

For The Love Of Things

Still Life In Art

MAP DISCOVER



Simply put, **still life** is making art by observing items that do not move.

It can include all kinds of objects, whether they are natural (such as fruits and flowers) or man-made (such as a vase or a table).

In this example you see a combination of both types.

DID YOU KNOW?

Contrary to what one might think, given that the plural of life is lives, the plural form of still life is still lifes!



If you could touch these objects, how might they feel? Which parts might be soft, hard, rough, smooth or prickly?



How many pairs of objects can you spot in this painting?

Still life is not a modern day trend. People have been observing everyday items (especially food) and recreating them in artworks for centuries.

For example, this still life is on the wall of a tomb in Egypt that was made in the 14th century BCE!

LEARN MORE.

The Egyptian civilisation is among the oldest in the world, and lasted for almost 30 centuries: from 3100 B.C.E to 332 B.C.E. [Read more here.](#)

A very popular subject among still lifes is the 'fruit and flower vase' theme.

Many artists have depicted this subject in their own unique style and manner. Here is an example of the flower vase theme.

EXPLORE.

Try replicating this composition using play-doh or clay.



What are the items that you recognise in this painting?

COMPARE & CONTRAST.

Look carefully at these two works on the 'fruit and flower vase' theme. On the left is artist Badri Narayan's take; the one on the right is by Laxma Goud. What do they have in common beyond the choice of subject? Make a list of all the similarities and differences that you can spot!





LOOK CLOSELY.

- Can you identify any of the fruits? What about the flowers?
- How do you think the texture of the background is achieved?
- Can you spot an odd bird in this painting?

If this bird could speak, what do you think it would say to you, the viewer?

Here are two more works exploring this theme, but in different styles.

LOOK CLOSELY.

- Can you find the flower vases? Are they present in both?
- What fruits do you see?
- What other objects can you spot in the paintings?
- What are the dominant colours? Are they similar or different in these two works?

THINK.

Can an artwork be called a still life if its representation is not entirely realistic? Why or why not?



Sometimes, artists also make still lifes that focus on a single item.

The idea is to observe the chosen object very closely and represent it using a preferred style.

THINK.

Do you think such a practice helps the artist? How?

GUESS WHAT!

This is a close up detail of a single object still life. What do you think this object is?

Hint: It's an edible object!



If you could touch it, what would this object feel like? Would different parts feel different? Why might that be?

Here is the complete image. Did you guess right? It's a jackfruit!

OBSERVE & REFLECT.

How are the different textures created in this painting using colour and a mix of unique brushstrokes?

What parts of this painting really look like the original fruit? What looks different to you? If you haven't seen a jackfruit before, you can Google it!



How would you describe this painting to someone else?

CREATE.

How about creating your own still life now that changes with time? Read on to know the steps!

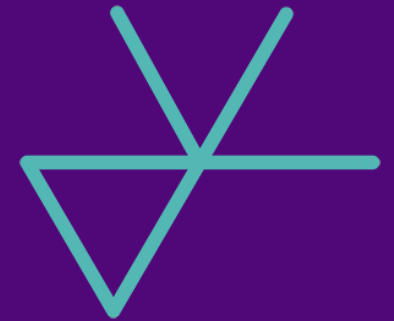


First, choose an item/ items to draw and put them on a flat surface like a table. Make sure you put it close to a window that lets in enough light.

Now, look at your subject in the morning hours. Observe how the light falls on it and the shadows made by your object. Make a quick sketch based on what you see.



Come back to your work space in the evening. Now check if the light falling on the object has changed. Has the direction changed? What about the shadows created or the intensity of the light itself? Make another sketch capturing these changes.



EXPLORE FURTHER.

Pick out one element from your composition, like the pattern on the surface.

Observe it closely and create a still life of just that one element, highlighting all the details.



This genre may have begun in painting, but today artists experiment with still life using other mediums as well.

For instance, here is a still life work made in wood.

What is represented here? Have you see its real life equivalent in a composition like this before? If you were to add something to this work, what would it be and why?

If you could colour this artwork, what colours would you use?



IMAGINE.

How would it feel to touch this item? Does that give you a clue as to what materials have been used to make it?

LOOK CLOSELY.

What are all the things you see represented in it? What kind of things are they? Are there any unidentifiable things?

REFLECT.

What do you think this item is used for? Do you think it should still be called a still life? Why or why not?

