



Drawing topics for high school students

Last Updated on May 27, 2021 High school Art students are often required to produce still life drawings or paintings within the confines of a busy classroom. Most Art Departments have cupboards crammed full of visually interesting objects that can be used to create still life arrangements. This article lists still life drawings or paintings within the confines of a busy classroom. are stuck or in need of inspiration. The collection includes tried and true favourites that have been used by Art teachers for generations, as well as more unusual and contemporary still life? Here is a definition provided by Wikipedia: A work of art depicting mostly inanimate subject matter, typically commonplace objects which may be either natural or man-made While senior Art students are usually free to come up with their own topic or theme (read our article how to come up with great subject matter) may be either natural or man-made while senior Art students are usually free to come up with their own topic or theme (read our article how to come up with great subject matter) may be either natural or man-made while senior Art students are usually free to come up with their own topic or theme (read our article how to come up with great subject matter) may be either natural or man-made while senior Art students are usually free to come up with their own topic or theme (read our article how to come up with great subject matter) may be either natural or man-made while senior Art students are usually free to come up with their own topic or theme (read our article how to come up with great subject matter). objects and scenes that meet the following criteria: Viewable first-hand Visually interesting, with a range of different textures, reflections, surfaces and forms Small enough to set up and arrange in the classroom (light, easily moveable) Able to arranged in different ways, creating original compositions so that multiple exciting works can be created Durable enough to be handled safely by enthusiastic teenagers (without sharp or dangerous parts, for example) Able to stored from lesson to lesson within a single lesson or photographed for completion at a later date) Appropriate for younger students to view (i.e. not offensive) This articles includes great work by students as well as famous still life artists. It is a work in progress, with many more ideas to be added over time! 50+ Still Life Drawing Ideas Popcorn, as in these original still life artivorks by Po Yuan (left) and Betty Chen (right), students of Elizabeth Jendek, Thai Chinese International School, Samutprakarn, Thailand: Although there is a distinct possibility that a number of still life items might mysteriously 'disappear' during the course of this lesson, popcorn provides an excellent opportunity for practising the application of tone. Completed in charcoal, these large works create a kind of semi-abstracted landscapes and require careful attention to light and shadow. Crumpled paper bags, such as this work by 18 year old artist Raegan Koepsel: Crunched and creased paper bags have been bags create dramatic shadows and provide an excellent opportunity to learn about tone. This is a great subject to draw with charcoal on mid-tone grey or brown paper. In this example, the paper bags have been twisted in different ways and carefully contrasted with a background of corrugated cardboard. Styrofoam cups, as inspired by this activity to help students understand how to represent ellipses (the oval shape that is visible when a circle is viewed from angle). The hollow truncated cones become surrounded by shadows and beautiful pockets of curving negative space, creating a superb still life drawing lesson. Photo courtesy East City Art. For more about drawing ellipses, please read 11 tips for improving your observational drawing. Machinery and mechanical parts, such as old sewing machines, disassembled clocks, cogs/wheels and typewriters, inspired by this drawing from Parkway North High School, United States, taught by Art teacher and artist Grant Kniffen: When the inner workings of mechanical items are exposed, there are often endless opportunities for art-making. In this observational drawing, the complex letter keys, crunched paper and detailed ink ribbon contrast the smooth surfaces of the typewriter and tabletop. Driftwood, rope and fishing accessories, as inspired by these Roy Lichtenstein still life compositions (images © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein): Many high school Art projects within New Zealand are based around the beach and coastline. Items such as rope, floats, hooks, anchors, driftwood and fishing nets provide an excellent subject matter for still life works due to the variety of shapes, forms, patterns and surface textures. The items are usually large and substantial enough that a still life arrangement in the centre of the room can be viewed easily by all students. These two works by American Pop artist, Roy Lichtenstein, 'Cape Cod Still life' and 'Cape Cod Still Life (Study)' show nets and rope entangled around an driftwood and shells. The bottom work is an oil and Magna (a brand of acrylic resin paint) completed in 1972, with a drawn composition study above. Fish, crustaceans and other seafood, such as these high school still life paintings from an IGCSE Art Exam by Nikau Hindin, ACG Parnell College: Still life paintings of fish and other sea creatures can make for an exciting lesson - especially when the real items are slapped onto the centre of tables