

THE ARGYLL COLLECTION

Photographing Artwork by Alan Dimmick

I have been photographing art works for many years, and have the following tips for you to do this yourself in your own home or studio.

The important thing for taking photographs of flat art is even light. The other essential is no camera shake, so the use of a tripod or some support is necessary. I would not attempt to take any images without one.

To produce suitable results I use two fairly simple lights which consist of an ES bulb holder with a 105w (500w in old money!) low energy daylight bulb inserted into the holder. It has the facility to use a white umbrella which diffuses the light, giving a wider spread over the artworks. A standard photo stand supports it. Very simple, but it gives very good results on artworks up to quite large sizes. They are easily available from the internet.

You will need two lights set at 45 degrees to the artwork. Try to have the lamps at the same height with the bulbs being the same height as the central point of the artwork. If you stand with your back to the painting, look toward the lights and try to ensure they are both the same height and at an angle of 45 degrees. If the lamps are too close together they can cause reflections or 'hotspots' which you don't want.

The space you use to photograph your work is quite important for the final result. If you can close curtains or draw blinds, so much the better. The room doesn't need to be totally dark but try not to have any direct sunlight causing nasty shadows! Turn off any overhead lights or side lights, that way you can see the effect of your photo lights more easily.

To get the required 45 degree angle to the work, you might, for larger pieces, need more space than first imagined. If the painting is 2 metres wide you will probably need 2 metres on either side of the work to photograph it properly – 6 metres! That is the ideal scenario but not always essential unless the surface is shiny or highly varnished, where you will need the extra space. If shine is a problem try to move the lights further apart. Generally photographing shiny, reflective works are always harder.

There are ways to get round this problem. If reflections are causing grief, I employ this technique which has been used since Victorian times. It's basically a large black cloth with a hole in it for the

camera! This is really the only proper way to record works under glass which cannot be removed, for whatever reason. The cloth has to be black and big – much bigger than the painting.

I have been documenting a lot of old, dark, shiny paintings in National Trust properties, and without the black cloth, the reflections would be very obvious. The cloth I use is about 5m x 3m in size.

Hopefully you won't ever need to be in that situation. Always try to get the picture out of the frame, or at least remove the glass.

Having a deep frame can cause little shadows cast by the lights. It might not be a problem if there is an overlay but you do not want shadows on the work itself.

I have talked about the lighting that I prefer to use, you can of course, use studio flash units – hopefully with some diffusion to soften the light. As a last resort, an overcast cloudy day gives even light – take the artwork outside (if it's not raining!) or a conservatory could work if wet.

Let's talk about cameras now. Even I use digital cameras now, they work well enough in terms of sharpness but their drawback is the slight lack of subtle tones. Bigger sensors or pixels should improve this. The most basic compact cameras should have enough quality to produce A4 prints if you use a tripod and just as importantly a cable release. Lots of people cause vibration by pressing the shutter too vigorously – very cheap wobbly tripods can be a nightmare. It is important to zoom right in without any trace of shake – I cannot stress this enough. Focus of course has got to be spot on and make sure the edges of the work are parallel to the camera. Spend a bit of time looking through the camera and slowly adjust the tripod.

More technical stuff: set the ISO sensitivity to the lowest – 200. Set the aperture to f8 or f11 and the lens should give the best results. Also, no wide angle lenses – use a zoom lens around 50mm – 85mm for less distortion.

I should mention 3D works – usually a shot from the side and above should work best. Walk round the sculpture with the light, and see the changes it makes till you find a point that looks suitable. Again, outside can work for some bigger pieces.

Finally, some computer knowledge is pretty essential.

For every single shot I take I usually have to spend a while using Adobe Photoshop to tweak contrast and colour etc. Any basic photo management software will suffice. Do experiment especially with contrast, brightness and colour balance. Whatever computer you use to print the photograph will

have an impact on the final image so if the colour has to be perfect, a test print should be done and compared with the original work.

Remember – even lighting is the key to good prints and don't forget the tripod!

Good Luck.

Alan Dimmick

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