Photographing Art

for submission to publications and the web

by Bruce Philpott

This is my reflection in a white-framed mirror. These reflections must be eliminated when photographing artwork. Follow along with me as I show you how to hide them.

You're an artist. You want your artwork to show at its best when you present it. Often you have to take pictures of your work to put in a catalog or on a web site. You may be a gallery owner needing to do a good job of showing the public about your upcoming shows. The object of this article is to help you take those photos.

I have other articles which are designed to teach you photography. I'm not going to try to do that here. I'm going to cover some very basic principles designed to enable you to depict a piece of art well in a photo. This short tutorial by no means covers every "right" way to photograph your art. It's intended to simply give you a start.

Please understand that no photograph will capture all of the beauty, subtlety and detail of a work of art. If that were true, we could simply sell the photos instead of that original. What we're trying to do is to show the viewer something that will depict your work accurately enough to come and look at it "in person."

Know your camera

I'm going to offer some general suggestions for using your specific model of camera. I don't know what camera you use, and I might not know how to use it if you put it into my hands. You'll want to be able to use your camera's settings such as self-timer, f-stop, white balance, exposure compensation and others, so please read and understand your camera's manual. If you've lost your manual, you can almost certainly Google your camera's brand and model and get a printable PDF of the owner's manual. Try "owners manual Nikon Coolpix L820" (typing in your own camera model).

White balance

Without a correct white balance (WB), you won't show the colors of your art as they actually are. White balance may not be the most exciting topic in photography, but it's very important. Check your camera's manual as to how to set white balance. Better cameras will permit you to set a custom white balance using a piece of white paper photographed in your current lighting situation. With simpler cameras, you just choose between sun, cloudy, shade, incandescent, fluorescent, flash, etc. That's not nearly as accurate.

Exposure

Your camera has three ways of adjusting light: Shutter speed, Aperture and ISO. If your camera is on a fully automatic exposure mode, when the light is dim, it will probably increase the ISO (light sensitivity) to compensate. This causes noise (grain) in the picture, so you want to *avoid increasing ISO.*

Instead, put your camera on Manual mode or Aperture Priority semi-auto so the only

thing your camera is allowed to decide is what shutter speed to use.

Avoiding motion blur

In many, many situations, your shutter speed will be too long (slow) to get a good photo when holding the camera in your hands. You'll want to get or borrow a tripod. Yes, there are other camera supports, but to photograph your art, you'll want a tripod, even a very cheap one.

Depth of field is how much is in focus, front to back. With three dimensional art work, you'll want the near *and* the distant parts of your sculpture to *both* be in focus. That means a smaller aperture (larger f-stop number) than if you were photographing a painting which is slimmer front to back.

When you set your camera to an auto or semi-auto exposure mode or even when you use manual mode and center the needle of your camera's light meter, that doesn't mean you'll get a good exposure.

If you have one painting of a sunlit snowy hillside and another that's a night landscape, your camera can't tell the *content* of the picture, so it tries to make every picture 18% reflectance gray. It will underexpose your snowy scene (making it too dark) and overexpose your night scene (making it too light).

It's up to you to use your camera's exposure compensation adjustments to achieve a properly exposed photo – one which correctly shows how light or dark the artwork is.

When you're in pretty dim light at your lowest ISO, and you've chosen an f-stop (aperture) which gives you a deep enough depth of field, you'll find your shutter speed is often very slow. Even though your camera is on a tripod, you may impart movement to it just by depressing the shutter button.

An easy way to prevent that camera motion blur is to set your self timer. When your shot is set up just the way you want, *gently* depress the shutter and let go of the camera and wait for the vibration to stop and the self-timer to trip the shutter.

Be sure to crop your image in your camera's viewfinder. There's no sense wasting pixels by having a lot of background in your photos. Get as close as possible to your art, eliminating anything that you don't want in the final photo.

As far as photographic technique, I'll divide art into two categories: Flat and three dimensional.

Photographing flat artwork

The problem most people run into in taking a photo of a piece of flat art is reflections. If you have a watercolor behind protective glass, this is the classic problem. Even if you remove the glass to take the picture, you may still see reflections on the surface of the painting itself.

For the purpose of example, I'm going to use a framed mirror and we'll pretend that's our framed, glazed watercolor. If we can succeed in eliminating the reflections in the mirror, we'll have a sure-fire method of photographing the art itself with no reflections.

On the previous page is a photo of the mirror with ordinary lighting, the way we're used to seeing it.

Notice that I'm photographing the mirror (standing in for your art) absolutely squarely... straight on. If I'm even a bit at an angle

Notice that the camera (upper left) is pointed squarely at the frame, not at an angle. The black backdrop behind the camera is what will be reflected in the mirror. See the resulting photo of the mirror and the lighting diagram on page four.