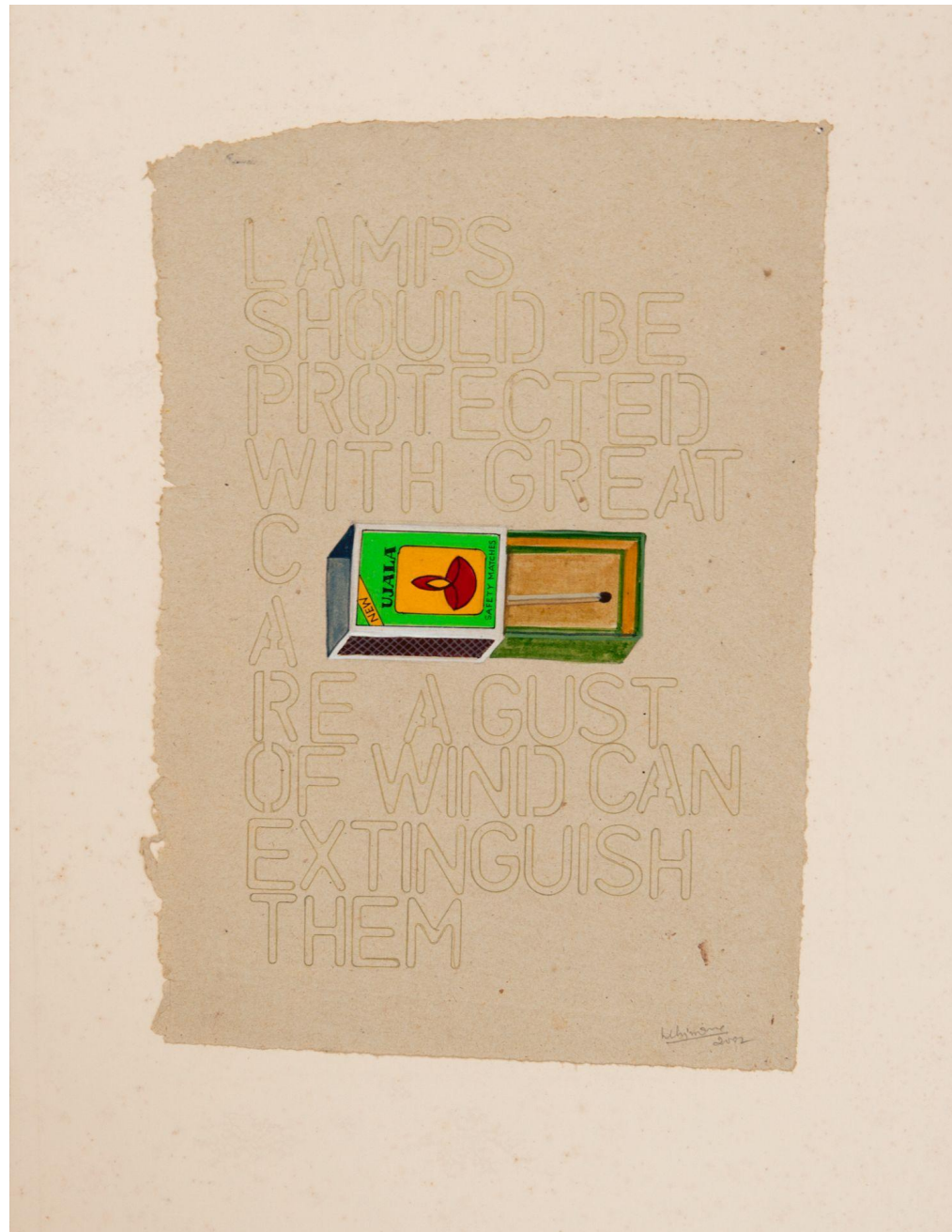
THINK.

You've seen several different examples of still lifes so far.

Based on this, what do you think are the key things that define a still life?



If this carpet were to inspire the designing of a book cover, what do you think the story would be about?



Broadly, still life includes the following characteristics. Do any of these match with the points listed out by you?

- Still lifes are artworks depicting items that do not move.
- They can include all kinds of natural and man-made things; commonly depicting flowers and food. They are sometimes celebrations of these pleasures, and sometimes reminders of their short-lived nature.
- They explore the qualities of form, colour, texture or composition of the subject. Therefore, they have often been used by artists to experiment with their styles.

If this were a poster, what would the film be about?

REFLECT.

