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Original Article

### ‘Foundations of Still-Life Painting’ – Colour Application, Textural Effects and Development of Holistic Composition. Analysis of Selected Still-Life Paintings by Second Year Students at Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya

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Still-life painting as a formative painting unit is important in enabling students to interact with elements of art in the arrangement of specific static objects that form a precise composition. This arrangement of objects in composition is essential in helping students to comprehend the concept of composition in creative work. Since they are dealing with arranged, static objects as opposed to flowing figures and other fluid or gestural forms that suggest movement as would be the case in regular painted pictorial compositions, a still-life composition provides an opportunity to apply the principles of art in a concise way. This in turn underscores the compositional essence of each element as it relates to any principle, the interrelation of which formulates the composition itself. It is envisaged that the execution of a good still-life composition shall assist students to apply the same compositional tenets in regular paintings. For instance, students are henceforth aware of the application of comparative proportions, the use of textural effects, illumination, shadows, balance, and placement of objects on the picture plane, as well as colour contrasts, harmony, and tones. This paper examines how students engage with still-life painting, arrangement of objects and the wider notion of composition. Since this unit provides the first opportunity for this engagement, the paper specifically seeks to determine the extent to which students internalize and subsequently apply, through visual depiction, the interrelationships between objects, their proportions, the use of perspective to create depth, textural effects, application of colours and colour tones, shadows, the effect of light and its sources, drapery, compositional base as well as the usefulness of backgrounds. In order to attract their interest, sustain their attention and enhance their creativity, the students were allowed to choose, assemble, and arrange their own objects in creating their still-life compositions. Unlike the traditional approach where students draw or paint a similar set of objects arranged before them, this alternative approach of painting objects of their choice eliminated the possibility of unnecessary comparison of work at this stage and instead provided the students with the opportunity to paint objects that actually fascinated them and spurred their

imagination. Students' attention was drawn to the visual difference between a regular, painted pictorial composition and a still-life composition. A regular pictorial composition comprises of undulating features that show movement or is expressive of a phenomenon be it the study of nature and the environment or an aspect of personal expression or social commentary. A still-life composition is static and shows only interrelationships between objects. Students were free to use watercolours, oils or acrylics and their respective materials and tools. The researcher then selected paintings that best demonstrated this internalization and suggested indicators of artistic skill at this formative level.

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## INTRODUCTION

Although still life has at times been described as a simplistic form of art where one just paints or draws static objects, it is an age-old genre that has been popular across time and has transcended various movements and periods in art and, hence, evolved accordingly. In painting, its main advantages are that it allows artists the leeway to experiment particularly with the application of colour in a given compositional setting where objects are inanimate, as well as through engagement with other elements and principles and the role each plays in the development of that compositional setting. It also provides an opportunity for the study of the comparative effects of certain stylistic approaches and techniques since objects upon which these are applied are static, unlike for instance, the transient nature of landscapes. Still life painting can be

approached stylistically from three broad perspectives; realistic or representational approach, impressionist approach, and abstract renditions. Other stylistic inclinations, innovations and refinements that are often considered styles in their own right can be found to be broadly embedded within these three. Representational still life paintings capture objects and their arrangement as realistically as possible with the elements used to depict the still life as it appears.

Levels of refinement may vary from artist to artist in terms of detailing and hence representations may vary in their individual distinctness in what can be described stylistically as a continuum of realism. Impressionist still life painting emphasizes less on the application of realistic colours as observed and more on the freedom of artists to apply colours as they perceive and deem appropriate for the enhancement of their work.

These still life compositions are also devoid of accurately defined shapes and refined minute details, and brushstrokes are often bold. Abstraction as an approach to still life painting follows the principles of abstraction particularly the dismantling of defined shapes of objects and their realistic proportionality and spatial arrangements into overlapping, distortion of perspective, and a new mode of spatial arrangement. It is considered artistically useful that from their formative artistic experiences, students are able to place themselves within this broad stylistic continuum from realism to the arbitrary in the execution of still life compositions and that they are able to gain prerequisite skills in the development of their overall or holistic artistic journey. These prerequisite artistic skills are not specific to any artistic genre and are applied to any subsequent creative work which then helps individual students to define their individual styles. In conclusion, the importance of this quest is not only about painting of a still life composition but the student's ability to apply it as an individual approach to his or her art.

## OVERVIEW

### Description

A still-life is a collection and arrangement of still or inanimate objects that are placed in a deliberate manner to construct a desired composition. The objects can either be manmade or natural/organic. A Still-life composition, derived from the Dutch word, *still even*, is often placed on a base like a table, stool, or pedestal and may feature subject matter such as bouquets of flowers often arranged in vases; foods, mainly popularized by varieties of fruits; common, everyday objects that can be harnessed around and which can be clustered together to form an interesting composition. Household items can also create good composition and can communicate certain narratives; other visuals that carry some forms of symbolism are also often used to signify a desired message. Migdol (2021) sums up the description, "The term

"still life" describes a work of art that shows inanimate objects from the natural or man-made world, such as fruit, flowers, dead game, and/or vessels like baskets or bowls. Looked at another way: still life depict things that are "still" and do not move".

### Brief Historical Background

Still life paintings have a rich heritage stretching all the way from primitive art to contemporary art and in each period, still life compositions have been executed in a different style that became important in the way they were viewed, executed, and analysed. Still life paintings can be traced back to the era of primitive art found in cave paintings, most evident in the funerary art work found in ancient burial sites of the Egyptian civilization. Still life artworks also appeared in Greek and Roman civilizations within the realm of Greco-Roman art in classical antiquity. The 16<sup>th</sup> century realism exalted the aristocratic culture that was prevalent then and the still life compositions subsequently featured finely painted objects that were a testimony to this societal hierarchical indulgence. Colourful flower paintings characterized the work of northern renaissance painters in the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century and artists went on to refine their realism featuring everyday life.

The Dutch golden age introduced the *vanitas* paintings which relegated the culture of pride and vain self-consciousness to the periphery and instead ushered in the philosophical perspective of the inevitability of life and death and the mythological perspective of the afterlife. This was extended to the *vanitas* still life paintings that bore the symbolism of the transitory nature of life. A popular example is the still life painting by Pieter Claesz which featured a human skull together with an hourglass and a burning candle which all pointed to the eerie notion of the inevitability of the passage of time and in equal measure, an indicator of the inevitability of death. "These paintings, often depicting human skulls and freshly cut flowers, serve as a reminder that life's

pleasures are fleeting in the face of our mortal existence” (Bailey, 2021). The impressionist period featured the work of prominent artists like Pierre Auguste Renoir. The impressionists were no longer interested in mythological content or fine, detailed brush strokes and instead focused on experimentation with bold brush strokes, placement of colours and colour tones.

The post-impressionist period led by Paul Cezanne included the work of Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh with his flat rendering and usage of tones of yellow. Fauvists started the process of breaking down defined objects in still life into geometrical shapes, the placement of which did not follow regular perspective. They also created certain exaggerations by the use of bright and bold colours that were no longer naturalistic. The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the advent of the abstraction continuum from the work of Paul Gauguin, through to Henri Matisse and Paul Cezanne to the totally abstracted work of Jackson Pollack towards the mid-century.

Still life painting continued to evolve through cubist innovations where objects were broken down to pure geometrical forms and planes with overlapping and elimination of identifiable two-dimensional forms to create multiple views of the still life that would be blended into one with use of blunt directional lines. Modern hyperrealists have taken still life painting a notch higher by dissecting and transforming inanimate objects into almost lifelike objects, concretizing new levels of transformation, thereby redefining the concept of hyperrealism into new artistic meaning. A fruit may be dissected to show veins of life like it was a living, breathing entity; leaves could be micro studied to depict them as living and other objects could be made to spring to life in a most bizarre yet fascinating way.

### **Guidelines to Still-Life Painting**

Guidelines to still life painting are more or less well defined but ultimately depend on the artist's

individual sense of creativity and ability to holistically interrelate these guidelines in order to come up with a pleasant composition. When used within the background of selected stylistic approaches, the still life paintings become visually pleasant, comprehensible, and engaging to the audience. From previous still life work by successive cohorts of students, this paper identifies the following guidelines as specifically pertinent in the painting of still life compositions.

