



TODD M. CASEY

# THE ART OF STILL LIFE

A CONTEMPORARY GUIDE TO CLASSICAL  
TECHNIQUES, COMPOSITION, AND PAINTING IN OIL



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A Contemporary Guide to Classical Techniques, Composition, and Painting in Oil

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**RIGHT:** Douglas Flynt, *Staging of a Still Life*, 2006, oil on linen, 18 × 12 inches (45.72 × 30.48 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

**OPPOSITE:** Dean Cornwell (American, 1892–1960), *The Artist's Studio*, 1950, oil on canvas, 30 × 24 1/4 inches (76.2 × 61.59 cm). Photo courtesy of Heritage Auctions, HA.com.

### A Dedicated Space for Painting

If at all possible, you should dedicate a space for your still life painting. It can be a room in your home, a separate studio, or even a studio space you share with another artist—anywhere you're able to focus solely on your art. I strongly suggest that your studio have a door that can be closed to help you stay focused on the task at hand. I like to think of my studio as similar to a meditation or yoga space. Painting can be frustrating, since you're solving problems over and over again. The more focused you are, the more productive you will be.





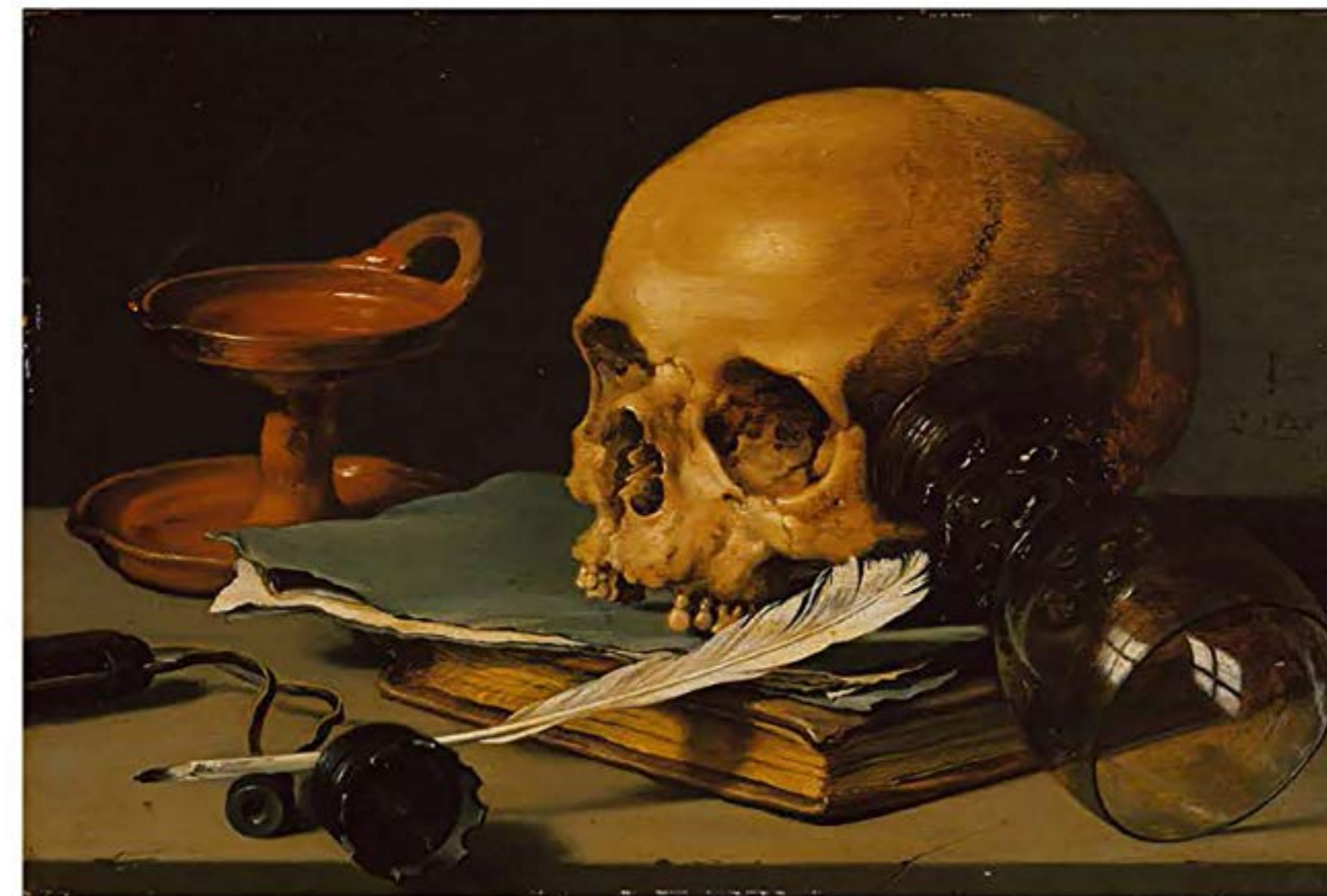
## FISH, BIRDS, AND GAME

Dead animals—fish, birds, and game—have also been subjects for still lifes for centuries. In the days before meat came prepackaged and refrigerated in the supermarket case, these subjects were things the artists would have seen on a daily basis. The great American painter William Merritt Chase once wrote of game as “an uninteresting subject so inviting and entertaining by means of fine technique that people will be charmed at the way you’ve done it.”

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Emil Carlsen, *Still Life (Mallard, Grouse, Small Game Birds and Copper Pots)*, 1897, oil on canvas, 17 × 29 inches (43.18 × 73.66 cm). Courtesy of Emil Carlsen Archives (emilcarlsen.org).

