



# The skills of Still life drawing

Fine-tune your drawing skills with the age-old tradition of still life



Try following our tutorial using the still life photo on the disc



**T**he still life genre is one of the most popular vehicles artists use to flagrantly show off. This formula for painting arrangements of everyday, inanimate objects dates from the 17th century.

One of the seminal still life artists is Juan Sanchez Cotan. Cotan's work exemplifies the prevailing taste at the time for all things real and somewhat grubby. The movement at the time was Baroque. Its famously stark lighting and dramatic shadows were a reaction to the previous beautifying period of the High Renaissance, glorifying the dirt and

no-frills ugliness of real life. 17th century Spanish painter Velazquez painted *An Old Woman Cooking Eggs* when he was 18. The dark shadows and unforgiving lighting sets off the copper, ceramic and metal objects beautifully.

This style of lighting has been hugely influential throughout the centuries, and can be seen in the *Godfather* trilogy to create a sense of dark, brooding despair. We are going to use this dramatic tone to enhance and enrich our still life setup.

In contrast to this oppressive style, Audrey Flack is a contemporary American artist whose body of work

includes some equally stunning work, yet are in total contrast to the Baroque themes of darkness. However, they too have prodigious 'wow' factor qualities. This artist uses air brushing as part of her technique, and creates impossibly colourful, textural and glossy still lifes. Her work is worth examining to illustrate two points about still life. First, her innovative use of composition and unusual viewpoints gives great results. In *Chanel*, her use of a cramped and close-up viewpoint and the mirror reflecting the scene enriches the detail and intricacy of the composition.

## Still life scenarios

What works and what doesn't in this genre

### Accuracy and balance

*This shot exemplifies a poorly balanced pyramidal composition. All the interesting, differently shaped objects are positioned on the left, and the white shirt takes up the majority of the right. Aim to compose your objects evenly throughout the setup*



**Contrast and definition**  
*Emphasise the visual qualities of your objects. Spotlights create more highlights and shadows than fluorescent light. Make sure your objects show off their best features. Use a good quality image and avoid pixellation and blurring*

### Ellipses and foreshortening

*This unusual shot is not in keeping with Baroque Realism. The scissors and pens loom bizarrely towards you and the circular tape appears flat. The stapler is also disguised by the foreshortening and the brush tips are lost*



### Poor composition

*The aim of composition is to show everything off and to really give the illusion of casual placement, but to actually arrange things pleasingly with a sense of togetherness. This attempt misses the point, like the scissors*

### Chosen composition

*All the objects can be clearly seen and are positioned so they enhance each other - large with small, plain with intricate. This provides a fun and challenging set of tasks*



Second, Flack illustrates another purpose of still life, which is worth mentioning here because it may influence your choice of objects. In her piece, *Marilyn Vanitas*, she refers to the 17th century theme of still life known as Vanitas paintings.

Objects are chosen and arranged because of their meaning. These paintings were composed specifically so as to subtly remind people that life and beauty is fleeting. Typically, a small or partially hidden symbol would lurk within a stunningly beautiful setup. For example, in Cornelis de Heem's *Vanitas*

*Still Life With Musical Instruments*, the jam-packed virtuoso performance by this Dutch artist is a picture of disarray and excess, and at the very bottom, if you look carefully, a snail hungrily eyes the fruit.

So now it is our turn to rise to the formidable challenge of still life. Over the next few pages we will break the task down into steps, troubleshoot potential mistakes and list important tips to help you on your way. This tradition allows you to explore the elements of art - line, form, shape, tone, texture and composition - and enhance your skills of observation. We will go through several

different ways to help you 'see' what is really there rather than 'look/glance' at what appears to be there. The next few exercises will help build your confidence to enjoy drawing successfully.

When it comes to setting up your own still life, there are alphabetical pointers to consider: accuracy, balance, contrast, definition, ellipses and foreshortening. The images above illustrate how these principles can affect a still life setup, so try them all and get a good grounding in the principles. We're concentrating on traditional pencils here, but you can apply the principles to any format.

# Drawing the scene

## Drawing normally

**N**ow you have a still life photo, it's important to consider some of the common hurdles and traps that can occur during this task.

There is nothing more daunting than a blank page, so drawing a grid over the photo and then one on the paper will help you position objects accurately.

