



PATAKA EDUCATION
Art • Heritage • Culture

A STILL LIFE IS A THEATRE THE ART OF SUSAN WILSON



Tu-to the Maori Battalion, Susan Wilson, 2006, Oil on linen, 36" x 28".

TEACHER NOTES

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SUSAN WILSON

Artists Profile

"Painting a still life is like having a little theatre where you put on plays."

Susan Wilson in conversation with Michael Peppiatt, 2009.

New Zealand artist Susan Wilson has loved painting since she was a child. Captivated by light and colour, she was heavily influenced by the South Island high country landscape that she grew up in. She says that "as a child I was passionate about recording what I saw."¹ This keen sense of observation forms an essential part of her painting practice. Whether painting portraits, landscapes, or still life subjects Wilson always pays careful attention to "how things look and how things are shaped"². In her rich paintings she captures subtleties of colour as well as the "unspoken life"³ force, energy and atmosphere surrounding the objects that she observes.



Adios, 2007, Oil on Linen.

Journeys of Inspiration

Throughout her life Wilson has explored and lived in many different countries. The amazing paintings, sculpture, architecture, and religious art forms that she has observed in Peru, Spain and Italy have had a profound effect on her art making practice.

Throughout her paintings you can see references to some of the Western World's great Masters of Art.

Wilson sees her self as part of the Western painting tradition. During her travels she has sought out works by great masters such as Ensor, Goya, Chardin, Velázquez, Morandi

and Freud. These were works that she first discovered in her fathers books as a child.

Wilson's still life paintings often contain postcards depicting European land and cityscapes, gilded interiors of churches, places she has visited and artist's works that have moved her.



Charon crossing the Styx, 16th Century, oil on wood, Joachim Patinir, Museo Del Prado, Madrid, Spain.

1, 2, 3 - Susan Wilson in conversation with Michael Peppiatt, 2009.

Still Life

Wilson's still life paintings are autobiographical. She records important events in her life through personal objects and images.

A New Zealander at heart

Exploring her place in the world as a New Zealander is something that Wilson does in many of her still life paintings.

In *Tu -to the Maori Battalion* she has carefully placed a book by Maori writer Patricia Grace along side domestic objects like a chopping board and flour sieve. For her these objects hold special memories of home and conjure up recollections of people and places. Working with objects in this way fulfils Wilson's desire for narrative in her work.



Tu -to the Maori Battalion, 2006, Oil on Linen.



Kete from Rotorua, 2006, Oil on Linen.

Having retraced the steps that her father took when fighting in Italy during the Second World War, Wilson says "I've spent a lot of time trying to understand the war and what it did to the men who came back from it. I was brought up by old soldiers."⁴ Exploration of this heritage can be seen in her painting *Mt Manganui Still Life with Medals*, where her passport is carefully laid alongside medals from the Second World War.

A Still Life is a Theatre

In Wilson's paintings you can see that she revels in recording the beautiful surfaces of everyday objects. In her paintings she carefully observes the textural qualities of fabrics, flax and fruit, and like the old Masters she skilfully captures, the reflective and transparent qualities of glass and metal.

Wilson follows a long western tradition of still life painting in which everyday objects are symbols of time passing and memories.

"Like characters in a theatre"⁵ she has a group of objects that she uses over and over again in her paintings.

Having a love of the Opera, Wilson's still life paintings reflect her fascination with the placement of objects in stage and set design. She cherishes setting her objects up carefully. By rearranging them, she creates small and intimate environments in which she can tell her personal stories.



Adios II, 2007, Oil on Linen

5 - Susan Wilson in conversation with Michael Peppiatt, 2009.



STILL LIFE

Still Life :

*A picture of inanimate objects.
Common still life subjects include
vessels, food, flowers, books and
clothing.*

People have been painting still life objects for thousands of years.

Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber, 1600, Fra Juan Sánchez Cotán

The first Still Lives

The Ancient Egyptians

The Ancient Egyptians painted still life objects in the form of stacks of food offerings for the gods. These paintings could be found in temples and sometimes tombs. The Egyptians were not interested in perspective, or in shading. They were not concerned about making things look highly realistic. The aim of their paintings was just to simply show what each of these objects was.



Egyptian Still Life. Can you recognise any of these objects?

In the painting above you can see a basket of figs, grapes, bread, a leg of beef, duck, more meat and a cucumber. Quite a feast for the gods!



A Greek Still Life painting.

Greek and Roman artists are known to have painted still life objects too. Their paintings were more realistic than those created by the Egyptians. Examples of these paintings can be found on walls and floors of ancient villas.