William Merritt Chase (American, 1849–1916), *Still Life: Fish*, by 1908, oil on canvas, 40 1/4 × 45 1/4 inches (101.9 × 114.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, N.Y. George A. Hearn Fund, 1908.

Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *Still Life with a Hare*, 1730, oil on canvas, 24 3/4 × 32 inches (65.1 × 81.3 cm). The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of Henry P. McIlhenny, 1958.



## COMMON NARRATIVE THEMES

Because some objects carry symbolic weight, they can suggest a story, especially when juxtaposed with other objects. Thus some still life paintings can possess a narrative theme.

The so-called Vanitas theme was very popular among seventeenth-century Dutch still life painters. Vanitas is Latin for “vanity,” and this narrative theme emphasizes human mortality and the vanity—emptiness or meaninglessness—of human life. Vanitas paintings are dominated by objects that symbolize death, such as skulls, bubbles, and perishable objects, echoing the idea that life is fleeting.

**ABOVE, LEFT:** Pieter Claesz (Dutch, 1597–1660), *Still Life with a Skull and Writing Quill*, 1630, oil on wood, 9 1/2 × 14 1/4 inches (24.1 × 35.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The objects in this painting by Pieter Claesz are symbols of death, with the skull being the most prominent and obvious.

**BELOW, LEFT:** John Reger, *Vanitas with Gold Tooth*, 2012, oil on canvas, 12 × 12 inches (30.48 × 30.48 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

Some contemporary artists have also explored the Vanitas theme, as shown by this painting by John Reger.



**ABOVE:** William Harnett, *A Study Table*, 1882, oil on canvas, 39 3/4 x 51 1/4 inches (101.2 x 130.4 cm). Photo courtesy of the Art Renewal Center.

William Harnett's *A Study Table* shows draperies of two different cloths, neither of which has a clear highlight, which makes the fabric feel dense.

**RIGHT:** Jan Davidsz. De Heem, (Dutch, 1606–1683/84), *Still Life with a Glass and Oysters*, c. 1640, oil on wood, 9 7/8 x 7 1/2 inches (25.1 x 19.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase 1871.

