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# MODERN STILL LIFE

*From Fruit Bowls to Disco Balls*



A Beginner's Guide to Painting Fun,  
Fresh Still Lives in Oil and Acrylic

**SARI SHRYACK**

*Walter Foster*

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## CHAPTER THREE

# Drawing for Painting

## DRAWING

I've encountered many gifted painters, both abstract and representational, who don't necessarily see themselves as adept draftspeople. In other words, drawing isn't their forte. This realization is actually reassuring. Being a master at drawing isn't a must-have to excel in painting.

Over time, as my painting took precedence, my doodling and cartooning skills waned. Yet, my capacity to gauge proportions and create drawings that complement a painting has grown remarkably. Drawing for the purpose of painting is different than drawing as an independent art form. While there are intersections and a solid grounding in drafting can be beneficial, they aren't identical. Recognizing this distinction is pivotal.

So, what does "drawing for painting" entail? It closely resembles the process of measuring and establishing a foundational framework for your art. Just as in my painting technique, you'll begin with broader shapes, gradually honing in on the intricacies. As I said previously, you don't need a meticulously accurate contour drawing to start painting.

Some styles, like grisaille, are grounded in detailed drawings overlaid with sheer paint washes to introduce color. However, in our approach, we're integrating three essential painting elements concurrently: drawing, value, and color. Our drawing may appear a tad chaotic initially, with a plethora of lines and boundaries. Yet, these serve as crucial markers, akin to bumper lanes in bowling, guiding our journey. They ensure that as we pursue color and value choices, we stay on course, preventing drawing and proportion inaccuracies from hindering our progress.

After priming my canvas, my usual next step is to draw. But, instead of pencils, I use my paintbrush to map in my initial draw lines. To me, pencils can tempt an artist into crafting intricate drawings that eventually get overshadowed by opaque acrylic layers, but a brush nudges you towards the looser strokes apt for painting. This choice was influenced by a great piece of advice

I received at a workshop. The instructor pointed out that if mastering painting with a paintbrush is your goal, then not only should you paint with it, but you should also draw, shade, and blend with it.

To master your paintbrush, put aside the graphite pencil and embrace drawing with paint. Opt for a paint color that contrasts with your background in terms of value. For instance, if you've primed with a dark color, use a lighter one to draw. In this step, I suggest using a surfactant (flow improver), such as GOLDEN Wetting Aid, to give your paint an ink-like consistency ideal for drawing. A flat or bright brush, as long as it's relatively new with a sharp edge, is perfect for the task. Before diving into your painting, practice with your brush on scrap paper.

Draw using larger muscle groups, such as your shoulders or back, rather than the smaller ones in your fingers or wrists. This technique, commonly seen among architects, offers greater control and precision. In this phase, we aren't chasing detailed contour drawings. Our aim is to set boundaries. Start by outlining the outermost points of your subject, like the highest, furthest left, furthest right, and lowest points. A strong drawing commences with thorough observation, so as you embark on your drawing, it's essential to determine if your composition leans more towards a landscape or portrait orientation. No matter one's expertise, it's common to sometimes misjudge a composition's orientation. A handy trick involves using a dowel rod, extending your arm fully, and adjusting the rod to match the top and bottom of your composition. Rotate the rod to compare with the left and right sides. This process helps in discerning whether you're working with a landscape, portrait, or even a square composition.

After you've determined the proportions of your drawing, the next step involves identifying what I term as the *marquee object*. This object within your still life setup or reference photo holds a somewhat central position in your painting. It's neither a minuscule detail nor overwhelmingly large, but somewhere in between.

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The marquee object serves a pivotal role: it acts as a unit of measurement throughout your entire painting. To begin, extend your arm fully towards your reference photo or still life setup. Using the dowel rod, gauge how far this object is from the top, bottom, left, or right perimeter marks of your painting. Once you've plotted the marquee object on your drawing, ensure its size and placement are precise.

