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Designing Complex Still Lives



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**Stargazer Lilies, oil on linen, 24 x 18" (60 x 45cm)**

One of these lilies needed to be the focal point so I made one facing nearly straight forward and gave it the strongest light. The others were painted in lower key to avoid competition for attention.



**The Tang Horse, oil on linen, 20 x 12" (50 x 30cm)**

The black vase is the ideal foil for the horse as it allows it to stand out both in contrast and color. The blossom branch adds cohesion to the composition by creating a circle with the flowers and the horse.



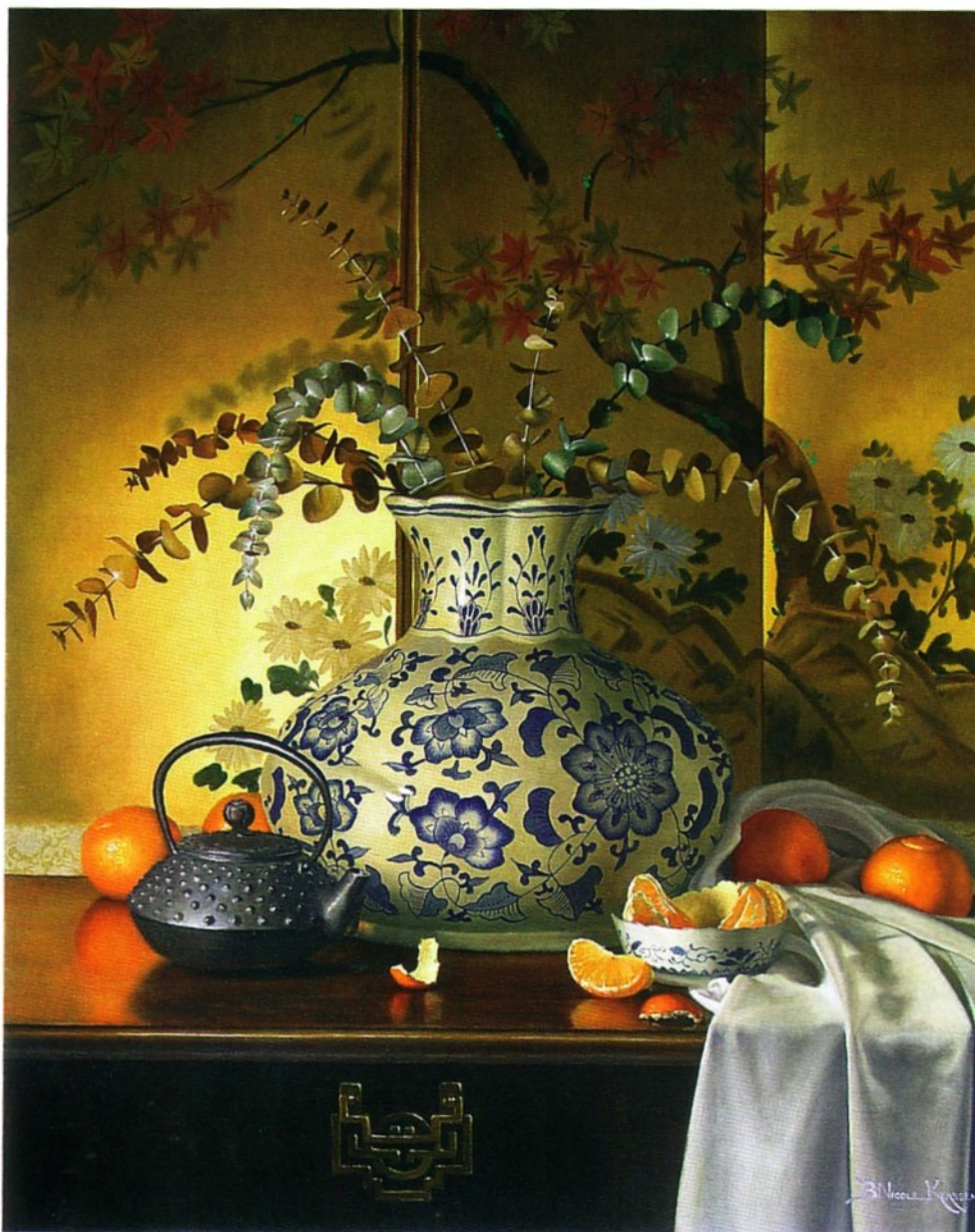
**Spilt Milk, oil on linen,  
16 x 20" (40 x 50cm)**

This painting is bound by the curve of the poppies which move the eye to the sweep of the white cloth, which leads to the curve of the cat's tail and there to the milk bottle, and back to the poppies.