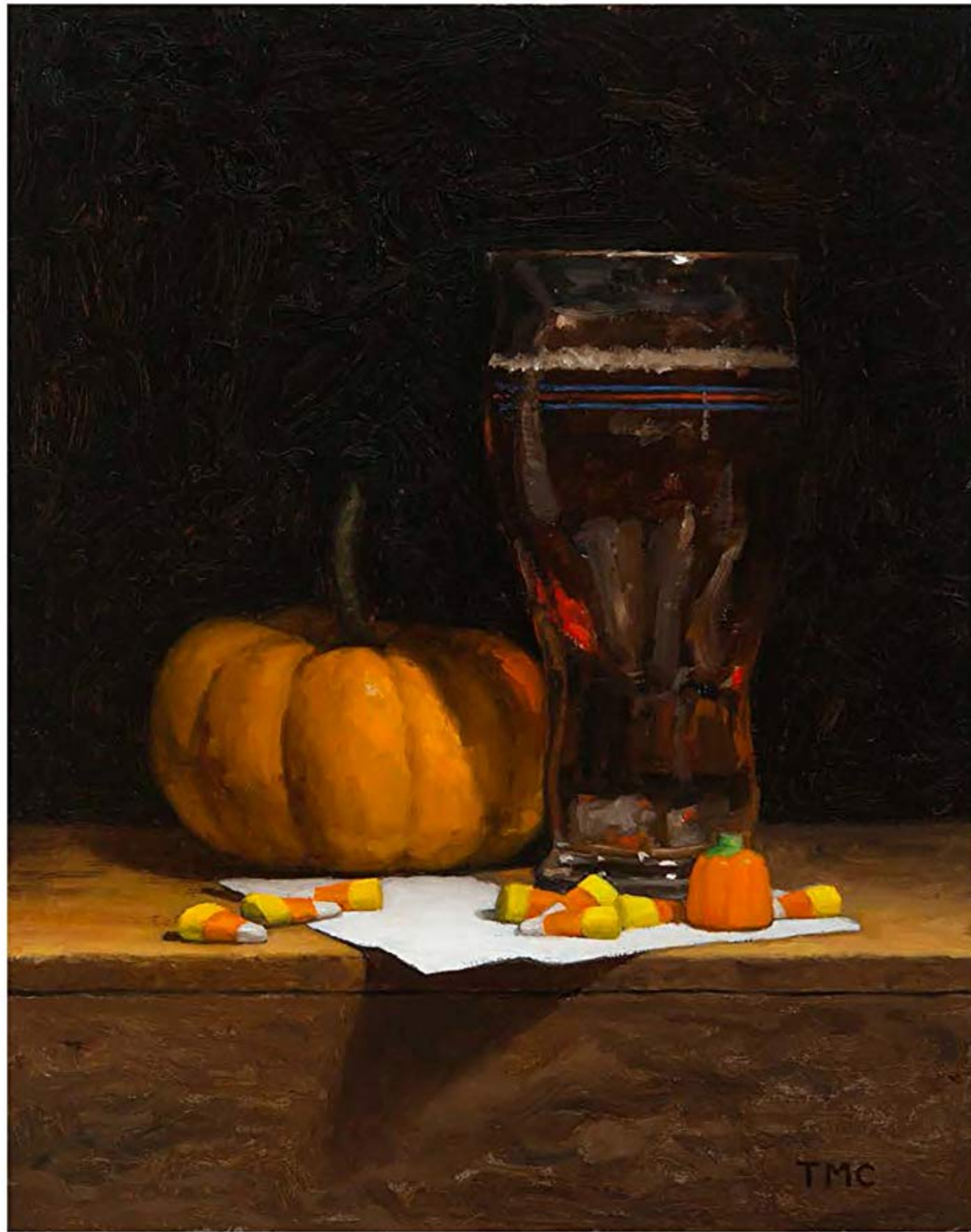
In *Still Life with a Glass and Oysters*, the fabric seems more like silk because of the shiny highlight.



**ABOVE:** Sarah Lamb, *Chocolate Mousse*, 2017, oil on canvas, 25 x 28 inches (63.5 x 71.12 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