#### ***Thumbnail Or Preliminary Sketches***

In formulating a still life composition, preliminary sketches are important in helping a student to work out the general layout of the work, particularly the setting of the composition within the picture plane, establishing the centre of focus, balance, rhythm, and determining the possible effect of the direction of light. These sketches are done on separate pieces of paper and one can then choose the most appropriate arrangement that will lead to a good holistic still life. These thumbnail sketches are, however, spontaneous and should not be subjected to too much spatial calculations otherwise the joy and logic of creative artistic layout is diminished. Watkinson (2022) notes that, “Composition is perhaps the most important aspect of still life drawing. If your composition works well, the image will most likely be successful from a picture making stand point. I like to begin with quick sketches that literally take fifteen seconds or so to complete. Drawing small, quick images or thumbnails let you explore designs dealing with the overall light and dark pattern of your image”.

#### ***Sense of Good Arrangement, Balance.***

A still life is first and foremost a good arrangement of selected objects. This arrangement is based on comparing sizes and proportions of objects when placed next to each other, or as may be dictated by the descriptive nature of a particular item. For instance, the size of a flower vase is considered together with the bouquet of flowers placed in it as one piece, which takes up considerable space.

Similarly, a basket of fruits is considered together with the fruits it holds as one piece and so the space it occupies is considered accordingly. In addition, the consideration of balance is important; the still life should be seen to portray a sense of *visual* balance as articulated by *physical* balance and should be well set within the confines of the picture plane.

### *Use of Objects of Different Shapes, Sizes and Proportions*

When collecting and assembling objects for a still life composition, one important consideration as observed earlier, is the deliberate choice of objects that vary in size and shape. A composition is ideally composed in layers starting from the smallest sized object that occupies the foreground to the tallest one that stand out and forms the focus. On the other hand, other objects or items may be placed in a diminishing order denoting the idea of perspective and the creation of depth. Since it is often not a good compositional idea to place objects in a line, it means there will inevitably be an element of overlap which is also underscored by layering. The awareness of this proportionate relationships between objects of whatever nature and description is critical in the creation of a good composition.

### *Textural Effects*

Objects are usually differentiated by the nature of their texture. A good still life composition will bear these differentiations as a way of highlighting certain objects, both manmade or organic, thereby setting them apart from others within the composition. An artist may consider the texture of a metallic jug, a ceramic tea pot, a woven basket, a wine glass, a bottle, or a variety of flowers and fruits. For example, in the arrangement of fruits in a basket, a pineapple will not only be the biggest fruit in terms of size but will be the dominant one in terms of its intricate natural textural effect; the smooth texture of grapes will be depicted to be

appear different from the ragged texture of oranges or pears.

### *Use of Attractive Colours in Objects*

Not all objects that may be featured in a still life composition are colourful but a good still life appeals better to the viewer when exhibiting colours than would otherwise be the case. In selecting and arranging objects and in order to avoid dullness in their work, artists perceive and use colour as a major consideration, particularly when including natural or organic items. Fruits placed independently or in a fruit basket, for instance, make an attractive still life because of their varying colours; purples, oranges, greens, and yellows as found in oranges, apples, grapes, and bananas. Floral arrangements are popular in still life compositions almost entirely because of their variety and amalgamation of colours. Other sources of colours in a still life include advertising objects such as cans, bottles, tetra packs and all other assortments of wrappers and industrial packaging materials. Individual objects like ceramic items may bear outstanding single colours or multiple decorative colours on their surfaces. Beautiful colours in still life compositions have also been traditionally derived from certain woven fabrics and textile materials as observed in drapery. As they gather and arrange their objects, artists harness the beauty of colour in their still life compositions as a factor of embellishment that augments the quality of their holistic outcome. In certain stylistic approaches, naturalistic colours as they are known may not be applied and instead the artist chooses colours as he or she subjectively perceives them. Bradbury (2022) notes that “Colour in a still life composition can be based on the inherent colour of the chosen objects and how they arrange to create flow and balance in the image. Colour choices can also be aesthetically based and have nothing to do with the reality of the objects. Rather they could be the subjective attitudes of the artist. Either way, colour in a still

life composition can benefit from being thought out carefully”.

### ***Bases and Drapery***

A still life composition by its nature must bear a base upon which objects rest. This base is, therefore, often a table surface, a flat stool, a pedestal, or any suitable elevated surface. The depiction of a base forms the basis by which depth starts to be evident through angles of perspective. Drapery has often been part of many still life compositions and is useful since it covers the item upon which the still life has been mounted; hence the particular cloth may cover the whole stool, table or pedestal and the folds or drapes that naturally manifest are further carefully arranged so as to flow down to the ground in a desired way. An artist can, therefore, mould the drapery accordingly to suit or augment the composition in its entirety by covering parts that are not interesting. Drapery often adds colour to the composition and may contain patterns that make the composition interesting. In still life painting, the careful study of painted drapery with its colour and patterns is just as important as the rest of the composition of objects resting on it.

### ***Use of Tones, Shadows, and Lighting Effects***

A still life cannot be depicted in its roundness, solidity, or stability without the use of tones, shadows, and lighting effects. Lighting may include natural light rays which depend on the placement of the still life within a given space or may refer, in some instances, to artificial lighting through which the artist wishes to highlight the composition, or parts of the composition, in a deliberate manner. As observed earlier, the use of tones, shadows and lighting/illuminative effects are a major collective factor in the stylistic approach in still life composition. Tones help in depicting the roundness, solidity, or voids in objects; the contrasts they generate also help in showing the direction from which light is coming from as well

as creating shadows that depict the ‘grounding’ of the objects.

### ***Use of Perspective***

In still life painting or drawing, the use of perspective is usually seen in terms of objects placed in the foreground and those that tend to diminish into the background creating a sense of depth. The relationships between sizes in the foreground and those placed in the background also suggest an element of linear perspective although not in the precise way as in the case of trees lined along a highway. However, perspective, in this regard, is useful in showing that placed objects rest on a flat surface that slices into the picture plane creating an illusion of depth and creating the image of a still life composition that is stable and balanced.

### ***Utilization of Backgrounds***

Like any other pictorial composition, a still life composition bears a background that is well thought out and deliberately painted to make the composition ‘pop’ out. This deliberate painting of the background ensures that it is not over bearing and does not diminish the still life composition itself. It should also not unduly interfere with the viewer’s eye movement upon the focus of the composition. At times the background may form a sharp contrast to the still life making objects significantly stand out. This contrast may be created by dark tones or contrasting colours. Shadows may at times be painted to appear strategically upon the background enhancing the effect of natural light or deliberate effects of illumination. Every still life composition must bear a background whose objective is not only to cover the upper segment of the picture plane but to help focus visual attention on the still life composition as an artistic piece.

### ***Use of a Focal Point***

Ordinarily a good still life composition should have a centre of interest or a focal point just like

any other pictorial composition. This can be in the form of a colourful or dominant object in terms of size, texture or illumination or can even be a basket of fruits or a bouquet of flowers. Other items are then placed and arranged around it to form a holistic composition. The focus of a still life is usually evident in the way the composition has been laid out within the picture plane and the use of thumbnail sketching is essential in figuring it out. Some compositions are, however, so closely intertwined that the entire still life becomes a focal point when viewed against a contrasting background

### ***Techniques***

Though closely intertwined with stylistic influences, techniques are important in the way students apply colours onto the surface. Considerations are made on the nature of their brush strokes, whether bold or refined; how they create their textures; how they render their tones and how they formulate the arrangement of their objects into a viable piece of art. The act of the application of these techniques is what transforms or builds up into a describable indicator of style.

### **Importance of Still-Life Painting to Students.**

Still life painting is useful to students in helping them to polish their skills and to enhance their capability in working with still objects that form a good continuous reference point. The objects, therefore, provide adequate opportunity for detailed study. In particular, students are able to focus on colours and colour tones, textural effects, arrangement, and composition, proportions, and effects of light. The gathering and arrangement of different types of scattered objects as well as a clear comprehension of the necessary guidelines help the students to transform otherwise meaningless, often discarded objects into a potent work of art that may bear a desired meaning or underscore some narrative. Giuroiu (2019) notes that, “A decent understanding of Still Life acts as a catalyst in the transformation of even the most

mundane objects into an artwork, based on the capabilities of artists. Also, this form of art notably enriches the skill sets of the painter or sketcher”. Boddy-Evans (2018) further observes that, “The still life is a popular genre because the artist has total control over the subject of the painting, the lighting, and the context. The artist can use the still life symbolically or allegorically to express an idea, or formally to study composition and the elements and principles of art.”

### **ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

The analytical framework that is applicable in still-life painting is no different from other artistic genres and can be crafted by examining different tenets of analysis. The framework outlined here correlates with the approaches in still life painting and emanates from the guidelines already articulated.

