

PHOTOGRAPHY TIPS FOR STUDIO TOUR ARTISTS

By: Dinah Satterwhite, Tour Manager, Photographer, © 2014.

Disclaimer: This information is based on my experience and personal opinion, and there are always exceptions. Do some research, look up photos of your medium on the web, and read books about photographing artwork. It will all help you to improve your photos and develop your own photography style.

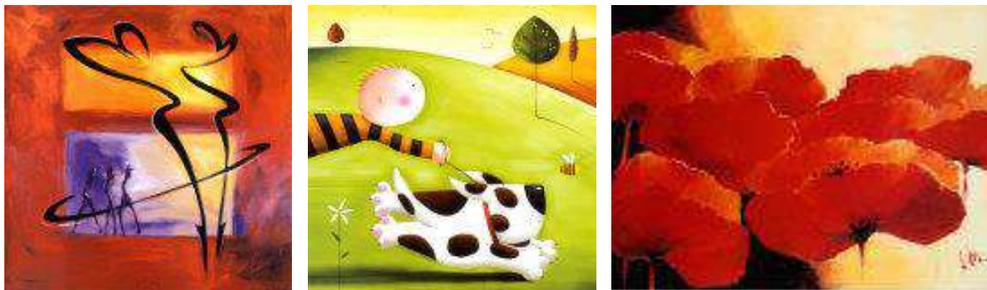
2-D ART: Flat art is much easier to photograph than 3-D, but you still have to be aware of several issues. There are two basic options – a direct scan or photo.

SCAN -- If you can have your piece professionally scanned, it's worth the effort. There will be nothing between your art and the scanner, so you won't have problems with flash, glare, lighting, distortion, etc. Every detail will be captured. I highly suggest that you get your flat work professionally scanned if possible, largely depending on the size of your work.

Most "home" scanners do not go larger than 8½"x11" and do not have high resolution capability. Some scanners, like mine, go up to 12"x17" and can *stitch* several segments together – so I am able to scan original work that is much larger, and often do watercolors or encaustics 24" or larger. (Contact me if you are interested in learning more). Then there are very high-end scanners at professional reprographics and print shops that can handle very large pieces, sometimes costing \$50 to \$100 per scan. Shop around and find one that you like, or ask other artists where they go to have their work scanned. Ask for examples, and discuss all of the fees.

TIPS FOR SCANNING ARTWORK:

1. Provide clean work, ready to scan – don't assume anyone will "fix" anything for you
2. Ideally, have the piece scanned before you frame it - if your work is already framed, remove the glass if possible to avoid reflections and glare (professional photographers can work around glass, so talk to them first)
3. Have several images scanned at the same time – it can save a lot of time and money
4. Request different formats for each photo (low, medium & high resolutions), usually jpeg
5. Request two copies of the CD while you're at it (copy the files to your computer, and always keep one original CD – never lend it out)



These pieces were scanned directly from the original. It would be much harder to photograph them and capture all of the details and variations in color so perfectly.

PHOTOGRAPHING 2-D ART

TIPS FOR PHOTOS OF 2-D ART

1. Remove the glass (or photograph your work before you frame it) to avoid reflections and glare.
2. Make sure your camera is exactly square to your art. Otherwise, the proportions will be off, it will look strange to the eye, and you'll have to crop some of your artwork to fit the frame of the photo.
3. Consider hiring a professional photographer (find one that's experienced with art!) It's an investment in yourself that will pay off.



Bad flash, angle distorted



Bad reflections, glare



Almost there, but still: un-even lighting and glare from the flash



My best option here turned out to be a direct scan, but if I didn't have that choice, I could have removed the glass, and worked hard to light the piece evenly and without glare or distortion.

3-D ART: This is one of the hardest types of art to photograph, but with a little effort, and some guidance, you can get some really good photos. The two biggest problems that I've encountered in reviewing other artists' photos are: lighting, and distractions. Lighting an object evenly, without "hot spots" or glare is hard, especially when you have a reflective surface. And distractions like a busy background or un-necessary props take away from your artwork. Nothing should distract from your art!

