



Julian Alden Weir, *Silver Chalice with Roses*, 1882

ARTIST BIO

Born into a family of artists, Julian Alden Weir (1852-1919) was introduced to the arts at a young age, and his developing talent was highly encouraged. His father, Robert Walter Weir, a professor of drawing, taught art to J. Alden and many of his fifteen siblings. At age seventeen, Julian attended the National Academy of Design before traveling throughout Europe to further his education. Although he studied traditional techniques at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts under classicist Jean-Léon Gérôme, over time Weir’s contemporaries influenced his style into becoming increasingly impressionistic. Ultimately, he exhibited with The Ten, an exclusive group of American Impressionists. Throughout his life, Weir taught at the Art Students League, he helped found the Society of American Artists, and was elected President of the National Academy of Design in 1915.

STYLE & TECHNIQUE

Known for his portraits and still lifes, J. Alden Weir’s *Silver Chalice with Roses* is strongly influenced by French Impressionism, a style Weir was largely opposed to earlier in his career. Trained in an academic painting style, Weir previously found Impressionism to be distasteful, even going so far as to say, “I never in my life saw more horrible things. They do not observe drawing nor form but give you an impression of what they call nature. It was worse than the Chamber of Horrors.” As Weir spent more time with artists like John Twachtman and Childe Hassam, however, he warmed to the once despised modernist aesthetic. Eventually, Weir’s own art began integrating elements of Impressionism, both in his brushstroke and his use of light.

ARTWORK

J. Alden Weir painted this still life as a birthday gift for his then fiancé. The chalice depicted was likely purchased by Weir in Europe. Despite this artwork’s delicate beauty, Weir told his fiancé, “I hardly know whether I can paint a beautiful enough [painting] to present to [you].” This painting utilizes the loose brushstrokes of the Impressionists and contrasts warm and cool colors in order to create a visually interesting still life.

INTRODUCTION

Still lifes depict carefully arranged collections of inanimate objects—in this case a chalice and roses. Weir’s painting invites a discussion of artistic tools and the variety of messages a still life might convey.

GOALS

Students will be able to:

- 1 Demonstrate understanding of artistic tools and use that understanding to compare and contrast still life paintings
- 2 Practice artistic skills by creating an original still life artwork
- 3 Observe the effects of taking a different perspective in the realms of art and literature

LOOK AND DISCUSS

- A still life provides an opportunity to explore artistic tools such as form, composition, color, and light. How do you see Weir using these tools in *Silver Chalice with Roses*? What effects do they have?

Form: How an artist depicts shape and dimension within a work

Composition: How an artist arranges or combines elements within a work

Color: How an artist uses pigments with various hues and intensities

Light: How an artist employs light and dark within a work

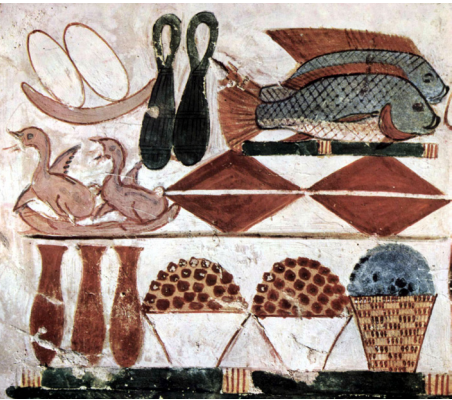
- Silver Chalice with Roses* offers several studies in opposition. What pairs of opposing qualities can you identify? Consider texture, weight, lighting, etc.

- Artists often include symbols to represent or communicate something deeper than what is shown in their artwork. What do you see in this painting that might be read as a symbol? What do these symbols communicate to you? How does your knowledge of these symbols change your perception of the painting?

CONTINUE THE STORY

The following paintings are additional examples of still lifes. Compare and contrast the artworks below with *Silver Chalice with Roses*. How do these artists use form, composition, color, and light similarly and differently than Weir? What other similarities and differences do you notice?

Note to teacher: These images are available in the public domain; you may choose to access them online to show your class a larger image.



Still-Life Found in the Tomb of Menna (c. 1422-1411 BCE)
In Ancient Egypt, paintings such as these are found in tombs. They depict offerings for those who are buried to enjoy in the afterlife. How does the composition of this painting compare to *Silver Chalice with Roses*? What do each of the two paintings communicate?