in the Art room (it may be worth checking out where these can be stored in between class - staff rooms may have space in the freezer)! Science equipment, inspired by this pencil still life from a student of Grant Kniffen at Parkway North High School, United States: Drawing exercises such as this can be a great way for making connections between other subject areas within the school. In this case, it might be possible to mimic a scientific experiment that students are currently learning about. Note the stunning composition in this work, with the combination of slightly curving textbook images and text providing an appropriate background to the detailed three-dimensional microscope. Wooden mannequins, as in these black and white still life drawings by Grade 10 and Grade 11 students from Conway High School, United States, taught by Carla Owen. Jeff (left), Dylan (centre) and Nathan (right): Wooden mannequins can be great still life additions, posed as if the figure is interacting / responding to its environment. In this still life drawing lesson, varied line weight has been used to create depth and create focal areas within the work. For more line drawing examples, please read our comprehensive Line Drawing Guide for Art Students. Armchairs, chairs or stools, as in this example by Daniel E. Munoz-Vidal: Art classes may only have access to mundane stools. Sometimes, however, an Art teacher will acquire an old chair, sofa or carved wooden chair that can become a permanent addition to still life collection. In this well composed drawing, chairs and tables have been positioned so that their forms intersect and slice up the page. Dolls, train sets and other toys, such as this observational drawing of a teddy bear completed as part of an AQA GCSE Art and Design project student by Holly Reynolds from King Edward VI Camp Hill School For Girls: Still life paintings of toys are a popular choice amongst middle and high school Art students. Although there can be risks with drawing cartoon-like toys, or those with distorted proportions (it can be difficult for an examiner to tell whether the drawing is badly proportioned rather than the toy itself, for example) items such as old and broken dolls, ancient teddy bears and intricate train sets make excellent still life material. This A3 drawing by Holly was completed from first-hand observation, in response to the topic 'Memories', using a range of graphite pencils (5H - 9B) and a putty eraser. Bottles, vases, jugs and vessels (this topic was inspired by a Highcrest Academy Art Department Pinterest board), such as the famous Giorgio Morandi still life drawings, etchings and paintings: Giorgio Morandi, a famous still life artist who died in 1964, is well known for his deceptively simple still life artworks, which repeat many familiar household items, such as vases, bowls and bottles. Morandi positions these with careful precision, with each object treated as if it were a sculptural entity: a formal exploration of space and form His paintings in particular have a subtle use of tone. The 1928 etching above, titled "Grande natura morta con la lampada a destra", may inspire students to produce pen drawings that have a similar cross-hatching aesthetic. Empty boxes, inspired by a drawing exercise completed by a student of Nicole Havekost: Boxes provide a great contemporary still life objects. At first glance boxes seem simple to draw; they are comprised of primarily straight lines, flat planes, with little detail; however, this task demands a good understanding of perspective and challenges students to really use their eyes to observe the variation in tone. Previously unnoticed details begin to jump into vision: creases, text, peeling edges of cellotape. This activity could be presented as a quick still life gesture drawing or a meticulous, detailed observation of angles, planes, light and form. Jewellery and treasure boxes, as in these still life gesture drawing or a meticulous, detailed observation of angles, planes, light and form. lessons that asked students to produce still life paintings with dark backgrounds (such as the necklace shown on black acrylic paint) and work over other prepared grounds (for example, the still life on the left is completed using Carandache crayon upon watered down acrylic). The jewellery boxes provide students with the opportunity to represent three-dimensional space, while the jewellery itself adds glistening, detailed focal areas within the work. Preserved animals and other specimens in jars, such as these modern still life artworks by Cindy Wright: In addition to insects, Science Departments often have wonderful preserved animal specimens that make for great still life subjects. If these are unavailable, you might wish to create your own dramatic interpretation, based on the still life compositions above by Cindy Wright. These works force us to meet the lifeless gaze of gutted fish coiled within a glass fish bowl. Fruit and vegetables, inspired by Paul Cezanne's still life with apples: Fruit and vegetables are inexpensive enough that large quantities can be purchased for classroom use, allowing students to organise the still life arrangements themselves or in small groups. Dedicated students may bring more unusual items from home. Although a still life comprised of fresh food is unlikely to last longer than a week (less within rambunctious classrooms) vegetables such as garlic, potatoes, onions, gourds and pumpkins can be kept for a much longer duration. There is also the opportunity to include wooden tables and