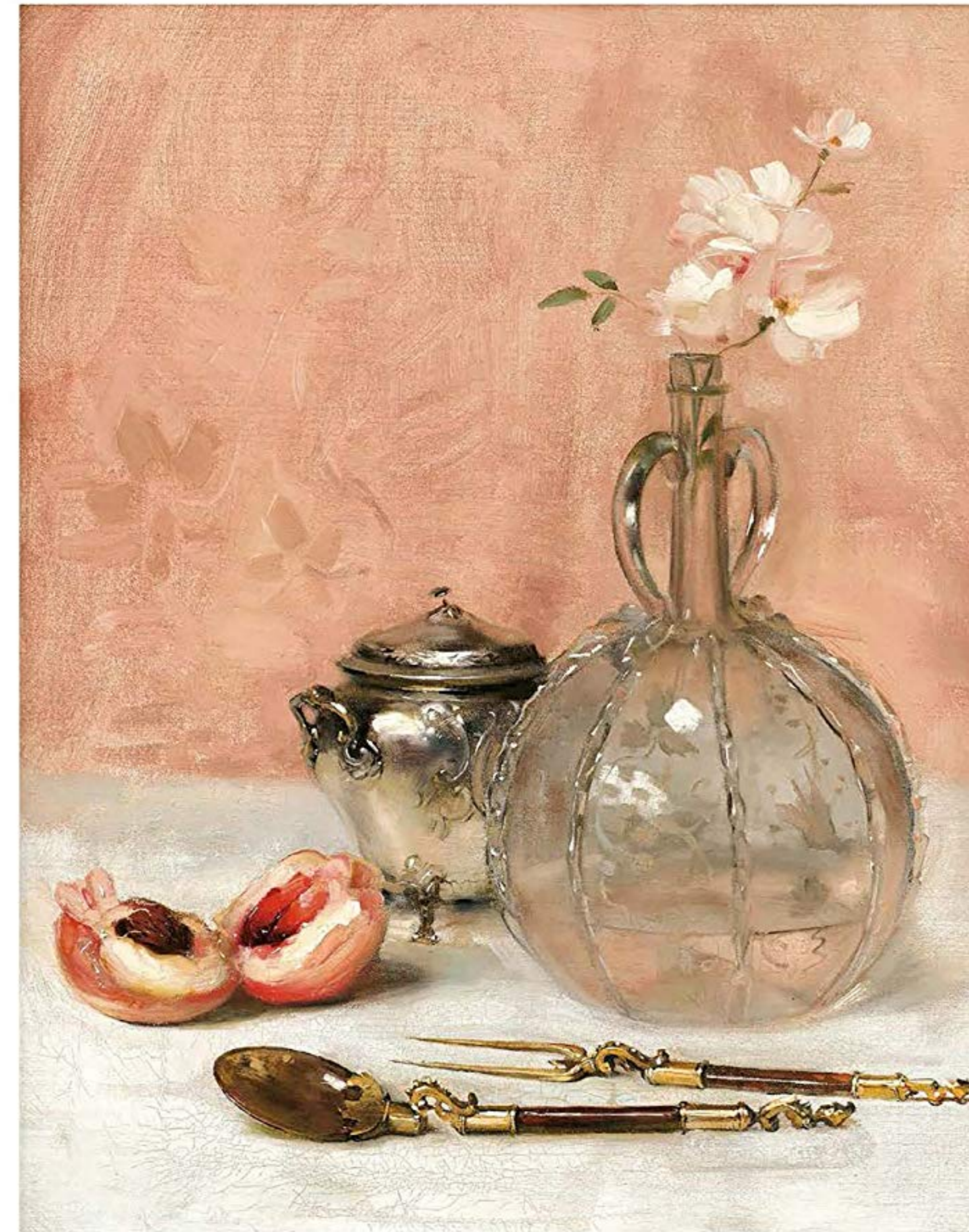
Wood can have an obvious or a broken-up highlight, depending on whether the surface is dry, polished, or wet. On dry or unvarnished wood, the highlight will be broken up because of the rough or matte surface. If the wood is polished, lacquered, or varnished, a clear, defined highlight will appear on the surface.

In Sarah Lamb's *Chocolate Mousse*, three different wood elements (tabletop, cutting board, spoon) interact differently with light.



**ABOVE, LEFT:** Todd M. Casey, *Octoberfest*, 2016, oil on panel, 8 × 10 inches (20.32 × 25.4 cm). Courtesy of Rehs Contemporary Galleries, New York.

**ABOVE, RIGHT:** My painting *Octoberfest* has both hard and lost edges. The contrast of the white napkin against the cast shadow is a very definite hard edge. The edge of the beer glass, by contrast, disappears—lost against the background darkness. A variety of edges makes a painting more interesting.



## HIGH KEY VERSUS LOW KEY

Just as musician can decide what key to set their music in, artists can decide to render an image in a high or a low key. High key means that the value structure of the image is predominantly light, and low key means that the painting's values are predominantly dark. Higher key images tend to feel fresh and modern, while the lower key images tend to have a traditional, classic look.

