

Charles Ethan Porter

What is still life painting? Who painted still lifes?

Duration: 45 minutes

Grade Level: Grades 2 – 8

Learning Objectives:

- Learn about Charles Ethan Porter
- Discover the art and progression of still life painting
- Learn how to compare and contrast artistic styles

Outcomes:

- Students will learn about the life of Charles Ethan Porter and what shaped him as an artist
- Students will learn about the history of still life painting
- Students will learn critical thinking and visual skills by comparing and contrasting artistic styles

Associated Activities:

- Still Life Collage, 30 minutes
- Still Life Painting, 30 minutes

Who was Charles Ethan Porter?

Charles Ethan Porter was born to a free African-American family in Rockville, Connecticut in 1847. He found early inspiration in his mother's garden and the Connecticut landscape. Just a few years after the Civil War in 1869, Porter saved enough money and was the first African American to join the National Academy of Art in New York.

In 1878 he set up a studio in Hartford and created a name for himself. His paintings were purchased by notable residents and visitors, such as author Mark Twain and landscape painter Frederic Edwin Church. An auction of 100 of his paintings in 1881 helped fund a two-year trip to Paris, France where he attended the Académie Julian and the French National Academy for Decorative Arts.

In 1883 he returned to Connecticut, but a change in artistic styles led to a decline in interest for his works (with no help from a poor economy and continuing racism). He began to split his time between Rockville and New York City, but by 1897 was living full-time in Rockville where he continued to teach, paint, and exhibit until his death in 1923.



Charles Ethan Porter, *Peonies*, c. 1900

What is still life painting?

Have you seen paintings that look like collections of objects? Or vases of flowers or fruit bowls? That is a still life. The items that are to be painted or drawn sit still and cannot move on their own. The artist does not focus on people or places, just the objects. While they may just look like a collection of random things, artists select their still life props very carefully in order to tell a story or show an idea they may have. The items chosen can also be symbolic, where one item stands for something else.

Activity: Create a still life collage using found items in your house.

Still life painting has been around for thousands of years. Some still lifes have been found in ancient Egyptian tombs, when they believed that whatever was painted would come to life in the afterlife. Still life painting has continued to be a popular genre for centuries.

In the 16th century, still life paintings began to gain popular interest as artists became extremely interested in the natural world and flower paintings were on trend. By the 19th and 20th centuries, artists like Vincent Van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Georgia O'Keefe, Andy Warhol, and many other iconic artists had created still life paintings of their own.

Activity: Create your own still life artwork using one of our templates.

Compare and Contrast Artistic Styles

As you've learned, still life painting has been around for centuries and comes in many different styles. See below for questions to ask yourself when you're comparing and contrasting still life paintings as well as other artworks.

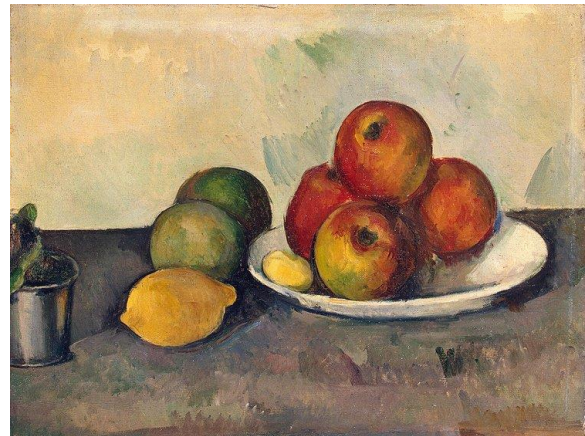
Questions to ask yourself when looking at multiple artworks:

1. Do the artworks feature similar props or objects?
2. Why do you think the artist chose this subject matter?
3. What story or idea are these paintings conveying?
4. What shapes, textures, and colors do you see?
5. What painting style do you think works best for still life?

Think: Use these questions to compare and contrast artworks by Charles Ethan Porter and other artists.



Charles Ethan Porter, *Apples on the Ground*, 1878, Oil on canvas, Wadsworth Athenaeum



Paul Cézanne, *Still life with apples on the Ground*, c. 1890, Oil on canvas, State Hermitage Museum



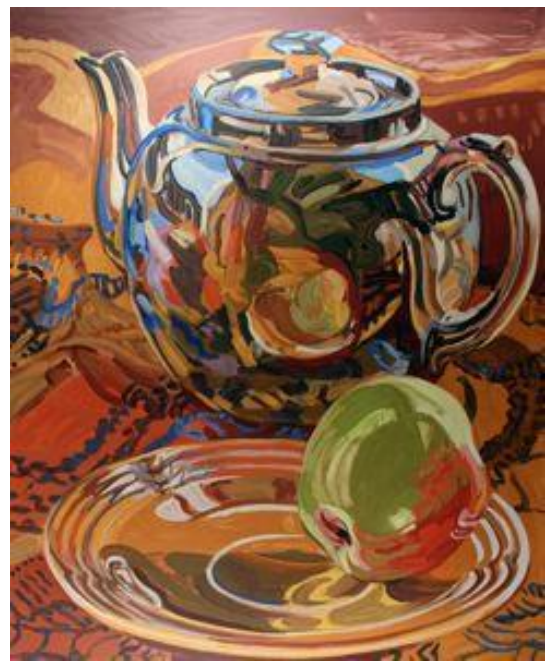
Charles Ethan Porter, *Peonies in a Vase*, c. 1885, Oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art



Vincent van Gogh, *Still Life: Vase with Twelve Sunflowers*, c. 1888, Oil on canvas, Bavarian State Painting Collections



Charles Ethan Porter, *Untitled (Cracked Watermelon)*, c. 1890, Oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art



Janet Fish, *Teapot with Apple*, 2007, Ink on paper, Mattatuck Museum