Ocean Turmoil II, Monoprint by Elizabeth Stafford

You can see by the exaggerated angle from which this photo was taken that it's important to photograph the painting straight-on. Otherwise the shape of the painting is distorted..

to the frame, it will distort the frame (and your art), making for an inaccurate image. Above is an example of doing it the wrong way, shooting it from an angle. Note that the corners aren't 90 degrees (square).

If we were to turn out all of the lights, we wouldn't see those reflections, would we? The problem is we wouldn't see the art, either. What we're going to do is to light the mirror without having those lights reflect back into the camera.

To light our art, we're going to use inexpensive equipment you can pick up at the hardware store for a few dollars, or you may even already have things in your studio which will work.

A couple of clamp-on lamps are inexpensive. You don't need light stands, either, you can use an easel or a hat rack, or even have patient friends hold them for you.

Position your lights to the left and right sides of your art as shown on pages 2 and 4, so we don't see them in the mirror. That way the reflections of the lights cease to be a problem.

Do we need to use two lights? Yes, because if we used only one light it would be brighter on one side than on the other, as the photo of a glazed monoprint (below) shows.

In order to spread the light evenly across the art, aim the left light at the right edge of your art and aim the right light at the left edge. This way, the strongest part of the light beam (the center of the beam) has to travel the farthest; the less powerful part of the beam (the edges) will light the near part of the art.

In our photo of the mirror on page one, we can still see the photographer and the room behind him, and we don't want that reflected when we're photographing the art. If we turn out the lights in the room (aside from our two clamp lights) we won't be lighting the room as well as we're lighting the art.

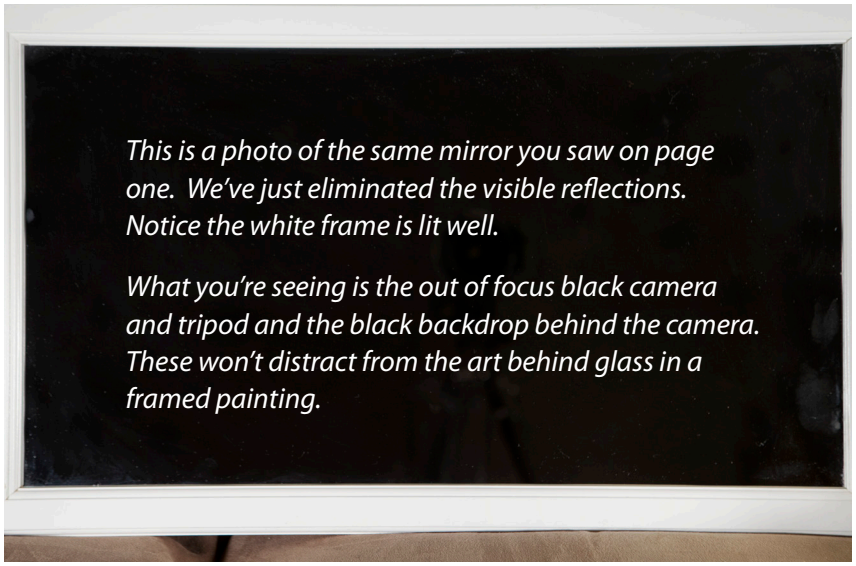
If we hang a large piece of flat black fabric behind the camera, we won't see a reflection of the room at all, just a reflection of that flat black fabric. If you use a black camera, we won't see the reflection of the camera, either. Rather than wearing a ninja costume and black face and gloves, I suggest you use a black tripod, set the camera's self-timer

If our artwork is only lit from one side, as this one is, that side will be brighter than the opposing side, so we need at least two light sources. It makes things easier if both of your light sources are the same.

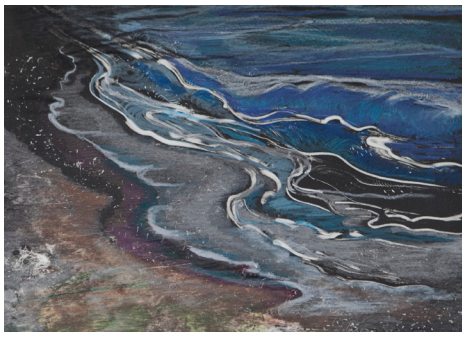
and step out of the scene. *Voila!* At the right is a picture of the mirror with no reflections and below is one of the monoprint photographed the same way.

I suggest you make a photo studio date with yourself and set up your easel (or wall hook) and lights and black backdrop (behind the camera, not the painting), borrow the camera if need be, and photograph your artwork in an assembly line fashion. Taking the pictures takes hardly any time – setting up your temporary photo studio is what takes time.

