Best Still Life Painting Techniques and Stories that Inspire
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Winning Still Life Paintings from *The Artist’s Magazine’s* Annual Art Competition

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*On the cover: Bouquet (oil, 13x11) by Will Wilson.*

*Above: Tin Elephant (acrylic, 16x20) by Jim Fetter.*
First Place
Will Wilson
The Dutch masters painted many an austere bouquet, but never one like this. “One day I hadn’t cleaned off my knives and they were all around the studio,” says San Francisco artist Will Wilson. “The vibrancy of the dried paint gave me the idea to put them in a vase.”

First Place
Bouquet (oil, 13x11) by Will Wilson.

A classically trained painter, Wilson creates his own paints by blending ground pigment with Maroger medium. Exaggerating the play of natural light in his studio, he painted each angular knife form in Bouquet one at a time. Here he limited his palette to gunmetal grays and muted browns, pretending the blades were paint-free to focus on contrasts of light vs. dark and reflective vs. dull surfaces. To balance the sharp upward motion of the splayed knives, he grounded the picture plane with a spherical turpentine cup and foreshortened paint tube.

The exuberant swirls of color encrusting the knives were added later, by spreading and scraping away textured layers of pigment with (you guessed it) a painting knife. To preserve his crisp edges, Wilson taped around the triangular blade forms before covering them with abstract tangles of oil paint. The result is simultaneously wild and contained. As a punctuation mark, Wilson added the delicately perched butterfly, whose wispy wings lighten the mood and weight of the image.

Second Place
Audrey Romano
In Memories of Times Gone By, every object has meaning, says Audrey Romano of Clifton Park, New York. “All the items were my mother’s. The scarf is one that she crocheted by hand. Objects such as the glass dish and the fan were from her house. The photograph is of me as a little girl.”

Romano spent more than a month completing this portrait of her past. Because the rose was perishable, she photographed her still life under studio lighting and then worked from photos for reference. On single-primed Belgian linen canvas, she carefully sketched in the objects with a washy mixture of
cobalt blue, burnt sienna and turpentine. Once satisfied with the rhythm of the composition, she developed a system of tonal values with painstaking detail, limiting the initial paint application to transparent oil washes.

Romano resolves the majority of a painting in this transparent stage with sable brushes to ensure colors that are pure, crisp and free of streaks. “By the time I go back in with permanent colors, I’m really just adding highlights and enhancements,” she says. For example, the old photograph was rendered nearly to completion with transparent ivory black, transparent brown and yellow. At the end, Romano glazed a light application of yellow ochre, raw sienna and white to mute the photo’s surface, then pulled out the details with additional washes of brown and black for an aged effect.

Third Place

Eric Wert

A former scientific illustrator, Chicago artist Eric Wert’s fascination with anatomical detail lingers, as seen in the intricate veins of the leaves in Caladium. It’s one of several images depicting ordinary houseplants freed from the confines of their pots. “The Hudson River School painters focused on the sublime in nature, characterizing nature as this unruly force that could take over,” explains Wert. “I like to give that same sense of wild abandon to natural things in domestic settings.”

To create the illusion of leaves glowing from within, Wert electrified his canvas with an underpainting of Gamblin’s radiant red mixed with Williamsburg’s dianthus pink. Working from photo references, he then sketched and refined his composition in pencil.

Nailing the details required zooming up close. Placing 4x5 transparencies of plant specimens on a light table, Wert used a magnifying glass to study the intricate details of the plant’s anatomy. These observations were parlayed onto his canvas via direct painting from left to right. Clove oil helped slow the drying time of his pre-mixed paints, keeping colors malleable for purposes of temperature and value adjustments. In the foreground, he hatched lightly over the pink base coat, lending a phosphorescent quality to the leaves.
Patricia Johnson

Pink ribbons from Patricia Johnson’s bridal headpiece mingle with stems of dried hydrangeas she discovered in a flea market in Honeymoon. “I liked the idea of these objects floating,” says the Pensacola, Florida, artist.

Painting from life and relying on her studio’s north light in the dead of winter, Johnson toned her canvas a neutral gray and mapped out a quick charcoal drawing. Details were then fine-tuned with a 4B pencil. Johnson blocked in the background first, blending Vandyke brown and titanium white for luminosity. From there, she tackled her main subjects, starting with the darkest darks. A few falling petals give the indication of a slight breeze, creating a sense of movement around the picture plane. The ribbons (which weren’t actually there) were added last to break the verticality of the composition. To harmonize the image, she infused the background with veiled hints of sap green and other colors pulled from her main subjects.

