

Photographing 2-D Art with a Digital Camera. By Garry McMichael

Increasingly, online galleries and social media are becoming major sources for artists to show, promote and sell their art. Competition is stiff. If you enter an art fair or art competition today, chances are good your entry will be online and you will be expected to submit quality .jpg or .png digital images. To be competitive you must have high quality photography. The ability to produce high quality photography has never been more important.

Modern digital “point-and-shoot” cameras are a miracle of technology. They are fully capable of taking quality photographs of your art. They automatically focus, set the exposure, easily zoom in and out and most of the time they give you great color photographs. Best of all, you can see an immediate preview of the photo and make necessary adjustments. But digital cameras are not perfect. If you want quality photographs of your art, expect to invest some time learning how to use your digital camera effectively.

Here are six mistakes artists make photographing their art, and what you can do to correct them. These are simple mistakes to correct, but uncorrected, they can keep you out of galleries, exhibits and art fairs. Most important, poor photography will keep your art from selling.

#1. Distortions: One of the simplest mistakes artists make photographing their art is failing to align themselves straight-on with the artwork, thus distorting the shape of the art. Have you ever tried taking a photo of a building only to have the building look like it's leaning backwards? That's a perspective problem known as keystoneing, and it's caused by the building and the camera lens being on two different angles. The same effect can happen when photographing art. If you are off to the side, above or below the painting you get a “keystoneing” effect. To avoid keystoneing you need to position yourself so the camera is centered in the middle of the painting. The camera lens needs to be at the same angle as the art. When you are off to the side or shooting up or down the artwork will be distorted.

Another type of distortion is associated with zoom lenses. Barrel distortion comes from using the wide-angle end of your zoom lens. This can cause the image to slightly curve creating a slight fisheye effect. To avoid this barrel distortion set the camera's lens in the middle of the zoom range.

#2 Fill the Frame: While you are correcting for these distortions make sure you fill the frame with the artwork. Taking a tiny photograph of the art in the middle of the image gives you a low-resolution image that needs to be cropped before using. By cropping you are lowering the image resolution and limiting the size the image can be reproduced. With a zoom lens on a DSLR type of camera it is pretty easy to fill the frame because you can precisely adjust the zoom until the frame is filled. With “point-

and-shoot” cameras it’s a little more difficult. The built in motorized zooms never stop exactly where you want. Select a focal length in the middle of your zoom range (to avoid barrel distortion) then physically move your camera closer or further away from the art until you fill the frame. For both consistent alignment and filling the frame set your camera on a steady tripod and the job will be much easier.

#3 Focus & Blur: Blurred and out of focus images will make your photographs unusable. No one wants to look at images that are out of focus. There are two causes of out of focus photographs; failure to hold the camera steady and the camera can’t focus on the artwork. Taking photographs with point and shoot cameras under low light conditions, such as indoors, is especially difficult. This problem is easily resolved by using a tripod. If you want sharp photos, make a modest investment in a tripod to avoid camera blur and improve your ability to fill the frame and properly align the image.

The problem with the “point-and-shoot” cameras failure to focus properly is a little more difficult to resolve. Auto focus systems make it much easier to get sharp photographs but when it comes to photographing 2D flat art sometimes the autofocus does not work very well. The problem is auto focus cameras need something of contrast in the image to figure out where to focus. Many of the “point and shoot” cameras only focus in a small square area in the center of the viewfinder. If you lack contrast or the focus area is filled with solid color your camera’s auto focus system may not work. It will just whirl back and forth looking for something to focus on. You could switch to manual focus, but the small LED screens on point and shoot cameras make it almost impossible to manually focus. Find something of contrast in the painting to focus on. Once it is in focus, re-center the artwork in the frame and take the photograph. Since the focus systems on different camera brands work differently it’s a good idea to review the instructions in your camera’s user manual. They may offer better techniques to focus on works of art.

#4 Glare & Reflections: Sometimes you can’t see the artwork because of glare and reflections. Glare and reflections are caused by photographing art when it’s framed behind glass or when the painting has a glossy varnish. Highly textured oil and acrylic paintings with a glossy varnish are especially prone to having severe glare and reflection problems. If you work with oil or acrylics photograph your art before you add a glossy varnish. If you work in pastels or watercolor, then photograph the artwork before you place it behind protective glass. Colored pencil artists are switching to vellum for their drawings. The plastic vellum can cause both unwanted reflections and ghosting if not pressed flat against the white backing. If you are using lights to take your photographs set the lights at a 45° angle to the camera to make sure they don’t reflect back into the camera lens (see lighting diagram). Always avoid “on-camera” flash. The flash is much too close to the lens and most of the time the flash reflects directly back into the lens or causes hot spots very similar to “Red Eye” on the art.

#5 Exposure: About 80% of the time you photograph your art the exposure will be perfect, but problems occur when you photograph dark (low-key) or light (high-key) art. The camera’s automatic exposure system is designed for average (middle range)

values and art that is at either end of the value range will confuse the metering system. It will try to compensate for the too dark or too light artwork. Consequently, low-key art is often overexposed and washed out making it too light, and high key art will be underexposed making it too dark. Even the simplest point-and-shoot cameras offer easy ways to make exposure corrections. It's a system called "Exposure Compensation". Look for the "+/- button" on your camera to override the camera's auto exposure system. The +/- button works differently on different camera brands and sometimes it is hard to find. You may need to read the camera's instructions to learn how your "Exposure Compensation" system works. Using exposure compensation is easy to learn, and once you have used it a few times you will find it an easy adjustment to make.

