

A Woodworker's Guide to Photography

Take great furniture photos
with the camera you already own

BY MICHAEL PEKOVICH



Same camera, very different results. The harsh gleam of on-camera flash puts your work in an unflattering light (left). A professional-looking image (below) is much easier and less expensive than you might think.

Ten years ago, if you had asked me how to get good photos of your work, I'd have told you to hire a pro. Not today. With simple lighting and a digital camera, you can use pro techniques to take great pictures.

This is possible largely because a digital camera's display screen provides instant feedback that lets you craft a shot step by step. Also, even a basic digital camera has all the image sharpness you'll need to create eye-catching photos of your work for the Web, or for printed photo albums, post cards, etc.

Getting started is easy. From camera setup to lighting to fine-tuning a shot, I'll share a stripped-down version of the process we use at *FWW* to get magazine-ready pictures.

Why do so many pictures of great furniture turn out badly? The three basic components of a shot are the camera angle, the



A short equipment list

CAMERA

The type of digital camera you have is not as important as how you use it. For this article, Pekovich used a typical point-and-shoot: the Nikon Coolpix. Most cameras have enough resolution and the important features that you'll need: a tripod mount and a flash system that you can turn off.



LIGHTS

The single biggest improvement you can make in your photos will come from avoiding the on-camera flash. At the magazine, we use a set of high-powered strobes. Another option is an inexpensive hot-light system in which the lamps stay on continuously. For this article, Pekovich used two halogen work lights available from any home center for around \$70. Add another \$20 or so for some heat-resistant diffusion sheets (Rosco 105 Tough-spun filter, \$6.50 for a 20x24 sheet at bhphotovideo.com) to soften the light, and a couple of pieces of white foam-core poster board to use as reflectors.



TRIPOD

Even with a couple of brilliant halogen bulbs shining on your work, you won't have as much light as with a flash system. That's why a tripod is crucial. Its most basic function is to hold the camera still, which lets the shutter stay open longer without resulting in a blurry picture. This lets you take advantage of lower light sources that would normally result in under-exposed pictures.



BACKDROP

Another way to dramatically improve your furniture photos is to shoot against a seamless paper backdrop to eliminate background distractions. Rolls of backdrop paper are inexpensive and readily available in a variety of colors; white, gray, and light neutrals are the most versatile. A 9-ft. by 36-ft. backdrop (\$40 from bhphotovideo.com) should work for most furniture projects and can be easily suspended from your shop's ceiling for out-of-the-way storage. Backdrop stands are also available.



background, and the lighting. Most home photos fall down in all three. Taking a picture of a piece from a few feet away using an on-camera flash will typically yield a distorted shot with harsh glare, dark shadows, and a distracting background. The fix is simple: First, set the furniture on a white backdrop. Second, move the camera back and put it on a tripod so you can turn off your flash. Then add a couple of utility lights to create natural shadows and you're well on your way to a great shot.

Set the scene and read the camera's manual

Work in a place where you have enough room to arrange the camera and lights. A garage or shop is fine; a living room can work if you move the other furniture out of the way. To remove background clutter and to isolate the piece of furniture, place it on backdrop, or seamless, paper. Pull out enough paper for the piece to sit on, with a gradual curve where the paper meets the floor. This creates a subtle gradation and pleasing shadows in the photo's background.

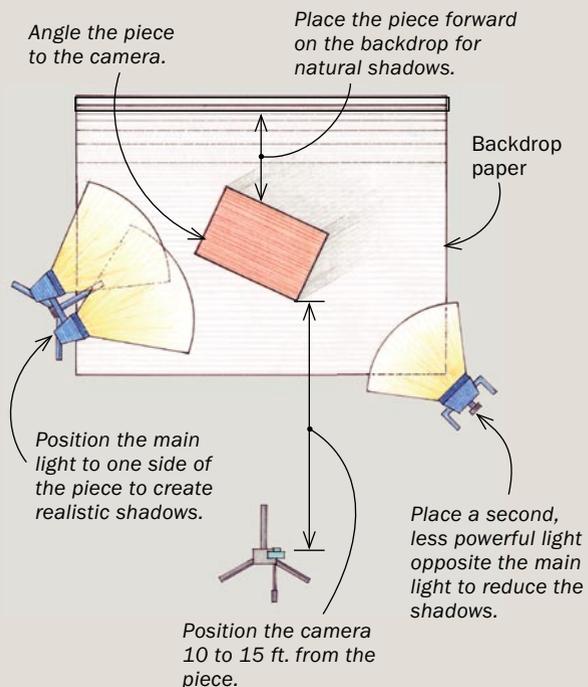
Now move the piece into place. A good rule is to angle the furniture to the camera so that the front and one side are visible, with emphasis on the front. Place the camera roughly at eye level—the height from which furniture is normally viewed. This is also a good time to set your camera's controls for the best quality shot. Start by turning off the built-in flash and adjusting the ISO setting to its lowest level. The ISO controls the camera's sensitivity to light; a higher setting requires less light but yields grainier pictures.

