



10 Tips to Get Started with Still Life Photography

By **Simon Bray**, 3 Dec 2011

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There aren't many photographic practices that date back further than still life photography. When photography originated, it was necessary for exposures to be quite long, so photographing static objects was the ideal subject matter. However, as the technology developed, the fascination for capturing still life has remained and is still one of the most viable photographic professions today.

At the top end, it is an extremely lucrative business, as magazines, catalogues and websites all require product shots. There are many advantages to working with still life that are often underestimated, so hopefully you'll be able to see it's scope for creativity and get started with taking some shots yourself!

1. Getting Started

Contrary to common perceptions, you don't need a studio or a fancy location to make a start with still life photography. You can begin by simply using a space at home, such as a table placed by a window, along with a simple backdrop and utilizing a couple of lamps.

It varies greatly to landscape or portrait photography, in which you are provided with the subject matter, for example, a stunning mountain scene or a model, which come with a huge amount of variables, but the creative content is there in front of you. With still life photography, there are far less variables, you, as the photographer have complete control over the situation,

including the subject matter, but you need to think extremely creatively in order to capture it in an interesting and engaging way.



Photo by [apwizard](#)

2. Choosing the subject

What you photograph is completely up to you. Have a search around the house to see if you can find something simple but interesting to start with. Please don't feel like you have to take photos of fruit or flowers just because everyone else does, think outside the box without being overly ambitious.

If, when you're out and about, something catches your eye, take it home with you (don't steal it!) or make a note of it so as to remember to try photographing it in a still life context. Try to avoid reflective surfaces such as glass and metal to begin with, as they will be extremely difficult with regards to lighting. Once you've mastered the single object shots, try mixing it up, combine objects of contrasting shape, colour, texture and see what you can come up with.



Photo by [whereisyourmind](#)

3. Lighting

Lighting doesn't have to be expensive, I know certainly for me that a set of studio lights aren't really within my budget, so for still life shoots I need to utilize all the light I can get my hands one. Remember that you have full control over the shoot, so if you want, find a room in which you can block out all natural light by using shutters or curtains, this way you will have complete control over the light upon your subject.

Using standard lamps can work extremely well if used effectively. Be sure to try multiple positioning set ups, not all light has to come from the front of the object, side and back lighting will add interest, shadows and depth to the shot. Alternatively, choose a room that is well lit via a window, and use this to your advantage. The natural light from one side will comprehensively light your subject and you can compliment this with a lamp or reflector.



Photo by [brtsergio](#)

4. Tripods and Angles

Depending on your lighting situation, you may or may not need to use a tripod and shutter release. I would recommend using these as they will allow you to observe and work with your subject matter. This set up will also allow you to use slightly longer shutter speeds than usual to ensure a small aperture allowing the image to be in focus front to back, if you so choose.

However, please don't let a static camera stifle your creativity, it quickly gets forgotten that

your camera has been sat in the same position for the whole shoot. Be sure to vary the angles and heights at which you are shooting. Otherwise, before you know it, you'll have a whole collection of shots all take from the same point with little or know variation. Mix it up a bit. Try shooting at the level of the subject or try a bird's eye view, looking down onto the subject, but be careful if you are moving around not to cast any shadows on your subject!



Photo by [yjhsu](#)

5. Get the backdrop right

Having a suitable backdrop for your subject matter will play a crucial role in the overall success of your shots. It's best to keep it nice and simple, so it doesn't interfere with your subject. A plain painted wall or a large sheet of white or plain colored paper would be ideal.

Think about how your choice of background contrasts the subject, do you want a neutral background, or are there tones that may work in complimenting the shades within your subject. For smaller objects, you may not need a backdrop as such, but instead require a surface to place the items on, for which something like black velvet is ideal, as it absorbs light and looks like a solid black surface.



Photo by [darktechsystem](#)

6. Composing the shot

The compositional element of your still life work is an absolutely crucial part of ensuring that your work is engaging and unique. Consider the rule of thirds, how can that be applied to your shoot to create a strong composition. Ensure there are no distractions within the frame, just

the subject and the backdrop.

Be sure to vary the composition of the subject matter through the shoot and think outside the box. Where are you leading the eye within the image? Are you utilizing negative space or might it work to try and fill the frame? Engage with the subject, what are its defining features? What is it used for? Are you able to put it into context or does it work as a stand alone subject?



Photo by [lindenbaum](#)

7. Taking all day over it

I often find that my mentality surrounding a shoot is dependent on the reason for the shoot. So if I am simply taking photos for pleasure or for myself (as opposed to being assigned work by somebody else), I will be less stringent with ensuring that all the aspects of the shoot are as well executed as they can be. This is obviously a bad habit that am aiming to shed, but when it comes to still life photography, there is no reason not to get it right. You have as much time as

you need to do a good job!

Unlike a landscape shoot, the light isn't rapidly changing and unlike a portrait, your subject isn't going to get bored of keeping still for long periods of time. Take advantage of this, set up your subject, lighting, backdrop and camera, try a few shots, then move things around a bit and have another go. If you get to a point where you feel like things aren't going quite right, you can just leave everything set up, make yourself a cup of tea and come back to it refreshed later on.

Another advantage is that there's no excuse not to have clean and sharp images, take time to get the lighting and focus just right. If you can get your hands on one, a macro lens will be ideal for this sort of work, however, if not, try selecting macro mode on your camera to give you the best chance of capturing the close up detail in your subject.