#6 Lighting: Another major problem in photographing of your art is the lighting can look uneven or off color. When it comes to natural looking lighting you can't beat Auto White Balance (AWB) for improving the accuracy of the colors in your paintings. But AWB isn't perfect, especially if you are taking photos in a location that has more than one light source that gives you "mixed" lighting. A good example is taking photos in a room with both warm indoor lights and strong daylight coming through the windows. Your digital camera becomes confused and doesn't know whether to balance for the warm indoor lighting or the cool daylight. Make sure you use only one light source, incandescent or daylight and let the AWB do its job. For indoor photography I use a couple of daylight balanced 23watt 5000K Compact Fluorescent Lights (CFLs) in inexpensive shop lamps to photograph paintings. You can buy the CFL bulbs and light fixtures for under \$35 at any Home Depot or Lowes.

If your art is not evenly lit it's probably because all the light is coming from one direction and isn't falling evenly on the art. This is especially obvious on large paintings. You may need to find a location where the lighting is even. Indoors, like to use two lights equally spaced on both sides of the camera and at 45° to the camera to achieve even light without reflections (see lighting diagram). Outdoors in the shade or indoors with even north light are two good choices. If you go outdoors watch out for reflections and glare caused by blue sky or objects behind the camera.

You have spent a great deal of time learning how to make great art. Learning how to photograph your art it will take an investment in time too. But don't skimp. It will make a big difference in how professional you and your art look and will have a big influence on your future sales.

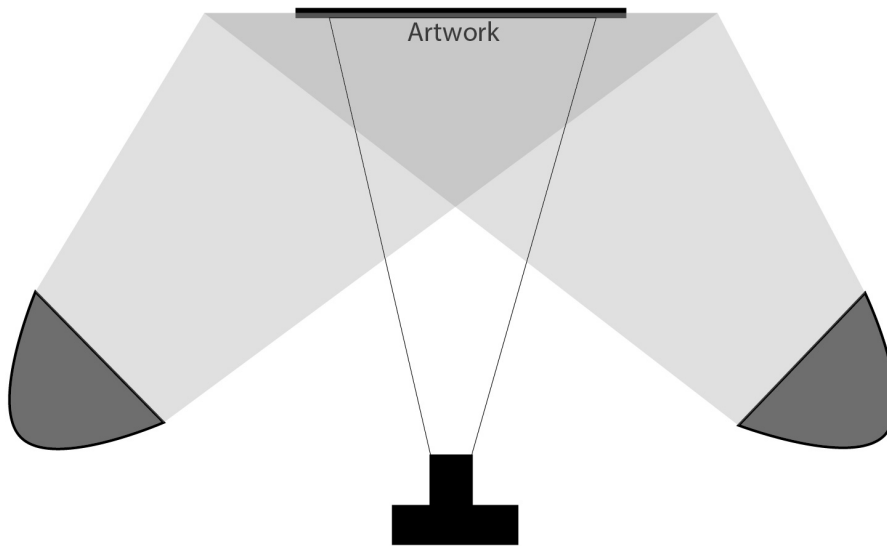
Garry McMichael is a commercial photographer and painter located in St. Louis, Missouri. A couple times a year he teaches one-day workshops on how to photograph 2D and 3D art. For more information on upcoming workshops visit his website:

<http://www.paintstlouis.org/>

You can also see Garry's paintings and photography at <http://garrymcmichael.com>.

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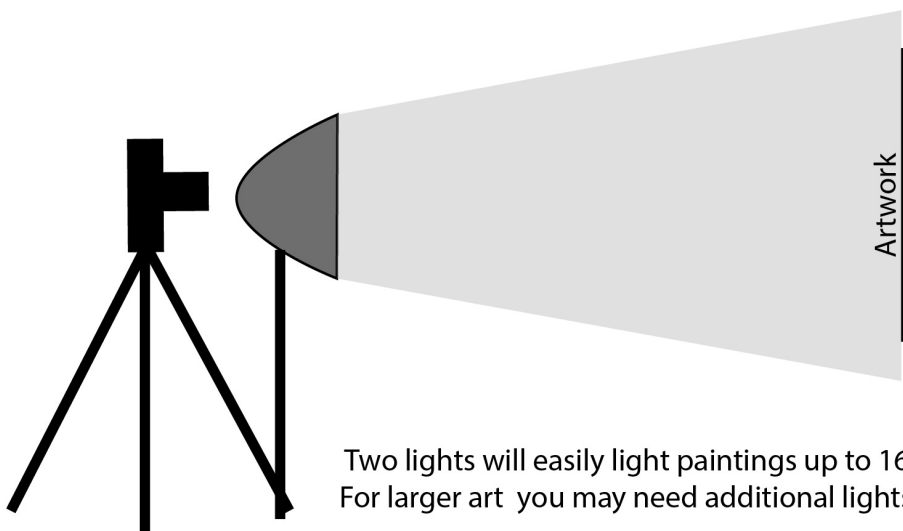
Lighting Set-up for Photographing 2D Artwork



Lights are spaced at equal distance from the artwork and at 45° to artwork.
Lights, camera and painting should be at the same height.
Camera is directly in front and centered on the artwork.

- Place camera on a tripod.
- Use a focal length in the middle of your zoom lens.
- Set the ISO to 100 for best quality.
- Set image quality to the highest setting for largest prints.
- Set camera to AWB (Auto White Balance)
- To make sure color is correct place a gray card in the image.
- Fill frame by moving camera forward or backward until the frame is full.

Lights that work well with AWB: 23 watt 5000K Compact Fluorescent Lights (CFLs)



Two lights will easily light paintings up to 16X20.
For larger art you may need additional lights.

