Notes to teachers: A Brief History of Still Life Painting

This unit is written to accommodate the IB Middle Years Program but can be adapted to any level in high School art. The cultural context for still life painting can be disregarded and the second video can be used to teach studio techniques. But the cultural context for still life painting is useful to cover because it explains much about the sensibilities behind this genre and what modern still life painting still has in common with the painters who revived this form of painting in the 17thcentury.

Often, the cultural context for different art genres is not taught. Who pays for a work of art has much to do with the meaning, subject, and intention of a work. It would have been so illuming for me as a student, to understand that the great female nudes of the 17-18th centuries, were often painted to show off a king's latest courtesan.

Probably the function of a work of art is the most significant element to understand about it because that informs everything else about the work. I included the history of still life painting in this unit because the function of the modern still life remains somewhat as it was in 17th century Amsterdam: a form of painting that celebrates the luminosity of the ordinary world in time. If the student takes the time to follow artists who have used this form of expression, he will better understand his own still life work.

I always include journal assignments in my units because they require a certain degree of investment from the student and they give a student time to learn what they don't know, more on their own terms. The work cannot all be done the night before. And the creative endeavor of building a research record reflects real process and real learning. A grade on the final project should only reflect 50 percent of the mark, for the process is so important in building knowledge and skills. One of the best justifications for the process journal is that its use drives the quality of work up within any class, far beyond expected boundaries. But it means time must be added to the pace of classwork.

In teaching students to paint from direct observation, it is most useful if they see the videos on color theory. Mixing the right color and value at the same time is very challenging and requires a student learn to see differently. Give plenty of time for color mixing practice.

If students do not have drawing skills, I have jumped the entire problem of drawing accurately and let students use a copy machine photo and just trace off the images. Starting with the outlines, students can then focus on color mixing and using shapes to describe a subject, rather than lines. Painting is not drawing. It is as I describe in the video, like putting a jig-saw puzzle together.