→ predominantly cool composition of greens and blues, it will catch the eye by virtue of being a minority in color and temperature. I also need to consider color harmony and balance of the overall composition. While designing, I walk a narrow line between contrast and discord and harmony and monotony. Once I was composing a piece with a mandolin as the main object and planned to use a golden brown vase since I thought it would be a nice echo of the mandolin. Once it was introduced however, it more than echoed the mandolin, it fought with it for dominance. It was too similar in size and color and it only confused the composition. Out it went. Things must not be too similar or too discordant for beauty. Usually I find that rules can guide me but actually looking at the arrangement before me tells me if I am moving in the right direction.

Once I am pleased with my composition, I still have to use artistic license to fine-tune the composition to further my intentions. While executing the painting, I need to remember which parts I mean to suppress and which to take precedence. I should make the edges of the focal point fairly sharp. The colors and values of the principle objects can be exaggerated slightly. I may also alter the colors of other areas a little in order to harmonize the composition or exaggerate a complementary color. This fine-tuning reinforces the framework of design constructed so carefully before the painting even began. If the framework is sound, my painting is halfway to success before I ever pick up a brush. □



**The Iron Teapot, oil on linen, 24 x 20" (60 x 50cm)**

The colors here are complementary orange and blue. The brown of the table top and gold of the screen are subtle versions of the orange in the tangerines. The white of the cloth is a subtle version of blue.

## About the Artist

A traditional still life and figure painter, B. Nicole Klassen received art schooling at San Jose State University where she is proud to have had Maynard Dixon "Dick" Stewart as an instructor. She further developed her skills under the instruction of the brilliant painter, Robert K. Semans.

Nicole had her first one-person show in 1994 in California and has since had many more solo and group shows in the United States and Japan. Her work was also in two group

shows at the Cahoon Museum of Art in Massachusetts and two at the Triton Museum of Art in California. Collectors hold Nicole's pieces in the U.S., Canada, Europe and Japan. She received honors from the Art Renewal Center for a still life and a figure piece.

Nicole was also featured as one of the nation's "leading ladies" of painting in the January 2006 issue of *American Art Collector*.

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USA

OIL

B. NICOLE KLASSEN EXPLAINS HER METHODS FOR DESIGNING STILL LIFES

# COMPOSITION

## The Secret of a Successful Still Life



***The English Saddle*, oil on linen, 30 x 24" (76 x 60cm)**

In this painting, the composition is triangular. The riding crop, boots and saddle strap form the outlines of the triangle, which directs and keeps the eye within the canvas. The light on the boot lining is important to explain the shape of the black boots against the dark background. The colors of the blanket complement the red of the saddle and lining of the boots without overpowering them.

Composition is the foundation of any painting. And as it is in architecture, the finest work will be wasted if it rests on a weak foundation. For this reason, I spend much time thinking about the arrangement of my still lifes. There are a number of matters to take into account when composing. Before I even begin to gather items for a set up, I decide on the theme and mood of the painting. When I arrange the objects, I consider their intrinsic qualities as well as their placement in accordance with the principles of design. Lastly, when executing the painting, I need to be mindful to fine-tune my colors, values and draftsmanship to make the most of the set-up I have created.

The first thing I consider is the theme of the painting. In some cases, this is a general idea such as "musical instrument against green drape" or "laid table" or even a color concept like "blue and orange". Other times it is more specific, such as "fly fishing accessories" or "English horse-riding tack".