TIPS FOR PHOTOS OF 3-D ART

1. Consider hiring a professional photographer (find one that's experienced with art!) It's an investment in yourself that will pay off.
2. Choose plain backgrounds (white, neutral or black) to show off your artwork. Subtle props can be used if it enhances or helps to define the art -- a ceramic vase with a few tastefully arranged flowers might work, as long as the flowers aren't more interesting than the vase. Do not take photos of your work sitting on your carpet, standing on your kitchen counter, hung on your wood panel walls, or laying down on your gravel driveway. What background will make your art look the best? Set it up, and clean everything carefully. Drape backdrops so they seem to disappear into the horizon.
 - For a neutral or light-colored piece, place your work on a large piece of black velvet.
 - Put your sculpture on an elegant stand if it's not distracting.
 - Take that necklace and cascade it over some raw pieces of white marble or hang it so it looks natural, with a neutral background (again, nothing colorful or distracting).



Too many distractions.



Much too busy, and distracting background.



Not bad, but the background is pretty busy.



Jewelry, or fruit?



Very attractive - nice use of props!



Nice layout, sharp focus, simple background.



Lighting and background are not great.



Beautiful, really shows off the piece!



Nice photo, shows detail and depth.



Nice plain background and eye-catching asymmetry.



Great shot for a group. Simple, clean.



Beautiful, but complicated to set-up.

3. If you are using your own digital camera, select a large file setting to insure the file size and high resolution that is required. You can always reduce the size and resolution later.
4. Focus! Ideally, everything in the photo should be in focus – your artwork, and all props or background materials. If you’re being creative and photographing a 3-D piece where only the front section of an object is in focus, OK, but make sure it looks intentional. Read my section near the end about “Depth of Field.”

5. Get close. Take photos of small sections of your artwork, even extreme close-ups. Show those details. You don’t always have to show the entire piece. When people look at this close-up shot, it will allow them to really feel like they can reach out and touch it. That’s a good thing. Let them connect with your work. Examples:



- ... for a complicated mosaic tile piece, zoom in to a section that shows how beautifully the pieces fit together, with your clean grout lines.
 - ... for a wood sculpture, show off that incredible wood grain and meticulous finish work.
 - ... for an oil painting, get in close to a particularly colorful section, showing the texture of the paints working together to create the feeling of rain falling on that tree.
 - ... for a glass plate, show that cool hand-formed edge where the design and colors seem to melt together like flowing lava.
6. Now that you’re close, are you using a tripod? Even small tripods are available in a table-top format. It’s worth it, and will save you time and make the whole process much easier. Did I mention that it will keep your photos in focus? Oh, you knew that! (If you don’t have a tripod, here’s a photographers tip: use a small beanbag, even a baggie 3/4 full of rice, or a frozen bag of peas. You can place your camera on the bag for stability, and the bag is portable and cheap.
 7. Lighting – this is so important, and shows perhaps the biggest “gap” between amateur and professional photos. Professional photographers have a complex set-up, involving light from different angles (either directly or *bouncing* off reflectors or white boards). They can make tons of minor adjustments to lights behind, under, above, or on the sides of your art. This is a huge advantage, and yet another reason to take your work to a pro.

At home, or in your studio, you can try to imitate their set up by lighting your artwork from several angles. This is called *fill light*. It “fills” in the shadows and helps to *gracefully* light your subject so there are no severe shadows. It will really enhance your artwork, and is worth every minute you spend on it. Bring in extra lights. Full spectrum bulbs are best -- invest in some. Shine them on your piece and keep adjusting them until you can’t tell where the light is coming from. If the light is too bright, stretch or hang a piece of white silk or a thin white bed sheet in front of the bulb to *diffuse* the light (be aware of fire hazards

with hot lights close to fabric). For very subtle but effective light, set up a bright light very close to your object and shine it away from the object, with a large white board nearby to bounce the light off of and back onto your object. This soft “bounced” light will also fill in shadows and give a more natural glow to almost any object. (see light-box below)

