



How to Set Up a Still Life

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Setting up a lively and instructive still life for students has some different considerations than if we are doing it for our own art practice. Artists have many factors guiding their choices when setting up a still life and there is a rich historical tradition regarding still life creation filled with symbolism and subtext, genre painting and commerce. The information provided here is more practical, focusing on basic concepts that will provide good composition and an opportunity for students to apply the skills they are learning.

Below are the key elements that will create a successful still life.

1. Object Selection

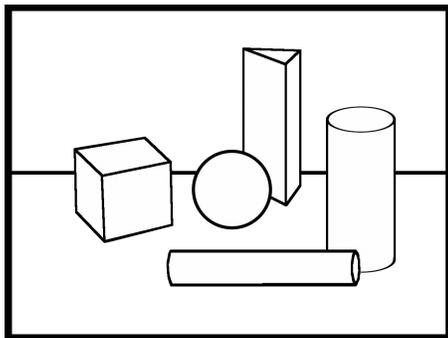
Look for objects that have a variety of:

- Heights
- Values & Color
- Texture
- Reflectivity (shiny versus matte)

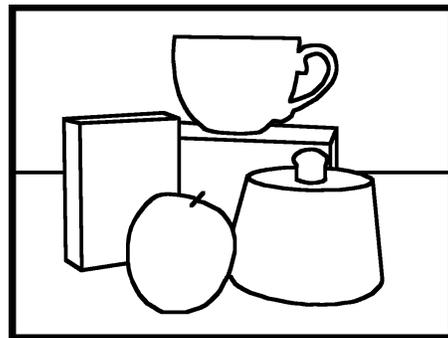
2. Composition

While you're setting things up, try rearranging; take objects out and put others in, move things around until you arrive at a pleasing composition. Below are some principals to keep in mind while setting up your objects.

- **Eye Level** - Make sure you know what angle students will be viewing from before you set up the objects. Walk around the still life at their eye level so you know how they'll be viewing it.

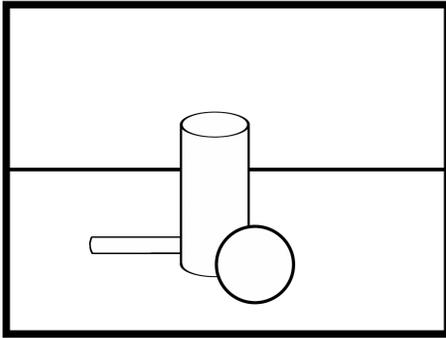


It's better to have students draw above eye level so students can clearly see volume and perspective.

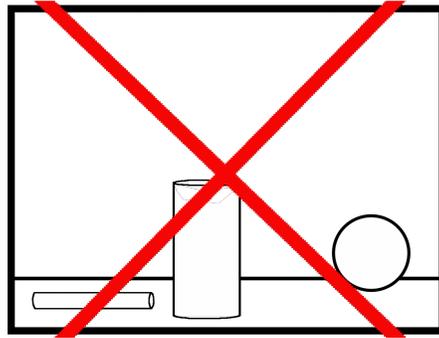


If objects are at eye level students will learn less about volume and perspective.

- **Overlapping** - Set objects in front and back of each other to give clear spatial hierarchy. This especially important if eye level is low.

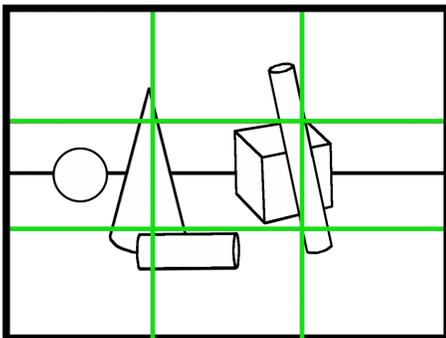


When objects are overlapped and eye level is above, the spatial relationships are clear.

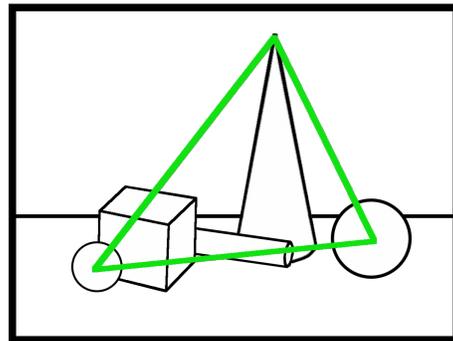


Low eye level and no overlap doesn't give good information about spatial relationships.

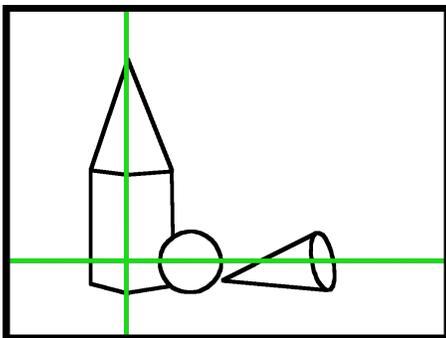
- **Rule of Thirds, Triangle Shape, L-Shape** - Think about the relationship of all objects as a whole. Below are examples of pleasing relationships and compositions.



