

## Still Life Photography

### What Is Still Life Photography?

- Type of fine art photography
- Feature an arrangement of inanimate objects
- Can be organic or human made
- Emphasis on arrangement of objects, lighting and framing
- Helps you become a better photographer

### Two Categories of Still Life Photography

- **Created Still Life**
  - Most common style
  - We build the entire composition
- **Found Still Life**
  - Run across it naturally rather than arrange it
  - Can move your camera, perspective, lighting and other elements of the composition
  - Sometimes can move some small element of the scene
  - “Found” still life is as much of an art as still life that is created
  - Learning to recognize something that would make a good still life is a skill

### Sub-Categories of Still Life Photography

- **Food Photography**
  - To be a still life – shouldn’t have a person in the photo
- **Product Photography**
  - Commercial photography showcasing a product with the intention of selling it
- **Flower Photography**
  - One of the most common and classic subjects in still life photography
- **Black & White Photography**
  - Creates a different mood
  - Remove color and other elements fill the gap – contrasts, textures, tones, shapes, lines, patterns
  - Best to decide to make B&W from the beginning – will guide the creative choices you make
- **Flat-Lay Photography**
  - Refers to angle of view rather than the subject
  - Sensor needs to be parallel to the subject
  - Simplifies process – single plane, no gravity issues
  - No need for complex backgrounds
  - Focus on the story
  - Use imagination & creativity
- **Table-Top Photography**
  - Focuses on objects arranged on a table
  - One of most common styles of still life photography
- **Abstract Photography**
  - Usually refers to images in which the subject is not readily recognizable

### Equipment for Still Life Photography

- **Camera**
  - Good resolution and image quality
  - Live view – helps to set up scene and composition

- Lenses
  - 50-125 mm range
  - Macro often too close, focus on details not main focus of still life
  - Don't usually need wide angle lens
  - Telephoto – narrow angle of view helps to fill the frame with subject and shallow DOF helps create a specific point of focus
- Remote shutter release
- Sturdy tripod
- **Lighting**
  - Natural light
  - Reflectors
  - Diffuser
  - Off-camera flash, strobes, LED light boxes, small desk light
  - Table by a window – but choose a window without direct sunlight or use on overcast day or block light with sheer curtain or cloth
  - Lighting is important – it helps you control the scene and create a mood
- **Choose the Right Light**
  - **Hard light** with strong shadows **vs. soft light** that brightens evenly
    - **Low-key**
      - Dark, moody ambience
      - Dark colored scenes that emphasizes the light in specific areas
      - Fast shutter, low ISO, narrow aperture to keep out ambient light
      - Good for B&W images
      - Emphasizes textures, shapes and forms
    - **High-key**
      - Clean and ethereal look
      - Bright and evenly lit
      - Softer shadows
      - Light usually diffused
      - Emphasizes color and detail
  - **Direction/Position of Light**
    - Natural window light
    - Portable light source gives you freedom to move it around
    - Sidelight to highlight textures
    - Bounce light with reflectors
    - Use “flags” to block light or create shadows where want them
    - Strobes or off-camera flash

### **Your Subject and Props**

- Your choice of subject matter will determine everything else that follows – so it's an important one.
- Still life is all about objects – and old objects tend to be interesting.
- Preparing objects in a scene is not only about enhancing or adding a wow factor; it's also about attention to detail.
- Every subject of every still life has some sort of appealing feature – shape, color, texture, function.
- Sometimes need to add some props that act as composition elements to make a compelling image.
- Make sure everything compliments the scene.

- Can use props that go with your main subject because they share a theme or color.
- Or can try opposing things to create contrast.
- When you photograph only one object and leave the rest of the frame empty, it can be a powerful image, but it has to be done properly and not all objects are suited to this.

### **Color**

- Powerful tool – source of contrast or common theme among objects
- Can guide viewer through the scene
- Use saturated colors to draw attention to specific parts of photo

### **Texture**

- Adds visual interest
- Using a textured background can create a contrast between negative space and the subject
- Have to consider the lighting and how it can enhance the texture

### **Storytelling**

- When image tells a story, the viewer is immediately involved
- Make your still life image communicate something to the viewer
- Be creative

### **Shoot More Than One Image**

- Plan your scene and shoot your shot
- But, then try changing the lighting, rearrange the objects, change the background, change the camera settings or the point of view
- May find something you like better

### **What Makes a Successful Still Life?**

- Comes down to intent and context
- Is your message conveyed
- Is your composition strong – does it guide the viewer's eye through the image

### **Getting Started – How To Do It**

- Start with one object – every additional factor in your scene adds to the problems you need to solve
- Start simple and build on your skills
- Avoid reflective surfaces on your objects
- When selecting multiple objects, they all need to work together in some sort of common theme
- Make selections of similar shapes, colors, textures, etc.
- Find a table and a space to create your still life scene on – one that you won't need for a while
- Select a backdrop before you start adjusting and moving your objects into place
- Backdrop needs to fit with your subject matter
- Select a surface to arrange your scene on if it will be visible
- Take your time
- Consider lighting
- Consider arrangement and rearrangement of objects
- Add and remove props
- Tinker with other elements in your composition

**Practice Exercise**

- Pick an object that appears to have no major photo appeal
- Set up a still life photo using it
- Keep working it until you find a way to make a stunning photo
- Try different perspectives
- Try different lighting patterns
- Try different backgrounds
- Keep going until you have a shot you're proud of
- Then pick something else and do it again

Once you start looking, you'll begin to notice amazing subjects for your still life photos. Release your inner creative genius and have fun!

Susan Milinkovich

[s\\_milinkovich@yahoo.com](mailto:s_milinkovich@yahoo.com)

[www.susanmilinkovich.com](http://www.susanmilinkovich.com)

513-478-8894