

A Simple Guide to Photographing Your Artwork

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This guide provides basic information to help produce high-quality images of your artwork for websites, social media, or for submission to exhibitions or galleries, using a smartphone, point-and-shoot camera, or DSLR. The images you submit are a documentary record of your artwork, represented accurately. Don't go for arty composition or dramatic lighting, and present your work with no distractions. Aside from backgrounds mentioned below, nothing should be visible except the artwork and needed fixtures such as stands for plates or a mannequin for wearable art. NOTE: This handout was created incorporating advice and suggestions from the photographers in the Chatham Artists Guild.

General Guidelines

- ***The most effective photos for these applications are square or rectangular.***
- ***Photographing Outdoors*** - 2-D work and some 3-D work can be effectively photographed outdoors in indirect daylight. Avoid direct sunlight.
- ***Do not use a flash*** – It will create a glare on the artwork, especially on anything reflective.
- ***Photographing Indoors*** can work with plenty of natural light, but photographing indoors at night or in a darkened room gives you complete control over the lighting.
- ***Back up from the subject.*** The default setting on phones and point-and-shoot cameras gives a slightly distorted image. Back up and zoom in until the image through the phone or camera looks just as it does with the naked eye.
- ***What Lights to Use*** – The specs for lightbulbs include a four-digit numerical value and the letter “K” indicating ***color temperature***, which is the tone of white light from warm to cool. Light bulbs or lamps that produce color-neutral white light equivalent to ambient daylight are rated 4000K to 5000K and give the most accurate color response when photographing artwork. When using clamp-lights, 75-100 watt-equivalent LED bulbs work well.
- ***Tripod*** - It is possible to take acceptable photos with a handheld camera or phone, but you stand a far better chance at good images with a tripod. The “Amazon Basics 60-Inch Lightweight Tripod with Bag” for less than \$30 is highly-rated and has the necessary features. A 60-inch tripod is appropriate for straight-on shots of prints and paintings, and level or from-above angle shots of 3-D work. If using a smartphone, get a tripod mount adaptor such as the “Vastar Smartphone Tripod Adapter.”

Photographing Two-Dimensional Work

- ***Photographing Outdoors*** - Most 2-D work can be effectively photographed outdoors in indirect light. Avoid direct sunlight when photographing artwork.
- ***Back up a bit and zoom in*** so that the photograph represents the work geometrically accurate.
- ***The level of the camera lens*** should be the midpoint of the artwork.
- ***Place the work*** against a smooth, white or gray background with as little pattern/texture as possible.
- ***Show Just the Art*** - In the best photos of rectilinear 2-D artwork, nothing is visible except the work itself – no frame, no matting, no surroundings. Exceptions are works with a round, oval, or irregular shape, ones with a purposefully irregular edge, or ones where the frame is part of the art.

- ***You'll Need to Crop the Image*** – The photo format rarely matches the shape of the artwork, so you will need to digitally crop the image. That's explained in a separate document.
- ***Photographing 2-D Work Indoors*** – same backgrounds as mentioned above for outdoor.
- ***Natural light can work*** indoors if there are plenty of windows.
- ***Otherwise, use two clamp lights with reflectors or with reflector flood bulb.*** Mount the lights on stands or any convenient support structures with the lights at the mid-point of the work vertically. Aim the lights at the work at 45-degree angles on either side. Place the lights far enough from the work that the light is evenly diffused with no hot spots.
- ***Avoid Glare and Hot Spots*** - If you are getting glare or hot spots, use inexpensive ***diffuser lamp covers for photography***, available online, or hang thin white cloth or paper in front of the lamps.
- ***Always photograph 2-D work without glass covering.***
- ***Play with the positioning of the lights*** to control light intensity and eliminate problematic reflections. However, if the surface of your work is reflective, a bit of that should show up in the photograph.

Photographing Three-Dimensional Work

Photographing 3-D artwork is trickier, and there's plenty of misinformation online. A common misconception is that you should eliminate all shadows, which can leave the work floating in a void. That's disconcerting and artificial except with items like jewelry. This becomes a significant challenge when attempting to photograph 3-D work outdoors in indirect light. Such diffuse light flattens 3-D work and surface relief. It depends on the shape and surface of the work, and photographing outdoors in indirect light may be an option.

- ***Show the Surface Beneath*** - If your art is designed to sit on a table or shelf, then we should see the surface it is sitting on in the phot. Avoid surfaces with distracting visible texture or color.
- ***Diffused Shadows*** below or around the work accentuate the three-dimensionality and reveal the surface beneath.
- ***Reflections*** - If the surface of your work is reflective, it should show in the photographs. Reflections shouldn't be glaring or distracting, but leave enough to be truthful to the appearance of the work.
- ***Make Sure the Whole Object is in Focus*** – The visual depth that is sharply in focus in any photograph is the ***Depth-of-Field***. You've seen photos where the front edge of an object is in focus while the rest is blurred. With artwork, that looks unprofessional. Most of you will use automatic settings on your camera or smartphone, and depth-of-field problems happen most often when the camera is too close to the object. Back up a bit and zoom in a little more to increase the depth-of-field. Keep in mind that this will mean a longer exposure and thus usually requires a tripod.
- ***Background*** – White backgrounds are popular, but consider where the image will appear. In a print publication, the page is often white, and a white background will leave your work floating in space. Most 3-D artwork looks better on a neutral gray background. Colored backgrounds can distract from the work.