8. What’s a light-box? Basically, a light-box is a partially open box made up of bright white non-reflective material (often cardboard or plastic). Your art is placed inside, and lights are directed at the object and/or at the white sides and background to bounce back onto your object. Your camera sits in front (on a tripod, of course). It’s a clean way to light up your work on a plain background, although props can also be used. You can buy a light box, or create your own. If you know another artist who owns a light box, ask if you could use it to photograph some of your work.



This is a common light-box that you can use at home. Notice the tripod, and multiple light sources. The side lights are actually bouncing light off the opposite white wall and back onto the side of the object – this indirect light is very flattering and helps to avoid hot spots.

9. Think about how the image will look when it’s printed at only 1” tall – complicated and busy photos won’t catch anyone’s eye.



This is pretty busy, and doesn’t give the viewer a place to rest their eyes. It will also be hard to tell what it is when it gets really small.

10. Collect a file of ideas showing photos of art/mediums similar to your own – refer to this when shooting your art or talking to a professional about how you want your photos to look. Collect magazine clippings, greeting cards, brochures from other art shows/venues, web photos, etc. These can really be inspiring, and help to define your photography style.



11. Google the web for lots of great information. I've found specific tips for photographing jewelry that was great! There is a lot of free information at your fingertips.

EXAMPLE #1: Photos of a vase, using a small, \$100 Canon camera.

Below are a series of photos that I took, starting with almost no effort, progressing through several "improvements," similar to what you could duplicate at home. Look at how the quality improves with different backgrounds, flash vs. no flash, close-ups, changing the angle, making slight adjustments, and even moving the vase. I finally got some decent close-ups, although most of these are not good enough for any publication. What would make it better? Ironing the white fabric for the full shots. A pinch more soft fill light (here I just used sunlight streaming in from my living room window). Imagine using a good SLR camera, with the white sheet ironed so it's flat and practically invisible in the photo, and better lighting.



Starting with just flash on the carpet, looks pretty bad. Then without flash the lighting is better, but the exposure was slower and the vase is out of focus. So for the next photo I rested my hand on a small table to reduce any camera shake and get a clearer image. Then I tried it with a white sheet on the carpet.



Here I started getting really close to the vase to emphasize the texture and glazes. The first one isn't as interesting, and it's hard to tell what you're looking at. The next two are a bit better, and really showcase the details and unique qualities. I turned the vase just a tad for the third last image – notice how much better the details become.



Now I tilted the vase onto its side, but it looks a little strange. The next two are a bit better, with the last one showing that it's a vase although it has a lot of glaring light and a pretty harsh shadow at the bottom. Plus parts of the image are not in focus, and it doesn't work well in this case.



I went back to shooting the vase right-side up, and included a little bit more of the front, with some good reflections on the glaze. Then I took one final shot of the full vase, but there is a lot of light reflecting that is distracting. I held a white board to the side of the vase on both of these, to fill in a little more light.

FINAL ASSESSMENT: If I wanted to work more to refine this shot, I would iron the white sheet and drape it carefully so there are no creases and you cannot see where it “ends.” I would also bring in various lights from my home (no yellow lights; use full spectrum if possible) and light different sides of the vase until I see a good combination that looks normal, but lights enough of the details. I would move the vase around a bit, and move the lights far enough away so there are no “hot spots” reflecting on the glazes. And I would use a tripod, or something sturdy to reduce camera shake. Once I have a good arrangement, I would shoot dozens of photos, shooting the vase in full, shooting extreme close-ups, making slight adjustments, moving closer, moving around the vase a bit, turning the vase slightly, etc. and then crop and adjust the contrast on the computer once I've narrowed it down to my 3 or 4 favorite shots.

