

A Simple Guide to Photographing Your Artwork

Photographing your artwork does not need to be an expensive or difficult proposition. While there are endless technical enhancements that a professional photographer can bring to a photo shoot, even the amateur photographer can capture a clear and accurate representation of their work by following a few simple rules.

The key elements to photographing your artwork at its best are:

- diffuse, natural light, and lots of it;
- a neutral background that has no lines or colours to distract from your piece;
- a modern digital camera set to its highest resolution;
- and a tripod or firm surface to hold the camera steady.

EQUIPMENT NEEDED

Camera

You don't need much more than a digital camera to take excellent photographs of your artwork. These days even the small point-and-shoot cameras take pictures of high enough resolution to capture even the finest detail, and automatic settings will usually adjust light, colour and exposure quite reliably.

Lighting

While professional photographers may choose to use studio lighting, the amateur photographer needs only ensure there is plenty of natural light on the art piece to ensure a clear and accurate image. Avoid direct sunlight, as it can be harsh, cause glare and/or shadows, and wash the image with a yellow tone – opt instead for bright, indirect light.

Northern exposure on a sunny day will usually do the trick, whether in a shaded spot outdoors, or by a large north-facing window. Bright, overcast days are best, offering lots of diffused light. You want enough light to be able to turn the camera's flash off – natural light is by far the most flattering.

If you are shooting indoors, you can heighten the ambient light by turning on all the lights in the room; the more directions the light is coming from, the fewer shadows are created. Shadows can distract from the artwork's clarity and shape.

However, you must ensure there are no lights directly behind the artwork – this is called backlighting, and it will make the artwork look darker in contrast. (Glass is a notable exception to this rule, as it allows the light to pass through and accentuate details.)

If you are shooting indoors by a window, make sure the artwork is facing the window so the natural light is illuminating it as much as possible.

Tripod

Using a tripod holds the camera steady to give a sharper image, especially if light conditions are not ideal. Placing your camera on a firm surface such as a table can substitute for a tripod; just ensure the surface is at the correct level to take the picture.

Backdrop

Depending on the kind of artwork you are going to photograph, you may want to consider a creating a backdrop with heavy fabric or paper.

For most 2D work, the artwork will fill the frame, i.e., there would be no spaces around the edge of the artwork, so creating a backdrop isn't necessary.

However, for 3D artwork such as fibre, sculpture, ceramic, glass and jewellery, there is usually no way to avoid having the surrounding space show up in the photo; you will need to make sure that space is as unobtrusive as possible, so it doesn't detract from your artwork.

For darker or brightly coloured items, a light neutral background is usually best. This could mean a white sheet hung up behind the piece, or a neutral-toned wall. Avoid anything with patterns or strong texture - use smooth, monotone backgrounds only.

For lighter-coloured items, a darker backdrop such as a medium gray tone will offer a better contrast and ensure the piece doesn't look washed out into the background. Again, use only monotonous - an unbroken, smooth backdrop will showcase your work best. Black can be somewhat harsh as a backdrop, except where jewellery or glass works are concerned - it offers an effective contrast with precious metals, stones, and brings out the details in glass work that would be lost against a lighter backdrop.

Be aware of what is in the picture with your artwork! Furniture, plants, wires/cords etc. will create a visual distraction – you want your piece to be the only focus of attention.

PREPARING YOUR ARTWORK

Most artwork will need little preparation, other than ensuring it is clean and smudge-free. For framed pieces that are behind glass, it may be best to remove the glass (leaving the piece in the frame) to avoid glare on the glass.

CAMERA SETTINGS

Your image needs to be at a fairly high resolution to show the finer detail of the artwork, so set your camera to its highest settings. Depending on your camera, this setting might be “Fine”, “Very Large”, or “Maximum” – check the owner’s manual for the camera if necessary.

Because natural light is the most desirable, you will need to disable any automatic flash settings - the flash is usually represented by a lightning bolt icon. Again, check your owner’s manual if necessary; flash can wash out the image, and create unwanted shadows and/or glare. If you’re not sure there is enough light to do away with the flash, experiment by photographing with and without flash, to see which image turns out best.

