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ASK THE EXPERTS

## Studio Craft: Using Food in Still Life



**Ask the Experts:** “I have been doing oil paintings of still life recently, with food as the subject matter. I am having a hard time keeping the objects fresh from session to session. Is there a trick to keep my subjects from spoiling before my work is done?”

**A:** In the long history of painting still life with food as subject, the ephemeral nature of edible material has been a challenge for artists. Especially when the goal is to capture the appearance of an appetizing meal, time is not always the painter’s friend. Even the most accurately rendered shapes of common foods can seem off-putting if the color isn’t right. There are ways, however, to compensate for the degradation of fresh still life objects or otherwise deal with compositions of food.

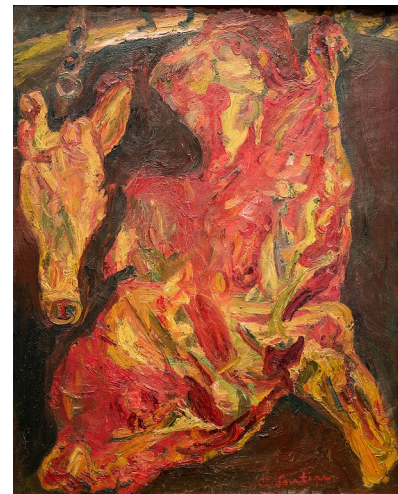
### Choose items with appropriate stability

Consider selecting objects that can remain durable for the duration of the painting process. Some items

like hard squash and pumpkins can retain the same appearance for weeks or even a couple of months at room temperature. In-shell nuts can be kept indefinitely at room temperature. Fresh apples may last as long as a couple of weeks in a still life. Citrus fruit can be usually keep its appearance for as long as a week if it is purchased fresh.



Fresh eggs usually last several days without visible change, though of course they will spoil internally at room temperature.



Chaim Soutine, “Side of Beef with a Calf’s Head” 1923

The most perishable items like fresh meat and fish start degrading before they even make it to the studio. When artists choose these, it’s a challenge to

remain near the subject matter once they begin to decay. Depending on the composition, it may be a good choice to keep perishable subject matter in the refrigerator until it needs to be addressed in the day's work; not every artist, however, likes to exclude some elements, because it becomes more difficult to capture the color and composition in its entirety.

The painter Chaim Soutine, who suffered starvation as a child, was fascinated with painting raw meat, and kept carcasses in his studio so long that neighbors complained of the smell. He used large amounts of fresh blood to restore a fresh appearance to the meat, which had lost color in a failed preservation attempt. Naturally, these measures exceed what most artists can do in the studio today.

### **Consider photo-reference**

Working from photographs guarantees the apparent freshness of the subject. Artists who are comfortable using photo-reference exclusively are assured of capturing the moment at which the still life subjects are at the peak of perfection. Those who work strictly from direct observation may object to using photos, but even artists who eschew photography as primary subject matter may still want to retain photographs to reference color, or at least to keep track of how much the subject matter changes from session to session.

### **Preserve items for display**

Some food items can be altered in the studio to stabilize them, and in some cases they may last indefinitely for future use. Loaves of bread are easy to preserve in an appetizing condition. Display-only loaves are easy to make by drying and varnishing ordinary bread, a common craft in the mid-20th century for home decoration. The best breads for dehydration and varnishing have minimal fat or sugar content, like artisan bread, baguettes and Italian-style loaves. Hard to obtain shapes, rolls and

pastries can be made by hand from dough containing a high salt content, as much as one part salt to two parts flour. When baked, these can be made to look quite real, and can retain a natural appearance for a long time, as the salt makes them dense and less prone to shrinkage. While salt keeps pests at bay, homemade salt-dough objects should still be varnished to prevent humidity from affecting them.



Eggs can be prepared for still life by removing the contents and leaving the shells intact. Prick a small hole at each end of the shell and use a straw to blow out the contents, then rinse the shell cavity. Once emptied, the shells can be used as they are, or filled with plaster to add weight and make them more durable.

### **Fake Food**

Artificial fruit and vegetables can substitute for fresh when long-term stability is important, but most “fake fruit” is unconvincing unless combined in the composition with some natural material. Artists who choose to use artificial food items for still life should spend a little more for the highest possible quality.



Detail, rotting fruit from Bacchus by Caravaggio, ca. 1598

## Embrace Decay

Many paintings of still life with food actually reveal, and sometimes vividly describe the breakdown, spoilage and rotting of the subjects. Often this is intended as a Vanitas, a statement about the brevity of life and eventuality of death. Some artists have used rotting or insect-infested food to suggest physical or spiritual corruption.



Detail, cooking eggs in progress from "Old Woman Cooking Eggs" by Velazquez, 1618

Rarer in artistic depiction of food is the capture of a moment when food changes from raw to cooked. This tests the artist's keen eye and skilled hand. Maybe the best-known example of this approach is "Old Woman Frying Eggs" by Diego Velasquez, 1618, which shows eggs begin to solidify and turn white in a cooking vessel. This painting includes a number of details which spotlight the artist's impressive skill, including the curved cast shadow of a knife in a bowl and a wide range of realistically depicted materials and surfaces.

To best capture the natural appearance food and all its phases from fresh to decayed, work toward improving general speed and accuracy in drawing and painting. Practice capturing the essence of the subject through rapid sketches, and combine these sketches with direct observation and memory to achieve the most complete representation of the subject. These skills translate well to figurative art

and portraiture, where the plausible appearance of the subject must also be captured in a limited time frame.

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