other still life items in the background. These famous still life items in the background. These famous still life items in the background. artwork). Both still life paintings are completed using oil and canvas in the 1890s and judged by some to be among the best still life paintings by Year 9 student Dougal Burden from Takapuna Grammar School: This exercise introduces students to different mediums and provides experience rendering a range of different reflective, smooth and faintly textured man-made surfaces. It also provides great way to spark other Visual Art interests and share knowledge about early photographic techniques. A glass of water, such as this example by Hanna Asfour: Although it is virtually impossible for a high school class to get to the end of a water-based lesson without somebody spilling something, this exercise can be a stunning and challenging task that really helps conquer the glass, water and the sparkling tonal variations within the shadow. A task of this nature can be a great onelesson activity, perhaps set as 'test' or one-off assignment. A jug and cup of tea, with inspiration from cubist still life paintings by Juan Gris: After preparing the drawing surface with a painted ground and glued down paper (some of which may have decorative patterns that mimic wood grain or a table cloth, for example), students may overlay fragments of observational drawings, from slightly distorted angles, with tone softly applied n the style of Juan Gris. This synthetic cubist piece was completed in 1914 using oil and mixed media and is titled 'Breakfast'. To see other background ideas, please read Painting on grounds: creative use of media for Painting students. Hands, as inspired by this observational drawing by Cath Riley: Contemporary artist Cath Riley has produced a series of detailed, highly realistic graphite pencil drawings of hands, including many in which the hand is touching, squeezing or gripping human flesh. Hands are an accessory that students are able to set up and begin drawing immediately. Each can pose their hand in an original position and have this with them to draw from in any location. This makes hands an ideal subject for quick still life sketches. Marbles, spheres and balls, inspired by Pedro Campos paintings: Well known contemporary still life artist Pedro Campos creates hyper realistic still life paintings, such as the marble and golf ball oil on canvas work, 'Camp Creek', above. Drawing marbles and other spherical objects challenges students to focus all of their attention upon color, tone and surface; capturing glistening reflections and textural variations to enhance the illusion of reality. Shells, as in these artworks from the students of Elizabeth Jendek (from left to right): Marisa Leong, Supanan Lee, Miri Morita, Warin (Pinky) Rungsakaolert and Po Yuan, completed while studying at Thai Chinese International School, Samutprakarn, Thailand: In addition to provided a wealth of varied visually interesting forms, shells are durable enough to survive the energy of a high school Art classroom. In this stunning unit of work, students have produced vibrant, high contrast oil pastel artworks. These works were completed after formally analysing the work of Georgia O'Keeffe, working first-hand from still life arrangements, mirrors to help generate complex compositions. Insects, such as these stippled pen drawings upon colored wash, completed by Grade 11 students Emery (left) and Caleb (right) from Conway High School, United States, under the direction of experienced Art teacher, Carla Owen: Drawing insects can be challenging, due to difficulty sourcing first-hand imagery. It is sometimes possible to purchase dried and preserved insects in display cases and to use a magnifying glass to make the task of observing details easier (Science Departments often have a set of these). The striking examples above have been completed using black pen applied in dots (stippled) to a watercolor ground. Potted plants, succulents and cacti, inspired by Laura Garcia Serventi's illustrations on Etsy: With an appropriate selection of plants (ideally those that can survive long periods without attentive care) and interestingly shaped plant pots, this can form the basis of a great still life painting lesson plan. These works by Laura Garcia Serventi include a variety of contrasting plant forms and flowers, with different subtle patterns, pots positioned on a dramatic tiled floor. Metal taps, silverware and other highly reflective objects, as is illustrated in this video of how to draw a spoon by VamosART. Many resources that demonstrate 'how to draw step-by-step' encourage students to draw by formula, rather than learning to see and record what is in front of them. This time lapse video is very helpful, however, as it provides good insight into how tone can be built up using light and dark pencils on mid-tone paper. Origami or folded paper, inspired by this observational drawings by Sean Dooley, a graduate of Savannah College of Art and Design: Folding paper can create stunning shadows and a mesh of intriguing angular lines. This example is one that is included in our list of substitute art lessons, and can involve students first constructing origami, before producing observational drawings in a range of different media. Please view our list of substitute Art lessons. Bones and skeletons, as in this example by Year 11 student Manisha Mistry, from ACG Strathallan College (please view her full IGCSE Art and Design Coursework project): Folding paper can create stunning