

Assignment

Still Life 2 - Further Adventures

That painterly style.....



Still life set up.

1. The set up

We'll attempt to produce a traditional/classic still life in a style similar to Renaissance Dutch and Flemish artists. Often their paintings used a single diffused source of light seemingly coming from a window or open door. Google for images - 'renaissance, still life'.

We need to have a good idea of how we want a finished still life image to turn out, but we can experiment and refine the arrangement and lighting quite a lot. In this sequence the still life (which might normally be shot in a light box) can be successfully arranged and lit using cheap and readily available materials and equipment. The first shot shows a few of the things needed to produce the final image. The spirit level is there so that you can check that you have a level base to start with, especially important if you are relying on [tripod](#) spirit levels and/or levels in camera.



2. First shot

The above shot shows the objects with black card so that a fade to black background can be achieved in the final image. The base is two old kiln shelves to which have been roughly and randomly painted with a water-based colour paint, giving an old stone shelf effect. The lighting is from a simple desk lamp and fairly even ambient light from a window. At the moment the desk lamp lighting is somewhat overpowered by the ambient light. I could, of course, wait until dark to take the shot, but I wanted to experiment and explore the options during daylight hours. (As you know, the tungsten bulb in the table lamp will give a 'warm' glow to the image).



3. Rearrange the shot

By moving the group closer to the near edge of the shelves, it's increased the distance to the black card - helping fade it in the dark background. In traditional still life painting the subject matter is sharp front to back: there are a couple of ways to achieve this. The first method is to stop down the lens to $f/22$ or beyond, hopefully increasing the DoF sufficiently to get the front to rear acceptably in focus. This can cause problems: the DoF may not be sufficient and diffraction can affect the resolving ability of the lens and lead to a softer feel than is required, especially when making large prints.

When taking a shot this way it's good to make sure that the Point of Focus is on the desired focal point of the arrangement (in this case the end of the stalk on the large squash)- it costs nothing to take a test shot and see if the whole arrangement is sharp enough. (A second method is to use a technique called focus stacking. This involves taking a series of shots focusing on different parts of the arrangement, gradually progressing typically from front to back. I usually end up with five to six shots but this varies according to the size and overall depth of the arrangement, plus your working distance. This enables you to use your lens at its sweet spot: if you don't know where that is you can always start at $F8$ - it can be a little either side but that's a good place to begin..... however, no need to go this route for the Assignment)



The lighting at this stage is still too harsh and flat.

4. Adjust the lighting

In order to deal with the harsh light from the desk lamp, we need to diffuse the main light. Bubble Wrap sheets, or thick parcel wrapping plastic, or materials such as net curtains can also be used. Simply double up layers if you wish to vary the strength of light. The black card can be removed if you have an alternative. Let your imagination work. The subject isn't going anywhere - time for experimentation.



The results

Three different versions of the image- each with a different background, lighting and colour balance. I have included a shell in one, often seen in still life paintings of the time. This was symbolic of wealth: shells from faraway places were keenly collected by Dutch merchants.





Final tips

It is a good idea to choose items that are of different sizes, colours and textures to add interest to your still life image; it is also a lot easier if they look as if they belong together. Many still life paintings of the Renaissance period contained various symbolic references to many aspects of life, death and faith. This led to sometimes bizarre combinations of objects that had to be skillfully arranged to produce convincing and aesthetically pleasing images. Perhaps it's safer to keep away from "hidden meanings" but, again, it's your picture, you do as you please.

Search for Renaissance still life images on the internet: they will provide an excellent source of inspiration, and attempting your own version of a favourite painting is a good idea. There are many books and articles on drawing, painting and photography that deal comprehensively with the technical aspects of composition and are well worth reading.