For sharp focus throughout the image, the lens opening, or f-stop, should be as small as possible. But most point-and-shoot cameras won't let you control the f-stop setting manually. Instead, they offer preset "shooting modes," a combination of flash, ISO, shutter speed, and f-stop preferences. Your camera's manual should tell you which of these preset modes emphasizes depth of field—the amount of the image that will be in focus. Landscape mode, often represented by a mountain-and-cloud icon, is typically a good choice.

A small lens opening means the shutter must stay open longer, increasing the chance of blur from a shaky camera. To avoid shakes, set the camera on a tripod and use the camera's electronic timer to avoid vibrations caused by depressing the shutter button.

The last function to check is the white balance. Every light source, from daylight to fluorescent to incandescent, has a different color cast. The camera's white-balance circuitry tries to adjust for the particular light source you are using to render colors accurately. Most cameras have preset options for various light sources as well as an automatic setting usually identified as AWB. This automatic setting is probably the best choice unless your camera lets you create a custom white-balance setting. A custom setting requires taking a picture of a white object positioned under your lighting source. Foam-core is perfect for this. The camera

3 steps to a great shot



A backdrop, two lights, and a tripod. Halogen work lamps from a home center provide ample light for photography. Diffusion film in front of the bulbs softens the light. Position the main light high, to one side, and slightly in front of the piece.

STEP 1 POSITION THE CAMERA

Start with the seamless backdrop. Drape the paper onto the floor in a gentle curve; pull out enough to run underneath the piece with some to spare in front.



Compose the shot. To avoid distorting the proportions of the piece, back up. The image should fill the viewfinder with the lens set toward the midpoint of its zoom range.



TIP

MOVE BACK AND ZOOM IN

Most cameras have zoom lenses. From a close distance, the lens acts like a wide-angle lens and creates greater distortion in a photo. For example, a table shot from a short distance will appear to have a large top and legs that taper inward. Moving the camera back will cause the lens to act like a longer angle lens so the same table will be more proportionately correct. Perspective distortion can be corrected in image-editing programs, but the less you begin with, the easier it is to fix.

STEP 2 ADD THE LIGHTS



Start with the main light. Tape heat-resistant diffusion sheets to the halogen light to soften its effect (above). Position the main light high, to one side, and slightly in front of the piece. The upside of “hot lights” (lights that stay on) is that they let you see how the photo will look. So work in a darkened room to avoid stray light (right).

then analyzes the image and adjusts the white balance.

You're in control of the lighting

With the furniture and camera ready, it's time to set up the lighting. This is where it pays to think like a woodworker. Just like a logical approach to milling parts, cutting joinery, assembly, and finishing are essential to a successful piece, so is the order of placing the main light, fill light, and reflectors critical to a good photograph. A well-lit photo is crafted in steps.

The first step is to locate the main light. Start by raising the light as high as you can. This will mimic a natural light source and create natural-looking shadows on table overhangs and molded profiles. For a tall piece, you can aim the light at the ceiling so that it bounces down. The main light should be slightly in front of the subject and to one side. This will create shadows that rake at an angle, to highlight and help define vertical moldings or setbacks. Position the main light and stand back at the camera to see the effect. When you think you're close, snap a test shot. At this point, the shadows may look quite dark. Don't worry. Look at where they fall. For this piece, I want a shadow under the top that looks natural but doesn't obscure the drawers. I also want shadows to help define the shell carving and drawer edge profiles.

Now add the fill light. This should be on the opposite side of the piece, also slightly in front. It should be less powerful than the main light, to open up the shadows without eliminating them. If your fill light is too powerful, just move it back.

Reflections can be both helpful and harmful

Even a properly lit piece can have a problem reflection or two, with tabletops and polished hardware being common culprits. In each case, the fix is typically simple and involves positioning a black or white reflector to kill glare or highlight dark areas. □

Michael Pekovich is the art director of Fine Woodworking.



Add the fill light. Position a weaker lamp opposite the main light to brighten the deepest shadows. If it is too bright, it will eliminate the shadows and create a “flat” photo. Remedy this by moving the light farther away or aiming it away from the subject and bouncing it off a reflector (see Step 3).

Online Extra

For more lighting tips and ideas for sharing your photos, go to FineWoodworking.com/extras.



Close but not perfect. The high position of the main light creates a natural-looking shadow below the tabletop and on the shell carving. The fill light keeps the shadows from being too dark. What's not so nice is the washed-out look of the side and tabletop caused by the reflection of the backdrop. Also, the hardware looks too dark because it is reflecting the back of the darkened room.

STEP 3 FINE-TUNE THE REFLECTIONS

Defeating glare. The color and figure of the lowboy's top and side are obscured by the bright reflection of the backdrop. A strategically placed black cloth and card will cut the haze and reveal the wood's beauty.



Brighten the brass. The polished hardware appears black because it is reflecting darkened areas of the shop. To make the brass show, Pekovich uses a piece of white foam-core poster board as a reflector.



BEFORE



AFTER



Keep shooting. With the main shot in the bag, it's time to think about other views. Pekovich chose a front-view shot to highlight the clean lines and symmetry of the case, and close-ups of the shell carving, dovetailed drawers, and drop finial. For each shot, he repeated the process of positioning the camera, adjusting the lights, and fine-tuning the reflections.