

Some Photographic Tips

As we reinforce the Register's presence on the web, and ask Members for a regular supply of updated high quality photographs of their work, it becomes increasingly important to feel at ease with photography. Taking professional quality photographs is not easy, especially for craft, which may involve small and often shiny objects. The illustrations in this article focus on gallery pieces, which is what I make, but many of the principles apply equally to production work (see a few remarks at the end).

The following assumes that you have a digital camera. For close-up shots, which most of us are taking, a Single Lens Reflex (SLR) camera is much easier for composing just the shot you want. However, compacts, and even Smart phones, can give just as good results, especially if they have a 'macro' mode for close-ups. A compact may require a bit of experimentation to get the object centred.

For most web sites, including the RPT one, pictures are uploaded in jpeg format and in many cameras they are downloaded from the flash card in the same format. However, if you've got the facility, take pictures in raw format (essentially a digital version of a film negative), this will give you the maximum detail from the camera, but requires some developing in software before uploading to the web as a JPEG file. Specialised software such as Adobe Lightroom can develop raw photographs, but cheaper software such as Adobe Photoshop Elements will work too and is something you may already have on your computer. In some cases you may have to update the software to allow functionality with your camera raw files.

A key issue is location and lighting. The best place is near large windows where you have plenty of diffuse natural light- strong sunlight can cause its own problems. The best background is a sheet of paper of suitable colour so as not to draw the eye from the object. I use a sheet of white paper obtainable for a couple of quid from art supplies shops. A chair acts as a good support for the background as in the picture below. The large book on the top anchors the paper and the object is set back so that the background fills the photograph. It's all angled so that it is well lit. If possible it's best not to use two pieces of flat card – the junction will always stand out.



I started using a sheet of cloth as a background but I found it very difficult to smooth it out so that no distracting folds or creases showed.

A clear Perspex stand can be useful to support your work as it tends to blend in with a white background.

An alternative to using a plain background is to show your work in the workshop with a suitable background, eg a pile of shavings, and can also be a good location for pictures of production work eg a pile of identical staircase spindles.

The direction of the line between camera and object will depend on the time of day. If the sun is right behind the object it may shine through the paper and cause all sorts of shadows, highlights and distortions. If that happens, you can close any curtains between you and the sun, or wait for it to move, or turn so that you're shooting in a different direction.

You can buy a lightbox or dome which is a white nylon 'tent'. This softens the light source(s) and reduces the effect of shadows. It is best used with extra artificial lighting and is probably more than most people need, but is closer to how the professional studio photographers work.

Before taking the picture make sure that you are not including a reflection of yourself - especially on highly polished work. If you have got one, then change the direction of shot. A reflector is also useful to provide shade or to reflect light onto shaded areas; a perfectly good one, collapsible for easy storage, can be bought for about £15.

Photographing craft objects is often a case of close up work. However, don't get too close. You'll often want to crop the pictures in some way for all sorts of reasons so provide some background; a reasonable rule of thumb is that both horizontally and vertically the object should fill no more than two thirds of the frame.

The camera should usually be on a tripod to avoid camera shake. An adequate tripod can be bought for about £20 or even less on-line – eg eBay or www.7dayshop.com. If you have the facility, it also helps to use the timer delay – if you're not touching the camera when the shutter moves then the risk of camera shake is further reduced.

If you have the options, it's a good idea to use a low ISO (slow film speed) to ensure maximum picture quality– it will increase the exposure time but, if you're using a tripod, that is not an issue - and medium f-stop (around 9) for reasonable depth of field, if that's what you want - though sometimes short depth of field looks better and emphasises the shape.

A final point in regard to taking the pictures is to turn off the flash if you can. Flash creates all sorts of highlights and saturation; a long duration shot without flash and using a tripod is usually better than a picture with flash.

Having taken your pictures and downloaded onto your computer you may need to process them in a programme like Adobe Photoshop. If necessary adjust the lighting and colour first, having got the colours right, Photoshop (and similar programmes) will then allow you to change the composition by cropping and/or rotating.

In some web sites and in many magazines the background is such a brilliant and uniform white that the object has clearly been cut from its background and pasted onto a pure white one. To my mind, not only is that a long and boring job to do properly, but I prefer to have a shadow, as in the picture below, which demonstrates that the object exists in 3 dimensions. On the other hand, if you don't want the shadow you can reduce or remove it with some secondary lighting and/or a reflector.



Most of this article concerns photographing relatively small, one-off pieces. For larger pieces such as furniture, eg tables with turned tops, many of the principles will apply but a plain background would be difficult, and possibly undesirable. For such items, a lifestyle shot is in order, ie with the piece in its place perhaps with suitable objects on top, and with careful attention to the background making sure that it fits and has no extraneous "clutter". For architectural work, such as a newel posts or staircase spindles, suitable pictures might be either as a neat pile before fitting (maybe in the workshop) or as fitted – again make sure that the background is not distracting.

Finally, I hope this has been a useful article but, as I'm not an expert, I'd be happy to take part in any discussion or indeed to be corrected.

Richard Shock