using one of the following mixtures:

- ultramarine blue and burnt sienna
- permanent alizarin crimson and Winsor or thalo green
- Winsor or thalo blue and scarlet lake or organic vermilion

Let your shadow areas dry completely, then glaze additional layers of color, working from light to dark, unsaturated to saturated, letting each layer or glaze of color dry completely before painting over it. Use wet-into-wet and charged in color for the petunias local color. Add the darker areas after this first clear, intense color is dry.

