



Still Life

Mrs. Bible Digital Photography 2020

Still Life

“A good photograph is one that communicates a fact, touches the heart, and leaves the viewer a changed person for having seen it. It is, in a word, effective.”

- Irving Penn, photographer

The world is filled with objects from flowers to seashells, from tools to toys, and from cars to musical instruments. Whether these objects come from the natural world or are made by people, whether they are new or thousands of years old, they are meaningful to someone in some way.

Still life photography is a way to capture the essence of these objects and reveal their importance to us and to other people, both in life and in the imagination.







Brief History

Still life is the translation of ***nature morte*** as it started in painting. The literal meaning is “dead nature” as it often depicted objects from nature but not living ones. Often times, the subjects included game birds, cut flowers, picked fruits, seashells, caught fish, and the like. At its core, still life art depicts anything that is dead or not moving. The English translation seems to have focused on the “not moving,” although the “dead” context adds a multi-layered meaning.

Starting with such a rich historical and artistic background, ***still life photography*** followed the same path of using nature morte and produced many classical works. Photography even recorded the dead as a reminder of death and mortality.

Today, photographers practice still life in many forms from product photography to table-top photography, from flower arrangements to found-objects or found still lifes.

Still life is a unique genre of photography. One thing that makes it so special is that often the subjects aren't very interesting. They're just ordinary objects that you normally wouldn't pay much attention to.

That means that to be successful at still life photography, ***you need to find ways to make your photos interesting.*** That also means it's a great style of photography for learning new skills.

By experimenting with different arrangements, lighting, and compositions, still life photographers can breathe life into their subjects.





Background, Light & Color

Think of the still life as a **partnership between the subject and the background**. A background can reinforce your subject or detract from it. You can use an object's natural environment, or use a neutral wall or background paper.

Pay close attention to light when composing your still life. The type of light, either direct or diffused, and the direction of the light can change the appearance and mood of your photograph. **Direct lighting**, especially sidelighting, will accentuate the textures and shapes of the objects, but may add more contrast to the scene than you want. **Diffused lighting** will show off all of the objects, but can sometimes look dull and two-dimensional. Mixing the two styles is one solution to this challenge.

Because you have complete control over the colors in your still life, both object and background, you need to choose wisely. There are three general categories of colors to choose from: **Warm colors** such as magenta, red, orange, and yellow. **Cool colors** such as blue, cyan, and green. **Neutrals** such as white, gray, and black.

Cool Colors,
mirrored surface,
side lighting



Neutral tones, simple background,
diffused and side lighting



Warm Colors, neutral
background, diffused lighting



Lenses & Equipment

There are no rules about **depth of field** in still life photography. If you want everything in focus, use a small f-stop like f/16 or f/22. If you want the background to go out of focus, use a more open f-stop such as f/2.8 or f/4.

Nearly *any lens will work for still life photography*, including a wide-angle, a mid range zoom, or a telephoto zoom. With any lens, be sure that you get close enough to your subject to get the composition you want.

- **Close up and macro lenses** will help you get creative with the perspective in your still lifes.
- **Telephoto lenses** are a great choice for still life photography. For one, the narrow angle of view offered by telephoto lenses will help you properly fill the frame with your subject. Secondly, the extremely shallow depth of field will let you create a very specific point of focus, such as focusing on a particular part of your subject.

It's a good idea to use a **tripod** when you do still lifes. Most still life images need careful attention to composition and to where the camera's viewpoint will be.

Zoom lens with shallow depth of field, note the foreground and background are out of focus, just the orange is in complete focus.