#### **Formal Analysis**

Formal analysis is important in artistic analyses and is used to tie up all visual elements in an artistic composition such as, in this case, a still life composition. It is essentially a visual description and focuses on certain distinctive features involving the usage of elements and application of principles in the development of an artistic composition. It is more concerned with what the viewer sees and how the viewer’s eye scans over the painting. Munsterberg (2008-2009) notes that, “Formal analysis is a specific type of visual description. Unlike ekphrasis, it is not meant to evoke the work in the reader’s mind. Instead, it is an explanation of visual structure, of the ways in which certain visual elements have been arranged and function within a composition”. Therefore, elements of art and design and their specific usage in the creation of a work of art constitute an integral part of formal analysis; principles of art and design are important in composition which

also forms an important tenet of formal analysis. Some important elements of formal analysis in the case of a still life painting are colour, line, texture, light and dark, mass and space and shape. The principles are juxtaposed into a viable composition which is a major mainstay of formal analysis. Munsterberg further observes that, “All formal analysis identifies specific visual elements and discusses how they work together. If the goal of a writer is to explain how parts combine to create a whole, and what effect that whole has on the viewer, then this type of analysis is essential”. Formal analysis often also touches on materials, techniques (particularly of colour application) and ties up with stylistic analysis. Formal analysis when applied to still life composition as it is applied to many other works of art is, therefore, based on the following:

### *Line*

Every work of art is first conceptualized and formulated using lines; whether in the initial preliminary sketches or developed drawings, lines become a fundamental tool in helping an artist translate ideas into concretized visual images which are formulated into relatable compositions and may communicate certain desired messages that people can relate to.

### *Shape*

The deliberate organization of lines leads to the creation of shapes which are further defined into specific artistic forms that constitute a composition. Every object, for instance, in a still life composition bears a distinguishable and hence recognizable shape. Artists are therefore able to create work that resonates with the audience and propagates a desired point of view. In a still life, every object or item is distinguished by its fundamental shape; be it a bottle, a certain type of fruit, a jar, a bowl, a fruit basket, a wine glass or whatever the artist wishes to feature in the composition.

Shapes are also crucial in the articulation of balance in composition since they fit in certain configurations that determine balance such as layering, use of pyramidal compositions, or compositions that imply rhythm and unity.

### *Textural Effects*

All objects whether natural or manmade are describable by their surface character. Although it falls within the context of formal analysis as an element, texture is uniquely important in still life painting since it is one way of differentiating objects through the description of their surface character. The more effectively it is used in the still life painting, the more effectively the painting is visually convincing. For instance, the viewer is able to distinguish between a ceramic vase, a glass bottle, a wine glass, fruits, flowers, tins, wooden objects, animal skins, and even fabric for drapery. Without visual textural descriptions, a still life composition would appear, even with colour, to be undefined

### *Colour and Colour Tones*

Colour is of unique importance in still life painting. It helps to define individual objects both natural and manmade through the natural colours they manifest. When used together with corresponding tones and other elements, it helps in the visual description of the entire still life composition making it engaging and lively. In formulating a still life, one may wish to use colour schemes as a basis for choosing objects or may use a thematic approach in selecting objects that contain colour. In this regard each colour bears its tones and it is the thoughtful use of these myriad of tones that makes a painting lively and outstanding, particularly when objects are arranged next to each other. Boddy-Evans (2019) notes, “Every colour can produce a variety of tones; how light or dark these depends on the colour. It is important to realize that tones are relative, that's why how dark or light they seem depends on what is going on around them. A tone that is obviously light in one



context may seem darker in another if it is surrounded by even lighter tones”.

### ***Value or Light and Dark***

The use of light and dark is critical in still life composition in the creation of tones for the purpose of depicting roundness, solidity, volume in objects. It is also important for the creation of shadows and bringing out textural effects. Without the use of light and dark, the still life painting would be described as flat.

### ***Mass/Space***

A still life involves the arrangement of objects into a deliberate composition. Objects, therefore, are the masses and they are surrounded by corresponding spaces which make them visible. The interaction between masses and spaces is what interests the artist in still life composition and forms the core of the creativity therein.

### ***Composition***

Composition is a major tenet of formal analysis since it encompasses the use of principles of art and design and guides how the elements are used. The application of intricate balance, proportion, rhythmical effect of eye movement, harmony, and contrast in the way colours are used as well as highlighting the focus of the composition are all important in examining a painted still life composition.

In addition to the application of formal analysis, other considerations are also important in the descriptive analysis of a still life composition. It should be noted that all these are interrelated and are, hence, used together to create visual harmony and although the rhythmical eye movement upon a painting may identify areas of dominance, there is holistically no visual isolation.

### ***Lighting Effects and Illumination***

Lighting effects have often been used in both black/white and painted still life compositions. The

use of natural light or directed artificial illumination helps to highlight certain parts of the still life and contribute towards the illusion of depth. In certain stylistic approaches, the way the light falls on certain parts of the still life creates the desired sense of mystery.

### ***Observational Skill***

The skilful execution of a good still life painting depends a great deal on the student’s individual capability to keenly observe all aspects of the still life; the nature of the objects, their colours, textures, sizes, and interlocking proportions as well as light and dark areas. Observational skill is, therefore, measured by the extent to which a student has been able to accomplish each of these guidelines and is, hence, seen as a holistic visual testimony of this accomplishment. If a student is able to study an aspect of the still life and yet completely miss another, then his or her observation skill is described as erratic and unfocused. Barnes (2019) notes that, “**Observation** is one of the most important skills that is exercised in still life drawings. In the course of putting pencil to paper, you have to make a ton of tiny considerations and decide how those translate into your work. You will have to decide, for instance, **object relativity**: how big is an object compared to the one standing in front of it, behind it, or next to it?”

### ***Capturing of Certain Pertinent Details***

Capturing of certain details depends on the stylistic approach to the still life painting but the essence of detailing is significant in still life painting in order to enhance and highlight certain parts that are pertinent to that particular still life composition. In this regard, certain emphasized details tend to culminate into focal points. Forms can be highlighted by their shapes, the details of their texture or by the intensity of their colours, or the sharpness of their tonal contrasts.

### ***Techniques***

In examining a painted still life composition, the technique used in the application of paint on canvas often serves as a point of interest because it affects the appearance and appeal of the overall work, particularly in the depiction of textural effects. The effect of brush strokes, their size, description, and direction of application as well as how they resonate with the forms and textures, they create are essential towards the understanding of the technique.

### ***Stylistic Influence and Communicative Value***

Not all still life paintings necessarily communicate a particular message but there are certain stylistic approaches that in their nature and content may be construed to communicate certain narratives, propagation of myths, and other beliefs. If a still life painting features certain objects that may ordinarily bear some symbolism or carry some message then that still life composition is seen as a propagation of that message. Richman Abdou (2022) notes, “In most cases, symbolic paintings use different objects to convey deeper meanings or narratives. This is best exemplified perhaps in *vanitas* painting: a genre of still life that focuses on the fleetingness of life”. Historically, the issue of whether still life contain certain meanings and hold specific intentions has been widely debated. The widely held conclusion is that when the

intention gravitates around propagating a certain philosophical or social message they have been used just as effectively as other genres. Delagrangé (2022) observes that, “The interpretation and the intention of the still life can vary strongly. In any case, it is a most valuable and subtle genre, taking on science, moral issues, philosophy, or pushing the boundaries of painting – be it by manner of *mimesis* in the 16th and 17th century, or by exploring the visual possibilities of painting during the 20th century”.

### **ANALYSIS OF WORK**

It should be noted that the students whose work is featured in this paper had not engaged specifically in still life drawing or painting before in the course of their units. These paintings were, therefore, their first perception and execution of a painted still life composition at university level. They were, however, led through and given the necessary guidelines in a studio setting with examples on how to approach still life painting in particular. The fundamental idea was for them to enjoy the exercise rather than attempt to soak in all the intricate details of still life painting at one go. This way, they would achieve the fundamental objective of painting a good still life composition. It was envisaged that in due course, they would internalize the essence of their work and become truly grounded in their individual approach, style, and skill.



Plate 1: Wanje Kazungu, 'Still-life' (2021)  
Water colours - A2

**Source** - Department of Fine Art and Design

In *Plate 1*, this simple but neatly executed water colour still life composition, shows the student's exploration of the old age 'basket of fruits' compositional theme and depicts a variety of fruits mainly grapes and apples. The fruit basket is executed in an interlocking woven textural effect and the roundness of fruits is shown through the use of sharp tones making the fruits seem almost shiny and alive. The student specifically uses an illuminative effect making it appear like light is shining upon the fruits from the left side. The

choice of colours is deliberate, making the composition glitter with fresh colours of the fruits. A slight suggestion of shadows makes the composition grounded enough on a wooden surface. The blue background creates a light contrast to the rest of the composition, thereby, highlighting it by colour contrast rather than tonal contrast. This demonstrates that the student is aware of the effect of background colour contrast as a way of enhancing the holistic composition without too much visual interruption.



