



FRANCIS E.  
CHARDON: A  
STUDY IN STILL  
LIFE

**ABSTRACT**

**Level:** Key Stage 5, Ages 16-18 (years 12 and 13)

**Subjects:** Art, Art History, Local History, Welsh History.

**Total task time:** 1 hour for reading and task 1-3. Task 4 time depends on the complexity of the composition and medium.



## Francis E. Chardon: A Study in Still Life



An exercise in living history by Llandudno Museum.

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**Objective:** an introduction to still life and art in dialogue. Students will have 3 photographic still lifes and one mixed medium still life with a short paragraph clarifying how the subject and the composition of a painting create meanings.



*Francis Chardon*

**Francis Edouard Chardon**, Victorian founder of the Llandudno Museum, was born in Calcutta on October 17th, 1865. His father, Edouard Chardon, was a wealthy indigo planter and his mother, Maria Theresa Rapallo, also came from a wealthy family which allowed Francis Chardon to study art without the need to sell it. Chardon was brought to England when he was 7 years old and studied in London, Germany and France before enrolling at the Institute of Fine Arts in Naples, Italy. He studied under art master Giuseppe Casciaro, a well-known pastel artist whose works are still being sold and collected today. Although not as celebrated as his teacher, Chardon did have one exhibition in London which was favorably received for its methods of composition, but what is art composition? It is a combination of line, shape, colour, texture, value, form, and space that the artist plans and implements to engage the viewer in a specific manner.

Line — the visual path that enables the eye to move within the piece

Shape — areas defined by edges within the piece, whether geometric or organic

Colour — hues with their various values and intensities

Texture — surface qualities which translate into tactile illusions

Value — Shading used to emphasize form

Form — 3-D length, width, or depth

Space — the space taken up by (positive) or in between (negative) objects

The composition of the painting is influenced by the artistic style (how the artist approaches the composition), and subject of the piece (what is represented in the artwork). A still life's subject is typically composed of inanimate objects. As an art subject, still life has long been thought to be a place where an artist practiced areas of composition but still life sometimes has a coded language where each subject in the painting is a reference to something else. In this case a grape might represent the state of a man's soul and a wilted flower, his loss of innocence or the end of a cycle of life. In the Victorian era, still life paintings were used for moral contemplation but also for scientific identification of plants and animals as well as for the artistic explorations in subject, composition, and style that would lay the grounds for 19<sup>th</sup> Century Modernist painters like Picasso.



*Giuseppe Casciaro teaches a boy to paint*

Let's look more closely at the Chardon's still life below:

## Francis E. Chardon: A Study in Still Life



Still Life  
Francis E. Chardon (c.1865-1925)  
Llandudno Museum

### Task 1: Studying Still life (task time 15 minutes)

Think about the following questions:

1. Line — Where does your gaze land first and how do the objects lead your gaze through the painting?
2. Shape — are the edges of the objects in the painting geometric or organic? Are there any repeated shapes?
3. Colour — Are the colours natural? Intense? Subdued?
4. Texture — What textures do you see in the painting? How do you perceive they might feel?
5. Value — How is the shading used to emphasize forms?
6. Form — Does the painting give you an impression of depth? How?
7. Space — How does the space taken up by objects (positive space) or in between objects (negative space) move your gaze in the painting?

Now let's look at the subject of the painting. Wine glass, walnuts, pomegranate, and grapes. The colours of the background are dark and the surface the objects sit on are light but rather than drawing attention to themselves, they serve to emphasise the shape, space, and form of the subjects. To a modern audience these objects might not mean much but a Victorian artist would recognise that this is most likely a religious representation of the Bible's *Song of Solomon* Verse 6:11.

“I went down into the garden of nuts to see the fruits of the valley, and to see whether the vine flourished, and the pomegranates budded.”

