

Perfecting the Art of Still Lifes

Still life photography encourages you to view your subjects artistically.

The still life is one of the oldest photographic genres in existence. It was a natural choice for early photographers in the 19th century, who took many of their cues from painting and who were often limited to stationary objects because of long exposure times. But while photographic still lifes have endured throughout the last century and a half, they've also changed drastically.

Go Slow: You don't need a fancy studio.

Contrary to common perceptions, you don't need a studio or a fancy location to start with still life photography. You can begin by simply using a space at home, such as a table placed by a window, along with a simple backdrop and utilizing a couple of lamps.

With still life photography there are far fewer variables. As the photographer you have complete control over the situation, including the subject matter, but you need to think extremely creatively in order to capture it in an interesting and engaging way.

Choose subjects that speak to you

What you photograph is completely up to you. Have a search around the house to see if you can find something simple but interesting to start with. Please don't feel like you have to take photos of fruit or flowers just because everyone else does, instead think outside the box without being overly ambitious.

If when you're out and about something catches your eye, make a note or take a picture of it so you can try to replicate it. Try to avoid reflective surfaces such as glass and metal to begin with, as they will be extremely difficult with lighting. Once you've mastered the single object shots, try mixing it up, combine objects of contrasting shape, color, texture and see what you can come up with.

Get comfortable with light and lighting.

Using standard table lamps can work extremely well if used effectively. Be sure to try multiple positioning set ups, not all light has to come from the front of the object, side and back lighting will add interest, shadows and depth to the shot. Alternatively, choose a room that is well lit via a window, and use this to your advantage. The natural light from one side will comprehensively light your subject and you can complement this with a lamp or reflector.

Get a Good Tripod and Work Your Angles

Depending on your lighting situation, you may or may not need to use a tripod and shutter release. With a tripod you can use slightly longer shutter speeds than usual to ensure a small aperture, allowing the image to be in focus front to back.

Be sure to vary the angles and heights at which you are shooting. Otherwise, before you know it, you'll have a whole collection of shots all taken from the same point with little or no variation. Mix it up a bit. Try shooting at the level of the subject or try a bird's eye view, looking down onto the subject.

Get the Backdrop Right

Having a suitable backdrop for your subject matter will play a crucial role in the overall success of your shots. It's best to keep it nice and simple, so it doesn't interfere with your subject. A plain painted wall or a large sheet of white or plain colored paper would be ideal. Choose according to the story you are trying to tell in your final image.

Think about how your choice of background contrasts with the subject. Do you want a neutral background, or are there tones that may work in complimenting the shades within your subject? For smaller objects, you may not need a backdrop as such, but instead require a surface to place the items on, for which something like black velvet is ideal, as it absorbs light and adds an elegant touch.

Compose the Shot

Be sure to vary the composition of the subject matter through a single shoot and think outside the box. Where are you leading the eye within the image? Are you utilizing negative space, or might it work to try and fill the frame? Engage with the subject, what are its defining features? What is it used for? Are you able to put it into context or does it work as a stand-alone subject?

Develop Your Eye for Still Life Scenes

Lighting angles and alternative light sources such as candles and lamps can provide more creativity. You could even try getting creative with apertures and use a f/1.8 prime lens to achieve an artistic shallow focus. Find some unique and inspiring subject matter that gets you excited and start shooting!

Colors can be a way of introducing either harmony or contrast. If you were photographing something blue, for example, and you used blue and green backgrounds you'd have a very harmonious and potentially calm image. On the other hand, if you added yellows or oranges into the scene, it would create tension and result in a more dynamic overall feeling to the shot.

You can bring color to your still life images in different ways. Backgrounds, fabrics, plates, bowls, vases – all these items are props that you can start collecting to build up a color library of props. Don't forget natural objects like foliage too; they can often really bring a shot to life.

Thinking about texture

Since you can't touch the objects in a photograph, you need to tell the viewer what they're like. Texture is the main way to visually convey what something would feel like if you reached into the photograph and touched it. With that in mind, pay attention to what the textures in your shot are telling your viewer.

Be the Fine Photographer!

Start by jotting down your still life ideas:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.