



Summary Article: **still life**  
From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

a pictorial representation of inanimate objects. The term derives from the 17th-century Dutch *still-leven*, meaning a motionless natural object or objects.

Image from: [Still Life in National Gallery Collection](#)

### Evolution of Still Life

Until the Renaissance, elements of still life, often imbued with symbolic or ritual significance, appeared as subordinate subject matter in religious or allegorical paintings. Hellenistic frescoes and mosaics from Pergamon, Alexandria, Rome, and Pompeii included depictions of plants and food in which a trompe l'oeil illusionism was often stressed. In early Christian and Byzantine religious paintings still-life elements were handled in a schematized and symbolic fashion until the end of the Middle Ages. Franco-Flemish paintings of the late Gothic era revealed close observation of natural details, as seen in much of the period's manuscript illumination.

At the beginning of the Italian Renaissance such detail was handled far more formally and was utterly dominated by the religious theme of the work, as in the paintings of Giotto. By the 15th cent. still-life objects were used to enhance the illusion of scientific perspective, a subject of passionate study in the new humanism. At that time still life became a separate genre in Italy; it was used to great effect by masters of marquetry.

It was in the religious works of Northern European masters that the revival of the study of nature was most completely revealed. The van Eycks, van der Weyden, van der Goes, and Robert Campin, to name but a few, observed carefully and recorded exactly objects of everyday use and subjects from nature. They incorporated these into religious works, giving them more and more importance until the still-life elements appeared in the foreground and diminished the religious, or landscape subject, as in the works of Aertsen and Beuckelaer.

Specialists in the handling of specific textures or effects such as glass, fur, plants, and the translucence of grapes came into being. Where Italian artists had communication with Northern masters, their works reflected the Northern interest in still-life subjects. The direction of this influence was reversed by the time of Caravaggio. Specialty pictures were the first major separate still lifes. These included works on the *vanitas vanitatum* theme featuring skull, hourglass, candle, book, and flowers in their iconography, as well as the banquet pieces that had become popular with collectors of 1600.

### Still Life in the Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries

Still life was developed as a separate genre primarily in the Netherlands in the works of Jan Bruegel (see under Bruegel, family), Rubens, Snyder, and Rembrandt. In France still life was used in the 17th cent. primarily for trompe l'oeil exercises and not significantly elevated until it received brilliant handling by Chardin in the 18th cent. French 19th-century masters, including Courbet and Cézanne, adopted still life wholeheartedly, giving it status equal to that of their other subjects. In the United States, Harnett and Peto used still life in order to display brilliant trompe l'oeil techniques.

### Still Life in the Twentieth Century

In the 20th cent. both American and European artists' most characteristic subject matter was still life.

The cubist artists, Picasso, Braque, and Gris, painted still-life subjects predominantly. The artists in many schools of abstract painting, beginning with Cézanne and continuing to the present day, forsook the objective representation of still life and developed myriad varieties of treatment of the subject, concentrating on color, form, and composition. Occasionally they painted other subjects, applying to these their still-life stylistic techniques. The painters of the pop art movement and their followers frequently criticized contemporary social values using, almost exclusively, still-life subject matter. They chose objects of popular culture relevant to their thesis such as soup cans and comic strips.

## East Asian Still Life

In East Asia still-life subjects were depicted as early as the 11th cent. Chinese works were distinguished by brilliant brushwork and rapid execution. Objects were frequently endowed with symbolic import in both Chinese works and the Japanese compositions often derived from them. The importance of illusionistic representation of the object was minimized in East Asian Art, and in general its treatment of still life does not correspond with that of Western art.

## Bibliography

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