

Still Life Color Study, c. 1915
Morgan Russell (American, 1886-1953)

Loosely brushed washes of watercolor suggest solid pieces of fruit.



Watercolor on paper; 5¼ x 8½ inches. Montclair Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, 1988.116. ©Simone DeVirgile. Photo by: Peter S. Jacobs, Fine Arts Photography

Morgan Russell was intensely interested in color theory. He made this small color study of fruit during the same years when he was painting abstract geometric compositions that created the illusion of volume and mass with color alone.

This painting is called *Still Life Color Study*. What is a “study”?

- Unlike a finished painting, a “study” allows an artist to experiment with a technique or a composition that he is working on.
- Russell may have been experimenting to see how colors suggest three-dimensional form.

Can you identify these three objects?

- It is difficult. Perhaps a lemon, a cut lime, and an orange? Could one be a vegetable?

What is unique about watercolor paint?

- Thin fluid watercolor paint allows colors to flow into each other and blend on the paper.
- A watercolor wash cannot be completely controlled by the brush.
- Watercolor paint can be either opaque or transparent.

How did Russell make the fruit look three-dimensional without conventional shading?

- He used the tendency of red, orange, and yellow (*warm colors*) to push forward, and green, blue, and violet (*cool colors*) to hang back.

Why did Russell purposely leave areas of the fruit unpainted?

- Small spots of unpainted paper create a sparkling highlight on the fruit’s surface.

How are the edges of each fruit defined?

- In some places a thin brushstroke serves as an outline.
- Some edges are clearly defined by a change of color.
- Some edges are so close to the color of the paper that they nearly fade into the background.

Where are these objects?

- The blue and lavender shadows underneath the smaller fruits suggest that they have been placed on a surface, but there is no indication of a table.