

# Stuff on a Shelf

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You may recognize a vase from Flowers.com or a salt shaker from your youth, but this collection of Goodwill objects is not about storytelling (supplies to make a favorite kitchen recipe), or nostalgia (old things that still give us the warm fuzzies). Most of these objects are dirty, chipped, scratched, mass-produced junk, but, I'm certainly not interested in depicting gritty realism, either. The whole setting has been cleaned up. Labels are hidden, imperfections removed, forms simplified, in a word: *idealized*. I want to believe in a place where there's a reason for everything, accidents don't happen, where everything works out in the end. This is my way of showing that place to you.

I begin by putting a group of "dancers" on my "stage," and look to see what happens. I'm sliding objects around as relationships form between their shapes, colors, angles, curves, weights, and textures. Think of it as choreography frozen at a peak moment. When I look at the flow of objects from left to right, I'm also reminded of a melody line – each painting with its own notes, rhythms, and intervals. Each object representing the tonality of a different instrument, from loud and brassy, to bass booms, to high-pitched squeaks, even a few silent moments. This interpretation inspired the use of a dance or music form in the title, coupled with a color name. The two usually share a common first letter (alliteration), or rhyme. Certainly, many of these will be unfamiliar to you, as they were for me. A quick web search, for example, will show that *Harlequin* is an intense green-yellow and *Habanera* is a slow, seductive dance from Cuba.

In addition to the relationships that develop by moving things around, I am also forcing an additional kind of order on the group. If several objects are almost the same height, I will paint them exactly the same. Objects are often aligned with major divisions of the canvas: one-third from the edge, directly in the center, or maybe a height that is a third or fourth from the top. The side edge of an object will often exactly intersect the axis of the adjacent object. I've also removed perspective from the objects, so that their tops and bottoms are straight across. Not only does this emphasize the geometry of their shapes, it also allows their straight-edged tops to visually connect with others their same height, creating implied horizontal lines across the canvas. Finally, I'm aligning objects in a way that uses negative spaces and edge connections to give contradictory information about the relative location of things.

The usual technical objective for still life painters is to create a convincing illusion of depth that the subject can comfortably occupy. There are a number of spatial cues an artist uses to depict depth in an artwork. There are also a number of cues artists provide, usually inadvertently, that destroy depth. Usually, these would be called awkward mistakes, but when done deliberately can create some complexity that provides a challenge for the artist and, hopefully, some additional interest for the viewer as well. Here are some examples from the paintings.



When looking at the lower, left portion of the shorter, white vase in *Majorelle Mambo*, that shape seems to detach from the rest of the vase - appearing to pull forward while the blue cup in front recedes behind as a background. This situation reverses back to “normal” when taking in the whole scene. This “figure/ground reversal” appears in many of the paintings. Notice how the edge of the blue pitcher flows into the blue cup and how the other edge of the blue cup continues into the edge of the peach vase. This is an alignment an artist would never intentionally use if the sole objective was creating a naturalistic space. It is one of those cues that destroys depth because at the point of intersection, the objects appear connected, the space between them removed. I also use this device to create relationships between the objects. It shows that an object is intended to be right there and *not* a little to the left.



Can you see in *Ube Juba* how I've done the same thing with the purple vase as I did with the white vase in the previous painting? Isolating a section of the vase by surrounding it in white creates a shifting spatial relationship between the three. The purple section can appear as part of the vase, or as an isolated shape on a white background depending on your point of focus. Drawing the white vases as the same height and connecting their top edges enhances the effect, making it difficult to perceive the jump back in space from the front vase to the rear.

Do you see how the orange cup and black pear (a candleholder) edges intersect each other's central axes? Notice that the left edge of the rear white vase intersects the top corner of the pear. The sides of the green cup were shaped to imitate the curve of the neighboring white vase and its height is the same as the pear. The heights of the purple vase and inverted black vase match. Between them appears a sinuous negative space that can take on the appearance of a "thing" in front of a dark background – another figure/ground reversal. The distance from the top of the orange cup to the top of the pear, is the same distance from the pear to the top of the white vases. From there to the top of the purple vase is half that. The color scheme is the secondaries (purple, orange, and green: colors derived from combining two primaries – blue, yellow, red). Look for similar relationships between the objects in all the paintings.



In a painting with substantially more objects, interconnection can be more difficult to come by. In *Kombu Cakewalk* I've tried to tackle that problem several different ways. First, is a color scheme with just greens and neutrals, with one green leaning turquoise rather than olive for contrast. Second, is with the "S" curve as a motif. As I'm arranging, I'll notice that as a common element between two or three objects and then add others with similar curves to see who I can work into the scene.

I've shown eight of the objects having the same height, which creates a strong horizontal line across the canvas - a repeat of the front table edge. This was only possible because of the absence of perspective (no ovals at the tops of objects) and because I tweaked the height of the objects when drawing them. Other secondary horizontals are created by other groups of objects sharing the same height. Naturally, the distance between all those implied horizontals is measured to be either equal or proportional in some way. The black pear is exactly centered, with the entire group also centered as a whole on the canvas.

Note how I again use the edges of objects to partially or fully enclose negative spaces. I put light or saturated objects in those spaces to create a rhythm of alternating dark and light shapes across the canvas.



*Fulvous Foxtrot*, is a good example of a painting with conflicting spatial cues. The objects are tightly arranged into a larger shape – a triangle. You are inclined to think of that triangle as being parallel to the surface of the canvas, which has the effect of flattening your perception of depth in the painting. In the center, I've enclosed a negative space suggesting a parallelogram and stuck a yellow cup in there. It is furthest from you, but the intensity of the color brings the shape forward. The white cup in front has an edge that flows directly into the other white object. In between is a black bowl that looks completely flat because of the absence of perspective, because its lit side is hidden, and because it is sandwiched between the two connected white shapes. Further complicating things is the mostly hidden reddish object (base for a pillar candle). Because you can't see its bottom and it doesn't reappear on the other side of the white object, you can't tell its distance compared to the tall brown vase. Its function is to provide a shape that is a repeat of the other objects with overhanging lips, to be a dark against the white objects, to provide an additional horizontal edge that aligns with the yellow cup, and to complete the primary (red, blue, yellow) color scheme.

It would have been a simple matter to shift the objects here or there, take a slightly higher point of view, and reintroduce perspective to present a completely normal looking space for these objects. Don't you think this is probably more interesting?