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*To send light into the darkness of men's hearts
- such is the duty of the artist. Schumann*

Composition & the Still Life

Whether you are just learning to draw or paint or have many years of experience under your belt, a still life is an excellent way to practice your rendering skills. Unlike working on location or from a live model, you can control the weather, keep the lighting consistent, and your subject is unlikely to fidget, want to chat or need a potty break. But do be aware that for an interesting picture, you must have an interesting still life; you can't just throw things on a table and call it good. Here are some suggestions to make your still life setup creative, interesting and well-balanced.

Planning & Set up

1. Gather a selection of items that relate in some way or speak to you. Think VARIETY. Vary sizes, shapes textures, colors, elevations, levels,
2. Keep it simple, if you do decide on a complex arrangement, might be best to simplify your colors to help with unity.
3. Decide on a viewpoint, (eye level, above or below) and a Focal Point, a star for your show with supporting players.
4. Mood. Think this out ahead. Are you telling a story, creating a peaceful place that a person would want to enter? Is it moody, dramatic, energetic? For more creative set ups, pick a theme like music, (heavy metal or classical items) make a portrait out of a still life setup? Instead of making a direct likeness of your sitter, use meaningful objects from his life, such as mementoes, awards, and any items that reflect his personal interests or hobbies. Mementoes, sporting collections, personalized set ups with favorites (great for person who is shy about having a portrait done). Other ideas: antique toys, candy dishes, African sculpture, antique jewelry, tools, gardening/potting items, art supplies, shoes, books, ornaments, money, clothes, pots, glassware, hair accessories, polished silver and other metals....
Go beyond a few pieces of fruit with a cloth in the background.

Excerpts from above taken from <http://jackiesimmondsartyfacts.blogspot.com> and the oil painting medic at <http://rachel-shirley.blogspot.com>

<http://willkempartschool.com/the-secret-of-good-composition/> **The rectangular format:** this is an absolute classic and extremely flexible format. When a rectangle is displayed with its shorter side across the top it is known as 'portrait format' and with its longer side across the top 'landscape format'.

The square format: This can work extremely well or very badly. You very rarely see a square old master painting. This is because it is harder to balance a painting that has lots of elements within, for example, a collection of figures in a landscape within a square format. It can look awkward very easily. However, using a square format for a more contemporary subject, an abstract or a minimalist seascape, can be very effective.

3 is the magic number

1. Composition is about variety just "don't make any two things the same"
2. The "Rule of Thirds" can be key to creating balance in landscape painting
Make sure the shapes, spaces and gaps between objects are all different.

A Brief History The rule of thirds was first written down by John Thomas Smith in 1797. In his book Remarks on Rural Scenery: *"Rule of thirds", (if I may be allowed so to call it)..., in a design of landscape, to determine the sky at about two-thirds ; or else at about one-third, so that the material objects might occupy the other two : Again, two thirds of one element, (as of water) to one third of another element (as of land); and then both together to make but one third of the picture, of which the two other thirds should go for the sky and aerial perspectives."*

If you put the principle of 'no two spaces the same' with the 'rule of thirds' you can create pleasing compositions very easily. If we analyze the quote below by Sir Joshua Reynolds we can see how both these points are touched upon.

"Two distinct, equal lights, should never appear in the same picture : One should be principal, and the rest sub-ordinate, both in dimension and degree : Unequal parts and gradations lead the attention easily from part to part, while parts of equal appearance hold it awkwardly suspended"

This last comment is the key, nobody wants a painting 'awkwardly suspended'. He also comments on the importance of contrast when creating a harmony to your work:

"And to give the utmost force and solidity to your work, some part of the picture should be as light, and some as dark as possible : These two extremes are then to be harmonized and reconciled to each other."

The golden mean Classical paintings had a very scientific and structured approach, with lots of confusing things like root rectangles and golden means. They are often more mathematical and planned out than you would ever imagine....

The key point to remember with composition is about variety - just "**don't make any two things the same**" and start with a rectangle canvas.

Four Rules of Photographic Composition

by [Elizabeth Halford](#)

Here are four hard and fast rules of composition I can't live without:



Thirds – This may be the most widely known rule of composition among photographers. There's even an option in most DSLRs to switch on a visual grid in your viewfinder. This rule states that for an image to be visually interesting, the main focus of the image needs to lie along one of the lines marked in thirds. For example, according to this rule, a horizon shouldn't be smack bang in the middle of a photo, but on the bottom third. A single tree in a field should be aligned with one of the two vertical lines.



Rule of odds – The rule of odds states that images are more visually appealing when there is an odd number of subjects. For example, if you are going to place more than one person in a photograph, don't use two, use 3 or 5 or 7, etc. Of course this is a pretty silly notion for an engagement shoot, right? Or a wedding shoot. Or a family with only two kids. But when possible, when you are not just shooting real life but composing images (still life, family groups, flowers) remember the rule of odds. Studies have shown that people are actually more at ease and comfort when viewing imagery with an odd number of subjects. I'd be very interested to know the different opinions readers have for why that is. I'll share mine in the comments below.



Rule of space – I used to get this rule mixed up with the rule of thirds. The rule of space probably comes naturally to you and you don't even know it's a rule of composition. The rule of space says that in order to portray movement, context and the idea that the photo is bigger than just the part that you're seeing, you need to leave clutter free 'white' spaces. For example if you're photographing a runner, give him a space to run into. Don't photograph him with all the space in the world behind him because this doesn't help the viewer picture the forward motion & the space he has yet to run. If you're making a portrait of a woman laughing at something not in the photo, leave space in the direction where she is laughing. This leads the viewer to wonder what's just beyond the boundaries of the photo. What is she laughing at? The reason I got this mixed up with the rule of thirds is that naturally, when giving your subjects space, they will be placed in a third of the photo.



Viewpoint – Often referred to as POV, point of view is the most basic of composition rules. And it's as simple as clicking the shutter. You are your viewer. Your camera is their eye. If you photograph a dog at eye level, your viewer will be viewing the dog at eye level (which gives the idea/feeling of equality). If you photograph a dog from below, your viewer will be seeing the dog from below (a low shot gives the notion of dominance). If you photograph a dog from above, you are projecting a feeling of your viewer's superiority in relation to the dog.

What's your favourite rule of composition? What goes through your head each and every time you compose a shot?

Read more from our [Composition Tips](#), [Photography Tips and Tutorials](#) Category

Read more: <http://digital-photography-school.com/four-rules-of-photographic-composition#ixzz21hCSaMxP>