

Still life/‘The curved mark’

Introductory talk with images

Step 1

Before the talk, each student should be given a copy of the student pack for Unit 1.

The talk consists of:

- discussion of genres in art
- the genre of still life
- Theme 1 – Art about making art
- Theme 2 – Art as allegory

Assessment

Students should know the justification for this unit, the relevant deadlines and the assessment criteria. Formative assessment follows each step of the unit. Summative assessment will bind the marking for each step with the final resolution to give an overall grade for the whole unit. Assessment should be continuous throughout the unit.

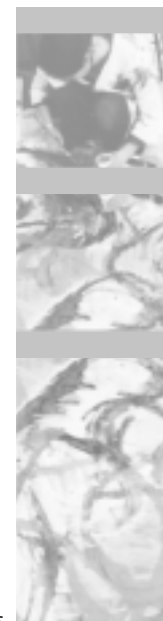
Self-assessment exercises

Self-assessment is a useful exercise throughout the unit. Once you have gone through assessment in some detail against the objectives, divide students into pairs and give them the work of two other students to mark, using copies of the coursework assessment matrix sheet included in the student pack, and keeping notes as they go. Each pair will then have to explain to the rest of the group the marks they have given; objectivity is obviously the key. Exercises like these help students to realise the importance of contextual studies, which can cover half the assessment objectives, *equal* to the final piece, which is popularly assumed to be the main provider of marks.

The justification for Unit 1

If this is the first unit since GCSE and the first piece of art work most students will have made since the previous May, it is important to spell out the key differences between GCSE and AS work.

- (1) The range and scale of materials and techniques used for drawing widens; at AS, drawing is grandly called ‘visual research’, and the process of recording visual research is usually named ‘mark-making’. The students are encouraged to explore forms of mark-making that they might not have encountered before and to show ways in which they can *read* how and why artists have used similar methods. This justification is linked to Theme 1 of this unit: art about making art.



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- (2) At AS, the depth of the research into the work of others is greater. It is not what an artist or, more usually, groups and movements of artists did, but *why* they made their work in particular ways that is important. How did that new art deal with what went before? How did it affect those who came after? What is the relevance of the answers to these questions to each student's own work? This unit will lead students through the search for meaning. The justification is loosely linked to Theme 2 of this unit: art as allegory.

How can the teacher know the students' answers to these questions unless they are included in the work journals in explicit depth? The processes laid out in the following steps are largely visual, to do with drawing and mark-making and designed to foster a growing awareness of visual language.

Introductory talk with images

In this talk with images it is essential to bring out the two themes:

Theme 1 Art about making art

Art that celebrates and examines the process of making.

Theme 2 Art as allegory

Art that uses one subject to investigate another; allegory or, literally, 'saying something else'.

Two key images lock into these themes:

Theme 1 *Cézanne's Still life with plaster cupid (RM1a)*

Theme 2 *Caravaggio's Supper at Emmaus (RM1b)*

Encourage the students to make brief visual notes in their work journals as you make your way through Step 1.

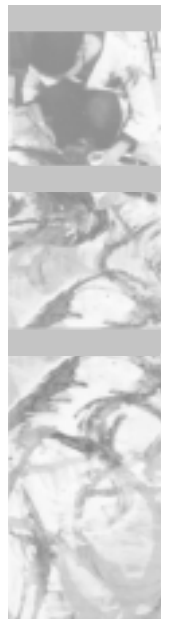
Overview of the introductory talk with images

The students' task is to make a piece of art, in this case a still life, one of the traditional subjects or *genres* of art. What do these subjects mean?

- A discussion about ways in which the subjects for making art were traditionally divided up; the *genres* (French for 'kinds', 'categories').
- Careful definitions of the *genres* with examples to show students that each genre has been chosen for a reason and what that reason might be.
- Introduction of the two themes and how they relate to the students' chosen subject: still life.
- Examples of images that illustrate the two themes.

Introducing the genres

The subjects for art were traditionally divided into types or 'genres', arranged in a hierarchy of importance: the closer the art came to 'real life', the lower it was placed in the hierarchy. The exact titles for the genres may vary, but they are basically history, portrait, landscape, still life and genre (a special use of the word



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to mean 'everyday life'). Many of the images used to illustrate the introductory talk are shown again during the discussion of the two themes for this unit. This will make students familiar with the works.

It is interesting that the Tate Modern has re-established this way of displaying art, moving away from the idea of the chronological progression or development of art. The Tate Modern *genre* classifications are: History/Memory/Society; Nude/Action/Body; Landscape/Matter/Environment; Still life/Object/Real life.

