In this lesson we’re going to look at a still life floral arrangement, but we’re going to practice loosening up with our acrylic painting, so we’ll be doing the majority of our painting with a palette knife.

Be careful to study this photograph before you begin. Although we’ll be painting loosely, you’ll need to know how all the flowers fit together in the composition.
Materials

- Canvas or MDF board primed with white acrylic gesso and underpainted with yellow ochre and titanium white
- Colours: titanium white, cadmium yellow medium, permanent alizarin crimson, quinacridone red, cobalt blue, pthalo blue, burnt umber
- Palette knife
- Small brush
- Pencil

The Initial Sketch

As I said this is going to be a loose painting, but don’t mistake that for the okay to be slack with your drawing! In fact it might be a good idea to do a complete monochrome sketch of this arrangement before you start, just so you can get a feel for the composition.

Once you’ve done this you can have a go at sketching onto your surface. We’re not looking for too much detail, but you need to get all the shapes that you can see outlined so we can get some nice clear tonal blocks of colour in our painting.
Step 1: Darkest Darks

We’re going to start by looking for the darkest darks in our reference picture. These are the dark leaves at the back of the composition. Let’s mix our cobalt blue with a bit of our cadmium yellow medium – this is going to give us quite a dark green.

Mix it with some water and then wash it into the darkest areas.

We’re looking for shapes, so don’t worry about details at this stage.

Next we’re going to take our permanent alizarin crimson and mix it with a touch of the cobalt blue – this will dull is slightly, but don’t add too much – if you do it’ll become a very overpowering purple!

We can use this to paint in our next-darkest tone: the dark pink flowers on the left-hand side of our picture.

If you look closely at your photograph, you’ll see that although dark, there is a brightness to this colour. We’ll achieve that in two ways: using the luminosity of the warm coloured ground, and by layering brighter tones on top.
Step 2: Mid Darks

Add some titanium white and quinacridone red to this mix (more white than red!), and then we can use this new colour to paint the flower on the right-hand side of the picture.

We can also use this on the left-hand side if we see areas that are slightly brighter than the dark we’ve already put on.

The quinacridone red gives this mix its brightness, but use it sparingly!

Next we can add some more titanium white to our mix – titanium white is an opaque white so it covers completely what’s underneath...

Paint in this colour onto the flowers on the left-hand side where they get a little brighter.
**Step 3: Lights**

We’re now moving to our light tones in our picture.

Take your previous mix and add in more white and a touch of yellow.

We’re going to paint it on the areas where we can see the light pink flowers.

Your paint should be a little thicker now.

Notice how I’m holding the brush – I’m holding it quite a long way down the handle. This forces me to loosen up and make more gestural marks.

I’m also scrubbing the paint on with the side of the brush. This allows me to cover a larger area as I don’t have to worry about detail.

You can see that this technique also allows me to blend colours and creates a lovely effect.
Step 4: Background Flowers

Water down this pink mix to wash in the flowers in the background.

When we wash in colours, we’re not bothered about detail. We do it because it gets our eye used to the shapes and tones that we’re painting.

Once we have everything blocked in like this, we can go back and adjust tones and tighten up details.

If you take a look at your reference photograph again you’ll see that there are areas of this flower that appear further in the background. Add a touch of the cobalt blue and cadmium yellow medium to your mix and paint it on the areas that melt further into the background.
Step 5: Bright Greens

Let’s have a look at the bright greens in our picture now.

We’re going to get this colour by mixing pthalo blue with titanium white and then some cadmium yellow medium. We’ll use these three colours for the background so to make our green stand out we need to add plenty of yellow.

Once you’ve mixed your colour, load your brush and then hold it up to your reference photograph to see if it’s a good match.

If you’re happy, then paint in the leaves and stems in the centre of the picture.

Keep flicking back to your reference photograph and if you think certain areas need darkening, then add in a bit more blue to your mix.
**Step 6: Painting the Background**

It’s now time to use the palette knife! If you want to know more about how to use a palette knife you can have a look at the [July Episode of ArtTutor TV](http://www.ArtTutor.com). You’ll see me teach ArtTutor’s Phil and Hannah how to paint this picture with plenty of palette knife tips!

You can also have a look at Bob Davies’ [Acrylic Painting Foundation Course](http://www.ArtTutor.com) which has a lesson on using palette or painting knives.

So, taking your palette knife we can mix up our background colour. As I said previously we’re going to use the same three colours as our green mix, but we’re going to put a lot more blue and white into it. Be sparing with the yellow so that the turquoise we’re mixing now will stand out from the green we’ve just put down.

Test your colour against your reference photo again and put half of it to one side. Next, add in some more white to the other half. You should now have two tones that you can work between to create your background.

Use your palette knife to spread the paint onto your surface. I’m painting the negative shapes of the flowers and tidying up the rough shapes we washed in at first.

Build up your picture like this, observing the tonal changes in your reference, until all of your background is covered.
Step 7: Painting the Sunflower Centre

Let’s move on and block in the shapes of the sunflower now. At this stage of the painting we can work between the brush and the palette knife.

So taking your brush, mix together the cadmium yellow medium, a touch of alizarin crimson, and some burnt umber.

We can use this to paint in the centre of the sunflower.

Look carefully at the reference picture and adjust the three colours in your mix to paint in the other tones in the centre.
Step 8: Painting the Sunflower Petals

With the centre blocked in, we can be much looser with the petals, so that means going back to the palette knife.

I’m not using the cadmium yellow medium out of the tube for this – it needs dulling ever so slightly with some of the permanent alizarin crimson.

Load your palette knife with paint and work from the centre, pulling out towards the background.

Be careful if your background is still wet because you could pull up the paint you’ve just put down and dull the effect of the vibrant yellow.

Continue to paint the petals all the way round the sunflower. Don’t worry about getting the precise detail of each petal here, it’s all about loose, expressive marks.

The palette knife gives an especially nice effect here because if you miss an area, you can see the warm coloured ground coming through which adds a bit more interest.
Step 7: Final Darks

With our painting coming along nicely, and all the areas blocked in, we can assess areas that need to go darker.

I’m going to mix up a darker purple and paint it in on the right-hand side of my painting. Because yellow and purple are complementary colours they’ll stand out next to each other and create a real punch in the composition.

To make the purple mix some of the quinacridone red, alizarin crimson, cobalt blue, and titanium white together.

You can also go back in with your palette knife to create some more interesting marks.
I think I need to reinforce some of the areas of green that I put in initially. All I need to do this is a thicker mix of the greens that we made at the beginning.

After this I think it’s best to stand back and have a good look at your painting. I would even go away and come back with fresh eyes later. That way you’ll notice immediately if anything looks out of place, or doesn’t quite work.

Use the basic mixes from before (adjust them tonally if necessary) and make your picture individual! Work between the brush and the palette knife to carry on building up your picture. If you carry on with the palette knife you’ll get a much looser picture, if you go back to the brush you can get much finer detail.

Or if you’re happy... leave your painting as it is.
So here it is! The finished painting!

The best thing about a painting like this is that there’s no right or wrong outcome. Don’t try and copy my painting brushstroke for brushstroke; try instead to loosen up and make more gestural, expressive marks.
About Will Kemp

Will is an experienced artist and teacher. He runs his own art school from his studio in Cheshire where he concentrates on making the mysteries of painting and drawing accessible to new and frustrated artists.

See Will’s full profile at: www.ArtTutor.com/Will-Kemp

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