**LEFT:** Joseph Bail (French, 1862–1921), *Still Life with a Decanter and Travel Fork and Spoon*, 1887, oil on canvas, 13 × 9 ½ inches (33 × 24.2 cm). Photo courtesy of Sotheby's.

The range of value in this still life by Joseph Bail is predominantly light, so the painting is considered high key.

**BELOW LEFT:** Willem Claesz. Heda, *Still Life with Oysters, A Silver Tazza, and Glassware*, 1635, oil on wood, 19 ¾ × 31 ¼ inches (49.8 × 80.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. From the collection of Rita and Frits Markus, bequest of Rita Markus, 2005.

This classic seventeenth-century Dutch still life is a low key painting in which the dominant values are dark.





**TIP**

While it is not imperative, I highly recommend that you tone your canvas rather than working on a white surface. It can be hard to gauge any values off a white surface because every other color appears darker than the surface, which is the lightest color. (The same thing happens if you work on a black surface; every color you apply appears white in contrast.)

## WORKING OPTICALLY: THE POSTER STUDY

Just as we work both optically and conceptually when drawing, we use the same two approaches when painting. The optical way of working is to paint what you see in front of you. It's a very two-dimensional way of thinking, in which you copy the information as you see it. Think of it as abstractly recording the two-dimensional shapes of light, shadow, and contour and also how the shapes interlock with one another. Essentially, it's copying what you see without thinking about what it is you are painting.

The poster study—the first step toward a final painting—is a purely optical experience. The aim is to observe how light falls on your setup and also work out your composition. Poster studies are small and slightly abstract—done with much less

detail than the final painting. I like to think of them as the dress rehearsal before the big performance.

When working on a large painting, you can get wrapped up in the experience of modeling form with paint and can lose track of the big picture. The poster study is intended to provide you with a reference to keep you in check throughout the larger final painting. It helps you stay in the correct range of values so you don't make your tonal transitions progress too fast or too slow.

The first two values I locate on a poster study are the lightest light and the darkest dark (normally the highlight and the crevice shadow or a black object in shadow). The reason for this is that there is usually no guessing as to what each of these colors will be. They are the lightest and darkest pigments I have: black and white. Then, every other stroke of paint I put down will be darker than white and lighter than black.

**OPPOSITE, LEFT:** The poster study is meant to guide your work on the final painting. I usually hang it next to the final painting, so that I can refer to it as I work.

**OPPOSITE, RIGHT, AND THIS PAGE:** Todd M. Casey, two studies (each 8 × 6 inches) and final painting *The Great Escape*, 2015, oil on canvas, 48 × 36 inches (121.92 × 91.44 cm). All are in private collections.

I'll often do more than more than one poster study to work out a painting's composition and the narrative. These small paintings then guide the final painting, shown here DIREX.





A direct approach, by contrast, means that you are working directly on the canvas, often without a preparatory drawing or underpainting. A common term for this is *alla prima*, which is an Italian phrase meaning “at the first try.” Whereas in indirect painting you allow each layer to dry, at least somewhat, before applying the next, *alla prima* painting is a wet-into-wet technique.

A lot of the Impressionist painters adopted the *alla prima* approach. Their goal was to capture the light and its quickly changing effects, leading them to sometimes mix colors directly on the canvas. At the time, flat brushes had just become popular, so you see a lot of mark-making in Impressionist paintings.

One mistake that students commonly make with this technique is putting too much paint on the canvas and then trying to paint on top of it. The trouble is that they then have to add a lot more paint to cover the layer below. This can create quite a mess. To avoid this, consider washing in a quick underpainting or layer of color to map out your composition and drawing.

**OPPOSITE:** Max Ginsburg, *Studio Still Life*, 1978, oil on panel, 20 × 16 inches (50.8 × 40.64 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

Artists can work directly on the canvas without an underpainting or drawing, which is a bit harder to do. That was Max Ginsburg’s technique in *Studio Still Life*.

**LEFT:** Todd M. Casey, *Red Roses*, 2012, oil on panel, 6 × 8 inches (15.24 × 20.32 cm). Private collection.

I finished *Red Roses* in one three-to-four-hour sitting. This forced me to dive right into the painting, which is difficult because you must juggle drawing, color, values, and composition all at the same time.