shadows and a mesh of intriguing angular lines. This example is one that is included in our list of substitute art lessons, and can involve students first constructing origami, before producing observational drawings in a range of different media. Complex interiors and window panes, as in this Henri Matisse still life: Titled 'Still life after Jan Davidsz De Heem's 'La Desserte'' this painting is Matisse's interpretation of a work by seventeenth-century Dutch painter Jan Davidsz de Heem. Drawing influences from cubism, Matisse contructs the scene using intersecting angular lines. In this exercise, the background may take on equal importance with the central still life, with open windows / table surfaces / surrounding items becoming a prominent part of the composition. This task may also become an 'inverted still life', where the still life arrangement is pushed into the foreground, with background items helping to set the scene and tell a story. Old shoes and sandals, as in these examples by Vincent van Gogh: The traditional 'still life with old shoe' remains a popular choice among Art students. Shiny surfaces often contrast metal buckles, twisted laces and furled edges of leather. Shoe polish and brushes can also be a great addition. These van Gogh still life with old shoe' remains a popular choice among Art students. (top) and 'Three pairs of shoes' (bottom). Art-making equipment, such as is this example by Textiles Art teacher Gayle Bicknell, which was prepared as part of a lesson for her BTEC art class at Alton College, Hampshire, UK: This topic lends itself to Jim Dine inspired charcoal still life drawings - working with a range of mixed media and textural backgrounds. This teaching example by Gayle is a graphite drawing of a single pair of scissors over a collaged background that has then been photographed and digitally manipulated. Woodworking tools, as inspired by this teaching exercise by Jaime Brett Treadwell, artist and full-time Professor who teaches foundation courses for all AFA programs offered at Delaware County Community College including Studio Arts, Graphic Design, and Photography: In this task, students are encouraged to set tools upon a sheet of white paper, with a light source (such as an inexpensive table lamp) shining upon from an angle that creates interesting shadows. Students use a viewfinder to select a composition from the arrangement, considering the relationship between positive and negative spaces. The image is created using a range of experimental techniques, such as erasing back areas, rubbing the paper with napkins and so on. Visually pleasing tools that are scarred and battered with use can often be sourced at low cost from second hand shops (remember it is best to avoid those that may cause inadvertent injury). As with above, woodworking tools are a great subject matter to use while studying the work of Jim Dine. There are also great ideas for tools in this great Highcrest Art Department Pinterest board. Weaving, as in this example by Year 11 IGCSE Art student Manisha Mistry, from ACG Strathallan College: In this still life lesson students were required to research traditional drawings from these and photocopied the weaving for subsequent tasks. Weaving drawings offer the opportunity for students to practise blending colors in a wide range of different mediums. Musical instruments, as in this detail from a Pieter Claesz vanitas still life: High school Music Departments are sometimes willing to lend instruments overlapping in order to create interesting shadows, as in the detail of the oil painting above by Pieter Claesz. This work is titled 'Vanitas Still Life with the Spinario' and was painted in 1628. You may also be interested in viewing this 100% AS Coursework project based upon an abstraction of instrument still life by Year 12 AS Art and Design student Nikau Hindin, ACG Parnell College. Old books, such as this example of a Dutch still life with books completed in 1628 (artist unknown): Beautiful old books can often be purchased from second-hand shops. School English, Geography, Science and History Departments also may have great old textbooks that have been discarded by past students or are no longer used. welcome variety and visual interest in still life drawings and paintings of books. String, sticks and stones, inspired by a teaching exercise designed by Andrew Strachan (now teaching at ACG Senior College). In this activity, students are presented with a collection of sticks, string and stones, and asked to create a sculpture by tying together the sticks and hanging a stone from this using the string. Observational drawings are then created of this, with the tension of the thin, taut string contrasting the textured wood and stone. Still life with flowers: A drawing of flowers: A drawing of flowers can become cliché, 'pretty' or uninspiring (adding to the endless formulaic roses, hibiscus or lily flower drawings that fill the world). Extreme care should be taken to guide students away from 'rote' or 'formulaic' drawing, where the flower is drawn from memory or step-by-step according to some predetermined pattern, without first-hand observation of form or tone. You might choose uncommon flowers, or those that are damaged, dried or decayed, for example. Rather than in a flower pot or vase, the flowers might be scattered upon the ground, as in 'Four cut sunflowers' by van Gogh above. It is also worth noting that flower still life drawings and paintings can also be a hit with family members, with many parents enthusiastically