Remember, during the initial phases of honing your drawing skills, the process might be time-consuming. As you develop a better knack for proportions, this process should become easier. I, for instance, can now execute this step much faster than during my college days. So, patience is key and try to avoid being too hard on yourself.

To verify the object's size, extend your arm as you did with the overall layout and use the dowel rod to measure the marquee object's height. Rotate your arm to check its width. This measuring process—comparing the actual object to its representation in your painting—requires constant back and forth with the dowel rod. Once you're certain about the proportions of the marquee object, ensure its placement is correct. Use the dowel rod to measure how many “marquee object units” there are from the top, bottom, left, and right perimeters of your painting. For example, the distance might be equivalent to three marquee objects from the left and one and a half from the right. With the marquee object correctly sized and positioned, you can then utilize it as a reference to measure and plot the rest of your painting.

Much like how one would use a ruler to measure in inches or centimeters, the marquee object becomes your reference metric when measuring the height or width of elements in your painting. It might feel peculiar initially to measure items as “two or 2.5 oranges tall,” but that's precisely the method you'll use.

Another invaluable technique is the act of *dropping a vertical* or *dropping a horizontal*. Novice painters and sketch artists, unfamiliar with this approach, might sometimes misjudge diagonals, either exaggerating or understating them. By dropping a vertical—essentially aligning a straight reference next to a perceived line—you can gauge its true orientation. This is an indispensable tool, as many times I've mistaken the tilt of an arm or a body contour in a portrait, only to realize it deviated only slightly from being a pure vertical or horizontal.

Additionally, the dowel rod can assist in comparing the relative heights of objects. For instance, by extending your arm and holding the dowel rod horizontally while observing your reference, you might discern that the top of your marquee object is just slightly taller than another object on the opposite side of your painting.

To summarize, you have two main tools to employ when drawing:

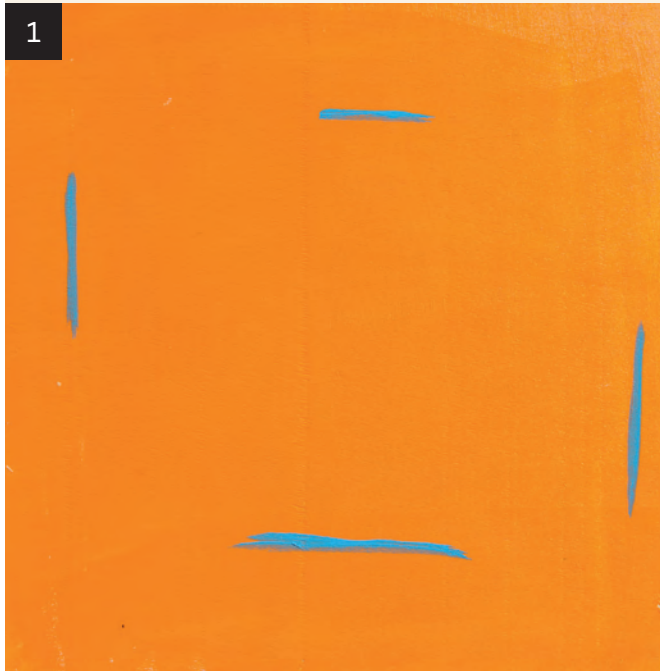
**1. Marquee Object Measurement** This is a method I strongly recommend. It employs the central object as a unit of measurement, creating a consistent scale throughout the artwork.

**2. Dropping Verticals and Horizontals** By superimposing these straight references onto both your painting and the reference photo, you can constantly verify the alignment and orientation of objects.

Lastly, always remember the “One Look, One Mark” rule, where you make one brush mark for each gaze at the subject. It's easy to get carried away when drawing familiar objects. Continuously cross-checking proportions is crucial. You aim to reproduce what stands before you, not a stylized, cartoonish rendition or a memorized version. This is especially true if your goal is a true-to-life, representational drawing.

