Take the Shot

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Easy Peasy

Who doesn't want some advice from a pro with solutions to common problems encountered while photographing your artwork—it's easy peasy.

Fill the Frame

When shooting flat artwork, position the camera close enough—or zoom in—so the work fills the frame of the viewfinder or display.

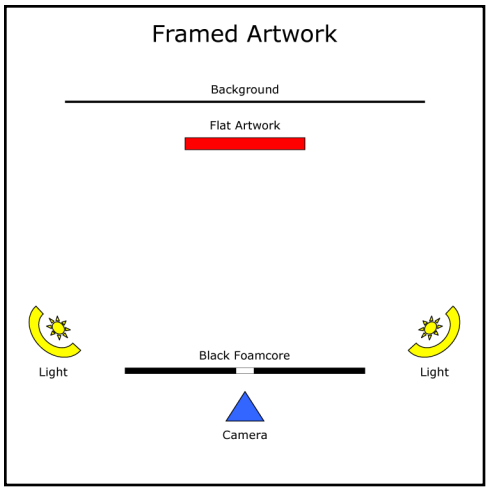
And if the normal orientation of the artwork is vertical, here's a trick. Leave the camera positioned horizontally for ease of operation. Just turn the piece 90° to photograph it. This will give you the largest image, and with one click you can rotate it back to vertical when you edit later.

Always be sure to take one or more close-up shots of the piece at this time. Getting these detail images now will ensure you have them if needed—and with lighting that is the same as the overall photo.

Framed Artwork

Although it's easier to shoot flat artwork while unframed, sooner or later you'll need a photo of a work that's already been framed.

If you've ever tried to photograph a framed piece, you may have seen a ghost image of the camera, you, and what's behind you in the photo. This happens because the glass or acrylic glazing in the frame acts like a mirror and reflects an image of the camera. The ghost ruins the photo and it is, unfortunately, almost impossible to "exorcise" when editing.



The solution, which I use in my studio all the time, is a simple one. Start with a piece of black foamcore. It should be at least twice as large as the artwork to be photographed, so tape two pieces together if you need to make a larger board. Then cut a hole in the center large enough for the camera lens to look through. Now position it in front of the camera—with the hole in front of the lens—and shoot the photo.

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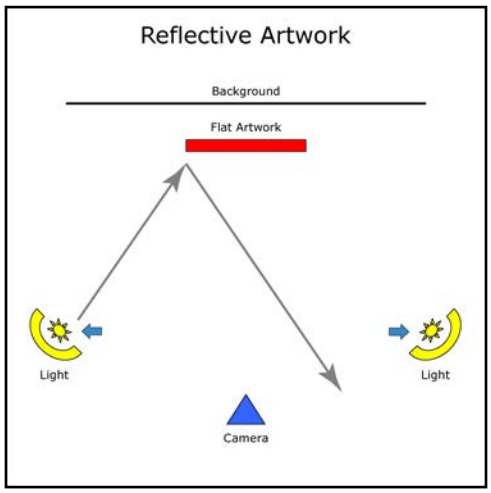
No more ghosts, because the reflection of the black foamcore is…well, no reflection. It's that easy!

Reflective Artwork

Here's a common problem with larger works that are varnished or have a reflective surface. The lighting creates glare on the sides of the artwork.

This happens when the lights are placed too close to the camera. As a result, the light is reflected off the end of the artwork and into the camera, causing glare.

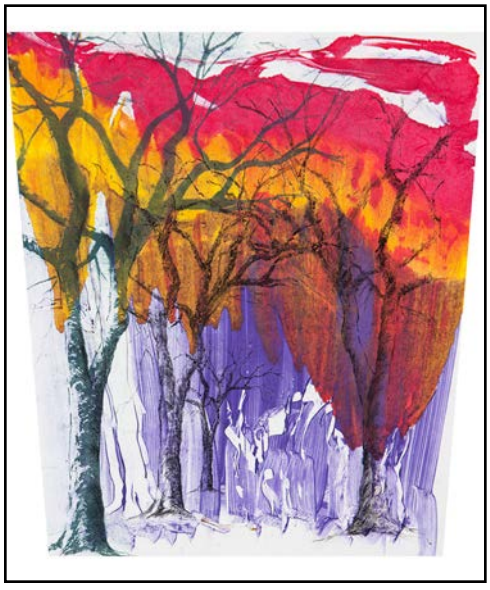


Fortunately, there's an easy solution—just move the lights further from the camera. How far away? Reposition them at least as far away from the camera as the width of the artwork. Now the reflected light will miss the camera.

Voilà. Much less glare.

Keystoning

Here's another common problem when photographing flat artwork. One side of the work is larger than the other—here, it's the top.