Plate 2: 'Still-life' (2020)

Oils on canvas

**Source** - Department of Fine Art and Design

In *Plate 2*, the student studies a single tea pot, an arrangement of fruits in the foreground and a separate fruit basket bearing some fruits. Students are fond of 'fruit basket' composition themes because fruits provide the necessary artistic challenge in terms of the application of colour, colour tones and texture and perhaps because fruits are easily recognizable by their types. They are also easier to arrange into a beautiful, colourful composition. The student studies the beautiful texture of the basket, depicting the intertwined texture using tones and effects of shiny light, demonstrating the special usage of textural effects in still life paintings. The texture of the basket though just an illusion, appears tangible and thoroughly descriptive. The texture on the metallic tea pot is equally convincing with the reflection of light shining upon the smooth surface giving it its metallic appearance. An important indicator of the individual capability of the artist is to depict the varying nature of textures. The student also applies

colours on the fruits to differentiate them but perhaps the strongest aspect of the still life is the realistic use of tones reminiscent of 16<sup>th</sup> century realism. The background is very dark and contrasts with the still life objects making them stand out against this background. Light also reflects upon the objects from one direction making them realistic and rounded. The arrangement or placement of the objects within the picture plane is simple, realistic, and logical, starting with objects in the foreground and 'layering' them up to the tallest object which is the tea pot; the student clearly demonstrates understanding of the concept of proportionality. The student also demonstrates admirable comprehension of the application of perspective in the creation of the base of the still life and the usage of tones and shadows to differentiate between the individual objects, the nature of their forms and the suggested spaces between and around them.



Plate 3: Nyagah Eric Gitau, 'Still-life' (2021)  
Acrylics on Canvas

**Source** - Department of Fine Art and Design

*Plate 3* shows a perplexing still life composition showing a concerted effort towards the arrangement of objects and their proportional interrelationships. The composition can be divided into two parts; firstly, the composition of the objects themselves in the upper half and the secondly, the study of the drapery on the lower half, comprising the holistic piece. In some still life compositions, the arrangements of the objects themselves in the upper half of the picture plane is just as impactful in terms of composition, as the drapery in the lower half; and therefore, the drapery becomes of unique visual interest. By the use of a variety of tones, the student achieves a level of delicateness in the description of the glass texture on the bottles but more vividly, on the wine glasses that is undeniable. This is achieved by

depicting reflective light effects that outline the edges of the glasses and tones that describe the forms of the bottles as well as the wine jar. The labelling on the wine bottle gives it its unique description. The quest to depict the tones that describe the folds of the drapery is deliberate and thoughtful and demonstrates that the student is aware of the drop and flow of these folds. It is also elating to note that the student depicts the sharp edge of the covered table, thereby, showing the application of perspective and how it is used to depict the base of the still life. This helps to show that the still life composition rests on this surface. The background is cleverly crafted with the use of reflecting light emanating from the right-hand side of the picture plane, lighting up the still life against a dark tonal contrast of the diminishing light.



Plate 4: 'Still-life' - Deborah Okong'o Mong'ina (2021)

Water colours – A2

**Source** - Department of Fine Art and Design

*Plate 4* is a still life water colour painting that contains striking colours and textures. The composition is based on a tilted fruit basket that appears to spill its content of fruits onto a flat table surface. The striking aspect of the painting that draws the attention of the viewer is the study of the intricate texture of the basket itself to which the student devotes considerable time. She keenly depicts the interlocking woven textural pattern which she executes with thin, deliberate brush strokes. Often the beauty of a still life is found in the study of unique textures found in certain

objects that form part of the composition. The suggested texture of the water melon is simple yet visually effective. The grapes are presented both in vivid purple and green making them sparkle with freshness and the wine glass bears its recognizable shape and depiction of liquid. The grapes are further enhanced and rounded by the use of tones ranging from very dark to light. In this still life, the background is lighter than the objects themselves and bears no shadows. The composition however goes beyond the edge of the paper.



Plate 5: 'Still-life' (2020)

Student Artist – Elizabeth Kiambi

Oils on canvas – 82 x 67 cm

**Source:** *Department of Fine Art and Design*

In *Plate 5*, the student depicts a well-executed still-life composition placed on a shelf cavity of a wall. She features an assortment of books, wine bottles and a glass half full of drink. She executes her work with admirable detail and precision, including bright colours, tones, and shadows as well as the use of reflective light that helps to describe the smooth, shiny surface character of the bottles and the glass. The arrangement of the objects is linear because of the nature of space she has chosen but she studies the objects and their respective labels with remarkable detail and colour. Often students tend to spend considerable time meticulously painting the labels on objects because they perceive that to be the most

interesting part of the still life from which they derive great joy and satisfaction. She inserts a wooden surface background, with a convincing study of wood texture. The painting itself is about the passage of time depicted by the hanging clock which denotes the ticking away of time. The student, hence, expresses the need for people to choose and spend time in whatever way that adds a modicum of value to their lives, including reading, having a good drink, travelling (depicted by the hanging landscape picture). She also places some dice at the corner of the painting denoting that life bears the concept of probability, that one cannot tell what tomorrow shall bring and, hence, the need to enjoy the opportunity of the moment.



Plate 6: Deborah Okong'o Mong'ina Deborah (2021)

Acrylics on canvas – 80 cm x 60 cm

**Source** - Department of Fine Art and Design

In this still life (*Plate 6*) the artist combines aspects of realism with a touch of simplicity of execution. The details on the bottle, including the study of its shape, labels, as well as use of light and dark tones is very well visually rationalized to produce the effect of a glass bottle full of liquid. The packaging for the bottle is included as a separate object and is painted in a sharply contrasting black and is labelled accordingly. The artist, however, does not apply any shadows in the work and, hence, the objects as placed on the drapery, seem to float on the table surface. The glass with ice cubes, in particular, seems to hang in space rather than rest on the table. Some students deliberately omit

shadows or very dark tones as part of their style ostensibly because they do not want to interfere with the neatness of their work. The arrangement of the objects including the lemon in the foreground and the hanging piece of cloth on the wall depict the subject matter of the still life. The background is articulated by a suggested wooden texture with the pink colour providing a light contrast. The setting of the drapery is depicted through suggestive folds outlined by bold lines rather than the usual realistic presentation using blended tones and shadows. However, various tones of blue suggest light and dark areas that vaguely outline the folds.





Plate 7: Peter Rwamba (2021)

Acrylics on canvas – 80 cm x 60 cm

**Source** - Department of Fine Art and Design

*Plate 7* is a beautifully executed still life that shows thoughtful arrangement and good placement of objects, relating them according to sizes and proportions. The student also studies individual shapes differentiating various objects and giving them their individual visual description. All the objects are well placed and rest upon the base of the composition showing very good use of perspective and creation of depth. The application of colour and style is deliberately geared to studying each object as it appears, making the holistic composition very pleasant to view. The detailed study of each object and the application of tones and sparkles of shining light meet the artistic purpose of depicting the surface quality of the

objects which in a still life is another way of distinguishing them. It is, hence, possible to identify the ceramic smooth texture of the tall jug, the pale glass of the water jug, the pale bronze-like metallic surface of the lamp holder; as well as the textural surface of the fruits. The student takes time to study the drapery utilizing light and dark tones as well as shadows to depict the flow of the folds. The edge of the table is outlined by a light tone on the cloth that signifies a sharp drop. The background, though, appears unfinished which is not unusual because students often pay great attention to aspects of the still life that fascinate them. This student was completely engrossed with the objects and drapery.



Plate 8: Njeri Njoroge 'Still-life' (2021)

Acrylics on Canvas – 80 cm x 60 cm

Source - Department of Fine Art and Design

Still life compositions in the formative stage of a student's artistic development attain their significance not always because of the 'level of skilful execution' exhibited but because of the 'level of effort' displayed by the student. In *Plate 8*, the student's interest gravitates around the nature of the objects, particularly the fascination with labels. The arrangement is well done with the appropriate relating of sizes of objects to one another through layering, with the bottle as the tallest object placed at the back of the composition. The objects appear to adequately rest on the table although shadows are not emphasized. The most striking part of the still life is the application of

colours, colour tones, effect of natural light and the visual impact of labels in distinguishing the objects. The importance of painted labels in painted still life cannot be underrated; not only does it help to clearly distinguish objects by way of their colour branding, design, or patterns, but also highlights the aura of random colours brought together by the arrangement of interesting colourful objects. This adds freshness and vibrancy to the entire composition; it is akin to artistic advertising in its own right. There is a suggestion of perspective and depth although the blue band container seems to float on the red cloth because of lack of the consistency of shadows.