Another way to begin is to choose an object near the centre of your composition and use it to relate to shape, size and spaces taken up by other objects. This measurement can be used to ensure that everything is drawn in proportion to that measurement. Keep checking the

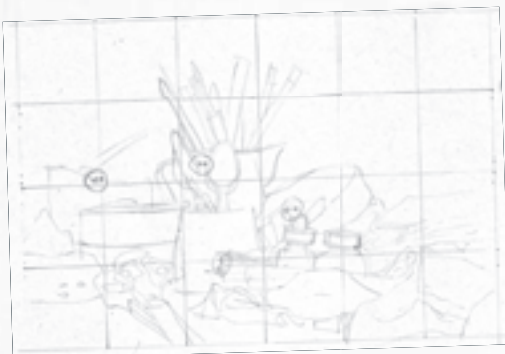
relationships between the objects and correct them if it goes wrong – don't keep blindly trudging forward.

A really clear line drawing can be sketchy at the outset. Pencil in shapes, but go over the top of this once again to draw a bold confident line for clear definition.

With an accurate line comes accurate tone. Shading needs layering, subtly and an appropriate choice of pencil. But, just as much, it needs really keen observation. When drawing ellipses, draw the bottom curve then turn your paper upside down and re-draw it; it is a much more natural, controlled and even method.

The mantra 'less is more' is always worth keeping in mind. In art, it essentially means that some lines and shades that you think need to be included don't. The paintbrushes best exemplify this. The delicate texture of their bristles can be lost if you outline them heavily; let the background do the work for you, leave the line out, and draw the background solidly but a bit randomly.

When you are making the marks, bear in mind the subject you are drawing. For example, drapery loves curvy, more circular lines to accentuate the contours, but use dots and scribbles for sponge.



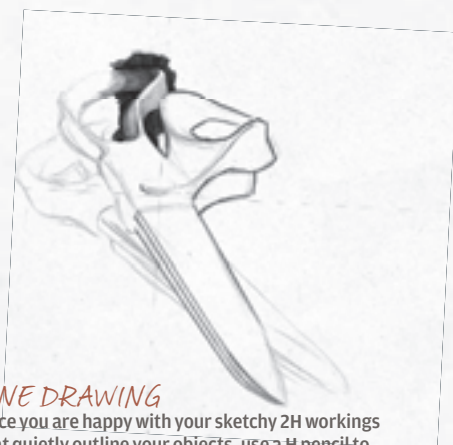
### SQUARING UP

This really lets you map out your image without thinking about the relationships, and is excellent for building your confidence. There is no shame in using grids, so don't feel like you are cheating. It's a great starting point and used by many more people than would care to admit it.



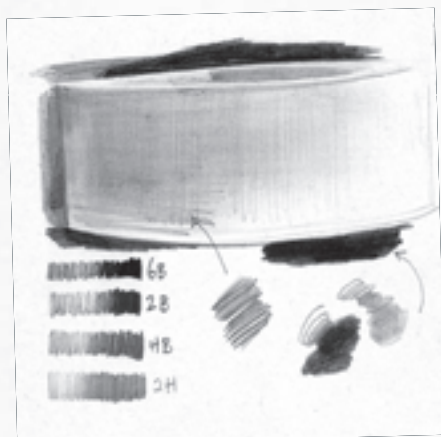
### ACCURATE PROPORTIONS

Work outwards from the middle using a cross in the centre to start the measurements. The spoon fits about three times into the top half of the picture and one of the brush tips can be spotted two 'spoons' up. Now you know you are not going to run out of space at the top.



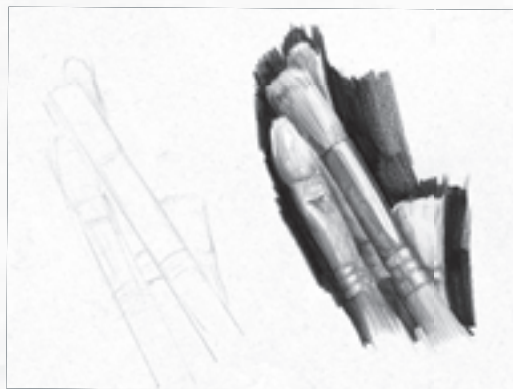
### LINE DRAWING

Once you are happy with your sketchy 2H workings that quietly outline your objects, use a H pencil to produce a clear and confident shape that sorts out any complex areas you may have secretly put off tackling, for example, the scissor blades or the brushes.