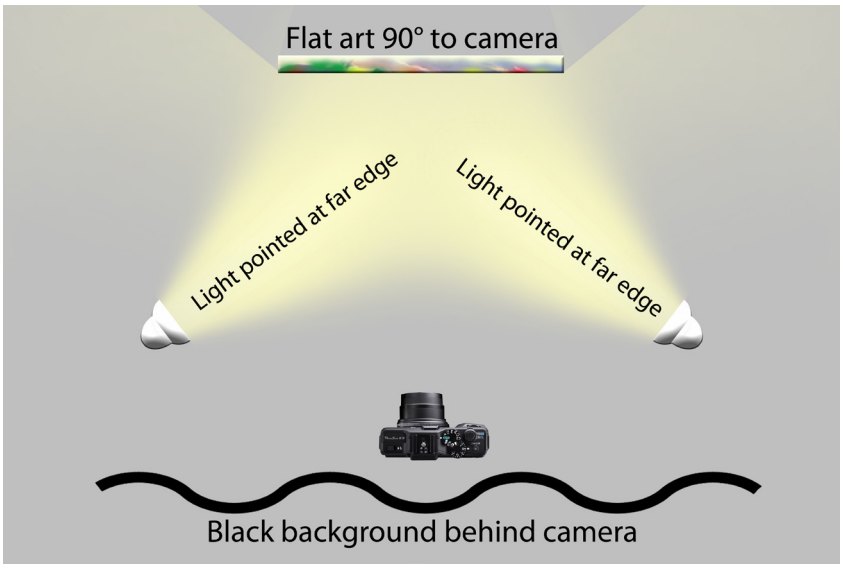
Mattes cover a bit of the edge of a piece of art. You're either going to have to crop out the matte (therefore the part the art that the matte covers), or temporarily unframe your painting, photograph it and put it back into its frame. If you're selling the art unframed, but displaying it in a frame, photographing the entire unframed painting is the best thing to do, in my opinion.



You don't have to be a vampire to take pictures with no reflections. Compare this photo of the mirror with the one on page one. Following these simple tips will permit you to avoid capturing reflections in your art which has been framed with glass.



A reflection-free image ready to submit.



Here's the setup as seen from directly above. The lights are not reflected into the camera from the art since they're angled from the sides. Neither the camera nor the area behind the camera will show as reflections because they're black.

Photographing three dimensional art

I'm going to divide three dimensional art into two categories: small and large. First I'll speak about photographing small art, and let's assume the worst: You're photographing very reflective objects. In this case, we don't want a black reflection in the objects or the viewer might think the objects were actually black.

Google "silver sphere earrings" and click on "Images." You'll notice that almost all of them are showing reflections that are almost completely white. In my opinion, a gradual gradation of grays to whites is most attractive. It's easy for someone to see a reflection in a photo of your reflective objects (such as jewelry) and mistakenly believe that details reflected in them are actually a part of the object. We want to depict your art as accurately as possible.

Another thing which can mislead the viewer of your photo is shadows. Is that shape a feature of the art, or is it just a shadow of something else? Photographing your three dimensional art with a large apparent light source (a cloudy sky, for instance) will soften any shadows while still showing the 3-D-ness of your work.

To softly light small objects, especially reflective ones, flip a card table upside down and lay white paper on the underside of the table (which is now your display surface). Pin an old white sheet or other translucent white fabric over the legs of the card table and you have a light tent. Point your lights at this tent and they'll light your small three dimensional art and provide a soft white reflection in them except for the opening where you've inserted your camera.

Commercial light tents are available on the internet. They aren't terribly expensive and they literally pop into shape and then easily fold down for storage. I don't own one, but if I photographed a lot of small reflective objects, I certainly would.

Photographing *large* three dimensional art poses its own set of challenges. Let's assume the worst again - that you're photographing a ten-foot chrome figure study. In this case, I'd use reflections I can find in nature and backgrounds in which your sculpture would display well. The evening sky, immediately after the sun has gone over the horizon is a beautiful thing to show reflected

Here I've turned a card table into a light tent. I've turned the card table upside down and wrapped the legs in white fabric, overlapping the fabric to form a "roof." I've placed lights on both sides. You can see the result below: A photo of reflective objects I had around the house. There are no distracting reflections and very soft shadows.

in your chrome sculpture; a sunset might be even better.

Even if you're lucky and your sculpture isn't made of chrome, you'll find that a huge light source such as a sunless sky will be the perfect light for your sculpture.

You don't have to wait for the sun to go down over the horizon to get a sunless sky. You can place your sculpture in the shadow of a very large building, or (my favorite) photograph it while the sky is overcast.