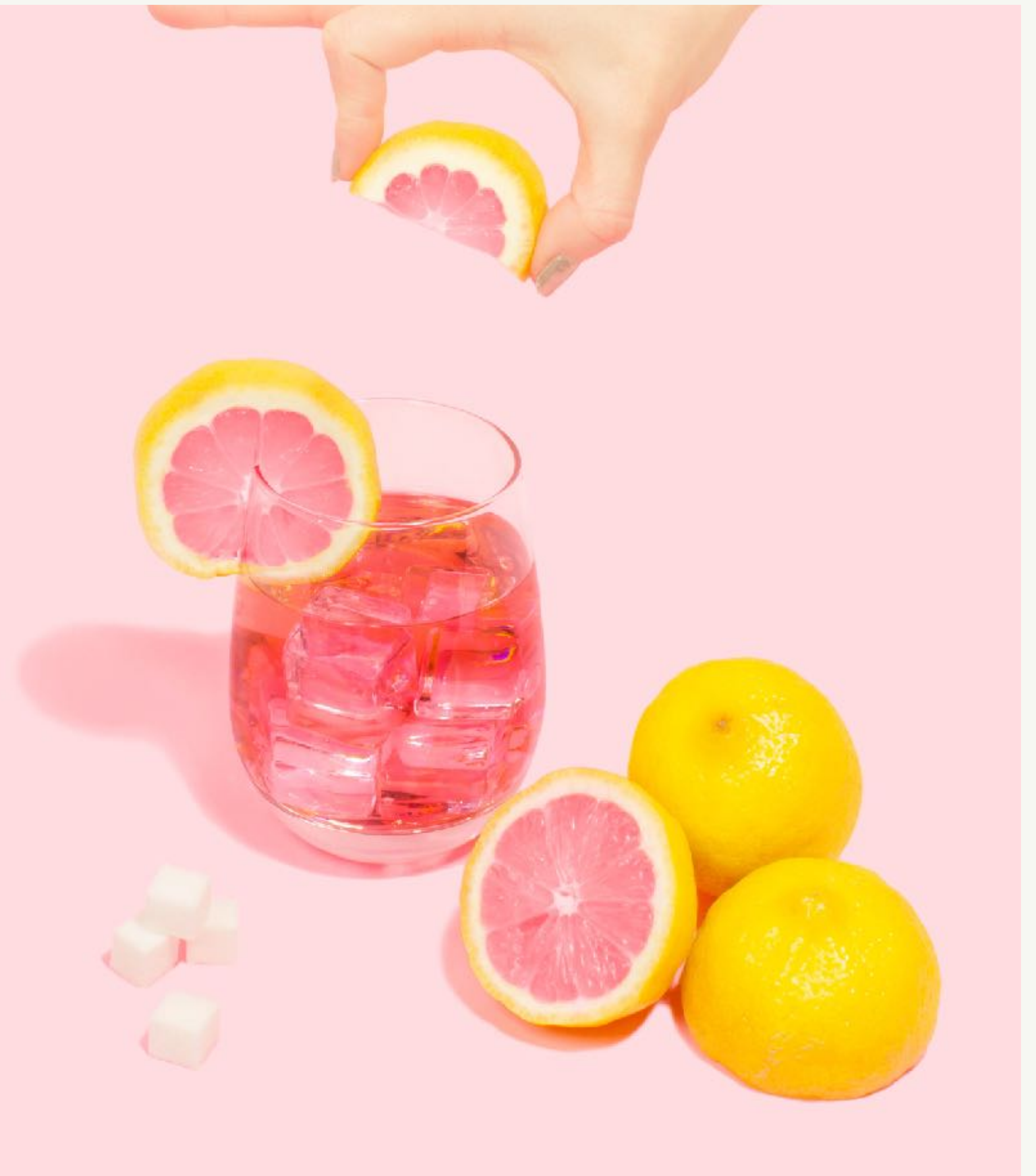
Experiment & Practice

Still life photography makes it easy to experiment. In contrast to portrait and landscape photography, you don't have to deal with live models, and you don't have to search out an interesting location or photo opportunity. Instead, ***you can create your own interesting composition using common objects you have or find nearby.***

Make sure you experiment with the viewpoint and angle in your composition. This will add to the interest and perception of your image.

Once you understand how to create great still life photography, you'll be well equipped to create better photo compositions in any situation.

Still life is a great way to show off your skills and artistic flair, making still life shots a great addition to any portfolio, and is the perfect way to show potential clients what you are capable of.