Plate 9: William M. Angwenyi, 'Still-life' (2021)

Acrylics on Canvas – 80 cm x 60 cm

**Source** - Department of Fine Art and Design

*Plate 9* is a simple but well executed still life composition showing how students often just seek to enjoy their work through a concerted effort to study the objects and get them right. The arrangement and placement of objects are well done with the bottle as the focus and the other objects arranged in descending order of size as well as the careful relating of their proportions. The use of shapes is accurate; which helps to identify the objects themselves. The student then proceeds to apply colour and colour tones with an amazing touch of accuracy; the bottle is convincing with a touch of shining light spots and tones that depict its roundness and glassy effect. The student even takes time to insert the tag on the

bottle and the slightly torn label sticker, showing a keen sense of observation. The labelling is meticulous and helps, as always, to identify each object as a unique artistic piece. The wine glass, half full of red wine, bears the effect of glass which is attained through the use of tones and touches of shining light spots. The ageing books are superbly painted with a suggestion of accumulated dirt. As a testimony to the sense of placement and overall arrangement, the student places a pair of spectacles as if they were an afterthought denoting the fact that still life compositions can be made to look spontaneous rather than overly arranged. The still life is wrapped up by the use of shadows that help to rest the objects on the table surface and outline the

paper upon which the objects are placed. In this still life, the background is not really emphasized and it can be concluded that the student concentrated on the objects as the source of his immediate inspiration. The light background, though, suggests a slight shadow of the bottle, but

does not cause any undue visual disruption because the viewer's eyes tend to focus on the essence of the composition itself.



Plate 10: Yvonne Achieng' Okumu 'Still-life' (2021)

Acrylics on Canvas – 80 cm x 60 cm

Source - Department of Fine Art and Design

Plate 7 show a still life composition that is based on related objects that bear a certain distinction. In this case the related objects are assorted drink cans and a coca cola bottle accompanied by other items. Such compositions are often inspired by their colourful aura which some students find attractive and challenging. Each can be well painted with adequate study of detail which shows colour application and the use of tones to show the

roundness of the cans as well as the suggested nature of their material. The student shows some open cans and one that is crumpled, with a good depiction of the creases of the light metal sheet. The most striking part of the still life is perhaps the painted labels of the objects including the coke bottle which is done in very good detail suggesting glass material rather than light metal as in the case of the cans. The student's ability to show these

distinctions of materials is outstanding. The use of perspective is evident which helps in the suggestion of depth. The student also makes a concerted effort to study the almost silky drapery on the table with the careful application of tones to show the flow of folds on the drapery. Though the background is not very dark, it provides enough

contrast to make the entire still life adequately enhanced. The visual impact of the cans and bottles as well as the silky drapery is so colourful and strong on eye movement that the viewer almost forgets that there is also a plateful of food resting on a book.

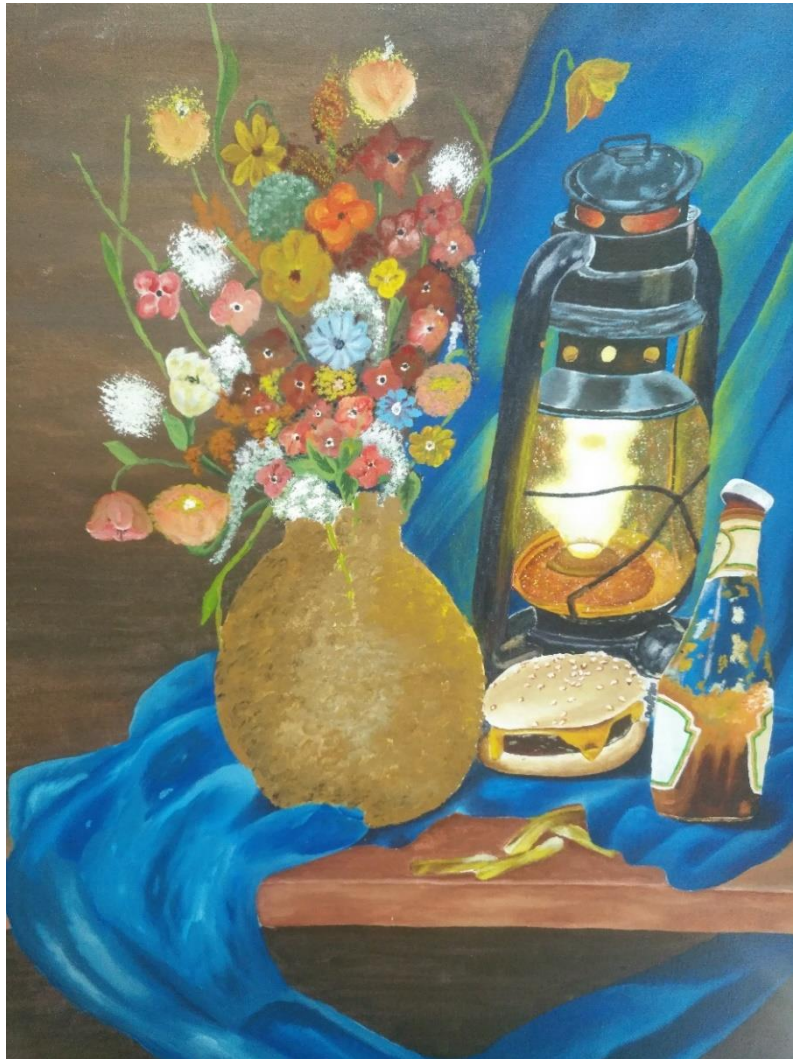


Plate 11: Gloria Auma 'Still-life' (2021)

Acrylics on Canvas – 80 cm x 60 cm

**Source** - Department of Fine Art and Design

In *Plate 11*, the student creates a study of a number of unrelated objects which shows how students are often fascinated by the idea of arrangement and placement and want to put objects together that will provide some painting challenge. Usually, a bouquet of flowers forms a composition on its own

but in this still life, it is placed alongside other objects. The student makes a detailed study of flowers placed in an opaque glass flower vase and ensures this particular aspect of the composition overlaps upon a dark background in order to make it stand out. She proceeds to make an accurate

study of a lantern emanating a flare of light. Other objects include a bottle of sauce and a hamburger dripping with cheese. A banana peeling is placed in the foreground. The application of colour is emphasized by the variety of colours provided in the bouquet of flowers. The use of colour tones is very effectively demonstrated and helps not only to study the intricacy of the flowers themselves but also to make the other objects rounded and

convincing. She paints each object with a focused sense of detail enhanced by the study of textures including the textural effects on the flower vase, the flowers and even the sesame seed bun of the hamburger. Her drapery extends from above, spreads upon the table and flows down. She includes a suggestion of shadows that help to anchor her objects and create a sense of depth.



Plate 12: Maigo Keng'ara, 'Still-life' (2021)

Acrylics on Canvas – 80 cm x 60 cm

**Source** - Department of Fine Art and Design

Plate 12 shows a simple still life composed of a large water pot with handle, a blue ceramic tea pot and a wine glass that has been improvised as a flower vase to hold what appear as orchids. The shapes of the forms are well studied and particular interest seems to have been focused on the effect

of natural light reflecting on the drapery and the blue tea pot. This illuminative effect is enhanced by the use of a variety of tones which depict the roundness of the forms and the folds of the drapery. As observed in many of the other compositions, the student is able to depict the

surface character of the objects through textural effects, thereby, helping to visually distinguish them. This also suggests the material from which they are made such as the glass of the wine glass, cloth of the drapery, wood of the table and the ceramic material of the tea pot. The white flowers help to reflect the light creating further illumination particularly seen against the dark background. The student uses very dark tones to depict the shadows underneath the table hence

defining the edges of the table and enhancing the sense of stability of the entire still life composition upon which it lies. The tones, together with the use of perspective, also help to create depth in order to show that the objects are resting on the surface of the table the edges of which are very well outlined. The background seems to be set on patterned wall paper and is visually adequate to enhance the still life without distracting the viewer's eye.



