

# NOT JUST ANY STILL LIFE

*New England Still Life* | Rebecca Salsbury James



Rebecca Salsbury James (American, 1891–1968). *New England Still Life*. c. 1940. Reverse oil on glass. Unframed: 22 × 17 in. (55.9 × 43.2 cm) Framed: 25 3/4 × 20 7/8 in. (65.4 × 53 cm) The Baltimore Museum of Art: W. Clagett Emory Bequest Fund, in Memory of his Parents, William H. Emory of A and Martha B. Emory; Edward Joseph Gallagher III Memorial Fund; and purchase with exchange funds from Bequest of Lowell Nesbitt in Memory of Adelyn D. Breeskin, BMA 2007.161. © Artist or artist's estate

A blue vase holds white lilies, pink poppies, one white rose, one pink pansy, and blue forget-me-nots arranged with greenery. The vase itself seems suspended in space, casting a narrow shadow on an all-white background. An image like this is referred to as a still life—a painting or drawing of carefully arranged objects. As with this artwork, a still life may include objects from nature such as flowers or fruit.

The image has a smooth, glowing quality, a result of the reverse-painting-on-glass technique used by the artist. In this technique, an image is painted on glass and viewed through the glass on the other side. Details are painted first, then the paint is built up, ending with the background color. The artist, Rebecca Salsbury James, mastered this technique as a self-taught artist. Of the complexity of reverse-painting-on-glass, artist Marsden Hartley once wrote to James, “it nearly killed me and I never had the courage to take it up again.”

Reverse-painting-on-glass is a technique with a long history across cultures and one that continued to thrive in American painting traditions. James was clearly familiar with the history of the technique, but she was also influenced by European modernist work and early color photography. Painted in the mid-20th century, this work reflects how the artist deftly took a traditional technique and genre (still life) to create a fresh, new perspective on a simple vase of flowers.

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Reverse-painting-on-glass with a complex subject is extremely difficult. However, there are adapted versions of the technique that are fairly easy and result in a satisfying final product. Show students this brief video by Lolly Palooza on reverse-painting-on-glass and have them create an artwork using the same technique: [artbma.org/glass](http://artbma.org/glass). Materials required will be a glass candle holder, blue painter's tape, rubbing alcohol, matte fixative, acrylic paint, brand-new pencils with fresh erasers, soft cloths, and water.



Example of reverse-painting-on-glass by Lolly Palooza.



***New England Still Life, c. 1940***

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