

Professional Guidelines

Guide to Professional Quality Images

Obtaining fantastic, high quality images is the most important step on the path to achieving professional success. Superior photographic images can, and do, make the difference between acceptance and rejection when applying to an exhibition, being invited to participate in a gallery show, or having your work chosen for inclusion in a book or featured in a magazine.

This document is a complement to the **Professional Guidelines** topics titled, ***Working with Digital Images Effectively*** and ***TOP TEN TIPS for Getting Into a***

Juried Exhibition, Craft Show, Book or Magazine. These **Professional Guidelines** documents are checklists or guides to review and critically evaluate the photography of your art or craft. For in depth instruction, there are many fine books, classes, and online tutorials where you can learn more comprehensive information that can assist you in getting amazing quality images. See the ***Resources for Legal and Professional Advice*** for some suggestions.

I Qualities of a Superior Photographic Image

A Images must be in focus.

- 1 The entire artwork or object must be in focus.
- 2 Focus may be hard to see on your computer monitor at 72 dpi. Examine your photographic images closely by zooming into the image.
- 3 Focus in a slide is difficult to see without projecting the image. If it is necessary to send slides, project your slides before sending them out for publication or jury review. (This slide issue may soon be obsolete, but some of us still have old images that are in 35mm slide format.)

B Exposure should be exactly correct.

- 1 Over or underexposed images are not worth keeping.
- 2 Avoid high contrast images with extreme light and dark areas. Quality photographic images should have nuances of graduated grays and colors that help to clarify and define the object or artwork.

C Consider the photographic image as a composition.

- 1 Experiment in advance with various compositions or viewpoints even if you plan to take the work to a professional photographer. This can save you time and money.
- 2 Fill the photographic image with the artwork or object – avoid excessive empty space.
- 3 Leave a small margin of background around the edge for all views (except the close-up).
 - a Leaving a small margin of open space in the picture plane between the object or artwork and the edge of the photographic image allows for the small cropping effect that occurs when duplicating slides, scanning slides, or cropping images in Photoshop.
- 4 Avoid empty space in the middle of the picture when photographing small items such as a necklace, rings, or earrings. This rarely looks good. Think of another composition or a different layout.

- 5 Consider dividing the picture plane into thirds, if appropriate, placing objects (or the focal point) on the 1/3 demarcations. (*See Examples of Good and Bad Photography.*)
- 6 Avoid an unbalanced image, for instance, where the work is off to one side.
- 7 Multiple items within one photographic image should be arranged carefully, creating a compelling composition.
- 8 Keep props, if any, as minimal as possible. The artwork should be the only object attracting attention.

D Images should not have harsh shadows or distracting highlights.

- 1 Soft shadows underneath the work are a plus since they can give the work a foundation, grounding it in the photo.
- 2 Harsh shadows are distracting.
- 3 Avoid “hot” spots on reflective surfaces from bouncing flash, strong light or direct sunlight. Avoid using the flash on your camera.
- 4 Avoid bright highlights that tend to wash out the color, texture or details in the work.
- 5 Usually the flash on the camera should be turned off. The flash creates “hot” spots and bright highlights that are impossible to anticipate before shooting.
- 6 Diffusing your light source may prevent harsh shadows, highlights and “hot” spots.
 - a Consider bouncing the light off white foam core or paper back toward the artwork or craft being photographed.
 - b Consider covering photography lights with translucent tracing paper or vellum.
 - c Make a tent with translucent tracing paper around your work to soften the light.
 - d Purchase equipment that creates a diffuse light such as “Cloud Dome”
<http://www.clouddome.com/> for photographing smaller work.

E Images should not be off color.

- 1 Blue, brown or yellowish appearance in the photographic image as a result of incorrect film or incorrect lighting is not acceptable.
- 2 For best results, use professional photo lighting.
- 3 Shooting outdoors or near a window may work if you are careful to find a clear, diffuse, luminous, white, natural outdoor light.
 - a Avoid “bluish” images from taking photos in the shade.
 - b Outdoor light is best in an “unshaded location” on an overcast day. (This means a location that would be in the sun, but on a day that is foggy or overcast.)
 - c Avoid dappled light outdoors (due to leaves or shrubs or bright reflections),
 - d Avoid direct, harsh, brilliant sunlight.
- 4 Digital images can be corrected in Photoshop, if necessary, but it is preferable to avoid this problem by setting the white balance in your camera before shooting.
- 5 When using film, match the type of film to the type of light source.
 - a Daylight film for daylight photography.
 - b Tungsten film for tungsten (incandescent light bulb) photography.
 - c Use appropriate filters for difficult circumstances such as fluorescent lights.
- 6 If your film images are off color, try scanning the slides or transparencies to create digital images and then color correct in Photoshop. (Read the document in the **Professional Guidelines** titled, ***Working with Digital Images Effectively*** for some considerations and take a class in Photoshop.