Plate 13: Loise Kwamboka Kimaiga, 'Still-life' (2021)  
Water Colours - A2

**Source** - Department of Fine Art and Design

*Plate 13* is another 'basket full of fruits' composition which many students in their formative attempts, prefer to paint using water colours. The student makes particular effort to depict the attractive texture of the portable fruit basket and its intricate pattern of entwined straws. The basket is always a major object of attraction for still life compositions presumably because of its textural challenge; students are often curious to see whether they can get it right. The fruits are colourfully painted as is usually the case. Colour

yielding fruits are always popular; bananas for their greens and yellows; grapes for their purples and greens; apples for their greens and reds and mixtures in between; and pears for their pale browns, greens, and yellows. Studying and painting these colours provide the opportunity for the students to gain confidence in their colour choices, application, and relations. The student uses tones to blend in the colours and make the fruits appear rounded and textured; as well as creating shadows that depict the fruits as flowing

out from inside the basket. The basket is well placed and rests on a flat surface, the depth of which is shown by the use of perspective and dark tones. To depict, perhaps, the continuation of a warm colour theme, the student paints the background with yellows and a peculiar ring of white flare which is akin to a sharp 'glare' of light

which creates a contrast to the edge of the fruits. At this stage, students are encouraged to interact with colours, colour tones and their effects and to start to learn how backgrounds work *or* at times do not work so well in still life compositions. This way they are able to develop a workable style that enhances their work.



Plate 14a: Rochester Otieno Anabwani, 'Still-life' (2021)

Acrylics on Canvas – 80 cm x 60 cm

Source - Department of Fine Art and Design

*Plate 14* shows a still life composition again showing unrelated objects. In the quest to put together and arrange objects of their own, students tend to choose objects that offer them some kind of challenge, particularly those that bear striking colours, labels, interesting textures, and shapes as well as those upon which light effects create varieties of tones. Often this arrangement of objects may not necessarily follow any thematic consideration and may not even bear any meaning other than compatibility of objects. The student carefully studies the shape of the bottle, with appropriate application of colour and tones including spots upon which the light is shining.

The bottle also bears the label that clearly identifies it. He also studies the packet of salt with the application of light tones as well as the relevant label that helps to identify it. The tomato is very well painted with the correct colour tone and shiny textural surface shown by the use of spots of shining light. The polythene bag wrapper placed next to the tomato is beautifully executed though it is not possible to tell what it contains, probably some foodstuff for cooking. The blue yarn is placed at the back of the composition and provides a sharply contrasting blue. There is also a single shoe placed on the right side of the composition. The still life is placed on a piece of cloth which



shows some folds. The still life (*Plate 14a*) was first presented in class without a background but later a background was inserted (*Plate 14b*) and the objects became somewhat refined. The background, executed in dark tones, helped to

enhance the effect of natural light falling upon the objects. As already noted, students were free to experiment with background colours as they sought to learn how backgrounds affect the presentation of their overall work.



Plate 14b: Rochester Otieno Anabwani, 'Still-life' (2021)

Acrylics on Canvas – 80 cm x 60 cm

Source - Department of Fine Art and Design



Plate 15: Rochester Otieno Anabwani, 'Still-life' (2021)

Water Colours – A1

**Source** - Department of Fine Art and Design

*Plate 15* is an interesting water colour still life painting and demonstrates how students, even in their formative stages of painting and interacting with a certain medium, are able to focus their attention upon certain pertinent aspects that enable them to produce captivating work. In this still life composition, the student was first and foremost fascinated by textural effects of objects which he tried to study in detail. Since the impact of textures is based on a holistic composition, it can be said that the student renders a good composition of fruits that seem to overflow from the basket, with a keen study of their sizes and interrelated proportions. The shapes of individual objects are well studied and this helps to differentiate between the different types of fruits. The intertwined texture of the fruit basket is presented meticulously with minute details inserted with thin water colour

brush strokes, becoming a major focus of visual attention. He proceeds to study the texture of the fruits making an effort to extract the patterned texture of the pineapple. He uses a variety of tones to depict the texture of other fruits such as bananas, berries, grapes, and apples. The student leaves out crucial details like base shadows, an omission that makes the fruit basket seem to float although it is helped somewhat by the edge of the table. As observed before, students tend to concentrate their efforts on certain pertinent areas and in this case, it is observed that the student probably did not pay much attention to the background, but the blue colour may have provided a contrast in default; the major focus was on the still life objects themselves. The white areas indicate unfinished segments.



Plate 16. *Still-life – ‘grapes and champaign’* (2021)

Student artist: Frida Ijai

Oils on Canvas – 80 cm x 60 cm

Source: *Dept of Fine Art and Design*

*Plate 16* is an extremely striking still life composition which is testimony of the creative ability of individual students. Its striking points are in its simplicity yet in its precision; it does not bear a precise base as would ordinarily be the case and objects look like they are placed on a floor that merges with the background, making the composition peculiar yet engaging. The wine glass halfway full of bubbling, frothing wine depicts absolute finesse of execution; one can almost feel the sizzling effect of the liquid. The use of tones on the wine glass is very finely executed showing the

reflections that denote a glassy effect amidst the dark background. The illuminative effect of light which focuses on the lower end of the composition is excellent which in default, creates the undefined base upon which the objects lie. The artist studies the fruits meticulously using various tones of red and uses a dark background to help focus the light on the objects in a most vivid way. Shadows depict the direction from which the light is coming from. Sometimes, still life compositions are simple, involving few objects but that does not diminish their artistic value and appeal.

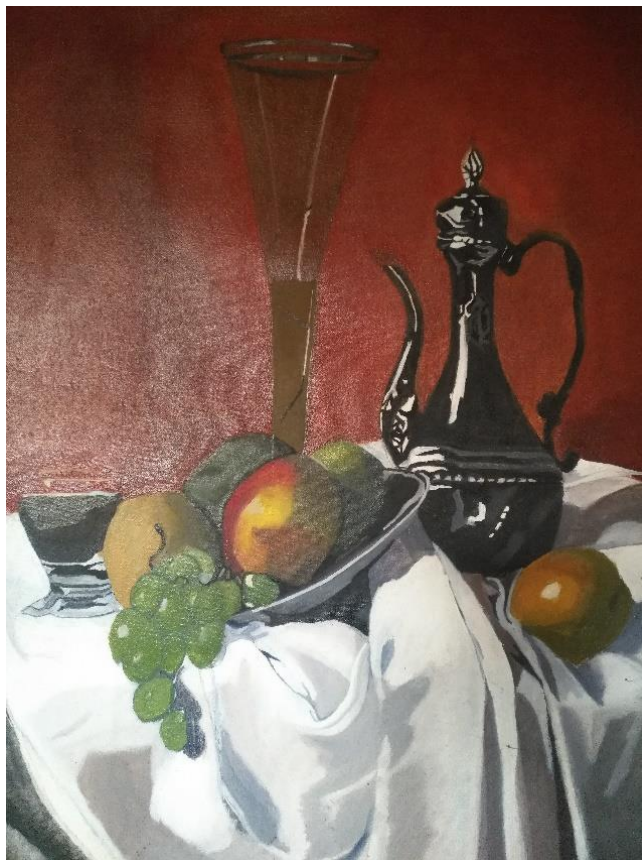


Plate 17 (2021)

Student artist: John Baraka

Acrylics on canvas: 80 cm x 60 cm

Source: *Dept of Fine Art and Design*

*Plate 17* shows a still life composition with good arrangement of objects demonstrating that the student is aware of relating sizes of objects and their relative proportions to create good a composition. The objects include a slightly tilted plate with fruits almost spilling over, a black ceramic wine jar, a wine glass, and a tall glass flower vase. The still life is set on a fully draped table with a plain background. The student takes time to study colours and colour tones using tones to effectively show the roundness of fruits and most profoundly the nature of the drapery with its beautiful folds and creases. This is augmented by the precise use of shadows that also enhance the illuminative nature of light falling deliberately on the still life, lighting it up from the left side against a darker right side of the picture plane. Shadows are also used effectively to ground the still life leaving no doubt that the objects are firmly placed on the table. This also enhances the sense of depth and the depiction of perspective. The background is plain and dark apart from the part upon which the light extends. This student was very aware of the visual power of falling light and wanted to fully exploit that sharp shining effect in defining his still life which subsequently became its main strength.

