



# Still Life Photography: 5 Tips to Level Up Your Shots

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**TIPS  
FOR BEAUTIFUL**

# FOR BEAUTIFUL STILL LIFE PHOTOGRAPHY

Want to capture stunning still life photography?

In this article, I offer five easy ways to improve your still life images. I cover all the key elements (including lighting, composition, and editing) – so that, no matter your camera gear, you'll be ready to shoot some *amazing* still life shots of your own.

Let's get started.

# 1. Pick items that interest you

Still life photography starts with subject choice...

...but in truth, there are no “best” still life subjects. Ideal subjects are simply items that interest *you*, and they can come from anywhere, including:

Around your house

Flea markets and thrift stores

Estate sales

The grocery store

The florist

Of course, the words “still life” generally conjure up visions of vases of flowers, pears on candlelit tables, old paper, and violins. And you can certainly capture beautiful still life shots by obtaining and arranging these “classical” items.

But you don't *need* to spend time pursuing such images if they don't interest you. Instead, ask yourself: What is meaningful to *me*? What objects do I love? Is there a story I would like to tell with my still life?

Alternatively, you might look for items that simply catch your eye. This next shot contains a piece of dried seaweed on some calico. Was the seaweed meaningful to me? Not really. Did it tell a story? Nope. It simply looked beautiful, so I wanted to capture it!





Finally, you can capture “found” still life arrangements – that is, still life arrangements that already exist (in houses, backyards, or on the street). Here’s a found still life, taken of a friend’s bedside table:





When picking still life subjects, here's my final piece of advice:

If you're stuck, just find some items that are personal and important to you, such as:

Family heirlooms

Pictures containing relatives

Books that you love

Then, after a bit of arranging, you'll capture a still life that's loaded with meaning!

## 2. Carefully select a background

The background can make – or break- your still life. If you want great results, you *must* choose your background with great care.

Specifically, *don't* choose a background that features distracting elements. Avoid eye-catching colors that draw the eye, and if you use fabric, make sure you iron it first (few things are more distracting than a wrinkled backdrop!).

Instead, keep it simple. Fabric, cardboard, and existing walls often work great, provided that they're relatively plain. The goal is to emphasize your still life subjects (so the viewer knows *exactly* where to look).

Here's an image featuring a plain backdrop made from a couple of old potato sacks:



And here's another shot, this time featuring a sheet of red fabric:



Also, experimentation is important! Different background textures and colors can complement your subjects in different ways, so it pays to test out a few options before deciding on a final arrangement. You may be surprised by the backdrops that make your still life really pop.





After trying several solid-color backdrops for this image, I experimented with some reflective cardboard (and I loved the result).

And you might even try experimenting with focus and **depth of field**. For instance, create a **shallow depth of field effect**, where you keep the front element sharp and the background blurry. Then try the opposite: Use a narrow **aperture** to keep the still life items *and* the background tack-sharp. See which you prefer!

### 3. Get creative with still life lighting

Light is an essential component of still life photography, and many still lifes feature beautiful lighting arrangements (which often create moody, painterly effects).

But it's important to realize that *you don't need fancy lighting to create a stunning still life*.

When you're starting out, I recommend using whatever light you have available, such as:

- Indirect light from a window

- A lamp

- A flashlight

- A candle

Don't just create your setup, take one shot, and call it a day. Instead, try out different lighting effects! Use a curtain to block out some window light, then remove the curtain to let the light stream in. Shine a flashlight at your main subject, then try a second shot where the flashlight is positioned off to the side and shrouds your subjects in shadow. Make sense?

Note that, if you're using lamps, flashlights, or candles, you will definitely need a **tripod**; indoor lighting won't get you a fast-enough **shutter speed** for handheld shots. (This can be a relatively cheap model; as long as it's positioned on a sturdy surface, it should be able to keep your camera steady.) When you're ready to shoot, just mount your camera to the tripod, activate the **two-second self-timer**, and start taking images.

By the way, a fun technique that works great for still lifes is called **light painting**. Simply set up your camera to capture a long exposure (in the area of 10 to 30 seconds), press the shutter button, and *paint* light – from a flashlight or candle – around your subject. You'll end up with some *very cool* effects, as you can see in the examples below:





A still life arrangement using several different types of lighting. From left: Natural light from nearby window, light painting with a flashlight, and lighting from a single soft box.

Once you get more serious, you can try lighting your still life arrangements with speedlights (though I recommend you modify any speedlight with a [softbox](#) to prevent hard shadows).

Whatever lighting you choose, make sure you spend plenty of time thinking about its *position*. Light that comes from the front will look *very* different than light that comes from behind your subject or off to the side, so you'll need to carefully adjust your lights to get the effect you're after. I'd recommend you start with sidelighting, as this often creates a beautiful, three-dimensional effect (and it's what I used when capturing the three example photos featured above).

## 4. Try plenty of compositions

Learning to [compose still life photos](#) is often a struggle for beginners. This is understandable, as still life composition brings up a *ton* of questions, such as: Where should I place all my items? Should they overlap? Should they be close to the background? What camera angle should I use?

Fortunately, still life composition isn't as hard as it might seem. I have two main recommendations, and they will take you far:

First, if you've not encountered them before, read about the [rule of thirds](#) and the [rule of odds](#). These will offer a fantastic compositional starting point for beautiful still life shots, plus they're really easy to use.

Second, just keep moving your items around.

This latter recommendation might seem a bit silly, but I promise: If you rearrange your objects enough, you'll eventually hit on an arrangement that looks great. Don't just settle for the first composition that you try – instead, test an arrangement, then evaluate it critically. Determine what you like and dislike about it, then make adjustments.

As you create different compositions, here are a few items to keep an eye on:

- Overly empty gaps (you generally want to keep the entire arrangement balanced!)

- Busy areas (you don't want to confuse the viewer with *too* much activity)

- Movement between objects (aim to lead the eye from one object to the next)

Remember: A tiny tweak can make a *huge* difference. So if an arrangement doesn't seem perfect, make a few changes. Chances are that you'll soon hit upon a better setup!

And try photographing from different angles. Shoot from standing height, then raise your camera higher or take it down low. Walk to one side of the setup and capture a profile shot. You can even test out different lenses! Each experiment might turn out great or it might look bad – but you won't know until you try.

## 5. Make sure you spend time editing your still life photography

Post-processing can make a *huge* difference to your still life photos, so I highly recommend you spend time editing your images in Lightroom, Photoshop, Capture One, or some other program.

Start out with basic adjustments, such as white balance, exposure, contrast, and saturation. Then, as you become more experienced, play around with more advanced options.

Consider doing **HDR photography**, where you take several images at different exposure levels then blend them together in Lightroom. Or **use Photoshop to add a beautiful texture** to your image for a painterly look:



## Still life photography: final words

Still life is a beautiful, compelling, intimate genre of photography.

So experiment with lighting, composition, and editing. Have fun! Enjoy yourself!

You're bound to end up with some stunning photos.

Now over to you:

*What type of still life photos do you plan to take? Which of these tips are your favorites? Share your thoughts in the comments below!*



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### **Lea Hawkins**

is an Australian photographer working mainly in the areas of portraiture, fine art, and for the local press. Her work has been published, exhibited, selected and collected – locally, nationally and internationally, in many forms. All shot with very minimal gear and the photographic philosophy that it's not so much the equipment, but what you do with it.

You can see more of her work at [www.leahawkins.com](http://www.leahawkins.com)

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