

# Symbolic Still Life: A Self-Portrait in Objects

## Journal Exercise:

In this exercise you will work with objects which already have strong symbolic associations for you. To begin, go into a room where you keep many personal belongings, for example, your bedroom, living room, office, or studio. Walk around the room looking closely at your things. Look inside drawers and boxes as well as at objects in open view. As you look make a list of items with which you feel a strong, intimate connection. Think: which objects would you miss most if you lost them?

Next, look at your list and select four objects which belong to separate parts of your life – to different ages or places or personal relationships. Gather the four special objects and arrange them around you on the floor, as if they were four points of a compass with you at the center. Draw a circle on a sheet of paper and divide it into four quadrants with a point for you at the center. Label each quadrant with the name of one object.

Pick up an object and examine it, letting your feelings of attachment envelop you. Fill in one quadrant with words and phrases saying what concepts and emotions the object represents for you. Why do you cherish this object? What aspects of your personality does it symbolize? What does it signify about your relationships with other people, either with specific individuals or with types of people? Does the object have any special power for you, like a good luck charm? Continue your examination by assessing any visual qualities which make each object special or identifiable.

Repeat, picking up objects one by one and writing notes until you have filled in a quadrant for each of the four objects. Don't worry if your interpretation of your attachment to an object is inconsistent. Include whatever ideas occur to you.

Can you imagine incorporating any or all of these four objects as iconography in a still-life painting? Would you need to embellish, exaggerate, or alter aspects of any of the four objects in order to make their symbolic meaning more apparent to viewers? Does it matter if viewers understand that the objects are symbols? Are the forms of the objects interesting or beautiful in themselves, or would you want to alter the forms to make them more visually appealing? Write down some of your ideas and reactions to the notion of creating a symbolic still life using objects of personal significance.

Make sketches of possible compositions for your painting. Include changes you might make to the objects you envision. In your composition, should all the objects be shown together or in separate quadrants like in the journal above? Should the relative size of objects or quadrants be based in actual size or on their personal significance to you?





### Preliminary Drawing Exercise:

Prior to completing the following painting exercise, make a series of preliminary drawings of still life objects in which you explore dramatic changes in viewpoint. Alternate your viewpoint so that you draw the same composition from different heights above the surface on which the objects rest: in other drawings position yourself so that you draw with your eye level below the level of the object's base. In another drawing position yourself so that the entire arrangement starts approximately 6-8 feet from you.

Note how any of these changes affects the visual relationships created in the drawing. Utilize a dramatic choice for your viewpoint as you undertake the painting exercise below.

You will need to draw the objects you plan to use for your symbolic still life from several angles to practice. You can draw them in groups or individually. Fill at least 2-3 sketchbook pages with drawings before moving on to the painting/drawing exercise below.

### Symbolic Still Life Drawing/ Painting:

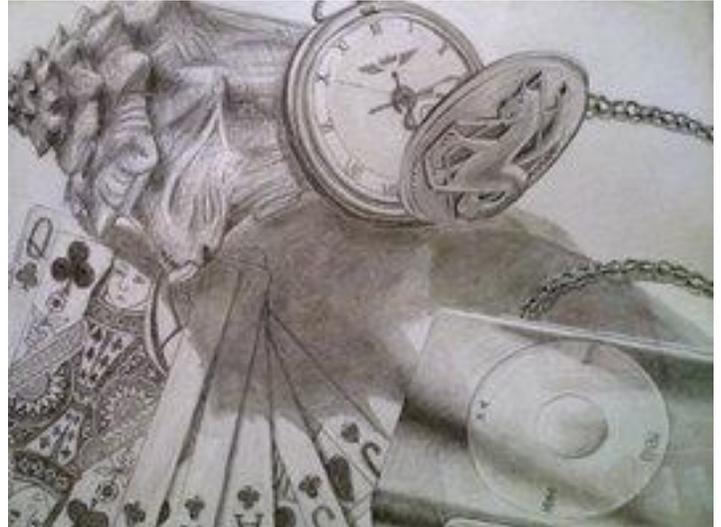
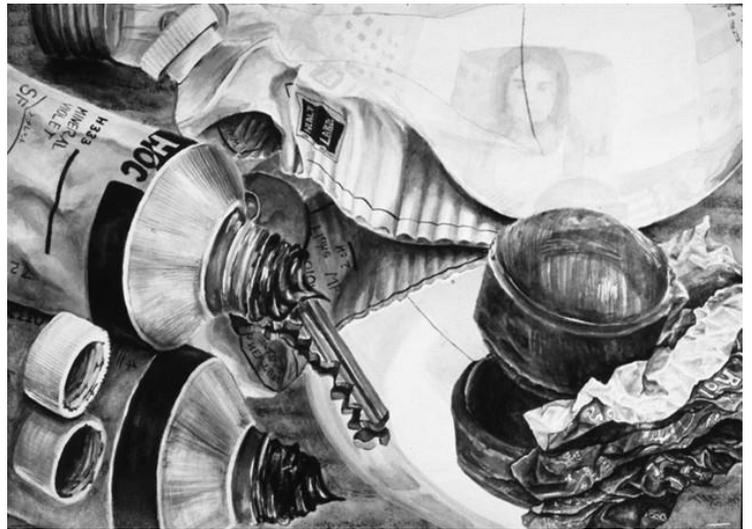
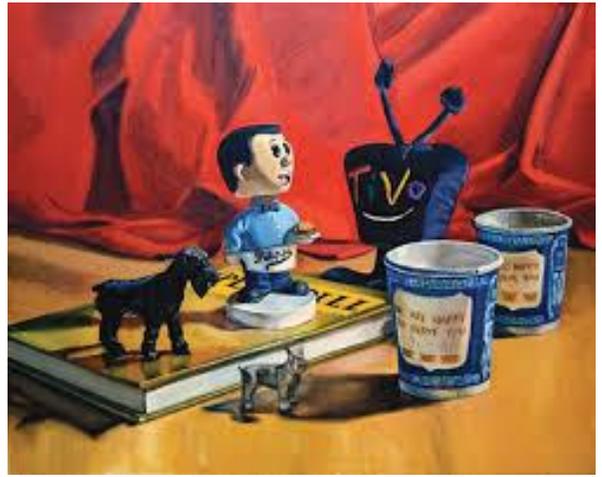
You should now have more than enough ideas and information to compose a fantastic symbolic still life representing you. You may use the objects and thumbnails from the previous exercise, use new ones, or modify your ideas using the drawings you did in the preliminary drawing exercise to create a symbolic still life that really represents you.

You may do this artwork with pencil and shade it in (be careful not to just color everything gray), or paint it using watercolor or acrylic. Individual objects should be as realistic as possible and shaded using a consistent light source. Not outline drawings! No outlines in paintings or drawings! Drawings or paintings should be of a reasonable size to get the amount of detail needed to realistically portray the objects.

Students: Please remember that realism doesn't necessarily mean boring and traditional, put your own twist and stamp on the painting and the project.



\* Note: You can may also want to include words and phrases from your journal exercise.



The drawings and paintings in this handout show AP & Pre-AP caliber work. They are appropriate in scope, show sufficient detail, and exhibit a light source. Pencil people: More contrast is better. The seashell still life is excellently laid out and the shading on the individual objects is well done, but the drawing with paint tubes above shows more value contrast and would, therefore, get a better grade from AP. *Please*, whether drawing or painting, expand your use of value to use the full range from white to black! Those painting, remember that muddy gray or dully colored work is not pleasing!

