

the artist

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**EXTRA
CONTENT
FOR DIGITAL
READERS
INSIDE**



WATERCOLOUR
e 1 of 94 pages  techniques



OILS
How to use shapes to build



ACRYLICS
Paint a night-time harbour

A modern take on still life

Ollie Tuck shows how everyday food items and crockery can make wonderful subjects for the still-life oil painter

In recent years I have been hooked on food as the subject of my still-life paintings. The infatuation prospered during lockdown when we made daily visits to our local farm shop and the weekly fish counter there. It was a time when we were all trying to occupy ourselves by making an event of everyday activities such as walking and cooking. This seeped into my painting practice as I began to turn the everyday food items that we'd purchased into subjects for my paintings. Even now that the world has opened up again I still find that food makes wonderful painting subjects that continue to hold my attention.

The colour and light that can be found in natural subjects, and particularly seafood, lends itself perfectly to painting; this is one reason why it has been studied

by artists in various styles over centuries. I studied history of art at university, so I have an awareness of what has come before and have always had an interest in still-life paintings. A period when this genre was really celebrated is the Dutch Golden Age, when commodities such as food and flowers were the subject of sumptuous and disorderly paintings. Although my own work differs greatly in style and context I do look to the combinations of textures and objects from this period as inspiration for my own paintings.

Composition

When arranging a still-life composition I focus on trying to establish a satisfying combination of colour, texture and pattern. My still lifes are created with varying combinations of four common

components. A natural subject, such as food or flowers, arranged with crockery and/or fabrics, composed within strong, natural light. The fabrics and crockery that I use are ones that I collect for my home. The everyday nature of these subjects lend themselves to creating decorative paintings with a homely feel. I enjoy the interplay of patterns that can be created between different elements of a composition. Contrasting hues can also be used to create interest in a still life.

Beyond the physical components of my compositions, the most important element is light. Light helps to create contrast and depth in a painting by creating shadows and reflections that help to communicate the different shapes and textures. My still-life demonstration is a simple arrangement of a natural element (garlic) with some of my

favourite Cornishware crockery. I like my still-life arrangements to feel relatable and I therefore prefer objects that are recognisable but which authentically exist together in a home. This bowl is the garlic bowl that I use in my home; it is embarrassingly full and messy (no judgement please!) but I feel that gives life to the composition.

Once I have assembled my still life and I am happy with the composition, I select the appropriate size of board to paint on. I usually have a rough idea of the size of the painting I wish to create before arranging my composition but the specific proportions become clear once the still life has been arranged. I always paint on gesso-primed lightweight MDF that I source through my brilliant framer (Bespoke Framing, Buckinghamshire). At the beginning of a new collection of work I will bulk order a mixed selection of standard sizes, such as 8x10in (20x25.5cm), and 12x10in (30.5x25.5cm), alongside some larger boards, which I can cut myself for unusual compositions. It is for this reason, and for the texture of the hard, primed surface, that I prefer to use boards as opposed to canvases.

Palette

Once my surface is selected, I prepare my palette (see materials list over the page). I use Michael Harding oil paints because his colours are rich and highly pigmented. Some artists' palettes are very neat, but,



▲ Tulips with Blue and White Patterns, oil on board, 10x10in (25.5x25.5cm)



▲ Asparagus, oil on board, 8¼x15¼in (22x40cm)

OLLIE'S TIPS

- Start simple. To begin with, choose a limited number of objects and focus on painting them successfully. You can add more elements to your compositions as your confidence grows.
- Look to the past to move your compositions forward. If you are unsure about how to arrange a still life, why not look at paintings throughout history? You can find inspiration for object placement, lighting and so much more by looking at these old paintings. This doesn't mean copy! I recommend Jan Davidsz. de Heem, Caravaggio, William Nicholson and Pierre Bonnard.
- Use light to avoid dull paintings. If you want natural light but work slowly, set up your still life somewhere that you can return to over multiple days. For more control, block out excess natural

light and use artificial lighting for your composition instead.

- Look for shapes and values rather than edges. It is better to look at the different shapes of colour and light that make up your composition rather than the overall shape of the objects.
- Turn up the colour. Pushing your colours slightly beyond what you can see can really bring your painting to life. If you see a hint of blue in a shadow, why not make it slightly bluer.
- Work from back to front. Start with roughly laying in the background and work forwards from there.
- Work thin to thick. Oil paints should be layered, but to keep your colours vibrant, make each layer slightly thicker than the last. This avoids muddiness and adds a looseness to your work. The final

highlights can be really thick and juicy!

