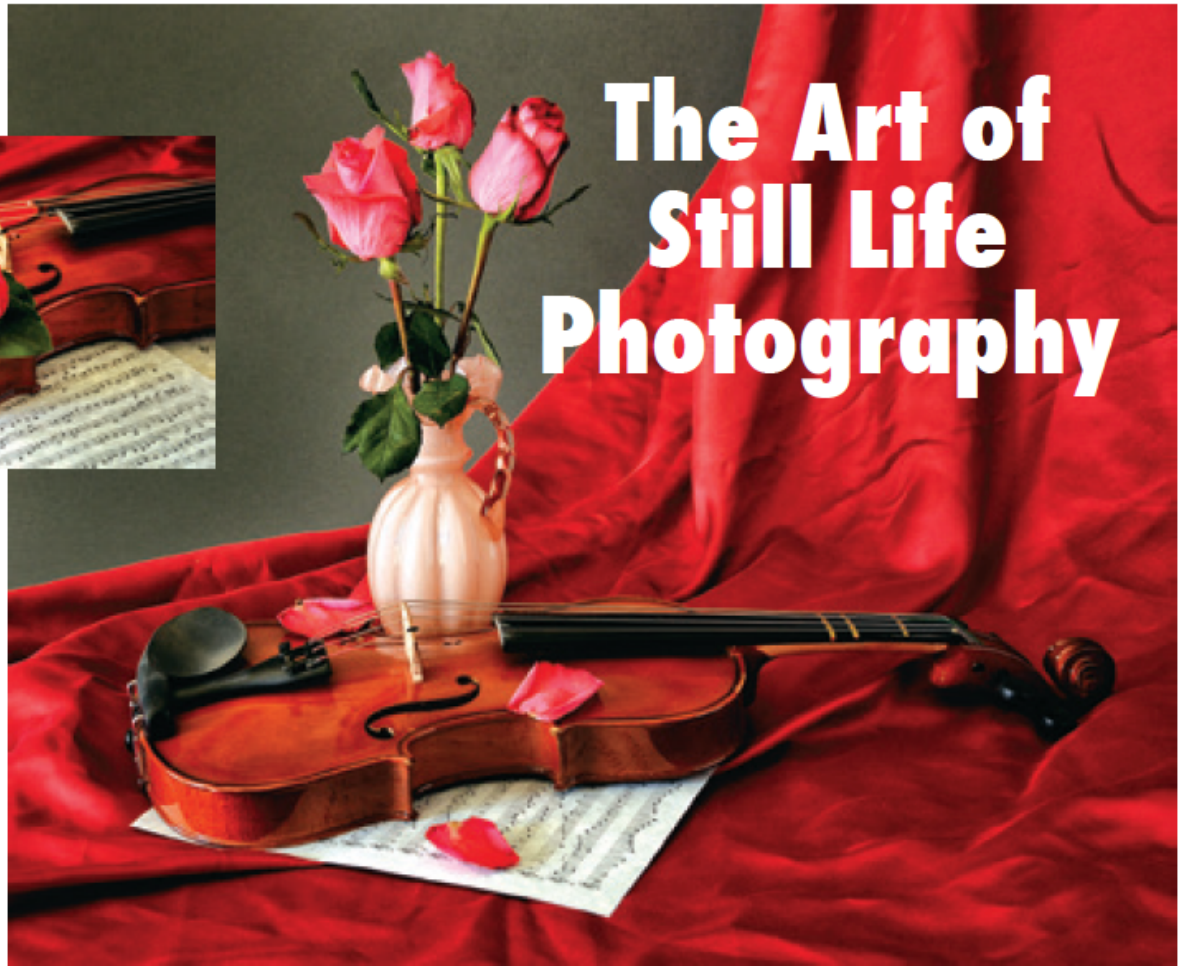


The Art of Still Life Photography



Sweet Rose Music
Move in close to capture details and parts of the overall still life image.



Violin and Red Roses
The addition of three loose pedals add to the interest and story in this image.



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What images come to mind when someone mentions still-life or table top photography? Traditionally we think of still-life as an image of a bowl of arranged fruit, cheese and wine or bottles of wine with grapes or an arrangement of flowers. These images come from the famous still-life paintings from days of old. When photography first started to become popular, a lot of the early art photography was imitation of earlier painted works.

A still-life photograph can be the arrangement of almost anything. One dictionary defines still-life as “a picture consisting predominantly of inanimate objects.” This definition covers a lot of ground, and you are limited only by your imagination.

To produce a good still-life image you need to carefully arrange your subject matter. To get a prize winning image, great care needs to be taken in the arrangement, selection of subject matter, shape, color, texture and lighting. Because in setting up your arrangement you have complete control over all these qualities, there is no room for mistakes. Everything has to be perfect and pleasing to the eye.