Shakeel Siddiqui

In Lace Tablecloth, a porcelain tea set rests on a high horizontal plane, counterbalancing the cascading material. “I wanted something simple at the top to keep the composition from becoming too busy,” says Shakeel Siddiqui, an oil painter and restoration artist living in United Arab Emirates.

To capture the elaborate nuances of the fabric, Siddiqui first painted the lace as if it were a solid piece of white cloth. Subtle value gradations in the folds were re-created using shades of titanium white mixed with burnt umber and hints of warm or cool colors. Once the surface dried, he meticulously painted the lace pattern, then (after it dried) he white-washed the area to meld the pattern with the cloth. With the lace design peeking through, he went back in and punched up the holes using a mixture of alizarin crimson, Prussian blue and viridian.

Jeanette H. Koumjian

Brooklyn artist Jeanette Koumjian has always savored rugs and textiles for their fibrous depth and rich colors. For Common Threads Unite Us, she says, “I chose patterns, textures and colors that evoked different cultures.”

Her pinwheel configuration emphasizes both the voluptuous folds and vernacular motifs of nine fabrics. On linen canvas, Koumjian did a grisaille underpainting (a detailed rendering in shades of gray). “This stage has to be a pretty strong representation of the values and shapes of objects in space,” she says. “It helps me anticipate problems.”

Once the values were perfected, Koumjian painted directly in oil color, first tackling the area with the most profound value contrast and then working outward. “While this still life is obviously representational, it also has an abstract quality,” she says.
First Place
Neil Carlin

“This painting is about the idea of spiritual or intellectual ascension, from a lower nature into a higher one,” says Neil Carlin, of Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. “The composition includes several living or formerly living objects, some in the process of dying [the roses], some remnants of life [the cicada shells], and others that represent death [the ram skull and crossbones]. The lotus is a symbol of rebirth, and the acorn hanging on a golden cord is a symbol of potential, of what could be.”

Carlin says he always wants his paintings to go beyond the literal interpretation. “I’d rather have a painting that’s engaging than have a technically unbelievable painting that’s one-dimensional in its meaning,” says Carlin, who earned a BFA in illustration from The University of the Arts in Philadelphia. He says his technical ability and artistry really blossomed during a five-year private study with New York City figure painter Michael Aviano.

Carlin, who now teaches at the Brandywine Atelier in Kennett Square, spent 170 hours on Transcendence, finishing it in a month. He transferred a full-size charcoal sketch to oil-primed linen, which he toned with a light-value wash of burnt umber and white. First he did the background, the ground plane and the skull; then he laid in all the shadows, planes and masses. He painted the lotus flower from life over dry paint and painted the skull using impasto to emphasize the lighter planes.
Second Place
Jim Fetter

When he retired 10 years ago, Jim Fetter figured he’d never again have to “paint tin,” referring to his years of illustration work for the automobile industry. But he built the still life Tin Elephant around ... well, a tin elephant.

“My wife collects elephants, so there’s no lack of subject matter lying around the house, particularly if I want to paint elephants all the time,” says the Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, artist. “What I liked about this guy was that he’s so crudely painted, and he was such a good foil for some of the other elements in the painting.” Playing textures against one another, Fetter juxtaposed the classical stature of an antique crock piece with the portly curves of a faux-Oriental vase, then added the whimsical touch of the fish-on-a-stick.

Fetter obliterated the white of the canvas with initial washes of middle tones, then blocked in general shapes of color. “Sometimes I get hung up on a single element,” he says. “But if I do that, when I come back the next day, I leave that area alone, or try to.”

His palette is a rectangular meat tray—the white porcelain kind used in butcher shops. He lines the tray with a 1-inch strip of a wet paper towel upon which he deposits globs of paint. He covers the tray between sessions and claims, with a touch of pride, that his acrylics stay wet for days.

Third Place
Judi Betts

Judi Betts says the key to painting is a simple concept: Use the fewest number of shapes possible to convey a scene. “I like painting configurations of overlapping shapes,” says the Baton Rouge, Louisiana, painter. “In the dining room of Happy Valentine’s Day, I liked the way the chairs overlap and make new invented shapes, and I liked the light coming through the windows and streaming through the transparent fabric of the tablecloths.”

Betts, who has been painting and teaching art for more than four decades, describes her work as creative realism. When she shares meals with her adult workshop students, for example, Betts engages them in one of her favorite creative exercises. “I paint my dinner,” she says. “It shows people they can paint anything, anywhere, anytime—and find inspiration everywhere.”

