

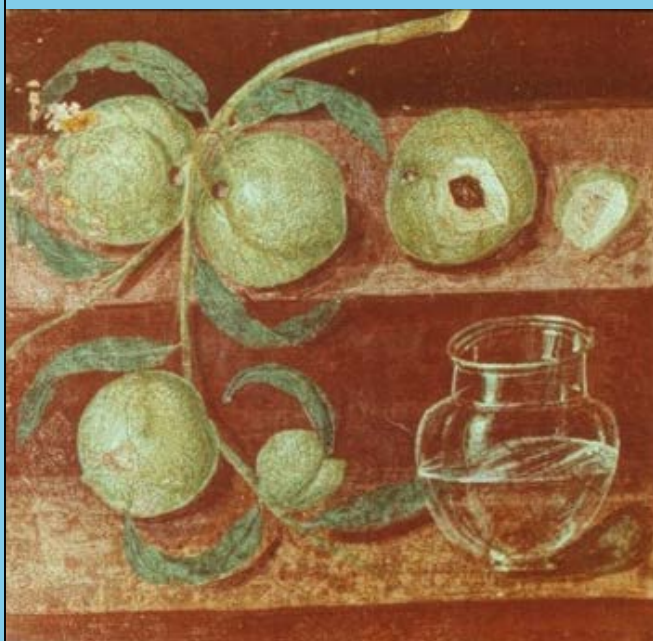
Still Life: A History

A **Still Life** is a work of art, a drawing or painting (usually) of a group of objects. Objects do not move, hence the word 'still'. In the past these objects tended to be flowers, fruit, and other kinds of food or dead animals - hence 'life'. The French for still life is 'nature morte', meaning 'dead nature'. You get the idea. Nowadays, though, still life can mean any objects small enough to be put in front of you, usually on a table. So when did it start?

The Ancient Egyptians

People have been painting collections of objects for thousands of years. The Ancient Egyptians painted stacks of offerings for the gods, in temples or tombs (see right). The Egyptians were not interested in perspective, or in shading. They didn't care about making things look realistic. They just wanted to clearly show what each of these objects was. Can you recognise any of them?

You can see a basket of figs, grapes, bread, a leg of beef, duck, more meat, and a cucumber. Quite a feast for the gods.



The Greeks and Romans

Greek and Roman artists sometimes painted objects too. These were more realistic than the Egyptians' efforts. There are lots of mosaics of objects you can see on the floors of villas or in museums, and wall paintings too - especially at Pompeii (the Roman town covered by ash in the eruption of Mt Vesuvius in AD79). There is much more effort in accurate shading and colouring here than the Egyptians managed. Look at the fruit on the left, and the way the glass is depicted with white lines. It is not done with true perspective, however. For that we must jump forward in time.



16th and 17th Century

Serious still life painting only took off in the 1500s in Northern

Europe. During the middle ages, art was supposed to serve Christianity, illustrating scenes from the Bible. Highly skilled painters in the 1400s and 1500s such as Jan Van Eyck included arrangements of objects as part of their Christian scenes. See the painting [Christ at Emmaus](#) right, by Caravaggio (1601). Can you see the fruit, bread, cooked fowl and wine? Another example is [The Ambassadors](#), below, by Holbein (1533). Can you see the scientific instruments between the two men?



Both of these paintings are in the National Gallery in London. Click on the links for more information.

During this time artists tried to create dramatic scenes in a very realistic style. In the 17th century still life became an art form in itself, especially in the Netherlands. These paintings were not thought as important as religious scenes or portraits, but they were very popular. Many beautiful works were created - see the examples below.



Pieter Claesz, *Still Life* (between 1625-30)

Compare the wine glass with the Roman glass above. The ellipse at the top is very thin - painted in perspective, as it would appear to the eye.



Jan de Heem, *Festoon of Fruit and Flowers* (between 1635 and 1684)

Vanitas Paintings

At this time vanitas paintings became popular too. The name refers to a passage of the Bible in Revelations, which says 'vanity of vanities - all is vanity'. The idea was that people love their

pleasures in life, the things that make them feel important or wealthy, and yet it all means nothing because time soon passes and we die. Bit depressing if you ask me. Although perhaps it's true that we shouldn't get too attached to our possessions. Anyway, vanitas paintings always had expensive and fancy objects, musical instruments and wine goblets standing for pleasure, and so on - but also reminders of time such as a candle or hourglass, or of death, usually a skull. Here are a couple of examples.