History painting

History painting is sometimes referred to as 'the grand manner'. Artists described the ideal, often by painting biblical and historical subjects or scenes from the classical past, e.g. David's *The oath of the Horatii*. Does that search for the ideal continue with painters like Rothko, whose *Seagram murals* are now on show in the Rothko Room at Tate Modern, or the Chapman Brothers' unpleasant reworking of Goya, *Great deeds against the dead*, from the Sensation exhibition in 1994?

Portrait

The role of the portrait varies according to the culture it is depicting. There is more to it than reproducing the shape of a face – look at Picasso's portrait of *David Henry Kahnweiler* for the perfect formalist portrait. Portraiture includes self-portraits, and much of the late twentieth century's interest in identity might come under this heading, e.g. Gilbert and George's *DEATH HOPE LIFE FEAR*.

Landscape

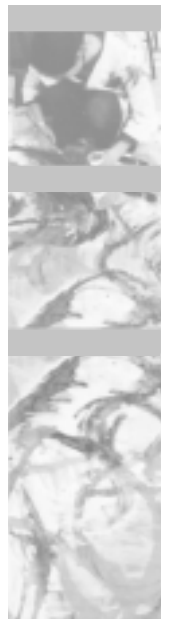
Landscape is not as straightforward a definition as you might think (read John Berger's analysis in *Ways of Seeing* of Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Robert Andrews*). Landscape covers everything from Constable's *Hay wain* to land art, for instance Richard Long's *Slate circle*, and could also take in any depiction of deep pictorial space, as in de Kooning's *Suburb in Havana* or *Door to the River*.

Still life

Still life concentrates on the close observation of relatively small objects. Much still life is concerned with form, e.g. Cézanne's *Still life with water jug* and the subsequent developments in Cubism, e.g. Braque's *Clarinet and bottle of rum on a mantelpiece*.

The seventeenth-century sub-genre of the 'vanitas' still life contains a specific meaning – the emptiness of material possession in the face of death. Harmen Steenwyck's *Still life: an allegory of the vanities of human life* is a good example: the skull for death, the passing of time in the watch, the impermanence of life in the trickle of smoke that will soon vanish. Damien Hirst's *The impossibility of death in the mind of someone living*, a dead shark suspended in formaldehyde in a display case, is a modern treatment of the theme.

Since still life involves identifiable everyday objects, there is considerable scope for cultural critique. We can find examples in Pop Art – Jasper Johns' *Three flags* and the whole 'flag' series. John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* talks about how 'merchandise' became the subject matter of art. A painting is a demonstration



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of more than the virtuosity of the artist: 'It confirms the owner's wealth and habitual style of living.'

Genre

Genre paintings are representations of ordinary, everyday life – Jan Steen's skittle players, Vermeer's scenes of domestic contentment, as in *A woman standing at a virginal*. Importantly, the subject is not idealised or elevated to the ideal. Tracey Emin's tent perhaps – *Everyone I have ever slept with, 1963–1995* – might fit into this category.

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Analysis of still life as a subject for Unit 1

Still life involves a way of looking – visual concentration on a collection of objects that can be understood at a single glance but which exclude the human figure. People are *implied* by the selection of objects and the ways of 'seeing' them.

Fruit and vegetables

A good place to start is fruit and vegetables, a theme that can be traced back to antiquity, for example in wall paintings in Pompeii and Herculaneum. Paintings of fruit were part of a classical tradition that concerned two things: abundance and luxury of the subject matter, and the skill and virtuosity of the artist. The Roman myth of the origins of painting celebrated the ability to create life-like imitations of reality (*trompe l'oeil* – French 'deception of the eye'). The painter Zeuxis challenged his rival Parrhasios by painting a bunch of grapes so realistically that birds tried to peck at them. Parrhasios retaliated by painting a curtain over the grapes, which Zeuxis tried to open the next morning. Parrhasios had won by deceiving the eye of a painter, whereas Zeuxis had only fooled a bird. Any later paintings of grapes reiterate this theme.

In the past, artists have been aware of this story, and images of grapes are often a deliberate reference to the allegorical beginnings of painting and a celebration of the artist's ability to deceive the eye. Of course, still life is not restricted to fruit and vegetables; the list is endless, limited only by the need to represent objects that are domestic in scale. Often still lives are included in a larger painting.

Themes in still life

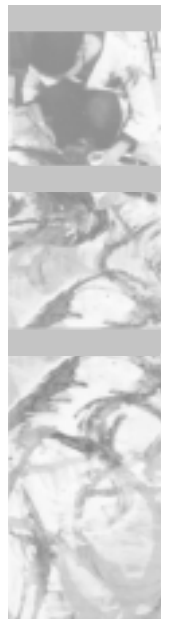
You can follow two key themes throughout the history of art:

Theme 1 Art that celebrates and examines the process of making art

Theme 2 Art that uses one subject to investigate another – allegory or literally 'saying something else'

Theme 1 Art about making art

- Courbet's *After dinner at Ornans* illustrates the Realist approach. Realists refused to paint subjects from mythology. They painted real people, peasants not goddesses, real food on the table.
- Look at the still life of bread and wine in Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, a work that fits all the genres of art into one painting. Manet was using traditional



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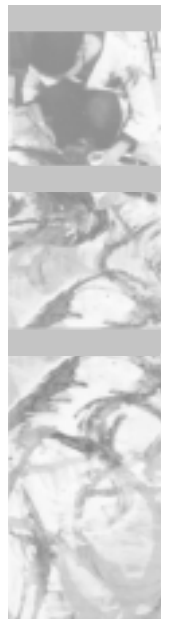
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compositional methods but a new painting style to present the ‘modern life’ of Paris in the 1860s.