## **OBSERVATIONS AND GENERAL OVERVIEW**

In examining the selected finished paintings, it can be observed that students followed the artistic guidelines or approaches as outlined earlier in this paper, particularly as pertains to the analytical framework. These were basically compositional but all, subsequently, entailed the formal way in which any work of art is approached including the usual interaction between elements and principles. It is also evident from the featured paintings that the students were aware of how to apply these guidelines and approaches in their work and, hence, their importance in helping them achieve certain desirable effects. As observed before, it must be understood that as far as the unit itself was

concerned, these students had not undertaken still life composition painting before and subsequently, the paintings featured in this paper were their first attempts. Their levels of comprehension of the guidelines for still life painting were, therefore, purely based upon the instructions and tips provided, examples and general class discussions, and to a significant extent, the individual capability not only to internalize these guidelines, but to artistically execute them. It can be observed that this contributed, to a great extent, to the variety, approach, and style of still life compositions featured in this paper.

## **Thumbnail or Preliminary Sketches**

It was observed that in the initial stage, some students found it necessary to make preliminary sketches of their still life composition as a way of ensuring that they developed a satisfactory layout that would then translate into a good composition. Others felt that they could directly sketch onto their canvases. This was mainly attributed to individual level of confidence in the general arrangement and placement of objects. It should be emphasized though that as a matter of good practice, preliminary sketches are always useful as an indicator of how the composition will turn out to be as well as the challenges that may arise, particularly in the application of principles. It was observed that those students who started by the use of preliminary sketches produced visually stable still life compositions after all elements had been duly applied since any glaring mistakes may have been eliminated.

## **The Skill of Arrangement/Spatial Placement**

It was observed that students were able to creatively arrange objects of their choice in a way that formed a logical composition. It was also observed that students were able to depict interrelationships between the objects featured in their paintings in terms of their sizes and proportions when placed next to each other. The beauty of a still-life composition is seen in its

arrangement of objects that signifies the essence of that composition. The ability to arrange physical objects into a creative composition is related to the ability to depict the resultant composition artistically. In still-life painting or drawing, the use of space is particularly important in basic layout and the interrelationships of proportions. In *Plate 7*, there is a clear sense of deliberate arrangement of objects according to their sizes, creating a cohesive sense of composition. The objects are placed upon a draped table base, an effect of depth that is created by the use of perspective.

### **The Base of The Still-Life**

Still-life compositions are often created with a base; this may be a suggested surface base or it may be a specific solid base like a pedestal, low stool, a draped table or even a shelf on the wall. In each case, the base of the still-life depicts the feeling of depth that slices into the flat surface which then allows objects to seem to rest upon it. It was, subsequently, observed that students were aware of the need for a compositional base to anchor the arrangement of their objects within the given picture plane. This is important in still-life composition because it creates a surface depth upon which the objects 'rest' and consolidates the feeling of stability. The use of a base is shown in all the paintings although its depiction is more profound in some paintings. For example, in *Plate 12*, the table is clearly the base upon which the water jugs, tea pot and wine glass rest. The draped table in *Plate 17* clearly demonstrates why a base is important in supporting the placed objects. This is also clearly evident in *Plates 9, 10 and 11*.

### **Use of Perspective and Creation of Depth**

Students utilized perspective in order to create the illusion of depth in their work which helped them to avoid the feeling of flatness or objects floating. In the placement of objects, this helped to depict those objects in the foreground and those placed behind them creating an impression of a natural overlap. Since a still-life is often presented as

realistic, the illusion of depth is critical in depicting the nature of the objects, their shapes, their arrangement, the effect of their sizes and their natural interrelationships. Although there were no abstract still life compositions in this study, ordinarily, in still life compositions that are abstract oriented, false perspectives or even total alterations of lines of perspective may be evident changing the structure of spatial placement.

### **Use of Unique Textural Effects**

Students used unique textural effects to study some of the objects in their still-life compositions. All students in their compositions used an aspect of texture to underscore the difference between one object placed against another. Textures describe the surface character of given objects and, hence, in a realistic setting, the more the textures resemble their referent objects, the more convincing the painted images of those objects become. Textures in their own description, therefore, help distinguish one object from another. Some students were able to depict these intricate textures better than others making their work more visually descriptive. It was also apparent that students comprehended the usefulness of texture as an element and sought to show its essence in the perception and execution of realistic compositions. In *Plate 2*, the intricate depiction of the woven texture of the fruit basket is memorable. The student takes time to study the intricate intertwining of the strands making the fruit basket appear realistic and convincing. In *Plate 3*, the textural folds on the table cloth help to emphasize the drapery which in turn helps to underscore the spatial placement of the entire still-life as well as depicting the base. In *Plate 4*, the depiction of the inter-woven pattern of the fruit basket in thin watercolour brushstrokes is pleasant to view as is the texture that depicts the watermelon.

### **Application of Colour and Colour Tones**

Students applied colour in their paintings in a manner that closely resembled each referent object.

This is because in painting, particularly in any rendition of realism, colour is the most influential element in capturing the essence of the painting and what it entails. It is evident, therefore, that the students endeavoured to capture the colours of the various objects; the fruits, the drapery, the flowers, and the backgrounds in the best way that helped enhance their holistic composition and captured the featured items as they exist. Colour does not often sit well in its flatness; and in addition, students used colour tones to enhance the natural appearance of the objects. They demonstrated that they understood how the tonal range works and how to extract and apply the variety of light and dark tones to enhance their work.

### **Application of Drapery as Part of the Holistic Composition**

Drapery is often associated with still-life compositions since most pedestals upon which a still-life is placed are draped in one way or another. The way this drapery is spread out, folded, and arranged becomes part of the entire still-life set up since it is not random but purposeful. Subsequently, the way an artist studies this drapery, its folds or creases and the way it is arranged becomes part of the rhythmical way in which the viewer's eyes scans over the holistic painting composition. It is observed that many students included partial or full drapery in their compositions and used colours, colour tones and shadows to depict the flowing nature of the drapery. This is best demonstrated in *Plates 7, 10, and 17*.

### **Use of Tones, Shadows and Effects of Light**

It was observed that students used the effect of colour tones, shadows, and natural light in their work in order to create depth and a sense of solidity in the objects. In many of the paintings the level of application of tones, shadows and illuminative effects was remarkable and clearly underscored the students' comprehension of the essence of these applications in the holistic

appearance of their work. For example, in *Plate 2*, the tonal variations helped to depict the nature and roundness of the fruits, the textural feel of the fruit basket and the solidity of the metallic tea pot. The very dark tone of the background helped to create the necessary contrast that makes the objects stand out. In *Plate 3*, the different tones on the wine glasses, bottles, jar, drapery, and background are carefully applied. This helped to enhance the visual quality of each item as well as the appearance of the holistic painting, making it convincing and pleasant to view. The same paintings also show the use of the effect of light particularly in depicting the sparkle on the glasses and the metallic shine on the tea pot. The illuminative effect of natural light is also effectively depicted in *Plates 12, 16 and 17*. Shadows were effectively applied in visually 'grounding' the objects in composition, effectively resting them upon the base; shadows also helped in differentiating between the various objects as well as emphasizing the folds of the drapery. This is well demonstrated in *Plates 7 and 17*.

### **Use of Background/Foreground**

The use of background in still-life composition is important in augmenting the composition itself as well as being able to create the necessary contrasting effect to highlight the objects. This contrasting effect can be created by the use of a variety of tones, contrasting colours, and illuminative effects of natural or artificial light sources as well as depiction of certain textural effects that may represent nearby walls. It can be observed that students tended to experiment with colours on the background but demonstrated awareness that the fundamental need for the background was to enhance the still-life composition rather than obscure it or compete with it. Some utilized dark contrasting tones while others used light colours and textural effects as their background. However, it was observable that most students did not give their background as much attention as the still life itself and tended to concentrate on the set up and nature of the objects.

### **Use of Labelling and Observation of Detail as They Appear in Certain Objects**

Some still-life compositions feature items that bear commercial labels as embellishments. Students are often fond of these items because they feel challenged to artistically replicate and depict the labels as they appear on the items as a way of achieving levels of realism. Subsequently, such items and other observational details become intricate aspects of still-life painting. It can be observed that students made considerable effort to replicate these labels as a way of achieving the details they desired which made their still-life compositions realistic and pleasant to view. For example, in Plates 5,6,8,9, and 10, the students chose items for their still-life compositions that featured a variety of intricate labels. These were painted with an admirable sense of detail and levels of accuracy that gave the compositions their description, colour, and exuberance.

### **Stylistic Approach**

It can be observed that in selecting their styles, students in this exercise tended to confine their work to realism which was executed to different degrees of finesse and did not venture into other styles like abstraction, cubism, or hyperrealism. This can be seen in the objects that they chose, which were everyday objects that they found interesting as well as fruits and flowers that they found colourful and textured. They did not seem to feature any form of symbolism or innate narratives in their work and confined themselves just to the beauty of the objects and the challenge of their composition. This is expected at this formative stage where students keep to their comfortable individual creative zone and only later venture into more experimentation with symbolism and other challenging styles like cubism or hyperrealism when they acquire more confidence in their painting and compositional skills.