## Drawing Step-by-Step (3D Watercolors)

1



### STEP 1

I start by priming my canvas with a bright orange color.

I mark the boundaries of the main forms I'm painting. Using a reference and dowel rod, I determine the furthest points of my composition: left, top, right, and bottom. Holding the dowel rod out, either horizontally or vertically, I align it with the most extreme points on the reference.

This simple technique, even with its imperfections, offers clarity. It helps ascertain if a composition is a more horizontal or landscape alignment and aids in centering the subject and gauging its main placement on the canvas.

2



### STEP 2

Here, we're using straight lines to shape the painting's form and set its placement. Remember, this isn't just about drawing, but about observing and positioning objects relative to one another. Building on the last step, use the dowel rod to pinpoint the extreme edges of objects. For instance, when aligning the rod with the bottom of the 3D glasses, note where it intersects with other items, like the top of the Ring Pop. Small details, even a millimeter's difference, matter. In my painting, the 3D glasses were a central reference. I gauged how other objects interacted with its boundaries.

This drawing approach, focused on relationships and proportions rather than detailed outlines, means constantly checking your work. Using the dowel rod helps verify alignments. Complex setups can often be more beneficial than simple ones. Without tools like grids or projectors, this method sharpens your observational skills and spatial judgment. Some imperfections may arise, but don't worry because upcoming steps will help you refine your work.

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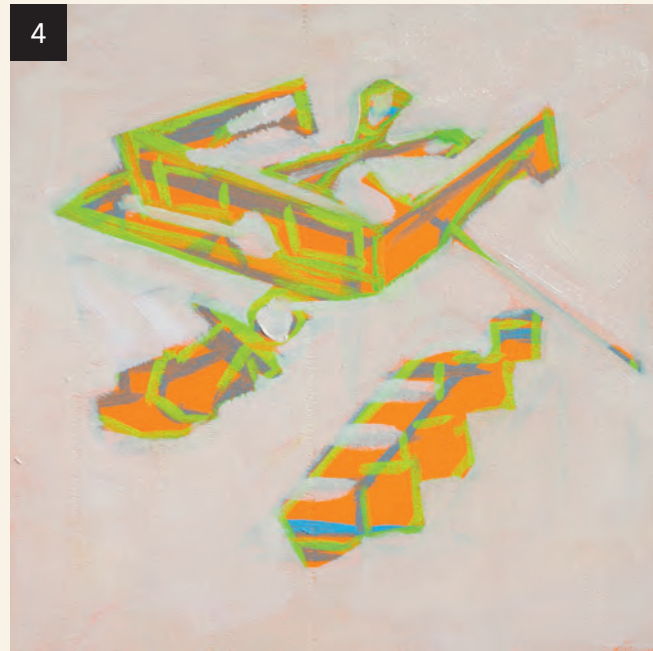
3



### STEP 3

Now, we'll improve our initial sketch. Don't dwell too much on perfecting it from the start. If you're about 80% sure your proportions are accurate and there's no significant oversight, go ahead and move forward. Any adjustments can be made as you progress. However, if glaring issues become evident after your initial sketch—which happened to me often as I honed my drawing skills—you can make corrections. If, for instance, the 3D glasses were drawn too large, there's no need to start over. Simply choose a different color and adjust the parts that are off, using the dowel rod for guidance. Here's a tip: Once you've confidently nailed down an object's placement and size, use it as a reference point—your *marquee object*—to check and adjust the positioning and size of surrounding items.

4



### STEP 4

I emphasize the power of using negative space, like the background's off-white color, as a drawing tool. This technique is prevalent in my works and helps refine drawings. Often, I find greater control using the edge of a flat brush to define an object's boundary by shaping the space around it, rather than detailing the object directly. Practically, this involves a dance between painting the object, refining, and then using the negative space to shape it. With this approach, busy draw lines are simplified, and the object's form becomes clearer. While I switched up the order in this example to demonstrate, the method can simplify intricate drawings. But a word of caution: avoid using the purest white. Choose a slightly muted shade, ensuring you have room later to enhance both color saturation and value.