Photo by [vamedia](#)

8. Inspired by the masters

If you're struggling with the lighting, composing or structuring of your shots, then you need to find some inspiration, and where better to look than to the original still life masterpieces of years gone by. Have a search online for renaissance still life artists and observe the elements of the pieces.

Studying these paintings will help you to think about form, shades and how the colors work together and will hopefully give you a few ideas on how you can shape your photography work to form strong and engaging images.



Photo by [layos](#)

9. Now it's your turn!

Now it's time for you to have a go yourself. Find a quiet day in your schedule and set aside some time to practice. Try setting up your camera and backdrop by a suitably light spot next to a window and get snapping!

Once you've mastered the basics, try getting creative, experiment with camera angles, lighting angles and alternative light sources such as candles and lamps. You could even try getting creative with apertures and use a f/1.8 prime lens to achieve an artistic shallow focus. However, if you take one thing from this tutorial, let it be this: still life photography does not have to be of fruit and flowers! So find some unique and inspiring subject matter that gets you excited and start shooting!



Photo by [apwizard](#)

10. Making a living?

There is plenty of demand for still life photography, particularly now that it is so simple for photographers to provide images for stock photography libraries, that are accessed by magazines, business publications and for online content. Once you've got your shots, don't be afraid to share them online, you could even try using Envato's PhotoDune stock photography service. So each time you set up a shoot, work as if you are on assignment, you never know, your still life work might even make you a few bucks along the way!

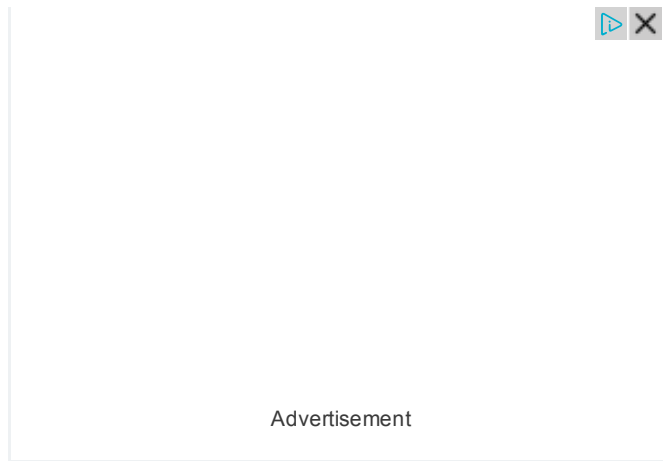


Photo by [gfpeck](#)

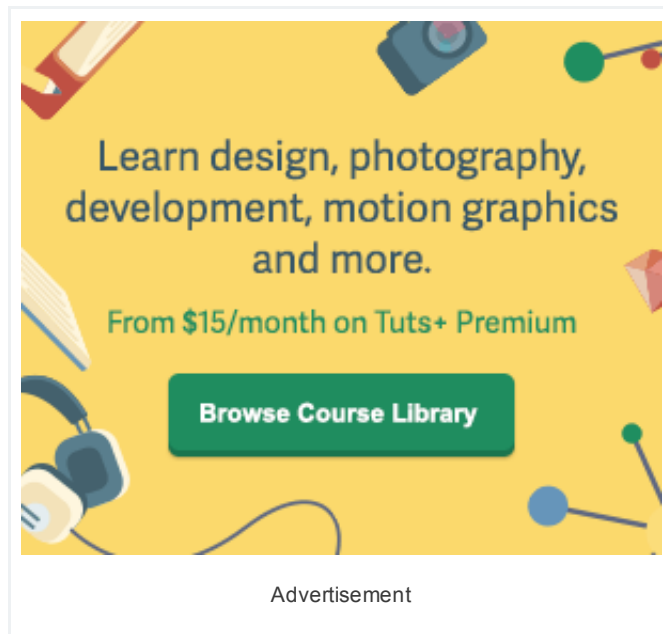
Tutorial Details

Difficulty: [Intermediate](#)

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About the Author

Simon Bray is a freelance photographer from Manchester, UK, working on commercial shoots as well [more...](#)



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Landscape Photo Shop · 8 months agoGreat post and great information! :) <http://landscapephotographyscho...>

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Narnie · 9 months ago

Thanksfor the tutorial. Should I use daylight balanced bulbs in the lamps I am using, to colour correct the images?

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jenny · a year ago

I was eying my dark navy velvet bedspread this morning after reading your article last night- it will make a wonderful backdrop for the still life photos I'll be taking today!

Your advice was inspiring and practical. I often take photos as I love watercolour painting and I'm always looking for subject matter. Sadly my photos do not always come out as imagined, buty with your techniques they should improve. The dark tones in your photos would be good translated into oil painting, so will start that too-thanks for the impetus I needed!

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luz aida · a year ago

Great tutorial, thank you very much

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Clint Rooney · a year ago

"with little or know variation" oh year, now that's an amazing way of spelling "no"

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**Susan** → **Clint Rooney** · a year ago

...and that's an amazing way of spelling 'dear'. If you're going to post such a pathetic remark about a really good tutorial, at least get your own spelling right.

10 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

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Ben · 2 years ago

In that home-made rig shown at the top, what sort of translucent paper or plastic sheet do you use? I'm building a light tent from a cardboard box, and maybe will try a rig like above. I thought about trying parchment paper, which is usually used for baking, since it's very translucent and light. What other materials are good?

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prashant · 2 years ago

nicely put together

will have to trv more of still life...

...have to try more of them...

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yanti aja · 2 years ago

I do enjoying diz still lyf photography...nice tutorial and thanks for sharing...GBU

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