For this piece, Betts used a dominantly warm wash neutralized with cool grays, especially in the lower left corner of the painting. “Gradation has to come early in a painting,” she says, referring to the gradual progression of colors across the bottom third of the piece.

Betts paints with her canvas propped up, allowing the colors to move, which she says helps make her blends occur more naturally. She never revets the paper after the first wash, letting the paint dry between layers. She purposefully softens and mutes some objects—

Second Place
Tin Elephant (acrylic, 16x20) by Jim Fetter.

Third Place
Happy Valentine’s Day (watercolor, 22x30) by Judi Betts.
the chairs in this painting, for example—in an effort to heighten the focus of others, such as the brightly painted bouquet near the center.

**Honorable Mentions**

**Julene Baker**

Self-proclaimed gladiolus lover Julene Baker of Rogers, Arkansas, never tires of the subject matter of *Morning Light*—here she cropped tightly on the flowers’ sword-shaped leaves and brilliant spikes of color. “I just get excited about them,” says Baker, a self-taught artist. “I always look forward to summer, when my glads start to bloom.”

She spent hours arranging the light and shooting film to get the right reference shot (which she enlarged to 8x12) for this painting. Due to the large size of the final piece, she also spent much time laying out her initial drawing.

She worked primarily from dark to light on the flowers themselves, but laid in the dark background last. She blended colors with her fingers and sprayed a light mist of fixative between each layer of pastel.

**Jonathan Trotta**

Jonathan Trotta doesn’t hide his passion for the work of the old masters, and he modeled his lifesize *Skeleton With Studio Props* after the full-length portraits created by Diego Velázquez. (He even nicknamed his skeletal subject “Diego.”)

“I wanted to paint the skull more impressionistically, like Velázquez’s Menippus, but I realized the crisp features and textures on the skull contributed to the spookiness of the painting,” says the Fort Lee, New Jersey, artist.

Trotta spent 45 hours on this painting over three weeks. A week in advance, he toned the linen canvas with a thin layer of middle-value paints mixed with Turpenoid and stand oil. After a loose charcoal drawing, he applied thin layers of burnt sienna and cobalt blue, heightening light areas with flake white. He used filbert bristle brushes, paper towels and a painting knife to get different textures, and painted the skull using an impasto technique.

**Daniel K. Tennant**

It all began with a cantaloupe for Daniel K. Tennant, who was so mesmerized by the spaghettlike design on the fruit’s fibrous skin that he composed a still life around it. The Bainbridge, New York, artist has been painting in gouache for 25 years, and he uses an airbrush to glaze transparent watercolors over the opaque gouache for delicate shadowing effects.

Painting *Still Life With Silver Spoon* on 8-ply museum board, Tennant crafted a triangular composition, with dainty lilies at its apex in front of the scrollwork on an upright piano’s sounding board. He paints backgrounds first, then finishes each element in complete detail before moving on to the next one. “When I started doing still life I was trying to cram in everything but the kitchen sink,” says Tennant. “Over time I learned to work with simpler compositions, focusing on fewer objects and zeroing in on shapes in more detail.”
Still Life

Orchestrating the Drama (oil, 24x20) by Anthony Waichulis.
First Place

Anthony Waichulis

Anthony Waichulis says *Orchestrating the Drama* (at left) was inspired by a lively discussion during a class he teaches at Luzerne County Community College in Nanticoke, Pennsylvania. “We were discussing what makes a successful expression of art,” says Waichulis. “I wanted to tackle this idea in a painting, giving the viewer a behind-the-scenes understanding of artistic expression.” His resulting trompe l’oeil still life aims to deconstruct the creative process, showing the messiness and evolution of ideas.

Waichulis explains that his painting can be “read” vertically: The artist’s idea (represented by the brain/skull) is tempered by knowledge (books) and is manifested in art (represented by the paints and brushes in the foreground of the painting). “It was important for me to frame this in the workspace of the everyman artist,” he says. “I wanted to show a masterful piece emerging from an old, tattered paper on a worn, homemade support. This isn’t a painting done in a pristine, elaborate studio on imported, stretched canvas.”

Working on acrylic-primed Masonite panel, Waichulis began with a simple pencil drawing, then started painting dark to light. “I’m not very bold with masking things in; I’m pretty controlled, moving like a typewriter over the panel,” he says. After establishing values and shapes, he completed the center of the painting and then worked outward, starting with the skull and finishing with the wood perimeter.

Second Place

Chuck Wood

To call Chuck Wood, 77, a pack rat would be an understatement; the Chicago artist has spent a lifetime collecting a hodgepodge of interesting objects, which served as the inspiration for *The Collector* (below), a casein painting.