Once I have determined the theme of the piece, I must decide what mood I wish to achieve. Shall I opt for a somber, dark, sparse arrangement? Or perhaps cheerful, bright and full? Often the subject will already suggest the mood. If I'm planning a canvas, which features my big ginger cat, I will likely find gay colors and a light tone most appropriate. There are times, however, when the mood needs to temper the theme somewhat. Once I was commissioned to do a painting of a woman's carpentry tools. She wanted the piece to look feminine. I needed to take particular care not to be swayed by the traditionally masculine and austere associations of the tools.

With theme and mood in mind, I select the items for the arrangement. I have already chosen a canvas size at this point and decided whether it will



**Woodworking, oil on linen, 8 x 8" (20 x 20cm)**

I was commissioned to do this painting of a woman's carpentry tools. She wanted there to be a feminine touch in the piece so I added her floral shirt and a yellow polka dot teacup.





**Morning Song, oil on linen, 12 x 18" (30 x 45cm)**

This color scheme is complementary yellow and violet. The curve of the canary and his gaze send the eye to the shadow on the wall. The stronger contrasts on the left side help balance the interest of the right side.



**The Plot Thickens, oil on linen, 20 x 24" (50 x 60cm)**

I originally had the books lined up evenly but changed them to avoid monotony. I surrounded the black typewriter with the light paper to keep it from getting lost against the dark background.

be horizontal or vertical. Having determined the format now makes arrangement easier as it cuts down on the variables. I work from life and set my subjects up on a table in front of my easel. My table is surrounded by dark movable panels to keep bounced light from interfering with my single light source. I find it best to begin the arrangement with one to three main objects. Usually, I have auxiliary candidate elements in mind from the start, but they may not make the final cut. I add and subtract objects on the table until I achieve a pleasing arrangement. This may take me as long as two days. I like to introduce a variety of surfaces to my set up if possible. Often this means glass, metal, ceramic, wood, dull and shiny cloth, liquid and plants all in the same arrangement. It adds interest and, often much of the charm of a still life lays in the good execution of these diverse materials. Sometimes choosing these elements may require a little research. I have particularly enjoyed learning about certain hobbies and pastimes by the necessity of setting up appropriate items. When I worked on a fishing painting for instance, I needed to find out how to run the line through which loops on the rod and which lures would be appropriate for a riverside scene. It is also a preference of mine to include items that are nearly timeless. I select in such a way that the decade in which the painting was produced and maybe even the century won't be instantly obvious. So I'm not likely to include a cell phone or a faddish fabric into the picture.

Aside from the tangible qualities of the introduced objects, I must also consider the more formal principles of design. There needs to be a focal point in the composition. If there is no area of emphasis the piece will look jumbled and confused. There are a number of tricks that help capture the eye of the viewer. One is the use of contrast. Contrast attracts the eye. If I have a dark violin that is getting lost in front of a dark backdrop, the introduction of something light behind it, maybe a sheet of music or a lighter cloth, will not only reveal the shape again but the difference in value will make the area stand out. Color, in temperature, quantity and saturation, can also be used to pull the eye. If my red violin is the brightest red item in the painting it will attract attention to itself. But if it is in a sea of brighter red objects, it will be lost. If my warm, red violin is in a →





***The Yellow Rose*, oil on linen,  
18 x 24" (45 x 60cm)**

I wanted this painting to have a lush, sensuous look about it. So I rumpled the red satin and tipped over one of the champagne glasses.



***Turquoise and Silver*, oil on linen,  
18 x 24" (45 x 60cm)**

The cup echoes the colors in this composition, as does the silver. I introduced the turquoise ribbon to bring more blue to the lower part of the painting. The tangerine leaves on the left keep the eye within the canvas.



# Designing the Still Life

## STAGE 1

I have decided to paint a 20 x 24" (50 x 60cm) canvas with a lush, ornate, musical theme. I start with fabric, sheet music and a mandolin.



## STAGE 2

These are some of the other items I plan to try in my set up.



## STAGE 3

I try each drapery and decide the ivory satin echoes the sheet music nicely without overpowering the mandolin. All the fabrics are shown at once for this photo but I actually try each individually.





#### STAGE 4

With the ivory satin roughly in place, I next see which candidates work best where I plan to put a medium sized, round object. Again, I actually try each item individually.