Evert Collier, *Vanitas Still Life with a Crowned Skull* (1689)
The still life above is a Vanitas painting: Vanitas images carry messages of the impermanence of mortal life and its temporary pleasures. The viewer is meant to consider the value of their worldly treasures in relation to God’s eternal reward for righteous living. How does Weir’s painting differ from a Vanitas painting in its inspiration and intention? How are they similar?



Vincent van Gogh, *Sunflowers* (1889)
In addition to symbolic meanings, still lifes can also be a means to practicing artistic tools such as those discussed above. In this Post-Impressionist painting, Vincent van Gogh preserves the various stages of a sunflower’s life through an exploration of different shades of yellow. After comparing and contrasting this painting with *Silver Chalice with Roses*, share what you like most about each work.



Georges Braque, *Still Life with Metronome* (1909)
Cubist artworks like the one seen here focus on form and structure instead of the subject. What do you see in this painting? How does this painting make you feel? How does that differ from *Silver Chalice with Roses*?

ACTIVITY #1: STILL LIFE LIGHTING

Materials: Trays, flashlights, paper, sketching tools (colored pencils or crayons)

Subject Areas: Visual Arts

Duration: 30-45 minutes

Bring an object from home with a distinct shape and color (ex. flower, fruit, shell, vase, silverware, jewelry, etc.). In a small group of three or five students (must be an odd number), use your collective objects to arrange a still life atop a tray, inspired by *Silver Chalice with Roses*. Notice Weir’s balance of height, visual weight, color, and light. At this step, pay attention to your still life’s form (3D shape) and composition (arrangement). Are the objects placed in a way that is visually pleasing and creative? Is there contrast between the objects’ height, width, color, and texture? As a group, decide on two different types of lighting under which you will sketch your scenes. For example, you can draw your still life either in direct sunlight, or lit with a flashlight placed at an angle, or even lit from beneath. Using two sheets of paper, sketch the same still life twice, utilizing different light sources. You may need to move your tray to achieve the desired effect. Notice how the setting affects the color and lighting of your drawing (including shadows and reflections). How did you change your sketches to reflect those changes?

Note to teacher: Students should be in small, odd-numbered groups to ensure their still life compositions use an odd number of objects. If there is an even-numbered group of students, provide an additional object for their composition.

UTAH STATE VISUAL ARTS LEARNING STANDARDS

Strand: Create (V.C)

Students will generate artistic work by conceptualizing, organizing, and completing their artistic ideas. They will refine original work through persistence, reflection, and evaluation.

Strand: Respond (V.R.)

Students will understand, evaluate, and articulate how works of art convey meaning for the observer as well as the creator.

Strand: Connect (V.CO)

Students will relate artistic skills, ideas and work with personal meaning and external context.

ACTIVITY #2: REVERSO POETRY

Materials: *Mirror, Mirror* by Marilyn Singer, paper, pencils, *Duck! Rabbit!* by Amy Krouse Rosenthal (optional)

Subject Areas: English Language Arts, Visual Arts

Duration: 30 minutes

Read *Mirror, Mirror* by Marilyn Singer with your class; additionally, you may read *Duck! Rabbit!* by Amy Krouse Rosenthal. Discuss possible themes of the books, including seeing multiple perspectives simultaneously. Find evidence of these themes in the text. Then, refer back to *Silver Chalice with Roses*. As a class, look at a still life (either from Activity #1, or one arranged by the teacher). Walk around it, view it from various angles, notice how different the arrangement looks when viewed from above, below, one side or another. The still life hasn’t changed, but your perspective has. What do you learn about perspective from these activities and discussions?

Write your own reverso poem like those in *Mirror, Mirror*. A reverso poem’s lines can be read either top to bottom or bottom to top, but it will have a different meaning depending on the direction.

Note to teacher: There are many poems in *Mirror, Mirror*; instead of reading all of them, you may want to limit yourself to “Cinderella’s Double Life,” “In the Hood,” “The Doubtful Duckling,” and “Bears in the News.”

UTAH STATE VISUAL ARTS LEARNING STANDARDS

Strand: Respond (V.R)

Students will understand, evaluate, and articulate how works of art convey meaning for the observer as well as the creator.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment for this lesson may include student participation in group work or discussion of interpretive answers. The lesson “Still Life Lighting” can be used to assess students’ understanding and application of artistic tools. The activity “Reverso Poetry” can be used to assess students’ critical thinking and writing skills.