“The Collector is for every collector in the world who would see this painting and recognize that exact state of mind of the person who arranged these items on a glass shelf,” Wood says. His style, although realistic, subtly gives his work a painterly feel.

Wood pulled the dust-covered, knick-knacked glass shelf from a bookcase and rearranged the items to create the composition, leaving evidence of their former places in dust-free spheres and elliptical footprints.
He says the green line of the glass shelf was a key element that defined this composition.

Wood spent about six months on this painting, taking great care with details, from the pipettes in the copper container to the feathers in the spool of thread to the fishing reel next to the bottle of aspirin. The red bottle was a challenge, he says, because he paints from a black underpainting and couldn’t get the luminescence he wanted in that particular bottle, so he repainted it white, to brighten its hue, then painted it red again.

**Third Place**

**Diana Carmody**

There’s never a shortage of scrambled eggs being served in Diana Carmody’s home in Greenwood Village, Colorado; luckily, her family doesn’t mind. The artist isn’t quite sure when her fascination with eggs began, but she’s done nearly 20 egg-related still life paintings and says her house is full of shelves covered with their empty shells.

“I love their simple shape, the way every egg is different and how the shadows react with each different grouping of eggs,” says Carmody, who studied art in Florence, Italy, where she gained a real appreciation for Italian pottery. “They’re a wonderful contrast to these intricately designed plates. I like the idea of juxtaposing the simple with the very complex.”

Working with many reference photos of different egg arrangements and plate designs, she essentially composed *Eggs-Hileration* (at left) in her mind, then created a detailed drawing on watercolor board. She painted with both acrylics and watercolors, being extra careful not to drip any colors on the eggs, which she says was a challenge on this large surface.

“Every painting of eggs presents a different challenge,” she says. “I paint them differently every time, or else it would get boring.” Sometimes she goes to great lengths to get just the right shadows on eggs: On more than one occasion, she’s photographed eggs while standing on a ladder on her driveway.

**Honorable Mentions**

**Scott Royston**

Scott Royston, 30, is a quintessential child of the ‘80s. He still loves listening to Corey Hart, Duran Duran, Frankie Goes to Hollywood and a host of one-hit wonders from the decade. And he remembers Hands Across America, a 1986 benefit event that brought millions of people together to join hands in a human line that stretched across the continent, benefiting the homeless.

That was the inspiration behind Royston’s *Hands Across America* (opposite page, top), which the Baltimore artist says is also meant to celebrate unity and honor God.

Royston’s classical realist skills were honed at the Baltimore School for the Arts and the Schuler School of Fine Arts. “I tend to paint things a little bit richer than they really are,” he says, adding that he coated this canvas with five layers of underpainting. “I don’t focus as much on the color of the objects as on their values. I use many colors to
make those values, and I don’t want to feel limited by formulas. The more I paint, the more colors I create.”

Frank Holmes
Since 1980, Frank Holmes of Narrowsburg, New York, a former instructor at Parsons School of Design in New York City, has been painting full time. His fantasy interiors, such as White Horse With Mirror (at right, middle), often have a touch of surrealistic qualities, while still being grounded firmly in realism. Some elements, such as the horse statue in this painting, come from a repertoire of objects Holmes uses as props in his paintings.

Working from a detailed drawing on the canvas, Holmes painted with a Liquin-based oil mix, using primarily small, synthetic sable brushes. He layered glazes and occasionally scumbled the surface to build forms and texture. “Since I’m not looking at an actual scene and have no real reference for the view I’m depicting, it can take me awhile to get the relationships right,” Holmes says. “I often have to repaint things a few times to make the values, colors and forms look believable. Sometimes that helps the painting, giving it character that it wouldn’t have otherwise.”

Ellen Buselli
“Each still life has its own challenges and story to tell,” says classically trained New York City artist Ellen Buselli, who set up her first studio 15 years ago. For Pink Roses (at right, bottom), she says, “each petal, leaf and object had its own value, temperature, degree of transparency and opacity, and sense of space as the light passed from light to dark. The dance of light and shadow in the leaves was a beautiful halo backdrop to the main focus of the roses.”

Buselli always paints from life in north daylight, favoring its soft and moody qualities, and finds her vases and other still-life artifacts at various antique, garage and pottery sales. Working with several sizes of filbert brushes, she uses varying brushstrokes of thin and thick paint to create her still life paintings. She works in watercolor and charcoal, and enjoys painting figures, portraits and plein air landscapes.
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