#### STAGE 5

I continue choosing items in this way until I am satisfied with the overall look.



#### STAGE 6

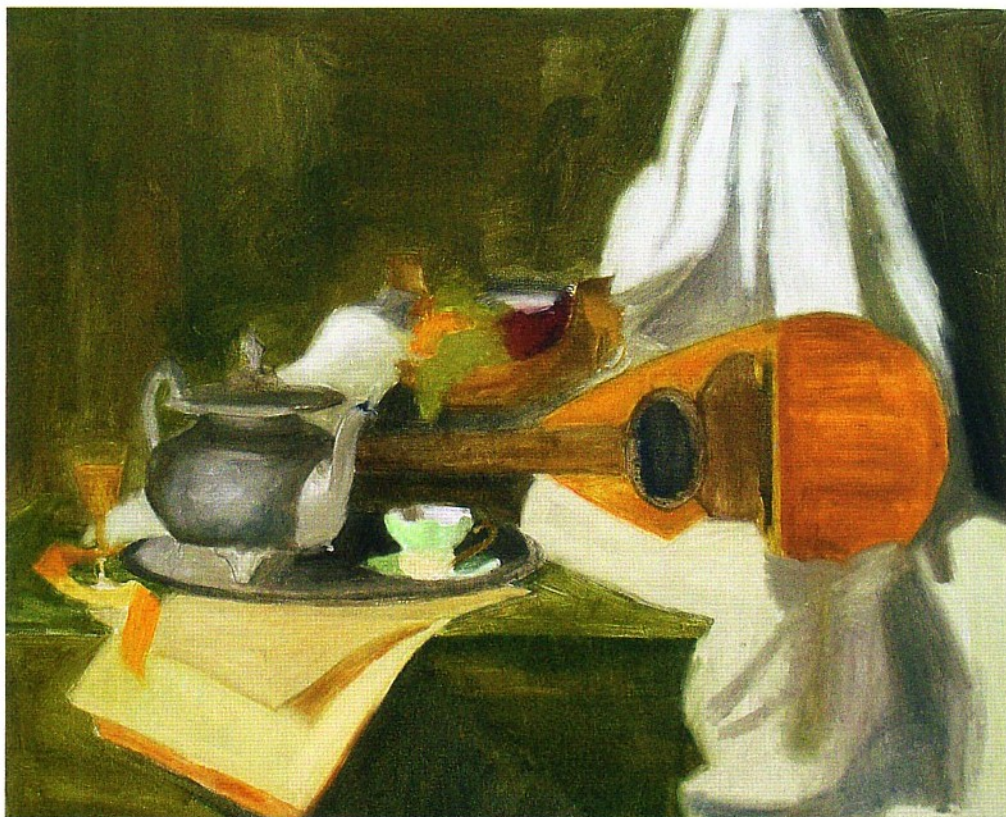
I bring up more of the ivory satin for cohesion. For balance, I add the butterfly into the vast area of green and add orange paper under the sheet music.



# Painting the Still Life

## STAGE 1

I next block in the painting to make sure the composition doesn't have any flaws I hadn't noticed before and also to ensure I have properly placed the objects on the canvas.



## STAGE 2

The whole painting is worked to the same level of finish as I go along. This way I can see the overall effect and make adjustments if needed.







### STAGE 3 – Final Painting

*Springtime Serenade*, oil on linen 20 x 24" (51 x 61cm)

## What the Artist Used

### Support

Fine weave single oil primed linen stretched on 20 x 24" (50 x 60cm) stretcher bars.

### Other materials

Mineral spirits  
Liquin

### Brushes

No. 8 flat  
No. 5 filbert  
No. 2 bright  
No. 2 filbert  
No. 0 flat  
No. 0 round  
No. 000 round

### Oil colors

Titanium White  
Alizarin Crimson  
Cadmium Red Light  
Cadmium Yellow  
Medium  
Cadmium Yellow Light  
Yellow Ochre

Raw Sienna  
Burnt Sienna  
Raw Umber  
Ultramarine Blue  
Cobalt Blue  
Phthalo Green  
Ivory Black