5



### STEP 5

I've mapped out the general shapes, values, and color blocks, guided by my previous drawings. Using a slightly larger brush for this task provided speed, but also introduced some inaccuracies. A notable error is where the arm of the 3D glasses doesn't connect with the front, especially on the red side. Here's a key insight: during this phase, even though our focus is on blocking colors and values, we're still essentially drawing. Don't rush to make it look "finished."

For instance, when working on the arm of the 3D glasses, I noticed an alignment issue with the front, but prioritized staying true to my reference over achieving a "realistic" look. If this painting ended here, connecting the 3D glasses might have been understandable. But given the multilayered process, I left the misalignment as a reminder to re-evaluate that section later. Remember, even when not directly "drawing," keeping an eye on accuracy can be invaluable in subsequent stages.

6



### STEP 6

I utilize Quinacridone Magenta, thinned for precision. As the painting evolves, achieving thin, exact lines becomes crucial for detailing. This redraw serves two main purposes: 1) correcting drawing errors made during block-ins and 2) introducing more detail, like the edge of the Ring Pop, the scissors' intricacies, and the paint containers. While this step mirrors earlier drawing phases, drawing becomes easier with the accumulated information on the canvas.

Even if some parts were slightly off, like the arm intersection of the 3D glasses, much of the composition is on point, making refinements simpler. You aim for higher accuracy with each phase, striving for 90–95% correctness now. And you can continually refine challenging parts, ensuring they align with the rest. Don't neglect to measure object intersections, even for non-touching elements. For instance, verify that the intersection of the 3D glasses aligns with the right parts of the scissors and paint. Ensure these interrelations remain consistent throughout the painting, even in the later stages.

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## STEP 7

I corrected errors from earlier stages, enhancing areas like the red on the scissors, the arms of the 3D glasses, and deepening the shadows. This included adjustments for the translucent reflection

from the lenses of the 3D glasses and adjustments to the brush and paints. Thanks to the corrections made in the previous step, pinpointing the accurate placement of colors and values became easier.



## STEP 8

I utilized the background color as negative space to further refine and define the objects, cleaning up excess draw lines from prior stages. While I don't mind some draw lines showing, the goal was to

respect the recent redraw from step 7. This technique helps in correcting drawing mistakes. Now, the painting appears functional, with only minor adjustments and highlights remaining.

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## STEP 9

This is the final touch-up where I add the highlights, emphasizing the texture and material of the objects. Highlights reveal the shiny surfaces of the scissors and the reflective nature of the paint and the Ring Pop. While the painting should already convey its message without these details, the

highlights provide depth, revealing the finer details of each object's surface. It's like putting the cherry on top, making the painting complete and more informative.

## DRAWING TOOLS

- **Dowel rod** This is a simple yet effective tool for drawing. While some artists use their thumb to gauge proportions, a dowel rod offers a more extended reference point, making it particularly useful.
- **Proportional dividers or ratio tools** These tools, much like the dowel rod, aid in comparing measurements between your reference image and your drawing or painting on the canvas.
- **Gridding** While not a "tool" in the conventional sense, gridding involves creating a grid on both your reference photo and canvas.

This technique is especially beneficial when painting from a photograph. To maintain accuracy, ensure that both your reference photo and canvas share the same ratio, such as 5:7 or 1:3. By using this grid system, you can keep your drawing proportional and avoid any distortions.

- **Hand mirror** By viewing the reflection of the subject and giving yourself a pair of fresh eyes, you can see—and correct—glaring proportional issues that you couldn't identify previously.
- **Projectors** Many artists, especially those working on larger pieces, opt for either a desk or wall projector. A projector simply casts the desired image onto your canvas, allowing you to trace it with ease.



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