This still life is not a direct illustration of the verse, but rather a response to it. The wine glass, which is a traditional symbol of the blood of Christ, sits next to a Pomegranate fruit which is also a symbol representing eternal life and the resurrection of Jesus. If you notice on the left side of the painting, there are

## Francis E. Chardon: A Study in Still Life

grapes separated from the bunch, a walnut is crushed in front of a wine glass, the yellow pomegranate is over-ripe. On the right hand of the painting, two walnuts lay together and the grapes are in a bunch. Is Chardon talking to us about separation in death? Maybe. What is important to understand is that the subjects and the composition in this still life were not chosen randomly. They were selected to communicate with an audience.

Let's look at a similar still life below:



**Still Life Study: Fruit**  
**Unknown Artist (17<sup>th</sup> Century)**  
**Llandudno Museum**

Just like we did above, let us think about what subjects we see in this still life. We have grapes on a healthy grape vine surrounding a burst open yellow pomegranate full of seeds. Tucked around the grapes are three nuts, still walnuts, but rather than having walnut seeds as Chardon does, we see ripe walnut fruits. This is much closer to an illustration of the verse from Solomon.

What is very interesting is if we think about the differences between the two. In **Still Life Study: Fruit** by the unknown artist it is the pomegranate that is open or blooming where Chardon's pomegranate is closed. Instead, Chardon shows us an open walnut but rather than blooming, the walnut appears to be crushed. Both paintings have three walnuts possibly representing the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit but if that is the case the crushed walnut in Chardon's painting becomes more significant. Chardon's still life features separation and isolation where the unknown artist is representing the connection and ripeness of the subjects. Could it be that Chardon felt religiously scattered or isolated? Again, we cannot be sure but considering that he owned the unknown artist's still life, it is likely that he was aware of the importance and the symbolic meaning of the objects selected for the painting. By looking at the paintings together and understanding what subject they themselves are a response to, we can contemplate religious meaning in both paintings. Rather than just a pretty picture of objects, both still lives encourage a viewer to interpret messages in the paintings.

**Task 2: Looking around you. (Task time 20 minutes)**

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Have you ever thought about your own still life work? Photographs are the medium of today and lots of us have studied ways to hold a camera (or phone), to get the optimum distance for your subject, how lighting and angle affect a photo, and most importantly how these photos are meant to communicate with a viewer. Take a moment and flip through the photos on your phone, in your bedroom, or in your home. Choose one of your favourites. Can you tell by how the subjects are arranged in the photo why the photo was taken? Write a short paragraph for yourself explaining how the composition of the photo evokes feelings.

### Task 3: Cultural and Personal Symbols (Task time 30 minutes)

Think about current cultural symbols in your everyday life that have meaning that might not be immediately apparent to a viewer. For instance, the following icons:



To someone in Chardon's day, these wouldn't mean anything, but we know these symbols mean Pause, Play, and Stop. A still life combines recognized cultural symbols attached to objects to create meanings. Choose no more than 5 items in your home to create a still life. Arrange them in a way that conveys a message to a viewer. For instance, a pair of scissors laying across a picture of a couple could indicate a break-up. Stuffed animals in a box could symbolize outing away childhood. Snap a photo of your composition from three angles and write a note about what the objects you have chosen mean in your photo.

### Task 4: Art in dialogue (Task time: You are the artist, work until you feel it is done.)

Use your favourite still life photo from task 3 above to create a still life in a different medium of your choice. This can be traditional mediums such as pastels, pencils, or paints or more adventurous stuff such as crayons, popsicle sticks, or sculpting from the stuff that typically goes in your recycling. Mix it up and try to use more than one medium. Your still life does not have to be an exact replica of your photo, it can be your artist's impression of what you see. When you are finished, put your still life photo and your mixed medium still life together and admire the way your two creations are different from one another. Does your second still life mean something different than your first? How does the meaning change for you when you change mediums?

Congratulation artist! You have now created art in dialogue.

For more information on still life see:

“Still life painting and drawing”, at <https://www.art-is-fun.com/still-life-paintings>

*A Closer Look: Still Life* by Erika Langmuir, published by National Gallery, London (28 Sept. 2010)