Rule of Thirds

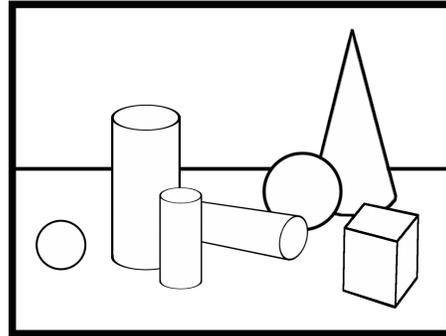
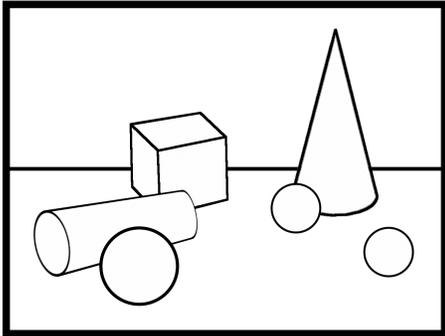


Triangle Shape



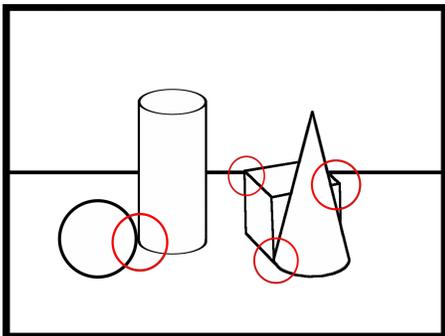
L-Shape

- **Rhythm** - Look for patterns, repetition, direction of angles that lead your eye around the still life from object to object.

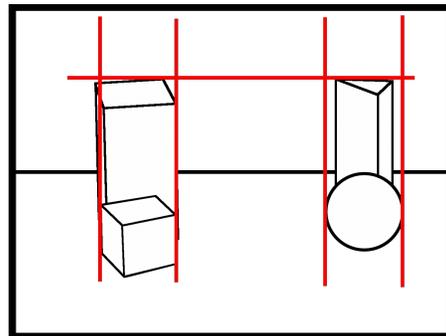


Repetition of shape, volume, color and direction of objects create lively and interesting compositions.

- **Tangencies & Alignments** - Try to avoid setting up objects so that their edges touch, or that objects align with one another. Walk around the still life and check this from all positions and angles that students will be drawing from.



Tangencies create visual confusion and uncomfortable compositions.

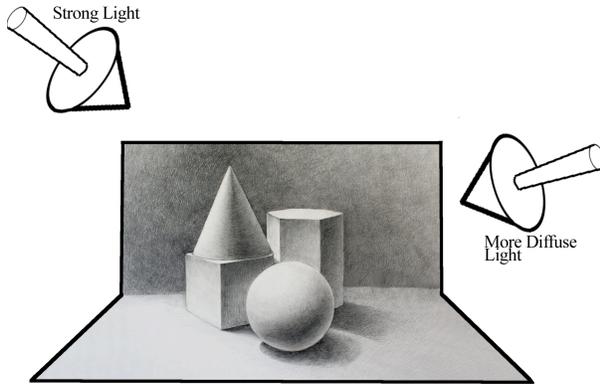


Objects directly in front & back of each other creates an unattractive composition.

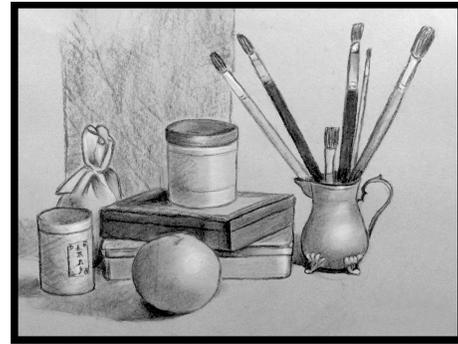
3. Lighting

Good lighting for a still life is essential. Keep these key factors in mind.

- **Contrast** - Your objects should have strong highlights and dark shadows.
- **Direction** - The best direction is 3/4 side from above. NOT directly above the objects and NOT from behind the objects. Two light sources also work well.
- **Cast Shadows** - Always look at the cast shadow shapes, see how they're interacting with other shadows and other objects. Look to see if cast shadows are interfering with the appearance of the scene in general.



Two light sources works well for class because students will be seated 'in the round'.



This is a great still life set-up for student work.



NO! Back lighting doesn't work well for students' still life.

4. Re-creating a Still Life

Here are some tips for breaking down and setting the same still life back up for multiple drawing sessions.

- Before you place your objects, lay out a large sheet of paper (can be any value or color). Once you've set all your objects mark where they sit on the paper with a pencil. When you've finished the day's session you can roll up the paper and store it with the objects. For the next drawing session roll out the paper and set the objects back where you've marked them.
- Fabric is difficult to set up again, matching the first set-up will be difficult. If you do want fabric, consider draping in a simple hang from one point. You could also use tape to mark the folds.
- Take photos of the still life from at least 4 directions (more is better). Take photos of the lighting placement too. This will help you not only be accurate with placement of the objects, but it will also give you accurate direction of cast shadows and on the objects themselves.