Just be sure that the sculpture is lit at least as brightly as whatever we can see behind it. Putting the sculpture in the shade of a building lights the art well, but if the sun is on the parched hillside weeds behind it, that huge bright area will distract from your art. The background shouldn't be lit more strongly than your subject.

Speaking of background for three dimensional art, you want to very clearly tell the viewer what part of the picture is your art and what part is simply the background.

My wife, Susandra, makes sculptures of rusty metal. They would show up terribly against a wooden barn, for instance. For a consistent look on her web site, she photographs her sculptures against a blue seamless background (which you can buy at photo stores).

An easier, more "living with art" approach is to photograph your sculpture against a *very distant* background which has no colors in it that match your sculpture. If your camera has a large sensor and an adjustable f-stop, open the aperture as large as possible (a smaller number f-stop) to blur the background more. With your piece as the only thing in focus, it will stand out nicely in the photo.

Palindrome by Susandra Spicer

Cameras with a large sensor will be able to give you a more shallow depth of field if you open the aperture (f-stop) to its largest (smallest number) f-stop. This will blur the background much more, as in the upper left.

Preparing your image for a catalog or other publication

Don't submit the image right from your camera. You will need some kind of image editing software on your computer to crop it and re-size it to the specifications of the publication or web site. I use Photoshop, but there are many other image editors such as GIMPshop (free).

Your image will look its best in the catalog if you submit it exactly as the publication requests. They will probably specify a format such as .jpg or .tiff or .pdf, and a measurement on the long edge in inches or in pixels. They may also specify a color space (RGB or CMYK). If they don't specify, RGB (which comes out of your camera) is what they're expecting. The publication will usually handle changing artists' images to the color space their press requires.

Find out, if you can, the maximum measurements in both height and width. This may determine which photo you submit to the publication.

Chose a piece of your artwork which will most proportionately fill the space in the publication. If the space in the publication is tall, submit a photo of a tall piece of art. If the space in the publication is wider than tall, submit a photo of a wider piece of art. Your object is to nearly fill the proportions given to you by the publication.

The photo you submit often determines how many people will visit your studio and how much of your work you will sell.

The diffusion confusion

I'd like to clear up some confusion I keep hearing about diffusing light to soften shadows on subjects such as portraits of older people. You'd have to have a black room to demonstrate this, but let's imagine instead that you're out in the middle of a dirt field at night.

If you have a light bulb with no frosting and it's lighting your subject from ten feet away, you'll find hard, crisp shadows on your subject. If you replace that bulb with a frosted one or a CFL bulb, there will be no perceptible difference in the harshness of the shadows.

The apparent size of your light source is the only thing that matters. Period.

Now, if you put a white card between that bulb and your subject (just have a friend hold it), and hang a white bed sheet on a clothes line a couple of feet beyond the light (hey, it's my imaginary field, so it has a clothes line), the light reflected back onto your subject will be much softer because the apparent source of the light (the huge sheet) is much larger.

Likewise, you could put the light bulb behind the sheet and enlarge the size of the light, but then you'll still have that little pinpoint of light (the bulb itself) showing through somewhat, so that's not quite as effective.

An accessory flash that fits onto your camera's hot shoe will often have a little diffuser panel (or you can buy one for it). I love to use these indoors, because the diffuser scatters some of the light up to the ceiling and some of it off at walls which will bounce light back to your subject. Out in the middle of my dark field, though (or when I'm using fill flash in sunlight), it does no good at all. In fact, it *decreases* the light that reaches your subjects and that will use up your batteries more quickly.

A room with dark-paneled walls and ceiling might as well have no walls or ceiling at all (we're back in the dark field), since they absorb any light I throw at them. We're stuck with on-camera, direct flash unless you can get a very large person wearing a white suit to stand near you.

If I'm taking candid* photos indoors, I look for white walls or a white ceiling. White ceilings aren't as good a reflector, because they cause "down-shadows" which cause "raccoon eyes" – deep eye socket pits. When we're shooting candids, though, we don't have much control over the environment.

I'll put one of those light-scattering diffusers on my flash and point the flash directly at my chosen reflector. Most of the time, you can't tell it's a flash photo when I do this.

Of course, my reflector has to be white, or I'm going to have difficulty with my white balance. If I bounce light off a deep green wall, for instance, I may be able to compensate somewhat for the green light I'm (in effect) using, but the subject is probably also being lit subtly by other light sources (a nearby lamp we hadn't noticed, for instance), and shifting away from green will alter that light's color. It's best to stick with white walls if you can find them.

** Candid photos are those taken without posing the subjects and with minimal adjustments to the extant lighting.*

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