F Plan for all the images submitted to one jury to be photographed at the same time.

For example, if 5 images are required for a grant application, take 5-6 pieces to the photographer for one session. That way, you are assured that the background, lighting, tone, etc will be consistent across the spectrum of your presentation.

- 1 If you maintain a relationship with one photographer, over time, your inventory of photographic images will be fairly consistent regardless of when you had it shot.
- 2 Taking photographs of a number of items at the same time may also prove to be more economical and can save on photographic set-up, processing costs or Photoshop modifications if needed.
- 3 If you are taking your own images, try to replicate your photography set –up, including lighting and background. Take notes on exposure and lighting for consistent, predictable results and future improvement.

II Close Ups and Detailed Images

- A Use a slower shutter speed** (which allows light to enter the camera for a longer period of time.) In a close-up shot, the camera is usually so close to the work that it may be blocking the light.
- 1 Take your camera off the automatic settings to control shutter speed manually.
 - 2 Shutter speed at ½ second or even up to a full minute are not uncommon.
- B Increase the depth of field** to enlarge the focal range of the camera. Higher F-stops increase the depth of field but decrease the amount of light entering the lens. Consequently a slower shutter speed is necessary.
- 1 Take your camera off the automatic setting to control the depth of field manually.
 - 2 Get as close to an F/16 setting as you can.
- C A tripod is essential** to take a good close-up and **KEEP IT IN FOCUS**. The camera must be held steady on a tripod because the combination of low light and increased depth of field usually slows down the shutter speed. (Hand held shots can't be longer than 1/60 of a second.) Extra lighting will help but not cure this problem.
- D Use a shutter cable, timer or remote shutter release for taking the close-up shot.** This prevents the camera from “jiggling” when your finger pushes the button to take the picture.
- E Very close detail shots may require a macro lens (a special close-up lens), extension tubes designed for your camera, or – at the very least – change of the setting on your camera.** The automatic settings on most consumer level cameras and lenses are not designed to get close enough to the artwork and stay in focus.
- 1 Remember that depth of field is diminished in close up photography, so focusing needs to be more precise.
 - 2 Check to be sure that your camera has a setting that will allow the camera to take a close up picture and stay in focus.
- F Turn off the flash feature on your camera when taking detail shots.** As mentioned earlier, the flash creates “hot” spots and unanticipated highlights.
- G Take your detail shots at the same time as the full view** so the color of the background and lighting is similar. The full view and the close-up images should look like a matched pair.

III Backgrounds for fine art or fine craft photography

A Backgrounds should be either graduated from white through grays to dark – or just solid white for fine craft and art.

- 1 Paper with a graduated light to dark surface, or in a variety of grays and subdued colors can be purchased at a photographic supply in a variety of sizes.
- 2 Normally a very dark, solid background is not ideal.

B The object or artwork should be the center of attention without a distracting background.

- 1 Avoid cute, complicated, clichéd or jazzy backgrounds that can detract from the power of your own work.
- 2 Do not use heavily textured fabric or paper, wrinkled or draped material, dramatic or contrived backgrounds including sunsets, sky, landscapes, pebbles or exotic patterns.
- 3 Colored backgrounds should generally be avoided.
- 4 If you want to take a chance on an unusual color or textured background, take two sets of photos for the same item. One set as recommend above, and the other as your experiment.
 - a Sometimes the unusual backgrounds can work for a catalog, magazine, book cover or postcard, just make sure the editor or curator has a choice.
 - b Slick or glossy, magazine-style images impart a commercial sensibility to the work that may not be appropriate for a fine art or fine craft situation.
- 5 Do not add your signature, your name, the name of your business or Etsy shop to the photographic image. This is very distracting, lends a “commercial” appearance and detracts from the purpose of the photo.

C Decide how your work relates to the background.

- 1 Do you wish it to be hung—to “float” above the background?
- 2 Consider resting work on a shadowed or reflective base such as frosted glass. This can create a dramatic appearance while grounding the work and giving it a foundation in the image.
- 3 For larger work (i.e. several feet or larger), a neutral floor and white wall is considered acceptable.

IV Live models Live models may increase the difficulty of photographing your work.

A Consider carefully whether using a live model will distract from the presentation of your work or enhance it.

B Use a model only if it is necessary to activate the piece: illustrate its function or form.

- 1 Use a model only if it is necessary for your work, situation or requirement for the jury.
- 2 Keep in mind that the human figure can unintentionally become distracting. Just the model's posture or appearance, even a stray hair or awkwardly held hand, can detract or diminish the quality of the photo.
- 3 When taking detail images of work on bare skin be sure that there are NO blemishes, moles, cuts, or complexion problems.
- 4 The model needs to appear as professional as the work.
- 5 Make sure the style (appearance) of the model is consistent with the style of the work (i.e. trendy work, trendy model, trendy hair, etc.; conservative work, conservative model.)
- 6 A general guide is to show as little of the figure or model as possible and let the work be the primary focus.

