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How to Photograph Your Paintings

-By Dan dos Santos



I've been asked this question a *lot* here on Muddy Colors, and I guess it's about time I finally got around to it.

One of the reasons it's taken me so long to do a post about photographing my work, is because photographing a piece is the *very* last phase of a commission. Which means when I do it, I'm usually strung out, on my 40th hour of being awake, trying my hardest to make a deadline, and just don't have the time (or stamina) to snap pictures of my setup. Which is shame, because it is arguable the most important part of a commission.

Getting a good photograph of your work is absolutely essential to the reproduction process, and deserves just as much consideration as any phase of an illustration assignment. After all, it doesn't matter how beautiful the original art is, the Art Director is not going to be impressed if the cover it was commissioned for looks bad.

It is important to know, **different types of reproduction are better suited to different types of paintings**. I work in oils, on a smooth untextured surface, with a decent amount of transparent layers. The process I am going to explain is what works for MY WORK. You may find alternative methods work better for you. The key is to experiment.

So let's get to it!

Why photograph a painting myself?

Typically, it is the Publisher's responsibility to scan a piece of original art. So why do even have to bother doing it ourselves? Well, for a few reasons...

Firstly, I find my work reproduces a LOT better when I photograph and color-balance the image myself.

Different artists use different mediums, and no one means of reproduction are great for all of them. A studio photographer will default to what method works best for the majority, which means you are not always getting the best results possible.

Secondly, it's more convenient for my Publisher, who would otherwise have to send the art out to be scanned and lose at least a day in the process. Sometimes a day is really important when you're working against a deadline. Even if I hand deliver an original, I still bring a scan of the image as a courtesy.

Lastly, cost. Sending a painting to get scanned professionally will cost upwards of \$100. If you are doing this a few times a month, that will add up quickly. That money can be better invested in nice photo equipment.

For particularly large, or particularly important pieces, I will sometimes go to a professional photographer to get my work scanned. But 9 times out of 10, I just do it myself.



I often visit a local professional who has a 12 foot bed scanner.

Should I use a Camera or Scanner?

Personally, I choose to photograph my work instead of scanning it. This is for two reasons:

1. Scanners tend to be quite small, and I don't want to stitch together 20 scans to get a single image.
2. The light a scanner uses is really harsh, and tends to overpower the appearance of subtle glazes.

For me, I find a camera better captures the way a human eye perceives the original art, particularly if you work with multiple layers of glazes. It seems to better retain the sense of luminosity and transparency.

Of course, this will vary depending on what type of surface you work on, what mediums you use, etc. For instance, if you work on paper in a medium with a matte finish like gouache or watercolor, you will likely have better results with a scanner.

Should I shoot inside or outside?

I always shoot indoors. On a cloudy day, you can get a decent shot outdoors, but it will never compare to the consistency of a controlled studio environment.

And now the Set up....

The most basic premise of getting a good photo is to light your painting with as **soft** and **even** of a light as possible.

The easiest way to do this is with strobes and bounce umbrellas. Bounce umbrellas not only reflect the light backwards, but they soften and spread it in the process. Soft light is very important. If the light is too direct,

some areas of the painting will be brighter than others creating 'hot spots' or washed out colors. A soft light also helps to avoid harsh shadows and highlights.



I use the same lights to photograph my paintings, that I use to photograph my models. It is a monolight kit, consisting of 2 x 750 watt/second strobes (1500 total), complete with umbrellas and stands. I use the exact kit found [HERE](#). A set up like this costs about \$1000.

If you are looking for something less expensive, I recommend a 'continuous light' kit. For the first 10 years of my career, I used this kit [HERE](#). A set up like this will cost about \$350

The advantage of the strobes is a *much* brighter and *much* whiter light. Having a lot of light is important if you want a lot of detail, and the whiter light makes color balancing your image a lot easier. The strobes also have an adjustable intensity, which the continuous light do not. Lastly, strobes do not put out as much heat as the continuous lights. Continuous lights are commonly referred to as 'hot lights', and for a very good reason. It may not seem like a big deal, but trust me, after 40 minutes under a 650 watt bulb, your model **WILL** be sweating.

So what if you can't afford *either* set-up?

You can achieve similar, albeit diminished, results with common lighting tools found at a WalMart or Home Depot.

I would recommend:

4 x clamp lights, like [THESE](#)

4 x 120W compact fluorescent bulbs, in the 5000K range, like [THESE](#)

2 large sheets of white foam core.