EXAMPLE #2: Photos of some jewelry, using a fairly high-end Nikon SLR camera, with a good 52mm lens, flash & fill light.

Below are a few photos from a series of over 500 photos that I took of some jewelry.



I started with a grey background, indoors, using some overhead sunlight from side windows and a skylight, and a full spectrum flip light on the left. In the second shot I moved the light farther from the jewelry to reduce the glare and bring out more details. In the third shot I moved it even farther away, and adjusted my camera to allow a pinch less light in. Notice how "cool" this necklace looks with the grey background, bringing out more of the silver tones.



Look at the extreme difference that the background and lighting makes on the same piece of jewelry!

Once I got to the computer, I cropped in very tightly onto the pendant, and love the little sparkle of light reflecting near the top.



Still, I wanted to bring out more of the warm tones to the various metals in this piece. After trying a variety of backgrounds, I settled on a special black glass that I love to work with, although it has many challenges. Here you can see some of my lights reflecting onto the glass, although I know I will crop them out of the final image. The warm overhead light in the first image, combined with some natural sunlight, gave a nice warmth to the jewelry. I added a cool side light and made some camera adjustments, and liked the results. But I moved the cool light farther away to reduce the glare and keep the overall feeling of warmth.



I moved the cool light even farther away and liked it even better. Then I moved the pendant around, but didn't like the un-natural way it looked on an angle.



Still not quite right in this first one. The next one is better, and there's a nice feeling to the warmth of the metals, with good lighting on all sides and no glare. I cropped quite a bit off this photo, and cleaned up a ton of dust and scratches on the black glass. I was shooting almost straight down on the jewelry, which also helps to make the entire piece in focus. In the last shot, I moved the camera quite a bit lower, and adjusted the depth of field* so that the front is in focus, but the photo gradually goes out of focus in the back. This close-up gives a really nice intimate feeling to the pendant, and makes you feel like you can reach right out and touch it. However, it will not be good for all purposes – sometimes you need everything in focus. So while I was there, I also took more photos with a different depth of field so everything was in focus.

*Depth of Field: When photographers talk about the “**depth of field**” in an image, they’re referring to how much of the picture they choose to have in focus. For 3-D art, it can be hard to have your entire piece in focus. Depending on your camera, if you focus on the front of a sculpture, for instance, the back may be completely out of focus. Sometimes you can use this to your advantage, but often times you need the entire piece to be in focus. This can be accomplished by setting your camera to a smaller aperture, like 32, which actually allows less light in to the camera, but increases the depth at which the camera will focus. Then, focus on a spot just in front of the center of the whole piece, and your camera should be able to capture all of it in perfect focus. But here’s the catch – at this lower aperture with less light, you need to increase the amount of light going into your camera. So increase your ISO a lot, and/or add (+) some stops (usually a “+” or “-” setting on the camera) to allow more light in. Without enough light, your photo will be very dark or even completely black. So you see it can be a bit tricky to have a 3-D piece of art in focus and well lit. Of course using a tripod helps greatly, and allows you to make minor changes to the art, or the camera or lighting, and quickly fine-tune your photos.

PICK ME! PICK ME!

WHICH PHOTOS GET CHOSEN FOR PUBLICATION?

When we choose the art for the Studio Tour brochures and ads we consider many factors, including some of these:

- ✓ high quality images that convert well to a small format
- ✓ colors and a variety of mediums that relate well to the surrounding photos or season
- ✓ artwork that crops to the right proportions
- ✓ clean images with work that is easily recognizable
- ✓ unique work that shows fine craftsmanship and style
- ✓ variety among the artists and mediums

The media (newspapers, magazines...) will consider many of these same criteria when they choose to publish a photo, along with an emphasis on: quality, appropriateness, season, clean images, easy recognition of a medium or object, and availability (the press waits for no one!). For them, high resolution is even more of a factor than for the Tour, since their format is often large (like for the cover or a newspaper).

Now that you’re savvier about your artwork photography, carry on -- and keep up the good work!