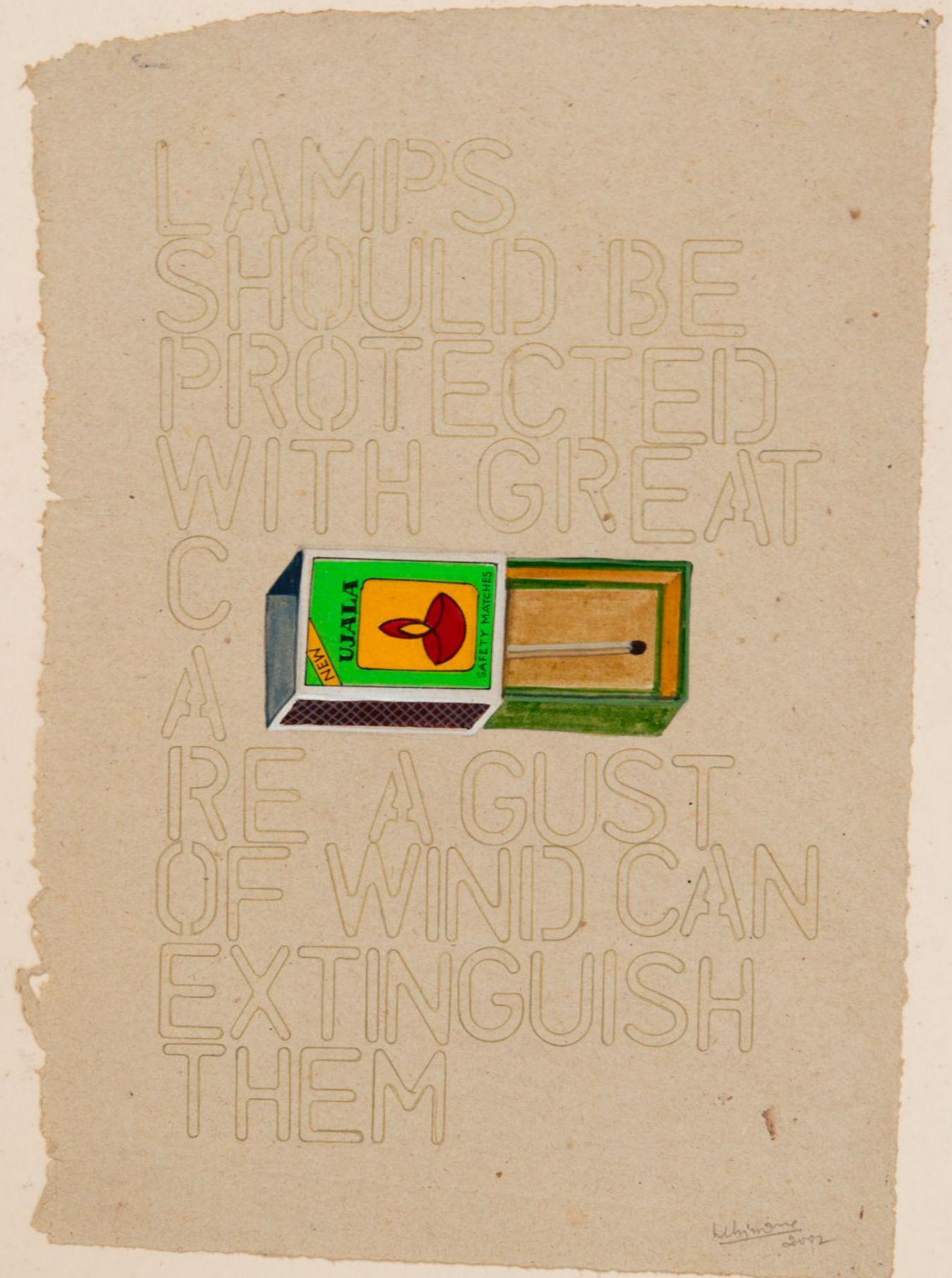
Read the text. What do you think is its relationship to the painted object?

What might the single matchstick inside a box mean, in your opinion?

THINK.

Can everyday objects (like this matchbox) be symbolic of abstract ideas? Does having an accompanying text help in building a story for this artwork?

Head to the **Stories With Art** extra to create your own narratives with still lifes.





By now, you know that still lifes were pretty trendy all over the world. They were particularly popular in the Netherlands of the 17th century. Among other things, the Dutch artists painted detailed flower arrangements such as this.

LOOK CLOSELY.

Can you spot a wilted flower in this composition? Why do you think that's included?

What else can you spot in this image?

Where is the light coming from? Is there only one source of light or many?



These images were full of secret symbols and clues that the viewer was expected to find and understand.

For example, the wilted flower, which in this painting is to the right of the vase, is meant to symbolise the impermanence of everything around us.

You can learn more about Dutch still life paintings [here](#).

If you were to give this work a title, what would it be?