### SHADING

With a solid foundation of drawing, use 2H, H and HB pencils for the midtones and greys, and 4B and 6B pencils for the darkest background areas. Check you have a really broad range of contrast from black to white. Circular rather than stripy shading can really improve the smoothness of your shadows.



### REDUNDANCY

Look closely at the still life and, where there is a meeting of intense darks and lights, consider how you could use the shadow to make the outline redundant. This really tests your powers of observation, so if at first you don't succeed...



### MARK MAKING

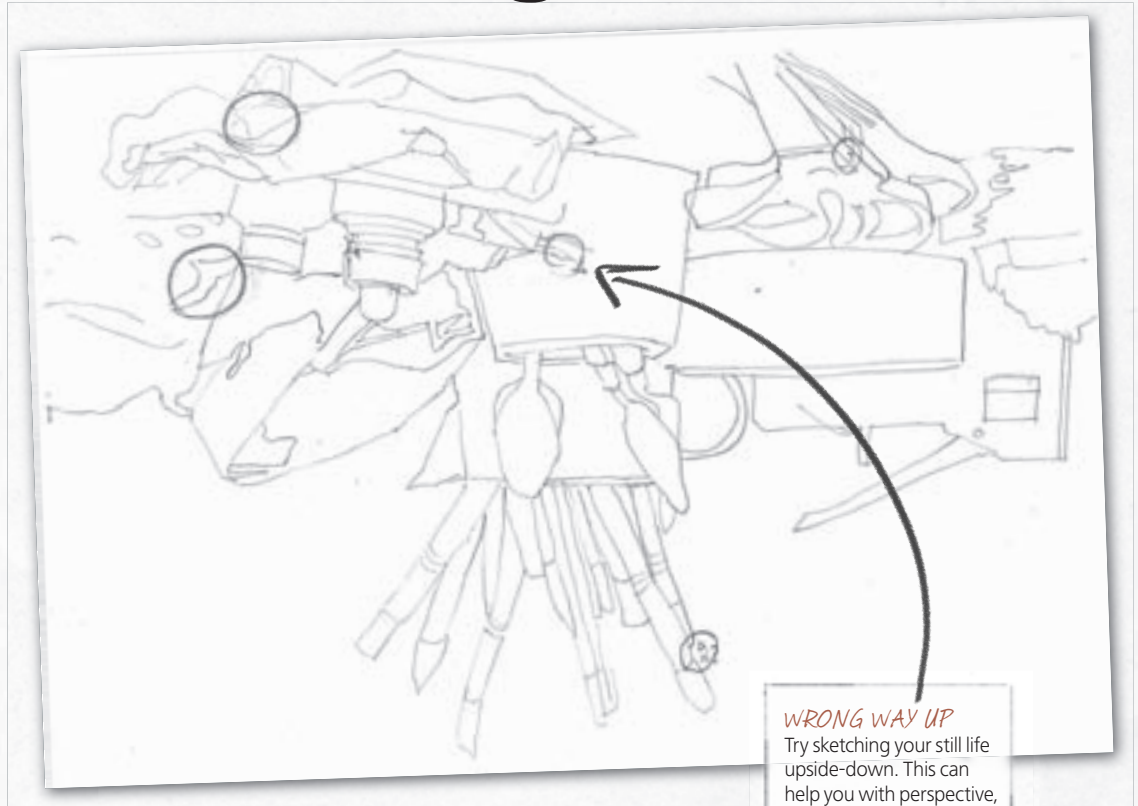
Experiment with the marks that you and your pencil can really do. The metal sheen is achieved with a rubber, but nothing is impossible. Smudging, scribble, rulers, rubbers and grids all are acceptable in the name of the still life 'wow' factor!

# Upside-down drawing

If you can feel yourself bridle at the idea of having a go at the 'serious' high-brow challenge we have just rattled off, here is a welcome break!