This is called keystoning—like the keystone at the top of an arch—and it's distracting for the viewer and looks unprofessional. It happens when the camera is positioned off-center from the artwork. In this side view, you see that the camera is higher than the center of the artwork. As a result, the top of the artwork is closer to the camera and appears larger.

To correct the problem, just move the camera so it's directly in front of the artwork and parallel to it.

Here's another example where the right side is larger than the left. In this overhead view, you see this is because the camera is positioned to the right of the center of the artwork. Again, moving the camera in line with the artwork fixes the problem.

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Sometimes you might be shooting off-center to solve a problem with reflections on a framed work. Instead, shoot the work straight-on and use the trick with black foamcore I showed earlier to eliminate the reflections.

Motion Blur

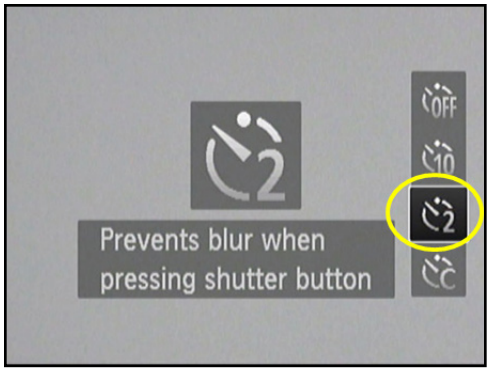
Sometimes, an otherwise sharp image of your artwork can be ruined by a small amount of blur caused by camera motion at the moment of exposure.

Motion blur is very common when the camera is handheld, and you should invest in a tripod to use when taking photos of your work. Mounting the camera on a tripod will go a long way toward steadying it, especially when photographing small pieces or with long exposures for maximum depth of field. The tripod will also make photographing multiple works easier on your arms.

Using the Self-Timer

Even with a tripod, though, it can be hard to avoid a slight movement of the camera when pressing the shutter button. This can be solved by using the camera's self-timer.

Most cameras have a self-timer feature that delays the shutter and lets you step in front of the camera to be part of the photo. But you can also use it to delay the exposure long enough after pressing the shutter button to remove your hands from the camera. You must, of course, use a tripod with the self-timer.



This camera has a button that let's me set the timer, and I can use the dial to select the delay. Your camera may have different choices, but two seconds is plenty of time to let go of the camera.

When I press the shutter button, the camera will wait the set amount of time before taking the shot. Just be sure you let the exposure end before touching the camera again. Now your photos will always be sharp.

Focusing Close Up

A challenge when photographing small objects close up—often referred to as macro photography—is getting the camera to focus on the subject. Every camera lens has a limit on how close to an object it can focus. This is not usually a problem—except with jewelry and smaller works of art.

The solution with a compact camera is to use the macro mode. This

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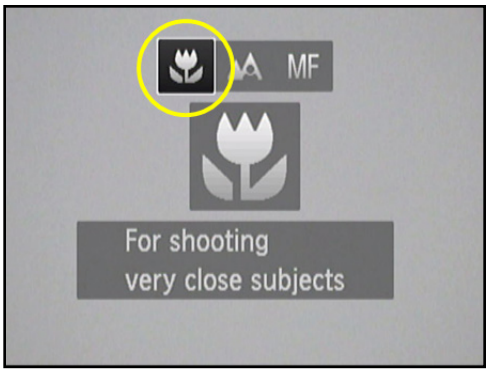
mode changes the internal optics of the camera to shorten the minimum distance at which it will focus. For a DSLR with interchangeable lenses, using a lens with macro capability will improve your ability to focus close up. Some dedicated macro lenses will let you focus close enough so the image is 1:1 or actual size.

Setting Macro Mode

On this compact camera, there's a button to turn the macro mode on or off. If macro mode is on, it is usually indicated on the screen, often with a flower icon.



Even with the macro mode or a macro lens, though, there will still be a limit on how close to an object the camera will focus. In that case, just focus as close as you can and plan to crop the image when editing.

Setting the Self-Timer and Macro Mode

1. Locate the instruction manual or user guide for your camera. Look in the Index for "self-timer". Write the page number where the instructions for using the self-timer are found here: _____.
2. Turn on your camera and follow the steps listed in the instructions to set the camera's self-timer to a _____ second delay.
3. Now press the shutter button. Describe what happens here:
4. Position the camera to photograph a small object. How close to it will the camera focus? _____ in.
5. If you're using a compact camera, look in the Index for "macro". Write the page number where the instructions for using the macro mode are found here: _____.
6. If you're using a DSLR, is the lens labeled "Macro" (or if you have multiple lenses, is one labeled "Macro")? ☐ Yes ☐ No
7. Follow the steps listed to set the macro mode or use the macro lens. Now how close to the object will the camera focus? _____ in.
8. Does using the macro mode or lens let you focus closer to the object? ☐ Yes ☐ No