- Pop the kettle on. It is important to take regular pauses from painting to avoid overworking it. Having a quick tea break will give you time to step away and return with fresh eyes.
- Keep some areas looser than others. Varying the amount of work you put into different areas of your painting creates contrast and relief for the eye. It also helps to maintain energy in the painting and prevents it from looking overworked.
- Paint from life, but photograph your work as you go. It is great to have a record of your process and photographing your work is another way of seeing it from another perspective. Looking back on your photographs will reveal things you may not have noticed, and you can take those lessons forward in your practice.

DEMONSTRATION *Garlic Bowl*

MATERIALS

- Gesso-primed MDF panel.
- Winsor & Newton Galeria gesso.
- Michael Harding oil paint: Titanium white No 2; lamp black; raw umber; ultramarine blue; cadmium red light; cadmium yellow; cadmium yellow golden; yellow ochre; yellow lake; and kings blue.
- Mediums: Gamsol odorless mineral spirits and Zest-It clear painting medium.
- Brushes: A wide selection ranging from super fine sables to size 12 synthetic hog brushes.
- Other: Rags. I prefer to recycle old clothes and sheets to use as rags to wipe my brushes. I am a messy painter and therefore tend to wear overalls or oversized jumpers that cover my everyday clothes.




▲ STAGE ONE

I created a rough drawing with raw umber, thinned with Gamsol, which can be removed and adjusted with ease using brushes or a rag

◀ STAGE TWO

Next I blocked in the colour paying attention to tone. Pinpoint the darkest and lightest areas of your composition and notice how all other areas relate to these. It is useful to squint at your set-up to help remove the details so that you can focus on the light. As I work through the painting, each layer will introduce increasingly lighter tones, which will culminate with those juicy bright highlights right at the end

and assess the drawing before starting to move into the detail. Keep stepping away at intervals throughout your painting process; you will often find me mug-in-hand looking at my painting and set-up from a few feet away.

As you add detail and light to your painting, try to think about the simplest way of depicting a subject. This helps to keep a painting energetic and vibrant. I also like to add vibrancy to my paintings by pushing the colours to their boldest expression; the phrase I use to describe this is 'turn up the colour' like you might turn up the volume. I like to think that the beginning of a painting is for accuracy and the end is for fun. 



sadly, I'm not one of them. I habitually add new paint to old, in the same areas of the palette each time and mix medium into them with a palette knife. Mediums speed up drying times and add a glossy lustre to the paints and subsequently the finished painting.

Once all the preparations have been made, I can begin painting. I tend to mark the outermost points of my composition before committing to further drawing so that I can ensure that I am working to the right scale for my canvas. I continue

drawing a rough outline of the elements using a brush to measure approximately how they relate to each other before laying in the shadows. Painting an underdrawing is useful as you can use a rag or brush to take away paint to lighten an area or correct part of the drawing before introducing colour.

Once the first stage is complete it's time for a brew! I recommend popping the kettle on at this point and having a cup of tea. This provides a brief pause in which you can step away from the painting



▲ STAGE THREE

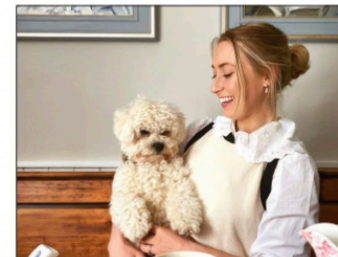
I completed the first layer of colour. Working from dark to light will mean that, at this stage, your painting will look like a version of your composition with the brightness turned down. Note that the edges of the objects are not defined with hard lines and the painting consists of patches of overlapping colours



▲ FINISHED PAINTING

Garlic Bowl, oil on board, 10x12in (25.5x35.5cm)

It was time to turn on the light and turn up the colour. Take another moment to look at your set-up and painting to identify the brightest sections and/or areas that you feel can handle more colour. Perhaps there's a slight blueness to a shadow that you can increase. For example, in this painting, note the brightest blue on the Cornishware, which I have made bolder. The magentas in the garlic cloves are also exaggerated and I have emphasised the highlight on the whole garlic bulb using pure titanium white for extra shine



Ollie Tuck

is a Sussex-based still-life painter who has exhibited with the RSMA and ROI. She is inspired by the beauty of everyday objects and has won awards including the RSMA Next Generation Award and Holly Bush Painter Prize, best figurative painting, 2021. Ollie regularly exhibits with The Watermill Gallery, Aberfeldy and Nadia Waterfield Fine Art, Hampshire. For information about upcoming exhibitions please visit www.ollietuckart.com or follow @ollietuckart on Instagram.