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In this session we'll be using simple mediums of charcoal and erasers to create a still life. Don't worry if you don't have charcoal at home, substitute it for a pencil instead. By sanding some of the graphite from your pencil tip, you can create graphite dust which can be used to tone your paper instead of the method suggested. Simply rub this dust into your paper using a cotton pad.

Do consider the size of paper that you're working on; it is far easier to go larger with willow charcoal and putty erasers rather than going too small, as this becomes somewhat fiddly.

Do feel free to change the image – rules and briefs are there to be broken! I've included at the end, the photographic reference I used in this tutorial but do feel free to set up your own compositions if you'd rather. These can range from vases of flowers, to simple vegetables and chopping boards. You might want to consider choosing objects that say something about you. For example, if you're a gardener, your objects could include items that you use in your garden; if you love to cook, choose objects to show this.

If you are setting up your own still life, a list of things to consider can be found on the next page.

Considerations for setting up your own still life

Choosing objects for your composition

Choose objects thinking about if they are more important for their shape or texture/pattern. Patterns can add points of interest but can be confusing if too many are used – try not to include more than one or two patterned objects. Think about placing plain fabric or having a plain wall behind your composition – if the objects are light, think about a dark background; if they are dark objects choose a light background.

Making your arrangements of objects

Odd numbers work best. Overlap some objects – not only is this more pleasing but it gives you a point of reference to compare objects against one another and look at the shapes formed in between them.

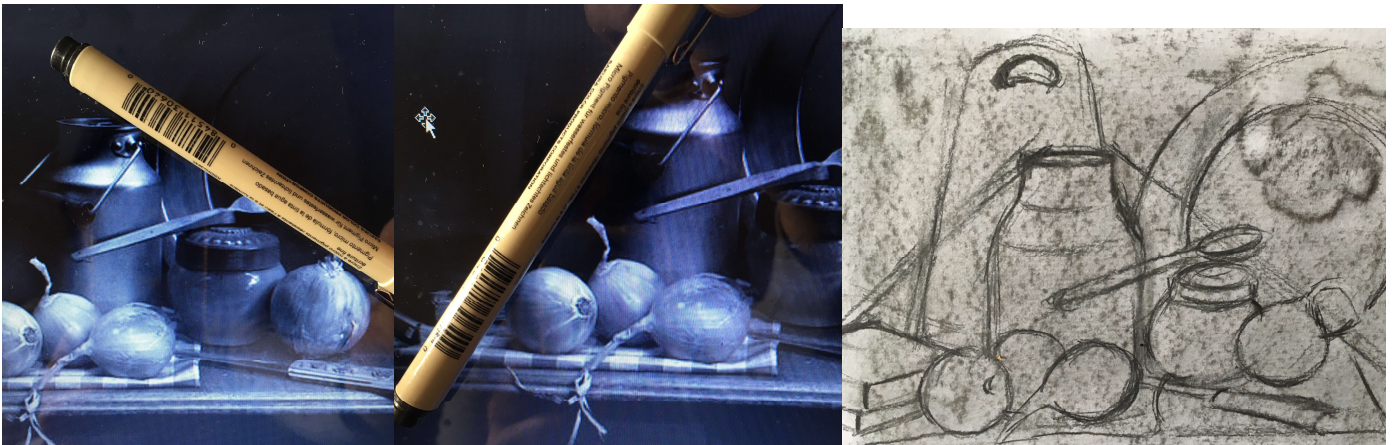
Lighting

Lighting is important in a still life in order for tonal contrasts. A single light source, coming from either the left or the right helps to define forms and casts good shadows. A light source can be as simple as sitting near to a window, either on your left or right. Obviously this light will change throughout the day so you may wish to take a photograph to work from. A good alternative is using a desk lamp with a moveable arm in order to angle light onto the composition.

Main Task: Still Life

Equipment needed: white cartridge paper (I used A3), willow charcoal, charcoal pencil, kitchen paper, angled easer, putty eraser, paper stump or cotton bud, hairspray to fix your work

If you don't have charcoal at home do substitute for sketching pencils/graphite.



Begin by taking a large piece of willow charcoal and using its side, rub it over your paper – do this in one direction and then the other. Using your kitchen paper, rub this into the surface of your paper. You can repeat this if you need a darker background. Note: in hindsight, I wish that I'd created a darker tone at this stage as it would have been easier to pull out the highlights later on.

Before beginning to draw, spend a couple of minutes just looking at your composition. Consider height and width relationships between objects, any shapes created between them and sections where they overlap and touch. It is also worth taking a pencil or pen and laying it across angles that you see. For example, in the first image, by laying my pen across the tops of the objects on the right hand side, I could see they formed almost a straight line – notice the shapes made in the negative space between the tops of these objects and the pen.

Using willow charcoal, begin to sketch out the shapes of your objects. Note in the third image how these are loosely sketched with not a lot of detail. Also note how construction lines to show the angles have been sketched in. The beauty of toning your paper with charcoal first is that mistakes and construction lines can be wiped away into the background again with your kitchen paper, as long as you haven't pressed on too hard with your charcoal.



Begin to put in some of the darker/mid tones that you see using willow charcoal. Thinking about these as shapes made by the tone can be more relaxing if you're worried about the objects that you're drawing. Do follow the contour of each object to begin to build form and look for those bigger areas first. Not too much detail too soon!

Take a piece from your putty eraser, warm it in your hands and mould it into the shape that you need. Begin to pull out some of the highlight shapes that you see. If you take a look at Nicole Wilson's still life drawing on the first page, she has used a toned charcoal background and a putty eraser to pull out the shape of her objects. When drawing with your eraser, the same rules apply – follow the contour of the objects.



Note: if you are finding it tricky to make your highlights as strong as you want them to be, you may not have made your background dark enough – don't worry! A swipe of darker charcoal will help.

Continue to work in this way, slowly adding more detail. Compare tones of one object to another; squinting at your composition will help you to distinguish between the very light and the very dark. Use your paper stump or a cotton bud to blend any areas that need a smoother transition.



If you have a charcoal pencil, begin to use this to add any finer detail or to sharpen up any edges that need more definition. Don't worry if you don't, sand your willow charcoal on a piece of sand paper to get a sharp point.

To add a point of different, I used a piece of willow charcoal on its side to add a hatch mark into the background behind the chopping board. I used a similar mark but with a larger piece of charcoal and harder pressure for the shadow underneath the table. If you like a looser, sketchier style, these types of marks can help.

Take a break from your work and come back with fresh eyes to adjust any tones. I found that some of my onions still had a harsh outline so using my putty eraser I dabbed at this line to knock it back.

If working in charcoal, give your final image a spritz of hairspray to hold the charcoal in place.

Reference Image Used

When starting out, looking at a colour photographic reference and then trying to recreate this in varying tones of grey and black charcoal can be overwhelming. Therefore I have converted the image to black and white in a Word document. To do this in Word, right click on your image and click on format picture. Choose the picture icon, select picture colour and then click on recolour. This will give you the option to turn the image to black and white.

