

Assignment

Still Life

Still Life photography provides a fine opportunity to learn about composition and lighting. Unlike landscapes you can control the light; and unlike portraits, your subjects will not get bored and start fidgeting.

Lighting

Most of the time, you will be working indoors. You will need good light, so work near a window, preferably one that allows plenty of sunlight in.



To avoid colour casts, try to work with natural daylight if possible.

The reason for this can be seen in this set of three photographs. They are all of the same clear glass chess piece. All of them were taken with the same digital camera, against the same background.

The first was taken under a normal tungsten light, using the daylight setting of the camera's White Balance controls. As you can see, the subject has turned orange. This is because tungsten light is cooler than daylight. We see blue as cold and red as hot but it takes heat sources the other way around to produce those colours. As I sit here looking at that same chess piece in the same tungsten light, it looks clear to me. Interestingly, down the left hand side you can see a reflection of the daylight from the window. This is the only part of the image that looks close to being white.

The second picture was taken using the tungsten setting on the camera's White Balance controls. This is meant to bring the lighting conditions back to a 'normal' light temperature when tungsten lighting is being used. It looks better, but there is still an orange cast to the piece. However, you can see that the reflection of the window is now blue. Daylight is hotter (more blue) than the tungsten light for which the camera was balanced.

The third photograph was taken in daylight using the daylight setting. This is more like the colour you would expect. So you can see why it is good to work with natural light if possible.

Of course, there are times when the "warmer" tones of tungsten light enhance the picture. So, don't be afraid to use the effect if it suits your purpose. Just set your camera to Daylight but use tungsten light. In most situations, the Auto WB setting will be sufficient to bring the colour temperature back to a 'normal' condition.

For the still life assignment, we'll steer clear of using either the camera's built-in flash or an attached flashgun. Stick with other available light, whether it's coming in the window or you're using a couple of spotlights.

If you are using window light, you will probably need to set slower exposure times. Preferably, you will use a tripod and remote shutter release, and while this is not essential, a tripod is a bit of kit that all photographers should have. Balance the light if necessary by using a sheet of white paper, or a purpose-built reflector, on the opposite side from the light source to reflect some light back into the shadow areas.

More detailed advice and instructions are to be found on the PDF files that are with the Portrait Assignment.

Start Small



When building up still life photographs, start with one item and notice how the light affects the modelling of the subject.

Still Life subjects are all around us. So it may be tempting to just grab a handful of items, put them together on a table and snap away. However, you will benefit from putting some thought into your work.

When you start taking still life pictures, always start small. Start with one item. Look at the way the light affects the shadows and the shape of the item. Then add something else and try different arrangements to get a good composition. Keep building the arrangement up in this way until you are happy with the image you have created.

As you build up your subject, think about contrasts; hard and soft, light and dark, smooth and textured. There are all sorts of contrasts you will want to try and each of them will produce a different effect. Derek Cooper, a professional 'product photographer' and therefore an expert at lighting 'still life' objects, recommends really flat lighting.... the apple above would be good, but even that light is about as sharp as you can get.

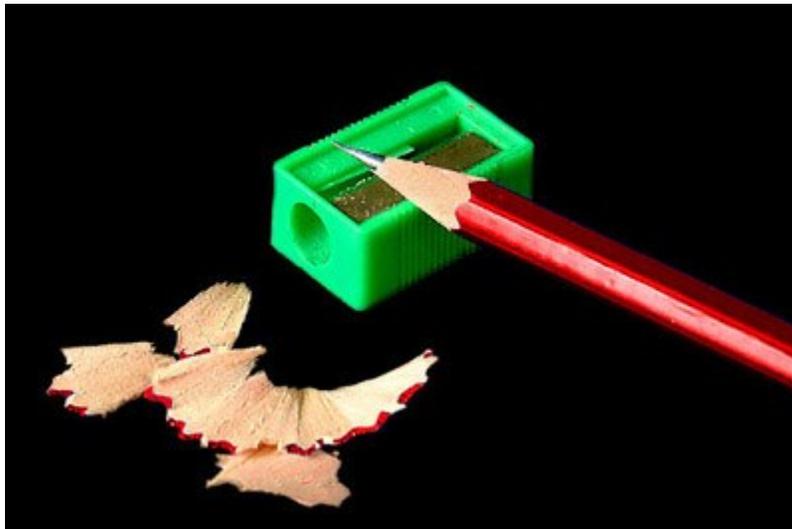


Autumn colours can be captured without spending too much time out of doors.

If you want to take photographs of the autumn colours, try a fine art type print of some autumn leaves and maybe add some autumn fruits.

Backgrounds

One easy mistake to make is not thinking about the background. Backgrounds are your main item of contrast. The right background will help to push the subject forward towards the viewer. The wrong background will hide the subject.



A black velvet background will help to absorb unwanted light and reflections.

Black velvet will absorb the light so you don't get unwanted reflections and bright spots. Alternatively, use a white or nearly white sheet, maybe of paper. However, in this case you

need to make sure that you remove all the creases as any shadows from them will show up in the final print. Of course, you may want this effect. For example, a draped cloth can work nicely as part of your subject.

Inspiration

Where can you get ideas for subjects? We have already looked at contrasts such as light and dark. It would be interesting to use a black and white film, looking at the tones produced.

Think about illustrating song titles. Pick a song that makes you think of a graphic image and try to create that image. You could do the same with book titles and proverbs or sayings. (By the way, you all laughed at the mannequin that was in the 'Secret Santa'... now you can see one way it can be used).



Ideas can be drawn from all manner of sources. This picture was inspired by an old song.

If you want to learn about portrait photography but do not have anyone to model for you, buy an artist's mannequin or a doll. You could then practice your lighting and poses whenever you want to. You could even leave your model set up. The mannequin will not have cramp when you come back two days later!

Image Manipulation

These Assignments do not require the use of digital manipulation, so any extra things that you do to the basic image on your computer are at your discretion and will not be taken

into consideration, whether good or not so good.



Spend some time manipulating your photographs to create interesting images.

So, don't put your camera away just because of the weather. Use the time to learn more about composition and lighting. Don't worry if your pictures do not turn out as well as you hoped. Learn from them. The lessons will be invaluable.