



When you look at this vignette, you see a lovely combination of shapes, sizes, and textures. The softer floral arrangement in yellow perks up the wood monotones and offers a softer contrast to the harder edges of the wheel and table. (Photo courtesy of Trade Winds Antiques, Forestville, Conn.)

## Arranging Your Antiques & Collectibles to Look Like “Still Life” Paintings

I enjoy visiting antique shops and paying attention to how antiques and collectibles are showcased. I am particularly drawn to three-dimensional displays that resemble “still life” paintings. These wonderful vignettes just seem to have an “artsy” quality that lends itself to our home décor. If you were to imagine these arrangements “framed,” they would make a lovely painting.

Successful arrangements are interesting. The best displays exploit or emphasize shapes, texture, color pattern, perspective, or some combination of these elements. In the language of the artist, we say “the composition” is good.

### Using a Combination of Organic and Geometric Shapes

In still life paintings, there is a relationship between objects. Painters speak of the shapes of the objects and the spaces (shapes) around the objects that they refer to as “negative shapes.” Shape and form are very important elements in a well composed painting.

Familiar shapes are squares, triangles, and circles. We also can speak of shapes and forms as being geometric or organic. Geometric designs have objects with hard edges and straight lines (see the box of tomatoes), while organic designs incorporate shapes that are softer and curvy (look at the

ceramic cookie jar). Organic shapes are freer and less defined than geometric shapes. You find many organic shapes in nature such as shells and clouds. Paying attention to “shape” or “form” as well as “space” and “background” is key when grouping objects. You may find that by adding an organic shape to an otherwise hard edge design you soften the look or perhaps you will want to build on a linear concept to convey a particular style or era. Using a draping scarf or tablecloth is another way to add an organic dimension to your display.

### Brilliant Displays Excite the Viewer

Brilliant displays excite the viewer with novelty, harmony, surprise, and simplicity or evoke a nostalgic or memorable emotion. By learning more about still life paintings, it is possible to apply these lessons to the task of creating an eye-catching display for your special antiques and collectibles. You may be interested in setting up a unique display in your shop or perhaps you have begun to freshen up the décor inside your home. In either case, paying attention to the characteristics of a good design can help you choose the right objects, background, and supports to carry out an effective and successful three-dimensional “still life.”

## Look At Me

In a “good” still life, inanimate or everyday objects are arranged in a manner which seems to call out at you “pause ... take a look at me, I am playful or dramatic or unusual, but I am worth looking at.” The display comes to life and evokes a variety of different feelings in the observer. Memorable displays seem to push buttons or at the very least evoke pleasant or nostalgic feelings.

When you are planning to arrange objects, consider mixing objects which may not necessarily go together. You can group the ordinary with the unusual or perhaps create a whimsical blend of old with new. One shop I visited surrounded vintage costume jewelry with 1950s math Flash Cards to add an element of surprise to their glass showcase. If you are scratching your head wondering what Flash Cards has to do with bangles and baubles, you are correct, nothing! But the jewelry case got noticed!

## Arranging Similar Objects Together

Another strategy is to arrange similar objects together with attention to form, shape, texture, or color. For example, you might group ceramic vintage vases that vary in size but have the same overall shape. Or you might try arranging vases of the same or similar palette but vary the sizes. Complimentary colors make very attractive displays. Notice how lovely the yellow and blue ceramic vases look together in the photo shown on this page. But, be careful about getting too comfortable. You will see that a black vase was added to the arrangement to stir the pot a little (no pun intended). And the designer broke up the monotony of vases with a clock, which maintained the rounded shape but offered a break in the materials.

On a recent visit to The Seymour Antiques Center of Connecticut, one dealer used the top of her glass showcases to stage a collection of colorful vintage children’s chairs, which were all similar in size and design.

## Creating “Exhibits”

In the same store, was a collection of vintage artist materials such as paint tubes, brushes, and supplies that were set up

In this photo, similar objects (pottery vases) are arranged in two groups of three with a “surprise” in each cluster. In the first triad, the smaller pottery bowl interrupts the two larger vessels. In the second grouping, a clock breaks up the monotony of using all pottery pieces. Attention has been placed on the complementary colors as well. (Photo courtesy of Trade Winds Antiques, Forestville, Conn.)



The large painting on the wall serves as a lively backdrop for this grouping of vintage artist supplies. The images of the painting on the wall also mimic the lines, shapes, and colors of the objects (art supplies) on the table. (Photo courtesy of Trade Winds Antiques, Forestville, Conn.)

on an older table. There was so much attention to the way the objects were placed, that I indeed thought I was looking at a still life painting that had come to life. You can see in the photo shown that even the background artwork mimics the colors and shapes of the tabletop vignette.

## The Best Decisions Are Made at the Last Minute

When you begin to create your own displays, don’t be afraid to experiment and to let things fall into place naturally. In my shop, “Kitsch n Stuff” at the Collinsville Antiques Company of New Hartford, Some of my best arrangements come from “accidental” combinations of objects. I might pull a turquoise tablecloth off a shelf and throw it down next to an orange pitcher only to discover that the two colors look groovy together.

My advice is to not allow yourself to work too hard at it. Designer Holly Hunt says, “The best decisions are always made at the last minute. Just know when the last minute is. Artists understand this concept as knowing when a painting is finished. It’s finished when it all hangs together well. And the nice thing about creating your make believe still life is that there is no wet paint and you can play some more tomorrow.

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