- 7 The aim, of course, when using a model is to clearly see and to focus on what is **on** the model rather than some aspect **of** the model.
- 8 Avoid showing the model's nipples (male or female) unless this is necessary for the content issues within the work. Nipples usually end up being very distracting.
- 9 Avoid nudity, if possible, unless this is important to the concept of the work.
- 10 Sometimes, mannequins can work very well in photographing your work if you need a body form.
- 11 If you do decide to employ a model, use a Model Release Form and have the model sign it. A sample **Model Release Form** is in the **Professional Guidelines**.

V Two-Dimensional Work – Special Considerations

- A **Two-dimensional work should not include the matte and frame in the photographic image** unless the matte or frame is an integral part of the work.
- B **Square or rectangular work must be aligned to the edge of the photographic image.**
- C **Sometimes larger rectangular or square works cannot be photographed with a 35mm camera without parallax.** (Parallax perspective makes your object look tapered, in some way, rather than square or straight.) There are ways to get around this problem, but they require professional experience with a large format camera or Photoshop.
- D **Slide film can be adjusted in the slide mount if necessary.** Special slide tape is designed for this purpose. Straighten up the appearance of the image cutting and taping the film at the edges, then remount the slide.

VI Digital Images *(For more information read **Working with Digital Images Effectively** in the **Professional Guidelines**.)*

- A **While photographing, shoot the LARGEST DIGITAL FILES your camera will take.** These will become your digital photographic archive and need to capture as much information as possible. MAKE IT GREAT!
- B **Always shoot using the RAW setting for digital cameras** when possible. This way you will have large quality files for printing.
 - 1 RAW files are uncompressed and contain the most information of an image. At a later time, if needed, RAW files can be converted into compressed, smaller file formats such as JPEG and TIFF for email and discs.
 - 2 Making digital images from slides and transparencies:
 - a Make digital scans from 4" x 5" or 2¼" x 2 ¼" color transparencies, if you have them, rather than scanning directly from slides. Large format film is important, if you believe that the image may be used for a full page catalog, ad, book or magazine cover...

VII Professional Photographers New feature packed consumer-level digital cameras lead many artists and craftspeople to think that they are able to take professional quality photos themselves. This is a mistake. Consumer cameras provide affordable photo documentation, but even superior work will look average using consumer-level photography equipment. Professional digital cameras typically cost \$3,000 to \$5,000. This is in addition to professional lights, filters, backgrounds, education and years of experience. It may be

wiser to invest in professional photographic services instead of equipment. Consider using a professional photographer that is experienced and knowledgeable about photography issues and the lighting specific to your media and the scale of your work. A professional photographer may charge \$65 to \$95 (some up to \$150) per hour. Set up and photographing one piece will likely require at least one to two hours. There may be additional charges for Photoshop prep on RAW images.

- A Professional artists and craftspeople need professional photographs.** Look for a professional photographer as soon as you are ready for this step in your professional development. If you are ready to define yourself as a professional artist or craftsman, your first step is professional photography!
- B Show your photographer examples of images** from magazines or books that represent your ideal quality photograph.
- C To find a professional photographer consider the following possibilities:**
- 1 Look in magazines and books for the photo credit of images or media similar to your work. Contact the artist or photographer directly.
 - 2 Ask other artists with similar work who their photographer is. Photographers may specialize in a particular media or size range.
 - 3 Contact a local art school for recent photo major graduates.
 - 4 Inquire at professional photographic supply stores for recommendations.
 - 5 Your national or regional art organization may have a list of **photographers** accustomed to photographing these materials. Jewelers and metalsmiths can find a list of photographers on the SNAG web site at:
<http://www.snagmetalsmith.org/ProgramsResources/Photographers/>.
- D Each media places unique demands on the photographer.** For example, metals and glass often have shiny surfaces with lots of reflections, ceramics may have subtleties in glazes that are important to capture, or fiber and paper will have texture that is important to the work.
- E Scale of the work requires different lenses and set up.** Discuss this with the photographer in advance of scheduling a photo shoot. Even photographers accustomed to photographing paintings and sculpture may not be prepared for the challenges in photographing jewelry, just as a photographer accustomed to photographing jewelry may not be prepared to shoot a six-foot sculpture.
- F Know the difference between the aesthetic requirements for commercial versus art/craft images.** Commercial photographers will stage their pictures differently than fine art photographers and may choose backgrounds inappropriate for a fine art or fine craft context.
- G Be professional yet firm in assessing a photographer's work.** This is all about communication. Ultimately, the photos will be how juries and other people evaluate your work.

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