### **Use of Balance**

Balance is particularly important in still life painting not only as a principle of art but more importantly, as a way of creating a semblance of physical balance. A good still life composition must bear this visual balance. When objects are placed together in an arrangement within a physical space, they need to be balanced in terms of sizes, individual proportions, and interlocking shapes. These are placed on a base for stability. This physical balance in the composition is what the artist observes in executing the painted composition and is helped by the use of colours, tones, interrelating sizes, logical placement of objects and organizing the spaces within the picture plane. The result is a still life composition that appears stable and pleasant to the viewer. It can be observed that students endeavoured to achieve this balance in their work. In Plate 9, the simple composition of a bottle, wine glass, books and a pair of spectacles placed on a table surface base shows good balance and a logical placement of the objects. The holistic still life is augmented by the use of perspective that creates a sense of depth. In *Plate 10*, for instance, the placement of a beverage can on top of others demonstrates how visual balance can be effectively used to depict physical balance. The painting suggests that the cans are well balanced and would not *physically* collapse; hence, in the painting itself the cans and the rest of the still life arrangement appear stable and convincing.

### **Application of Prior Skill**

It can be observed that although students had not specifically undertaken still life painting before as a unit at the University, they showed indicators of some prior skill in painting which they then applied in this exercise. This could have been derived from other introductory units in painting suggesting that there is a potent relationship between related units in painting. In some of the paintings, the level of skill in the application of colours, the use of colour tones, textures and shadows suggest apparent significant prior skill.

The students then applied this skill in tandem with specific instructions on still life composition painting, thereby, enhancing their focus and ability to embrace this new creative challenge.

### **The Importance of Class Critiquing**

The conduct of this unit entailed class sessions where the students had the opportunity to critique each other's work. It was observed that students showed great interest in pointing out points of strength as well as areas of weakness in each of their classmate's painting presented in class. While it is difficult to measure the specific effect of any critique, since it depends on the willingness of the student to implement whatever suggestions, it was observed that certain individual pieces improved significantly when suggestions emanating from the critique were inserted. These ranged from the enhancement of tones, the emphasis of textures, the strengthening of shadows and enhancement of colours to working on the folds of the drapery.

### **CONCLUSION**

In examining the still-life compositions, the level of engagement shown in the various pieces indicate that the students took creative interest in what they were painting, particularly the arrangement and placement of the various objects into a viable composition. It can be concluded that at this formative stage, the leeway to choose and assemble their own objects and arrange them in a composition of their own choice helped significantly in galvanizing their interest and enhancing their creativity. It also created the necessary impetus for them to apply colours as accurately as possible using the appearance of the objects as their desired referent resource.

It can be concluded that the exercise of painting a still-life composition is useful to students in a number of ways. It is a fundamental way of enhancing their pictorial compositional skills. In developing their still-life compositions in this exercise, they dealt with assembling, selection, and

arrangement of static objects within a picture plane; this arrangement within a given confined space drew their attention to the need for creative use of space. By extension, therefore, this capturing of visual compositional elements can then be extended to any other type of pictorial composition or artistic work. The students were aware of not only the need to apply accurate proportions in regard to one object viewed against another that depicted the distinction of sizes and the essence of perspective, but also the depiction of thoughtful spatial placement of objects that showed pleasant compositions that were centrally placed and were neither top heavy, bottom heavy nor side heavy.

### **Use of Colour**

It can be concluded that still life painting helps the students to focus their attention on the use and application of colour in composition. The opportunity to observe colours on objects that are static enhances their ability to comprehend colour relationships in terms of harmony and contrasts. Since a still life composition is deliberately selected and arranged, it provides a unique opportunity for the study of a wide range of colours as they manifest on both manmade and natural objects. A bouquet of flowers may contain many sparkling colours; the appearance of colours on drapery might be quite fascinating; an arrangement of fruits contains a variety of colours and their respective colour tones; colours on objects are as varied and as random as the nature of the objects themselves or as the labelling on the objects dictates.

### **Application of Tones Shadows and Light**

From observations made in this paper it can be concluded that well executed painted still life compositions must incorporate colour tones, shadows, and the appropriate use of lighting as a fundamental way to enhance the holistic appeal of the work. In this regard, colour tones are important in their application in order to avoid flatness of



colours and to suggest roundness, solidity, or voidness of objects; shadows are important in the depiction of grounding on a base and the placement of the objects on a given surface since a shadow suggests or defines the corresponding 'physical' presence of an object. Tones and shadows are enhanced by the presence of lighting whether from a natural or artificial source.

### **Perspective**

It can be concluded that when perspective is well internalized and applied in a still life composition, the placement and general arrangement of objects and their shapes are more appealing and more convincing in approaches that bear realism. Where perspective is deliberately distorted, the spatial placement of objects and their shapes take a new definition in approaches that bear abstraction and need a more concerted effort to decipher. The application of perspective is, therefore, important in the way the viewer observes and comprehends a still life composition in its entirety.

### **Application of Texture**

It can be concluded that textural effects are a uniquely important aspect of painted still life. Every object or item is describable by the nature of its surface texture and is, therefore, differentiated by the nature of that texture. Without texture, even the presence of colours, tones or shapes would appear visually insufficient to describe the specific nature of a particular object. For example, the unique woven texture of a basket forms the basis of the description of that basket; without the depiction of that textural effect, the basket would appear like any other rounded or oval container.

### **Stylistic Influence**

Students are more inclined at this stage of still life painting to produce paintings that please them rather than the quest to pursue any stylistic influence. However, all the still life compositions featured in this paper suggest certain inclinations towards realism as a formative basis for students'

confidence in Still life painting. It is from this basis that it is presumed that students will, in due course, develop other innovations in their work to either continue to thoroughly refine their work or to find the necessary impetus to break it down significantly to create new work that is less traditional.

### **Meaning in Still Life Paintings**

Not all still life compositions necessarily bear meaning beyond their artistic arrangement and presentation. Meanings that bear a certain narrative depend to a significant extent upon the stylistic approach to the still life composition itself. It is possible for a still life, just like any other genre of painting, to bear some form of symbolism or suggest a message which often depend on the nature of objects featured in the arrangement. In *Plate 5*, for example, the student expresses some meaning to her work by the use of specific items included in her work. As she explains it, the clock hanging at the corner denotes the passage of time and the transience of opportunity and hence the need to utilize time to its optimum value; the presence of bottles of wine and a glass half full of drink denote the pleasure of having a drink as part of purposeful pleasure; the books denote the pleasure of reading as a way of purposefully spending time, and the dice at the corner of the still life denote the concept of probability in life. Hence it is possible for still life compositions to bear meaning. The concept of still life compositions bearing some innate meaning is not new; indeed, over time, the symbolism carried in many objects featured in memorable still life compositions were perceived to carry precise messages when there was an effort to decode those hidden meanings. These were such as musical instruments, candles, flowers, skulls, fruits, mirrors and many more. Snow (2021), for instance, describes the essence of a bouquet of flowers as a symbol of life and growth; she observes, "A beautiful bouquet of flowers in full bloom can signify life, faith, growth, and power. Wilting flowers, on the other

hand, serve as grim reminders that life, material goods, and beauty are fragile. Specific flowers also have more specific meanings. For example, poisonous nightshade symbolizes danger or deception, daisies symbolize innocence, poppies symbolize sleep or death, and a red rose symbolizes love and seduction". Students are, however, more engrossed with the straightforward artistic engagement with certain objects, their placement and spatial arrangement and less with the precise role of the objects in generating meaning in a still life. It can be concluded that as students gather more confidence in their skill in painting and their boldness in engaging certain unusual objects, then they will venture more into the generation of meaning in their still life compositions. As already observed, certain still life composition may feature objects like horns, skulls, shells, and other traditional paraphernalia that denote a particular thematic undertone that, in turn, signifies certain meanings or narratives or bear certain social/cultural messages and implications.

### Need for Critiquing

It can be concluded that class critiquing is essential for individual artistic growth in the formative stages of any painting experience. This is because the students may not yet be grounded in the skill of conclusive self-evaluation and at times are quite perplexed by the observations of their classmates on aspects of their work. This helps them to note, agree or disagree with these observations or even defend their work in an artistic or scholarly way. This then aids their artistic perception in many ways as well as improving their artistic language and ability to present and explain their work in class.

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