While our first thought of a still-life is the traditional image we have discussed, one can produce strong images using more contemporary techniques. We can develop compositions with items painted with fluorescent paint and lit by black light to give strong color impact. We can use

objects that conflict or give a feeling of tension such as a beautiful red rose lying among rusted pieces of metal. We can create interesting compositions from everyday items such as crayons, rubber bands, paperclips, or candies. We can also produce an unreal image such as the hand-powered meat grinder with big tomatoes going in the top and little cherry tomatoes coming out the bottom.

Some still-life images may be found images. An old dusty table in an abandoned house with a few dishes can make an excellent subject. If you need to rearrange the items, make sure not to disturb the dust as this adds to the interest of the image. An old broken down piano can become a subject by adding a rose to the keyboard. A still-life doesn't have to depict beauty, particularly if it is telling a story.

The key to success with a still-life is to come up with an interesting arrangement of “things” that blend together as a pleasing whole or things that are in complete conflict, but grab the attention of the viewer. A still-life must have impact and be pleasing to the eye. Think about the rules for composition: the rule of thirds, leading lines, triangle arrangements and the fact that an odd number of items are more pleasing to the eye.

The scale of items is also very important. If the size relationship between items is not proportional, your image will not be pleasing. One of the biggest

mistakes made by photographers setting up a table-top is to include too many items resulting in an image that looks cluttered and makes it hard to determine a center of interest. Include just enough to tell the story or create the composition.

Most importantly the still-life must be well lit. You will need a flat working surface large enough for the items you are going to photograph. A kitchen table near a sliding glass door can be an excellent work area. Your set up can be a simple table top with cloth or paper background. The cloth background could be a colored sheet, blanket or tablecloth. You can drape the material to add interest. Rolls of seamless paper background material can be purchased from most camera stores in a wide assortment of colors. You don't need a large amount of lighting gear. A small soft-box with reflectors to fill in works best for studio lighting. Nice lighting coming through a window can be augmented by fill cards for natural light. It's not the quantity of light but the quality and direction that is paramount. Many use white foam core boards in various sizes as reflectors. They are lightweight and not expensive. It can be useful to have a few black boards to block light if needed. LED lights are new to the photographer but can make good fill lights. They usually have a large number of LEDs, 16 or more. Most sold for photographic purposes are daylight balanced but less expensive versions can be found in the



Table Top Setup in Kitchen
Simple and easy to set-up. Sliding glass door light on the left, fill reflector on the right.



Indian Autumn—The burlap backdrop adds to creating the overall feeling of autumn and the past.



Old Piano and Rose
A found still life in a junkyard. The addition of the red rose creates tension of old and new.

Photos © Larry Cowles,
FPSA, GMPASA/b



Cherry Tomato Maker—The imagination can create table tops that don't exist in real life.



Sunflower Arrangement—Try your still life in monochrome, many show well.

hardware store. The light is white and seems to give the same type of light as a silver reflector. These LED lights are easy to move around and easy to handhold. Move your table around and look at the light coming in from the side of your table versus light coming from behind the camera. Many times, side lighting will give nice shadowing that adds interest. If the lighting appears to be too strong or harsh, some white shear material can be hung over the window to diffuse the light.

Beware of reflections of other things in the room you are photographing. Reflective surfaces on vases, metal and glass can reflect too much light or can show the photographers image. This might be controlled by moving the object or the light. You can get matte clear spray at the craft store that can be sprayed on the offending surface that will reduce the reflection but not eliminate the highlight.

Before you start, come up with a clear concept of what you want to accomplish. Collect all the items you will need to photograph: props, subject matter, background material, reflectors and something to hold your background. This will save you a lot of time and frustration when you can't find what you need on the day of the shoot.

It will be helpful to have a few aides to help position your props or lift them off the surface of the table. Small blocks of wood and other items can be used under the back sides of some objects or under cloth to tilt them forward toward the camera for a better angle. Soft clay is a great item



Rose and Iron—Satin sheet used a background to accent old and new.

to hold props. Straight pins are great for holding folds in cloth backgrounds and table covers.

If you are using window light, it is suggested that you use a tripod. Not only will it reduce blur from camera movement, but it holds your camera while you are making small adjustments to the subjects. Do try different heights and angles of the camera so all your images don't look alike.

Always check your composition in the camera viewfinder. The placement of a flower petal next to a vase may look good when you are standing next to the camera but when you view it in the viewfinder you may see a merger. Try different numbers of items around the subject on the table. If you are taking an image of a vase of flowers, you might try putting one petal on the ground next to the vase. Try three, and try a bunch. Move things around looking for the most pleasing angles.

Many still life images lend themselves to artistic manipulation with filters such as those found in Photoshop and other filter programs. Use your original image as the base and try some of the filters as a derivation. Don't forget to see how it looks in monochrome.

Remember, you have control of all these details; any mistakes you make will be held against you. Have fun, experiment, and try new things. One of the best things about still-life images is that you can do them in your home; you are not dependent on weather or controlled by someone else's schedule. ■



Autumn Red Peppers



Yellow Roses and Books—Fill the space but keep it simple.

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