This is a really entertaining and quite mind-boggling exercise. It is often far more effective at helping you actually lay out a picture than squaring up or figuring out proportion measurements. We are enchanted by the optical and psychological magic of it, and it once again helps to dispel that age-old procrastinatory myth of 'I can't draw'! So prepare to suspend your disbelief and roll up your sleeves to pull off the best trick in town!

We have included the still life photo on the disc. Turn this upside-down and, starting at either the left or right side, draw what is in front of you. This can be on a larger piece of paper, but it must be approximately the same landscape shape as the drawing. Keep referring to your drawing and then the photo. Hold your nerve and don't turn it up the right way until you've finished! Then, with a flourish, amaze your audience with the accuracy of your work.



**WRONG WAY UP**  
Try sketching your still life upside-down. This can help you with perspective, as you are concentrating on the shapes, rather than the objects.

# Negative space



**NEGATIVE ADVICE**  
By looking at what's not in the composition, you're forced to look at the shapes objects make, rather than what they actually look like and focusing on the details.

One exercise that will definitely increase your understanding of the still life genre and allow you to express yourself a bit more freely is to look at the negative space of your image.

Our brain often fools us into taking the easy option and only recording objects as we expect them to be shown. Think of how easy it is to draw from your imagination as a child. The brain stores its own little visual vocabulary based on past experiences and previous versions, and it's much easier to churn out these than to really apply it. Children's formulaic drawings of houses are intrinsically recognisable as houses.

In the room, the objects themselves occupy positive space and the space around them is negative. For this task, draw lines and shapes to represent the space that the still life does not take up. The best example of this is the space between the handle and jug; it helps you look at the shape of the handle not just take it in and jot it down without thought. Draw as if you have never seen them.

# A still life step-by-step

Break an image down into sections for triumphant results

So, armed with some helpful tips, some interesting ways to test your powers of drawing, and a confident can-do attitude, it's time to try showing off some of your own 'wow' factor. The following steps show a systematic, logical approach to tackling the task, bit by methodical bit.

The setup we have used is a randomly but pleasingly arranged collection of artroom paraphernalia. They have been chosen for their variety of textures, forms and shapes, but are in keeping with the muted colours of the Baroque artists we have looked at.

Working from a photograph is a great way to begin; it's convenient for many reasons, especially because it is flat already, and takes up much less space. When you are confident using photographs, push the limits of your comfort zone and rise to the challenge of drawing a real still life that is right in front of you. Enjoy the experience of fluctuating light conditions and mysterious shifting of objects, knowledge of which will be denied by other members of your household, and the unstoppable passage of time on objects that are perishable! But seriously, the sense of achievement, enjoyment and relaxation is worth it so do have a go.



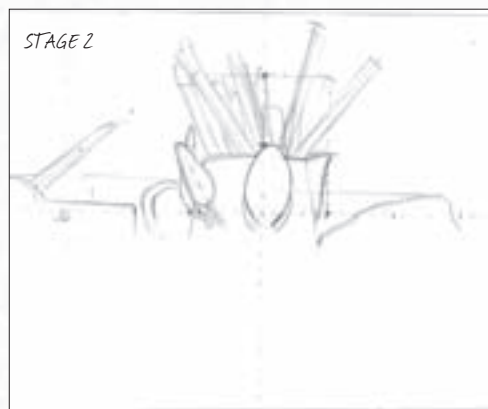
## Tackling the still life

Go from photo to a piece of art



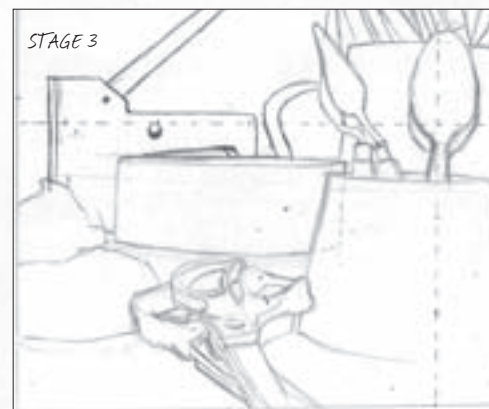
### STARTING POINT

Use a ruler to mark the centre of each side and draw a very light or dotted cross with a 'x' at the centre. Draw the same (if possible) on your picture. Measure with your finger the times your spoon fits along the top line (about three times) from the centre; divide this line into about three equally. Draw the shape of the spoon.