Total cost: \$50

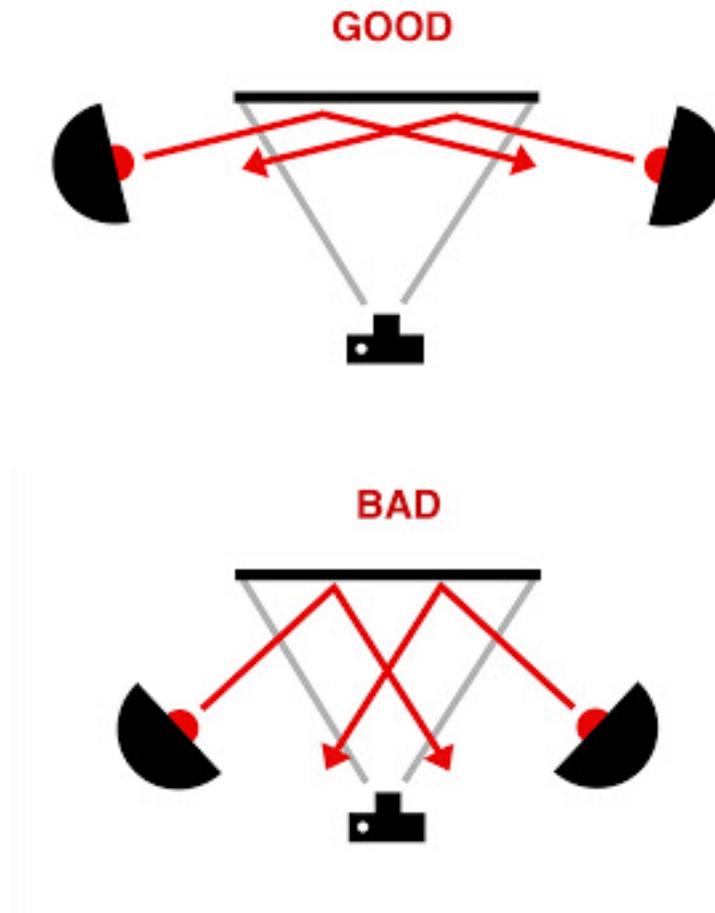
If you do not have umbrellas, you can use a white piece of foam core. Just angle it appropriately so that the light bounces back at the painting the same way the umbrella would. You can even score and bend the foam core to create more a concave shape.

Once you have the necessary lights, the next step is **positioning**.

I photograph my paintings upright, at a 90° angle. To either side of my painting, is one of my strobes. I aim the strobes **AWAY** from the painting, and let the umbrellas bounce the light **BACK** toward the painting at roughly a 160° angle. This is called a 'raking' light.

This angle is extremely important! If you place your lights in such a manner that the light strikes the

painting at an acute angle (less than 90°), the light will bounce off the painting, and back into the camera lens... causing glare. Glare, is quite literally a reflection of the light source on your painting's surface. The more acute this angle is, the worse the glare will be. An on camera flash would result in the absolute worst glare possible, since it is striking the surface at an angle of 0° degrees.



Once the lights are in position, I set up my camera and tripod. Now cameras and lenses are a great big bag of worms that I am *not* going to open here. We could talk about that for days! Suffice it to say, the better camera you have, and the better lens you have, the better your image is going to be.

I will say this though...

Lenses:

I shoot with a 50mm prime lens. A prime lens is one that does not zoom in or out. Instead, you have to move the camera forwards and backwards. That is annoying for reference shoots, but the advantage of a prime lens is that the image is crisper, and has much less distortion around the edges. A prime lens is not necessary (I only got mine a year ago), but it is a big help. If you *do* get a lot of lens distortion with your camera, there are several features in Photoshop that can help correct that.

Aperture:

Many people assume that narrowing your aperture to F/22 will always give you the crispest shot. **This is not true.** Any adjustable zoom lens has a 'sweet spot', a perfect combination of aperture and zoom where the light is most focused. (Think of it like sun through a magnifying glass). This sweet spot is usually somewhere in the middle of a lens' zoom/aperture range. To find it, you need to experiment.

To find mine, I shot some fine magazine print in every zoom range possible. I went through those shots, found the one with the most detail, and then shot at that zoom range in every aperture possible. The crispest amongst those will tell you where your sweet spot is.

File Format:

Always shoot in RAW format if possible. Check your camera's settings, and try to find the highest quality/compression possible. Many high end cameras offer a RAW format option. RAW format does very

little compressing, and allows you to alter your exposure/color settings *after* you shoot the image.

ISO:

Always shoot at the lowest ISO possible (Sometimes called ASA). I typically shoot at 100 ISO. If you go above 400, you are likely going to get a lot of noise in the dark areas. It's better to have a really slow shutter speed than to try to bump up the ISO.

White Balance:

White balance is imperative! Look at your lightbulbs, and find out the exact color rating. The closer to 5000K (or above), the better. Anything less than 3000K, and your image is going to be too yellow. Yes, your camera will correct for it, but in doing so will lose the difference between subtle whites and yellows. Once you know the temperature rating of your bulbs, set your camera to that exact white balance. On my camera, I can set it in 100K increments. Your camera may only have 'custom' option. In this case, you will need to photograph a ['grey card'](#), in order to accurately calibrate your camera.

Tripods:

Do not attempt to hand hold a camera when reproducing your work. Even the subtlest of vibrations will ruin the detail. In fact, not only do I use a sturdy tripod, but I usually set my camera on a delayed timer, because the simple action of even pressing the shutter button by hand is often enough to shake the camera. Like wise, if your camera lens has a Vibration Reduction feature, turn it *off*. If there is no vibration, that feature actually does more bad than good.