For the amateur photographer, once the resolution is set to maximum and the flash disabled, automatic settings on modern cameras work best. Even simple point-and-shoot cameras are advanced enough to automatically determine the best settings for the conditions. More advanced photographers can manually adjust settings such as ISO, white balance, exposure and aperture for the relevant conditions.

TIPS FOR 2D ARTWORK

Because photographing 2D artwork up close can result in distorted perspective (angles will look skewed), it’s best to step back at least 5-6 feet (farther for very large pieces) and zoom in. Only zoom in as far as your camera’s natural zoom will go; “digital zoom” will only reduce the image’s quality. Most cameras indicate how many times they can zoom: 3x, 5x, 10x.

Take the picture dead on - if the piece is low to the ground, keep your camera at the same height as the center of the piece to minimum distortion of perspective. If there is glare from a light source, try turning the piece slightly away from the light source. Use the additional image to highlight a detail, or to provide a close-up that shows texture, for example.

TIPS FOR 3D ARTWORK

Since 3D artwork is allowed up to three images for submission, make the best use of the three by carefully examining your work: is there something to be seen from every side? For example, a 3D sculpture of a human figure may need a full 360-degree representation, whereas a highly detailed abstract piece might benefit from a close-up shot. Think carefully about what elements are most important, and which angles best capture your work.

Shadows can be especially distracting with 3D pieces, so it’s important to have at least two light sources, or to make sure the light is as diffuse as possible. If you are using lights, use a stronger light on one side and a weaker light on the other, pointing both of them just ahead of the piece rather than directly on it. For 3D work that will sit on a display stand, rather than hang, set the piece onto the backdrop material (such as heavy cloth, paper or liner), and have the backdrop extend up behind it in a gentle curve. This will create a uniform background with no lines to take away from the focus of the piece.

Make sure the colour of the backdrop material is not too close to the colour of the piece; some contrast is needed to bring out the form. Avoid stark contrasts such as white on black.

Photographing 3D artwork up close, especially larger pieces, can result in distorted perspective (angles will look skewed). It's best to step back at least 5-6 feet – depending on the piece's size you might want to go even farther – and zoom in. Only zoom in as far as your camera's natural zoom will go; "digital zoom" will only reduce the image's quality. Most cameras indicate how many times they can zoom: 3x, 5x, 10x.

TIPS FOR FIBRE

Fibre pieces are often about details and texture, as much as the overall appearance. Since fibre pieces are allowed one overall image and one detail image, choose the detail carefully – let it capture those traits that make your work stand out.

For overall appearance, hanging can be important to best display some fibre pieces. In this case it's usually best to display the piece the way it would appear during exhibition.

TIPS FOR JEWELLERY

Jewellery is often best displayed against a dark background, to allow metals or jewels to shine brightly in contrast (think of standard velvet-lined jewellery boxes or display cases). Depending on the materials used, bright lighting might enhance the piece rather than wash it out; experiment with having a couple of light sources shining on the piece. Be careful the glare does not reflect back at the camera, as that will obscure part of the piece. Use the detail shot to provide a close-up view of some of the more intricate work in the jewellery.

TIPS FOR GLASS/CERAMIC

Since glass and ceramic pieces allowed up to three images for submission, make the best use of the three by carefully examining your work: is there something to be seen from every side? For example, a ceramic figurine may need a full 360-degree representation, whereas a hand-painted vase might benefit from a close-up shot. Think carefully about what elements are most important, and which angles best capture your work.

For both glass and ceramic pieces, set the piece onto the backdrop material (such as heavy cloth or paper), and have the backdrop extend up behind it in a gentle curve. This will create a uniform background with no lines to take away from the focus of the piece.

Make sure the colour of the backdrop material is not too close to the colour of the piece; some contrast is needed to bring out the form. Avoid stark contrasts such as white on black.

Glass pieces often benefit from having light shone directly on them, whether from above, below or the sides (think of daylight streaming through stained glass windows). This can bring out shapes and colours of the piece that may not otherwise be visible. Experiment with having one or more of light sources shining on the glass piece.