



Image Credit: **Dennis Culver** (American, 1945 - 2011)
Astrolith Chart (006-05) with Copernican Corridor and Eccentrics, n.d.
Color pencil and watercolor on paper
Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art.
Museum purchase, 1983 (1983.31)
© Estate of Dennis Culver

Throughout history still-life work has been of the most popular type of art. According to Charles Sterling, the father of still-life studies, “A true still-life comes into being once a painter makes the fundamental decision to choose a group of objects as his or her subject and to arrange them in such a way to produce a coherent picture.”¹

In this activity, we are going to explore how you can choose your objects and create your own still-life. While they are arranged in many ways, still-life composition is the building block for drawings, paintings, and photography. Putting together a still-life is easy and fun. Follow these basic rules for a successful and creative still-life.

How to compose a Still-Life!

Still-Life composition can be so much more than just a bowl of fruit or a vase of flowers. Objects can be collected from anywhere both man-made and natural, but there are many considerations in order to arrange an interesting and creative still-life subject.

¹ Ebert-Schifferer, S. *Still Life: A History*. Abrams, 1999



Image Credit: **Betty Hahn** (American, born 1940)
Stargazer Lily, 1980
 Dye diffusion prints (Polaroid Polacolor II)
 Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art.
 Gift of Betty Hahn, 2014 (2014.5.6).
 © Betty Hahn

Here you will find a list of elements to consider in creating your own still-life composition:

1. **Theme:** Some of the most successful still-life compositions are based on a theme or narrative (storytelling). Think about what is important to you. Do you like to cook? Think about kitchen utensils. Do you like to garden? Think about gardening tools. Do you play a sport? Look at your sports equipment for inspiration. How about arranging your favorite toys or

books? Do you play an instrument? Then think of the items that are associated with music-making. How about having each of your family members contribute an object that holds meaning to them for your still-life - a family portrait in objects!

While the theme is important, what works best are objects that hold meaning to you since they will create a relationship between you and your subject.

2. **Variety:** Gather the objects you want in your still-life. To create interest, choose items of varying size, shape, color, and texture. Think about how these variations work together. You want to offer the viewer interesting combinations to hold their attention.

3. **Composition:** Now, place these objects in a setting – on a shelf, the corner of a counter, on top of a dresser – a place that is associated with your overall theme. Think about placement: tall and short, smooth against soft, dark against light.

Look at how the objects overlap and intersect. In addition, think about the space around the objects. This is called the *negative space*; you want this to be interesting as well. Last, consider what is the most important thing you want the viewer to see. Place this in a prominent position: this is your *focal point*.



Image Credit: © LLGorian, Candy, Photograph, 2010

4. **Light and Shadow:** Don't forget to light your subject. When you do this, you will create shadows. Shadows should be considered another element to your still-life. They help to create depth and interest to the set-up while the light will help illuminate your focal point.
5. **Color:** Just as light and shadow work together, so do warm (orange, yellow, red) and cool (blue, purple, green) colors work together. By placing warm and cool colors next to each other, you will create a more vibrant picture.
6. **Drawing and Painting:** Many artists use the still-life composition and subject for their drawings and paintings. From here you can make a sketch that can be transferred to canvas or paper to draw or paint.
7. **Make a portfolio:** Even if you do not choose to make a drawing or painting from your still-life arrangement, use a camera (on your smartphone or some other camera) to photograph your still-life and create a *portfolio* of your creations.

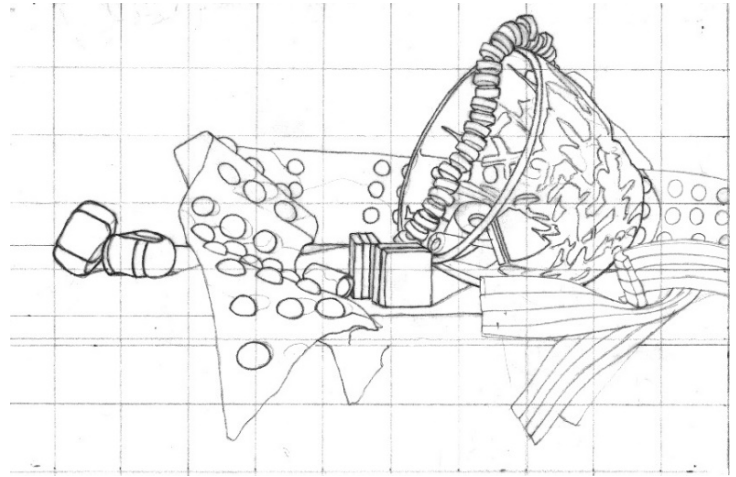


Image Credit: © LLGorian, Candy, Graphite Sketch, 2010

This is a great way to keep a record of your creativity and the things that are important to you.