



# How to Photograph Your Artwork

By ANSEN SEALE

Since I make my living photographing other people's art, my first advice to artists who want to do it themselves is to seek professional help. We photographers have the right equipment and lots of experience to get it right the first time. Anyone who has ever tried to photograph their own work will know that it's a rigorous challenge in the best of circumstances, and a downright waste of time and money if not done correctly.

If you must do it yourself, though, there are a few tips I can offer that will make the experience of shooting your own art more likely to succeed. I'll focus on paintings and other 2D media in this discussion. Sculpture is another story entirely. I'll also stick to tips for showing work on the web, but the basics of the acquisition of the image applies to print as well.

## Lights

Most artists are surprised to learn that direct sunlight is absolutely the best light you can shoot in. Your eyes may think it's harsh, but believe me, the camera can handle it. Sunlight, literally, has all the colors of the rainbow. Any other light source is somewhat deficient in one part of the spectrum or the other. Find a spot where you can hang your painting on a (clean!) wall and photograph it in the mid-morning or mid-afternoon. The sun should be at approximately 45 degrees to the painting. If you want to bring out high relief in your brush strokes, make that angle more acute (more over to the side). Obviously you'll want to avoid your own shadow, the shadow of trees and low flying birds.

## Camera

Another surprise to most artists is the fact that the camera is probably the least important of all the elements leading to successful photos. Any camera, film or digital, can do a decent job of capturing the essence of your work, but incorrect settings will always lead to disaster. The more you know about your camera, the better your pictures will be, so read the manual!

The automatic settings on your camera will probably be OK if your work has many colors and a good range of dark and light areas filling the frame:

<http://www.brianblood.com/WorksDetail/106893>

But if your work has strongly predominant hues, you will have better results with your camera on manual.

<http://www.marneadlerfineart.com/WorksDetail/58450>

Either way, automatic or manual, the key is to learn the basics of your camera's controls. Don't use the "Chimps-writing-Shakespeare" theory: shooting a bunch and hoping something "comes out". That's not the way professionals work and you don't have to either.

## Action!

The decisive moment is at hand! You've gotten your painting in good light and you know how to control your camera. There are a few things you can do before you release the shutter to make your work look its best.

1. Back up! (and zoom in.) This will help you square up with the painting and will let the lens utilize its sweet spot for the sharpest picture possible. With digital cameras, don't zoom in so far that the camera starts to "digital zoom". This just degrades the image. There's usually a little mark indicating when you've reached that point.
2. Fill the frame with your work. You've paid for all those megapixels, now use them. For web reproduction, you'll have to size the photo down with Photoshop or some other image editing program, but for prints, you'll want all the resolution you can get.
3. Shoot and edit in sRGB mode. This is the default of most cameras, but you might want to check yours. sRGB color mode is the closest thing to a standard that anyone has come up with so far on the internet. Everyone's monitor is a little different (or maybe a lot different!). Monitor calibration is also a discussion for another day. There are plenty of resources out there if you're interested.
4. Place a reference gray card in the scene for color correction later. You can make one in Photoshop, buy one commercially or paint one! It just needs to be something that you can take to your screen and compare to the image. Use it for every shot and crop it out later. Just be sure that it has a black patch, a white patch and something close to a medium neutral gray. If you print it out, be sure that your printer uses black ink only. This will insure that it is truly neutral.

There are many things I haven't mentioned here, but I guarantee that if you follow these steps, you'll get better pictures of your work. If not, call a professional, and make sure they specialize in photographing artwork.

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Ansen Seale is a professional photographer and artist in San Antonio who's specialty is photographing artists' work for catalogs, brochures, limited edition prints and the internet.

Ansen Seale's Commercial Site: <http://sealestudios.com>

Ansen Seale's Fine Art Photography: <http://ansenseale.com>