The 16th and 17th Centuries

In the 16th and 17th centuries the genre of still life flourished, particularly amongst Dutch painters. These paintings were not thought of as important as religious scenes or portraits, but they were very popular. Dutch still life painters are celebrated for their amazing ability to accurately record fine details, light, form and texture.



Dutch Painter - Jan van Huysum, *Bouquet of Flowers in an Urn*, 1724, Oil on canvas
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles



Dutch Painter - Pieter Clasez, *Still Life*, 1625-30

Vanitas Paintings

Vanitas, Latin for vanity, refers to a type of still life consisting of a collection of objects that symbolise death, the brevity of human life, and the transience of earthly pleasures and achievements.

Vanitas paintings became very popular in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Vanitas still lifes often include lavish objects like wine goblets and musical instruments representing earthly pleasures. The idea was that people love their pleasures in life, the things that make them feel important or wealthy, and yet it all means nothing because time soon passes and we die. Skulls, burning candles, hour glasses, wilting flowers, and rotting fruit can be found in Vanitas paintings as symbolic reminders of time passing.



Dutch Painter - Adriaen Van Utrecht, *Vanitas Still Life with Bouquet and a Skull*, 1643.

The 19th Century

In the 19th century the invention of photography meant still life could take on a different form. Artists were not so concerned with recording objects in a highly realistic manner. Still life became a subject through which artists could experiment with colours and shapes, and explore the glorious application of paint on canvas.



Paul Cézanne, *Still life with ginger jar and egg plants*, 1890-94

Cézanne

One of the greatest artists to have explored still life at this time was Paul Cézanne. In his still life paintings Cézanne began to play with perspective, tilting surfaces within the picture plane and depicting his objects at unnatural angles. Cézanne also explored colour and shape by simplifying his objects and flattening the forms that he painted.

Picasso & Braque - the Cubists

Two revolutionaries of art who were highly influenced by Cézanne's treatment of still life were Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. They of course were the fathers of Cubism. Both artists were inspired by Cézanne's idea of playing with perspective and showing objects from several different angles within one image.



Pablo Picasso, *Still Life with Fruit Dish on a Table* (1914-1915)

In many of Picasso's still life paintings the objects depicted are barely recognisable. Picasso reduces his objects down to simple, flat shapes. He breaks up the picture plane and begins to abstract his subject matter.

Into the 20th Century

There have been many wonderful and varied approaches to painting still life since Cubism. Still life is still an extremely popular subject for artists to paint and reflects many artists fascination with objects from every day life.

Famous still life artists from the 10th and 20th centuries:



Henri Matisse, *Red Interior : Still life on blue table*, 1947



Henri Matisse, *Still Life with Oranges*, 1912



Van Gogh, *Sun flower*, 1888.



Giorgio Morandi, *Natura Morta*, 1956



Wayne Thiebaud, *Cakes*, 1963.



Richard Diebenkorn, *Poppies*, 1963



Audrey Flack, *Marilyn*, 1977



David Hockney, *White Porcelain*, 1986



David Hockney, *Anteriums*, 1995



Frida Kahlo, *Still Life with Parrot*, 1951

GLOSSARY

Still Life : A picture of inanimate objects.

Common still life subjects include vessels, food, flowers, books and clothing.

Genres : Genres are the various categories of subject matter in the traditional academic hierarchy of art. These are : history, megalography, mythology, religion, portraiture, landscape, still life, rhopography, and vernacular.

Cubism : One of the most influential art movements (1907-1914) of the 20th century, Cubism was begun by Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1882-1973) and Georges Braque (French, 1882-1963) in 1907. They were greatly inspired by African sculpture, by painters Paul Cézanne (French, 1839-1906) and Georges Seurat (French, 1859-1891), and by the Fauves.

Pre & Post Visit Activities

- GATHER as many examples of still life art works as you can. Explore the works of sculptors and printmakers as well as painters.
- CREATE your own class still life composition. Each student can add an object that represents them, either from home or from around the class room.
- Get students to draw an object from home that represents them and / or their family. These drawings can be collaged together to create a huge class still life mural.
- RESEARCH the works of New Zealand still life artists: Michael Smither, Alvin Pankhurst, Frances Hodgkins, Julia Henderson, and Claudia Pond-Eyley. Create a still life in the artist's style. Experiment with chalk pastels, oil pastels, printmaking, and painting.
- FIND some everyday objects with interesting shapes and surfaces. Use these to set up a still life to be drawn, photographed and painted from.
- CREATE a three dimensional still life using papier-mâché.
- CREATE a still life that tells a story about someone who is important to you. Use your still life as inspiration to write a story about that person.