Look at this image now. Does it look similar to the last one?

This too, is the work of a Dutch artist but from the 21st century. His name is Bas Meeuws, and he makes still lifes like the ones from the 17th century using flowers in a vase. Only he uses a different medium and tool. Can you guess what it is?*

**Hint: We all have this tool in our mobile phones today.*

If this image were a gif, which parts will move and how?



Meeuws photographs each flower to build a digital 'flower library' from which he creates unique arrangements.

Sometimes the flowers put together in the image actually do not grow in the same season or may not even be found in the same place. Why do you think Meeuws makes such unrealistic arrangements?

Can you name all the flowers you see here?



A section of Meeuws' works were also inspired by the art of India, especially Mughal art and architecture. Can you spot the 'India-inspired' elements in this work?*

Go back to see the previous two images and try and spot them there as well!

*Hint: Look at what holds these flower arrangements more closely!

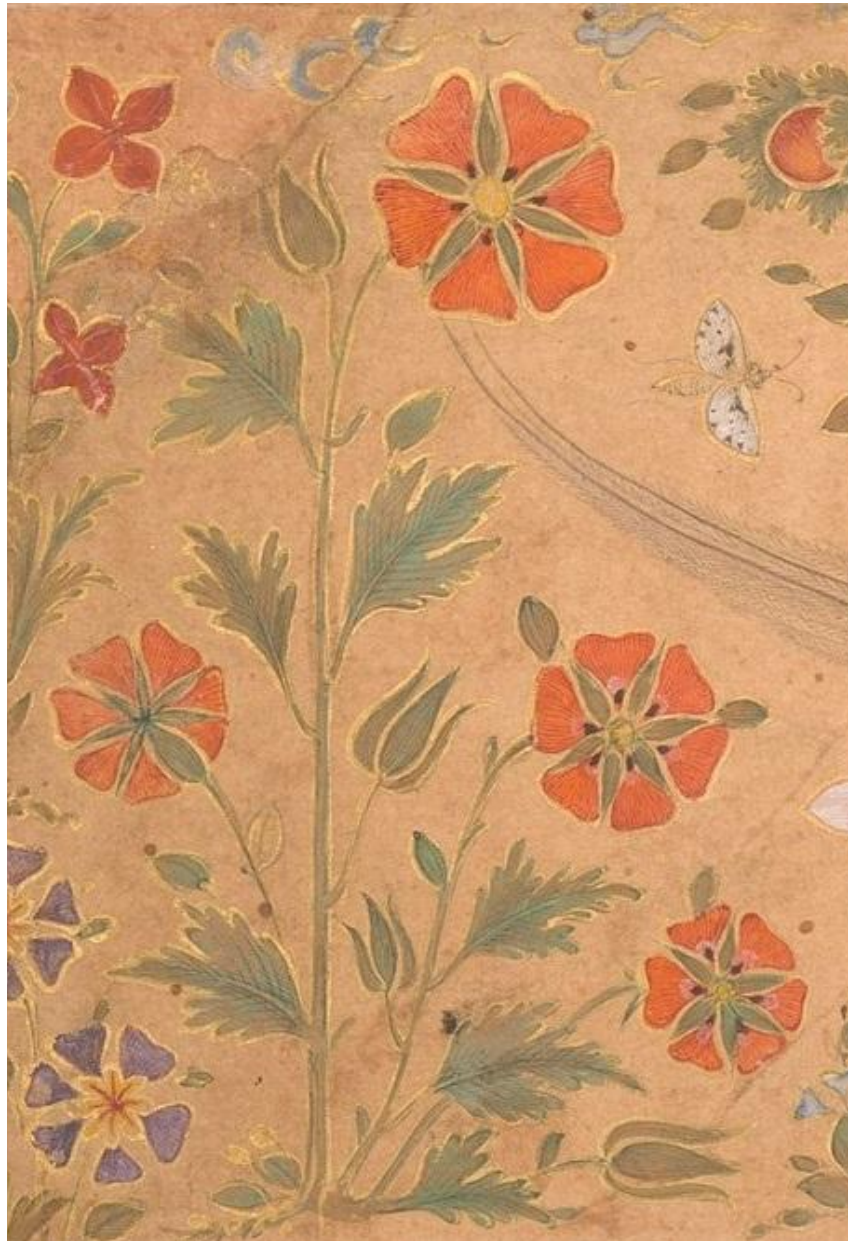
Where is the light coming from in this composition?



LOOK CLOSELY.

- How many flowers do you count? Can you name some or all of them?
- Apart from flowers, what can you find here?
- Do you spot the bird? Does it remind you of a different work you saw earlier?
- What creates a sense of symmetry in this image?