Lighting and Background when Photographing 3-D Art

As mentioned earlier, some 3-D work can be photographed outdoors in indirect light, but you'll get better results if you control the light indoors. The suggestions below require only a modest investment, and will

pay off every time you photograph your work. Having joined a guild of professional artists, it's reasonable to make the investment in minimal supplies and equipment to photograph your work effectively.

Photographing 3-D Work with a Studio Lightbox

- **Studio lightboxes are available inexpensively online**, and can work for photographing small art objects like jewelry or small pottery items.
- **White's Not the Best Background** – That's the downside – lightboxes are almost always white on the inside, leading to the problem mentioned above.
- **Consider getting a larger lightbox** allowing use of neutral-gray paper as a seamless backdrop inside the unit, flat against the floor of the box at the front and then curving up against the back wall.
- **Using Clamp Lights** - You can get by with a couple of clamp lights, but in order to reduce harsh shadows and excessive reflections, use thin cloth or paper in front of the lamp to diffuse the light. Search online for **diffuser lamp covers for photography**. Once you see them, you can also make your own from any thin white fabric.
- **Place the lights** in front of the light box off to the side aimed in the opening, and move them closer or farther away to regulate the intensity of the light.
- **Asymmetrical Lighting** - With 3-D art, asymmetrical lighting often gives the best effect. It's easily achieved by placing one light farther off to the side and farther away from the light box.

Photographing 3-D Work with a Seamless Backdrop

- **For 3-D work like pottery, turned wood forms, or sculpture**, a seamless backdrop gives the most professional results, and the setup is simple and inexpensive.
- **A backdrop in light or medium neutral gray** works well for almost any 3-D artwork. Color can distract from the artwork.
- **Cloth can work** if the fabric hangs smoothly with no wrinkles. The objective is to minimize distractions in order to focus attention on the art.
- **Backdrop Paper** is available in rolls at an art supply store or online. The width of roll will depend on what you are photographing. Rolls wider than 36" become cumbersome to handle.
- **Avoid backdrop paper that comes pre-printed with a gradient from light to dark**. Far better to achieve that gradient with your lighting.
- **Hanging the Roll** - Place the roll over a broom handle, long dowel, or length of plastic pipe, and hang it fairly high up, hanging from a picture rail, curtain rod, cabinet, or any other convenient setup where you can place a table beneath and in front of it. When possible, photograph your work in a basement or garage where the backdrop roll is easily hung on the wall.
- **Place a table beneath the roll**, unroll as much paper as you need, and place a spring clamp over the paper at one end of the roll to keep it from unrolling further. The paper should drape down from the roll in a smooth curve extending out onto the table, so that when you photograph your artwork, there is no visible horizon line.
- **Extend the Backdrop** – In order to have the lighting fade to dark in the background, pull the table farther from the roll before unrolling the paper so that there will be at least two or three feet of distance from the softbox and art object to the point where the paper starts curving up towards the

roll. Clamp or tape the paper down at the front edge of the table. If no other table is convenient, an inexpensive folding card table works well.

- **Alternative Backdrops** - If you have the storage space, a full sheet foam-core of thin Masonite works well. Either can be painted matt neutral gray with a paint-roller, and repainted when they get smudged. Clamp the front edge to the table and let the sheet curve up against the wall.

Lighting 3-D Art When Using a Seamless Backdrop

- **Minimize Shadows** - In photographing artwork on a seamless backdrop, it is important to minimize and defuse the shadows without eliminating them altogether.
- **Using Clamp Lights** - You can get by with a couple of clamp lights, but in order to reduce harsh shadows and excessive reflections, use thin cloth or paper in front of the lamp to diffuse the light. Search online for **diffuser lamp covers for photography**. Once you see them, you can also make your own from any thin white fabric.
- **Using a Softbox** - For the best results, consider purchasing an inexpensive **softbox**.
 - **A softbox is especially effective** when the surface is reflective, as with glazed ceramics, glass, or metal hollowware.
 - **Search softbox light** online and you will see that this device provides a broad field of diffuse illumination that reduces and softens shadows. Inexpensive but effective softboxes are available online for less than \$30 if you devise your own mounting device, or around \$60 with stand.
 - **Placement of Softbox** - For most 3-D objects, place the softbox just outside the photo frame, aimed straight downwards just above and in front of the work, and slightly off to one side if you want asymmetrical lighting.
 - **Leave some reflections** if your work is reflective. People viewing the image should see the work as it actually appears to the naked eye.
 - **A second light source** like a small spotlight or clamp light placed off at some distance can introduce subtle highlights and reflections that help define the shape and surface of the object. Aim it in at a different angle than the softbox. Use your own judgement, and move the spotlight farther away from the work if you feel the light is harsh. You can make a simple focus tube or light damper from aluminum foil or aluminum flashing to direct and narrow the beam of light.
 - **Reflective cards** (white cards, or mat-board covered with foil) placed just outside the photo frame will reflect light towards the object.
 - **Fade to darker in the background**. With all room lights turned off and illumination provided only by the softbox and spotlight, adjust the light so that it provides illumination for the art object, but fades darker where the backdrop curves upwards. An aluminum-foil shutter attached to the back edge of the softbox and a focus tube or shutter on the spotlight will enhance this effect. Look at photographs of 3-D work on any gallery website and you will see this technique used effectively.