High Angle

Low Angle

Types of Still Life

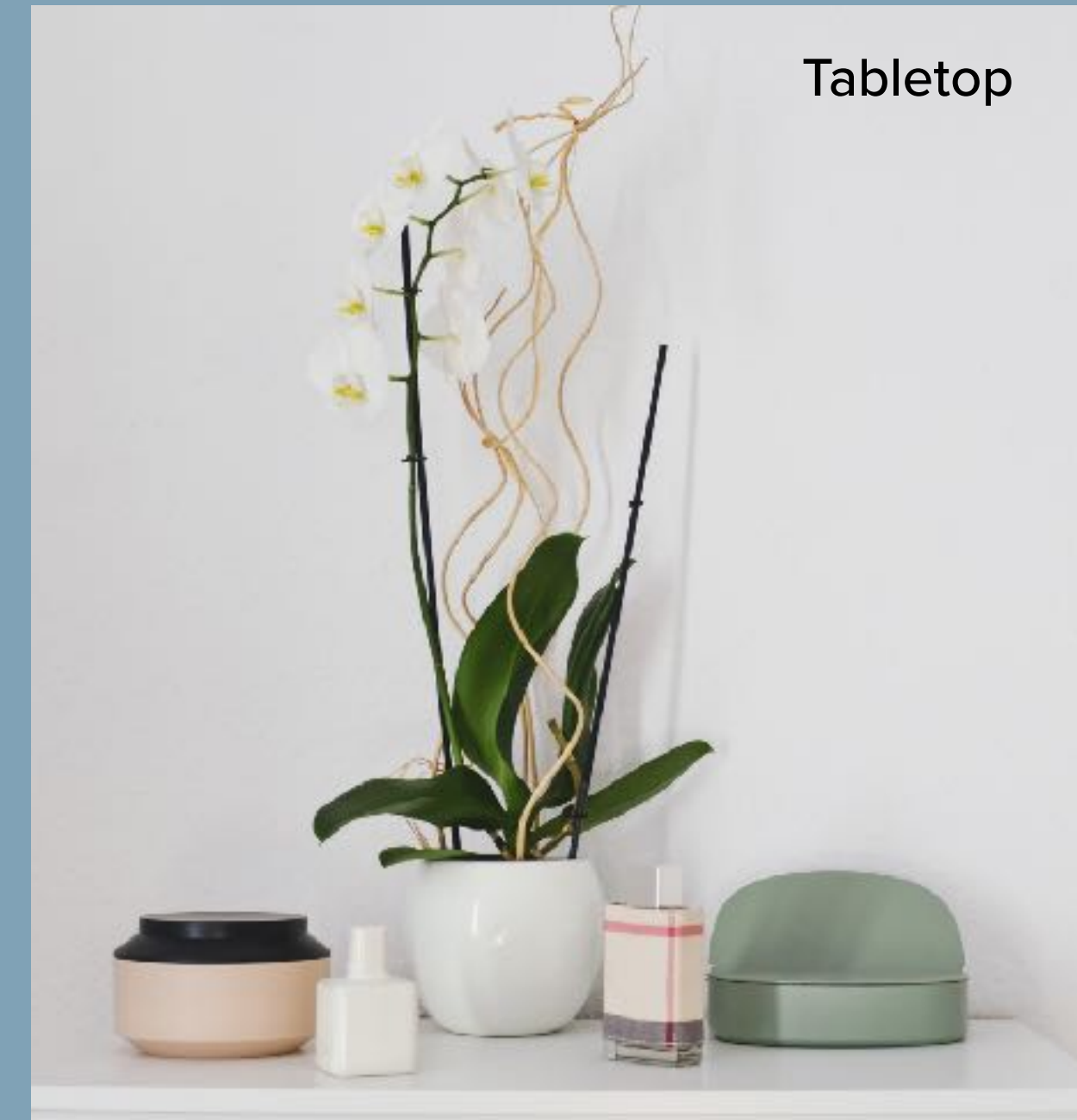
Still life photography encompasses a variety of subcategories. Here are just a few of them:

Tabletop Photography

Tabletop photography is the most common type of still life. It's what most people think of when they hear about still life photography. This category is all about shooting objects that are small enough to fit on a table. *The objects can be anything the photographer desires, as long as they're inanimate.*

Food Photography

Food photography is another subcategory of still life that is closely related to product photography. Often, the main goal is to depict food in an attractive way. However, when compared to product photography, *food photography often also involves setting the scene by arranging other food items and tableware around the subject.*





Product Photography

Another example is product photography. Since it involves shooting inanimate objects, it can be considered as a type of still life. However, where the two categories differ is that with product photography, ***the main goal is to show off a product.*** These photos usually focus on providing a clear image of the product without distractions. In contrast, still life shots are usually more artistically driven and offer more opportunities to be creative.



Found Object Photography

Photos of found object art can be considered another branch of still life, although found object art also usually involves modifying an object or placing it in an unusual context.

An example is this photo series where the photographer used common food items and balloons to create surreal and thought-provoking images. While they do fall under the umbrella of still life, they also go a step further to make viewers think about the subject in a different way.







Photoshop Enhancements

Enhancing with photoshop to intensify the mood can help to emphasize your subject. Try desaturating colors and “popping” out a specific color. You can do this subtly or dramatically like in the ***color splash tutorial*** on the class website.



Key Terms

- **Still life** photography is a way to capture the essence of these objects and reveal their importance to us and to other people, both in life and in the imagination.
- **Nature morte** the literal meaning is “dead nature” as it often depicted objects from nature but not living ones.
- **Direct lighting** will accentuate the textures and shapes of the objects and may add more contrast to the scene.
- **Diffused lighting** will show off all of the objects, but can sometimes look dull and two-dimensional.
- **Warm colors** are magenta, red, orange, and yellow.
- **Cool colors** are blue, cyan, and green.
- **Neutrals** are white, gray, and black.



To Do:

- Add to your Google Doc of the Key Terms for Class.
- Take Google Quiz.
- **Assignment:** Photograph Still Life
 - Monochromatic (1)
 - Warm Colors (1)
 - Cool Colors (1)
 - Neutral Colors (1)
 - Theme / Element or Principle (1)
 - For each image: Title it, list the lighting, and category.