Meeuws was also inspired by the tradition of botanical paintings, featuring single plants, both in Netherlands and in India. How about getting inspired yourself? Check out our **Activity Sheet** extra for more fun with botanical drawings and create your own!



Detail from "The Emperor Shah Jahan with his Son Dara Shikoh",
Collection: The Metropolitan Museum, New York



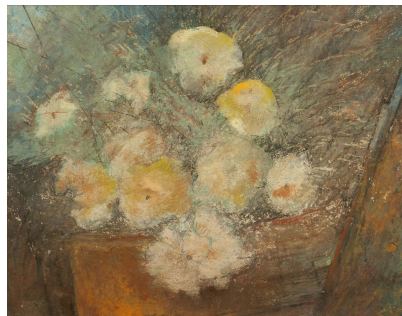
COMPARE & CONTRAST.

Here is a detail from a Mughal miniature, along with a photograph by Meeuws. Can you find **three** similarities and differences between them?

Here are some handy hints to get you started!
Did you count the number of flowers and buds?
Did you spot any flying creatures in both?
Did you notice the colour in both the flower groups?
Did you notice the shape of the leaves?



Untitled, 1994
Parwane Etemadi
Lithograph
H. 30 cm, W. 43 cm
MAC.01405



Still Life, 1959
Gopal Ghosh
Pastels on paper
H. 60 cm, W. 76 cm
MAC.01200



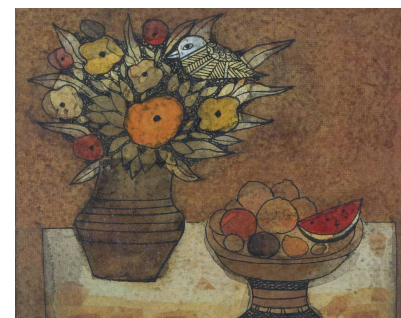
Still Life, 20th century
Laxma Goud
Pen and ink on paper
H. 22 cm, W. 26 cm
MAC.01298



Still life on grass, 20th century
K.H. Ara
Oil on paper
H. 53 cm, W. 74 cm
MAC.01046



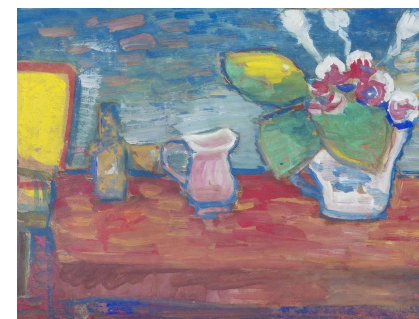
Jackfruit, 2006
Mahesh Baliga
Acrylic on canvas
H. 47 cm, W. 51 cm
MAC.01688



Still Life (Fruits and Flowers), 1990s
Badri Narayan
Watercolour on paper
H. 20 cm, W. 20 cm
MAC.01329



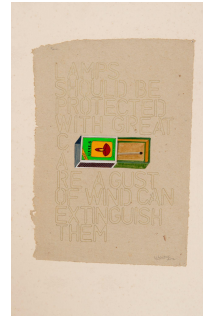
Carpet, Early 20th century
Unknown maker(s)
Wool on cotton and silk foundation
H. 258 cm, W. 162 cm
TXT.00671



Untitled, Early 20th century
Jamini Roy
Tempera on board
H. 28 cm, W. 40 cm
MAC.01413



Tulip(#15),2012
Bas Meeuws
Digital Photograph
BM12FP36



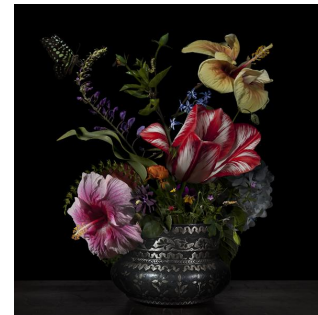
Ujala, 2002
V. G. Abhimanue
Watercolour and pen on paper
H. 40 cm, W. 25 cm
MAC.00020



Mughal(#27),2017
Bas Meeuws
Digital Photograph
BM12FP07



Mughal(#22),2017
Bas Meeuws
Digital Photograph
BM12FP10



Mughal(#30),2017
Bas Meeuws
Digital Photograph
BM12FP03



Mughal Botanical(#03),2015
Bas Meeuws
Digital Photograph
BM12FP13



Mushrooms in a bowl, 1990
Rajasekharan Nair
Polychrome wood
H. 16.5 cm, W. 19.8 cm
MAC.03151



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