- Picasso, some 44 years later, also recognised that including a still life in a larger painting makes the viewer look for more than one meaning: for instance, in his key Modernist work *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, the still life of a bowl of fruit refers back to Cézanne and the importance of visual analysis when creating three-dimensional form on a two-dimensional surface.
- Cézanne, fixated on painting how he saw, analyses the process of looking in his *Still life with plaster cupid*. The work is full of references to making art: it is a painting of a statue as well as a painting of a painting of a statue. Why is the background distorted? It is an examination of peripheral vision. Hold a finger in front of you and stare intently at it without moving your eye. How much background can you see? How does it distort? Now look at Cézanne's still life: he painted what he saw, not a Renaissance illusion of perspective.
- Picasso and Braque used Cézanne's example as the first step towards Cubism. Cubism broke with the past conventions for representing not only three-dimensional objects but also the space that surrounds them. Look at Picasso's *Still life with fringe*. Scrap materials represent a glass of absinthe and other objects. This is the beginning of *collage*; ordinary materials or objects are stuck together to represent other ordinary objects.
- Marcel Duchamp, the Dadaist, took further the notion of including objects to make art. The art object became independent as in the first ‘readymade’, *Fountain*, the urinal signed R. Mutt (the alias Duchamp chose to use for this particular work). As Duchamp said: ‘He chose it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view, created a new thought for that object.’
- After Duchamp, *choice* itself becomes the art. Damien Hirst in 1991 was able to present a pickled shark in a gallery (*The impossibility of death in the mind of someone living*) without having touched it himself, but the work still remained firmly within the genre of still life and still within the theme of ‘art about making art’.

Theme 2 Still life: art as allegory

- Caravaggio's painting, *Basket of fruit*, places the fruit above the viewer, a ‘composition’ that is very similar to classical Roman wall painting, e.g. in Pompeii. It also shows his ability to paint an object so that it appears to be about to fall on top of us. Caravaggio started his apprenticeship painting fruit, a subject showing his virtuosity.
- You can see how he uses the effect again in *Supper at Emmaus*, where a similar bowl of fruit almost falls into the viewer's lap, intensifying the surprise as Christ declares himself. If we look closely at the bowl of fruit, we see that the fruit is rotten – there is disease in the heart of man.
- *Fruit and flowers in a terracotta vase* by Jan van Os continues this theme. It is an extravagant display that celebrates the wealth of a patron who could afford expensive, rare plants (tulips), exotic fruits (pineapple) and flowers that came



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into bloom at different times of the year. Even in this abundance there are predators and decay. A mouse is eating the walnut; a fly stalks the grapes; the dragonfly and butterflies are symbols of human ephemerality.

- Dutch artists represented mortality in the specialised still-life form of the 'vanitas' paintings: 'In the day of prosperity be joyful but in the day of adversity consider...vanity of vanities; all is vanity.' For instance, *Still life: an allegory on the vanities of human life* by Harmen Steenwick contains the usual skull as a reminder of mortality alongside indicators of human glory – the sword (for war) and the exotic shell from the newly conquered colonies. The snuffed-out lamp and the watch show time running out, even though the shape of the lute and the water bowl act as reminders of fertility.
- The combination of found object (*objet trouvé*) and assemblage in the Surrealist object is also an example of allegory. Meret Oppenheim's fur cup and saucer, *Dinner in fur*, is an uncomfortable arrangement – the thought of drinking from such a cup provokes straightforward sexual associations. It is a metaphor for the Surrealist belief, derived from the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, that objects can have subconscious associations or meanings. Beneath external reality lies a very different world, and objects like Oppenheim's are the route to it.
- Pop Art took the Surrealist interest further, finding new contexts for individual objects and new understandings. Jasper Johns' 'flag' series, for example *Three flags*, takes the American flag and presents it as an object in itself. But it's not a real flag; it has never rippled in the breeze or hung limply. It is the 'idea' or 'sign' of the flag, a serious investigation of formal *and* political identity for a prosperous and expansionist country soon to be involved in the Vietnam war. (A useful reference book is *Shock of the New* by Robert Hughes – details are included in the bibliography for the unit.)