Harmen Steenwijck, *Vanitas* (1640)



Adriaen van Utrecht, *Vanitas Still Life with a Bouquet and a Skull* (1643)

19th Century

Artists continued to paint still lifes, but they were still regarded as less important than scenes from the Bible or ancient myths, for example. That changed in the 19th century with the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. Now artists were not concerned with making a photo-realistic painting - there was no point, now photography had been invented. Instead they experimented with colour, shapes, and the way paint was applied to the canvas, to create works which were beautiful in themselves - not because of what they *meant*. The greatest of these artists when it came to still life was Paul Cézanne. He single-handedly raised still life to a respected art form. Other well-known still lifes from this time include Van Gogh's [Sunflowers](#), one of which sold for \$40 million in 1987.

Look at the intensity and the non-realistic use of colour in these paintings. These artists wanted to evoke the beauty of these objects not by making photographic representations of them but by using exaggerated colours, or colours which worked powerfully together. Look at the brushstrokes - now you can see them, whereas before the application of the paint was supposed to be invisible. Now the painting itself was the focus, artists could paint in any way they wanted as long as the result worked.



Van Gogh, *Twelve Sunflowers in a Vase* (1888)

Cézanne

Paul Cézanne painted a large number of still lifes, as well as

landscapes and portraits. He is one of my favourite artists, which is why I've included so many of his works here. He was a genius with colour. Look at the close-up details of the pear and the tea-cup and you will see the use of unexpected dashes of colour side by side, to give vibrancy to the image. This sort of thing is extremely difficult to master - I certainly can't do it!

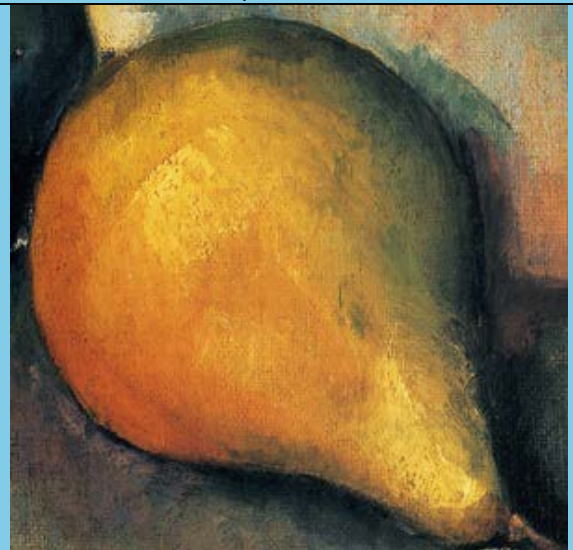
One thing to look for is the use of warm colours (reds, oranges and browns) to make things stand out against cool colours (blues and greens). But there is an amazing range of subtly mixed colours in some of the backgrounds to these paintings - he didn't just paint the table top brown or the sheet white, he gave them a host of colours to make them more alive.



Cézanne, *Pot of Flowers and Fruit* (1888-1890) Note the different colours in the table top and the wall behind.



Cézanne, *Still Life with Ginger Jar and Eggplants* (1890-1894)



Detail of pear - see the range of intense colours and the broad brushstrokes



Cézanne, *Still Life with Plate of Cherries* (1885-1887)



Teacup: detail from Cézanne, *Woman with a Coffee Pot* (1890-1895)
 Look at the colours used - violets with complementary yellows amid the blue shadows, non-realistic but highly effective. And the ellipses are not in perspective! Cézanne often broke the rules of perspective to make a picture look better. Often his ellipses are too wide, because a very thin ellipse looks less interesting. So we have gone back to the Egyptians again!

The Cubists

Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso claimed the Cézanne was 'the father of them all'. These two invented a style of painting called 'Cubism'. They took Cézanne's idea from of not painting things in perspective - from one point of view - but from several points of view, in order to create something more original and effective. Both Braque and Picasso painted numerous still lifes, as we see here. In some cases it's difficult to see what the objects were that they were depicting. We are getting close to abstract painting now, in which the artist isn't painting anything real at all, but just creating attractive images with paint.



Picasso, *Still Life with Basket of Fruit* (c.1910-1912)
 We're a long way from Pieter Claesz here!

20th Century

Of course artists have continued to paint still life pictures. There have been many styles since the Cubists. I hope you have realised by now that there is no one correct way to do art. The important thing is to learn a range of skills, then develop your own style. All the great artists first learned how to draw and paint in perspective, to create accurate shapes, tone, and colour. But once they had mastered this they spent years working out their own way of doing things, which is what they are remembered for. So it's worth learning the basic skills, but in the end all that matters is, 'does it look good?'

Enjoy painting!



Picasso, *Still Life with Fruit Dish on a Table* (1914-1915)
 Can you recognise any of these objects? Does it matter? Do you like the

way this looks?