displaying flower drawings (much more so that with some of the other still life suggestions on this page)! Lamps, lanterns and light bulbs, as in this charcoal drawing by Akrawczyk: In addition to transparency and curving reflective surfaces, these still life objects often have thin wires and/or power cords - and often emit light themselves - making them an extra challenging and exciting object to draw. Contemporary food and packages, as in this still life painting by Tom Wesselmann (Art © Estate of Tom Wesselmann / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY): Collections of popular contemporary foodstuffs - bright packages and eye catching labels - can be used to create stunning compositions, as in this Tom Wesselmann still life. Many of these 'pop objects' have the benefit that they are packaged and long-lasting, able to be stored for some time in an Art room cupboard. A cluttered desk, inspired by this Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin still life: Although Art students are often masters of the cluttered desk syndrome, this task can be set up within a classroom with more purpose, so that the selected objects are part of a narrative, whereby the composition conveys a particular backstory and meaning. In this Chardin still life, titled 'The Attributes of the Arts and the Rewards Which Are Accorded Them', completed using oil on canvas, objects have been selected to represent various artistic disciplines - painting, drawing, architecture and sculpture - and are arranged alongside a ribbon with a cross, the highest award an artist in this region and time could apparently receive. The work was completed using oil on canvas in 1766. A busy pinboard, as in this still life painting by Jean-François de Le Motte: Still life arrangements can be easily pinned to classroom pinboards. This painting completed in 1670, includes a painting within a painting, a letter to the artist, a printed pamphlet and an accounting booklet. Eggs, as in this AP Studio Art summer assignment set by teacher Billy Hicks: Students throughout the ages have voiced their frustration when they are set the task of applying tone to drawings of eggs, however almost all see the value of the exercise when the work is complete. This still life activity involves a contrast of textures, with the smooth eggs resting on textured cloth or crumpled paper towel to create a visually pleasing composition. Another variation involves drawing open egg shells, with light falling across the concave and convex surfaces. Rubbish / litter / discarded remains, as in this drawing by Brittany Lee, Year 10 Art student at ACG Parnell College: Samples of litter and other remains, such as orange peelings, banana skins and apple cores can make excellent still life subjects. This work was completed using black Indian and water on wet-strength cartridge paper. It was completed within one hour This drawing lesson also featured in our list of ideas for substitute Art teachers. Seedpods, as inspired by this observational drawing by IGCSE Art and Design student. Claire Mitchell, ACG Strathallan College (you may also like to view this Highcrest Academy Art Pinterest board for inspiration); Seedpods come in many intriguing organic shapes and forms. They typically last for a long time and are readily available - often in the school yard itself. Shirts, dresses and drapery, as in these examples by the students of Kristy Patterson, Guymon High School: Shirts, dresses and other clothing items, which might include coat hangers, zips, buttons, belts, buckles, items of adornment, as well as traditional costumes, offer the opportunity to draw draped folded fabric alongside more complex accessories, pleats, seams and textile details. In the exercise above, students produce realistic drawings of a personal item of clothing that are pinned to a display panel (the panel can be shifted aside and placed in storage until the next class). Random objects hanging from string, as in these graphite drawings by the students of Jaime Brett Treadwell, artist and full-time Professor who teaches foundation courses for all AFA programs offered at Delaware County Community College including Studio Arts, Graphic Design, and Photography: A still life composition that is created from hanging objects has the presence of the string to create tension and linear elements, alongside unexpected shadows, angles and alignment of objects. It can also result in dramatic contemporary imagery, as students hang and explore unusual subject matter. You may also wish to view this high school art project by Nikau Hindin, which contains images derived from decaying fruit and vegetables hanging on string. Cutlery and kitchen utensils, as in this warm-up drawing exercise is one of the most challenging on this list. The still life drawing combines reflective surface, convex and concave forms with small details and knotted string. This work was earlier featured in How to Create an excellent Observational Drawing: 11 Tips for High School Art Students. Did you enjoy this list? Please share it with other Art teachers and students that you know! Amiria has been an Art & Design teacher and a Curriculum Co-ordinator for seven years, responsible for the course design and assessment of student work in two high-achieving Auckland schools. She has a Bachelor of Architectural Studies, Bachelor of Architecture (First Class Honours) and a Graduate Diploma of Teaching. Amiria is a CIE Accredited Art & Design Coursework Assessor.

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