OK!

So we've got our lights set up with no glare...

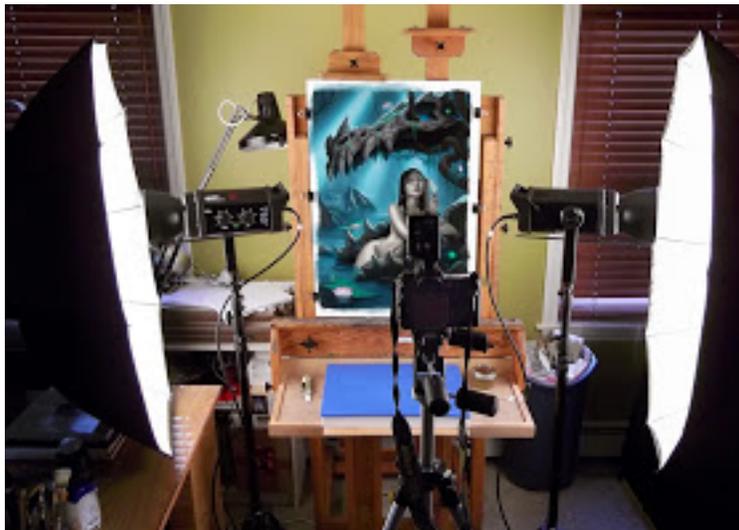
Have our lenses zoomed into their sweet spots...

Set our ISO to 100...

Adjusted our White Balance...

And leveled our tripods to ensure they are perfectly straight with our painting...

We are ready to shoot!!!



Now my camera is by no means 'top of line'. I shoot with a slightly outdated, 10 megapixel, Nikon D200. The image this gives me isn't *huge*, but it is certainly large enough for a 6x9 inch book cover at 300 dpi. However, I'm worried about **more** than just the book cover.

What if my client wants to zoom in on the painting, and use just a detail of a the face?

What if I want to make a poster of the painting?

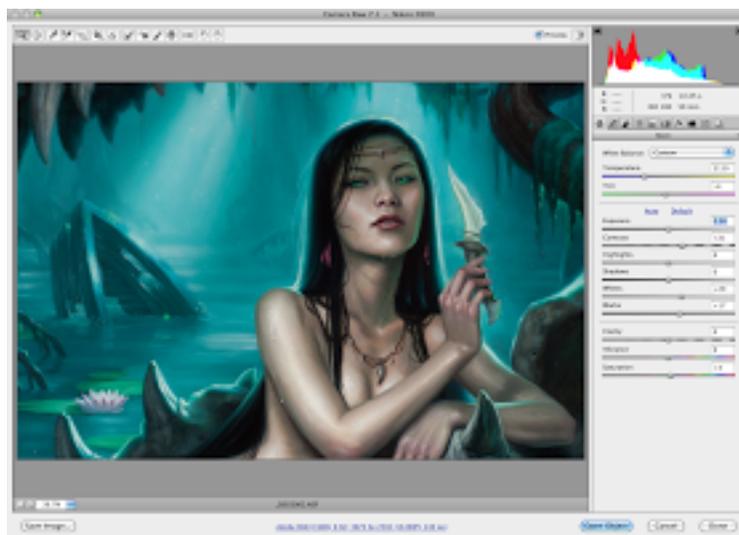
What if I finally do a book of my art?

I am going to need a MUCH larger image for any of these purposes.

Because of this, I actually shoot my painting in 3 separate shots, and then stitch them together later. I take a shot of the top, the middle, and the bottom of my painting, all with significant overlap. When shooting the middle, I take special care not to crop on any particularly important areas like a face.



I then import these RAW images into Photoshop. Using the built in RAW editor, I can adjust any exposure/color inaccuracies I see.



Once I am content with the exposure/color balance, I splice the images together. Photoshop actually has a really nifty Photomerge tool just for this sort of thing. Go to: (File > Automate > Photomerge). If I *still* see some color imbalances, I usually remedy it using the 'color balance' tool, or 'selective color' tool.

The final result is a file that is about 20 inches tall at 300 dpi... more than enough for most professional applications!

I tend to keep this original file for my own personal records. I usually give my Art Director a slightly smaller file, roughly 11x17 (300 dpi), which is still more than enough for any of their needs.

I then make a low-rez version (800-900 pixels) for my website, add a small watermark, **and I am done!!!**



As lengthy as this article is, I'm certain there are still some aspects of my process that I overlooked. If you have any questions, please ask away in the comments section. I may not get to them for a few days (as I am traveling at the moment), but I will answer all questions as soon as I get back!

<http://www.muddycolors.blogspot.com/2012/12/how-to-photograph-your-paintings.html?m=1>

Other links for Photographing your work:

<http://mcfineartphoto.com/art>

And setting up lighting for your studio:

<http://willkempartschool.com/art-studio-lighting-design/>