### TOP HALF PROPORTIONS

Using your standard measurement of the spoon, work out where the rest of the objects sit in the top half. For example, the top lip of the jug may be two spoons wide with half a spoon on one side and one and a half on the other. Think join-the-dots at this stage.



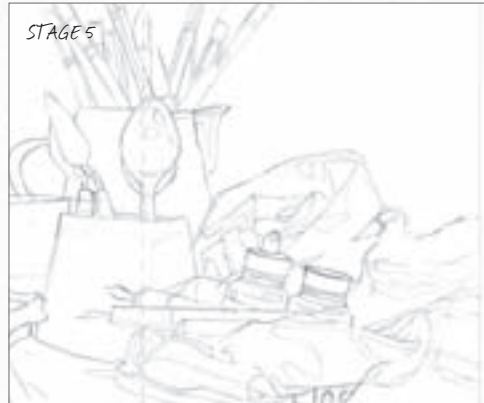
### BOTTOM LEFT QUARTER PROPORTIONS

Pay special attention to the foreshortening of the scissors; rely on your standard spoon and be reassured that it will not try and fox you - yes those scissors really are that short! Concentrate on making sure the outlines are clear and confident - there is no need for tone at the moment.



**BOTTOM RIGHT**

There is much more detail in these two bottom quarters, so it's important to feel confident that they are accurate. Take pride in providing yourself with a concrete foundation to work with. It's not a myth that you should look more at the still life than your drawing. Keep looking, checking and tweaking it until you are absolutely happy.



**MAPPING TONES ON THE RIGHT SIDE**

Now you have outlined and positioned the shapes, it is time to do the same for the shadows. With a light, unlikely-to-smudge, H pencil lightly draw the shapes of the shadows. Don't worry too much if you don't get them all, the general catchment area will do fine.



**MAPPING TONES ON THE LEFT SIDE**

At the moment you are using a light, hard pencil that can be shiny and difficult to work into if it's used very firmly, so use it lightly and it's very easy to correct, as well hardly leaving any marks. Draw the outlines of the shadows lightly on the left hand side.



**BASE COAT OF TONE**

Shade in the areas you have drawn as shadows. This just needs to be a general shading; don't worry or overwork it, it's simply to give you an idea of how the shadows are going to look so that you can correct their shape and position, but not their intensity.



**AND SOME MORE**

Once again, shade the areas you have designated as shadow. Assess the shading in comparison to the photograph; if you are totally happy, move on. Now comes the hopefully foolproof non-smudge tip. I have done this as a right-hander; sway the sides around if you are left-handed.



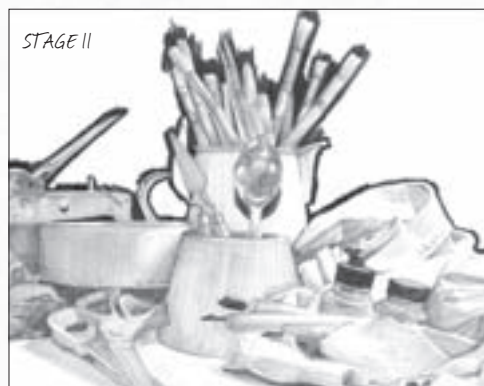
**MODELLING THE TONES ON THE LEFT**

Aim to include the breadth of contrast from black to white in your image, but this stage is all about the full range of greys. Work from left to right to prevent your hand smudging previous shading and really enjoy exploring the marks, shadows and shapes created by overworking with the HB pencil. Use the pencil and pressure to its fullest advantage.



**MODELLING THE TONES ON THE RIGHT**

Work up the right side, using the flattest part of the tip of your pencil to avoid scratchy marks, correcting where necessary with a rubber. Enjoy the subtler tones in the shirt and enhance the folds with curved lines. The modelling should really take a while, with lots of checking and correcting.



**THE BACKGROUND LINES AND REDUNDANCY**

Look very carefully at the top of the stapler and you will see a thin graceful highlight. Capture this when you fill in your background, and remember the sketch but bold bristle effect too. Solidly colour in the stark background and show off the skill of the foreground. Now treat yourself!

