

Image is everything: Photographing your work

By [Scott Grove](#) January 22, 2021 | 4:30 pm EST

For Woodworking Network

As Will Rogers said, “You never get a second chance to make a good first impression.” For woodworkers, we usually get only one chance to show our work to potential clients through our website and social media; to art, craft, and museum show juries; and to judges like those in the Veneer Tech Craftsman’s Challenge. So, if you want to make a good first impression, make sure your photographs are as best as they can be.



Quality of your photos can make or break the possibility of selling your work; getting accepted into craft shows; and winning awards. Of course, your first goal is to make beautiful and flawless woodwork, but your secondary goal should be to create stunning photos of it.

Although hiring a professional photographer is usually the best way to go, it can be costly. You might have to move large pieces to their studio or pay extra for them to come to your dusty shop. Set up can be time consuming. Photography is an art, and the field has its experts, but with available books, classes, and YouTube videos, you can get a decent education on taking good photos. And investing in a good camera and light boxes can dramatically increase the quality of your photos.

Start with basics

Luckily, with today’s affordable digital cameras (and even high-quality smartphone cameras), you can take good pictures with reasonable effort, expense, and practice. Start with the basics: Be sure to carefully clean your work, as any dust will show up in your photos. Take your time and schedule a half day (at least) for photography.

Be prepared to review test shots on your camera screen or PC. Adjust lighting as you go along. And while you’re set up, take a wide variety of shots so you can select the best ones later. Most cameras have a video mode, too, so take some short videos of opening doors and drawers, and move around the entire piece.

Lastly, take a shot with you in the image, take a formal one and a fun, crazy one. Don’t use them for jury or award submission; you can be disqualified if you include your face or name in the shot. But fun shots are great for your website and marketing collateral.

Here are some more specific tips:

Camera

Start with a digital device, either an SLR camera (Single Lens Reflex – where you see through the actual lens); a compact camera; or a smartphone. Next, connect it to a stable tripod, preferably with a remote control, as even pushing the shutter trigger can shake the camera and blur the image. I use my timer when shooting with my SLR and voice control with my smartphone. (My wife sometimes hears me yelling, “Cheese, cheese, cheese!” in my shop during a shoot.)

Background

There are two types of product shots: 1) studio with a white or neutral background; and 2) in-situ (“on site” or “in position,”) i.e., in a bedroom for a dresser or a hallway for a console.

Although in-situ shots can help give your work context, sometimes the surrounding background can take away from the piece. Avoid outdoor settings or piles of sawdust. Although they can be creative and great for your website, they are usually distracting for show or award applications.

Unless the work requires an in-situ shot to explain the function of the piece, or it’s installed, it’s best to shoot in a studio or your shop with a full background. Note: some publications like or require in-situ shots, so if time and funds allow, do both.

Studio backgrounds are typically created with a “seamless” (a large wide roll of paper) or fabric backdrop hung and curved down and under the work. Fabric drops are usually left wrinkled as it is hard to get them smooth. Fabric often comes with a molted print to help diffuse the look of the wrinkles, although sometimes patterns can be distracting.

I like to use a white backdrop because I can create a dramatic transitional shadow (a white to black gradient) by hanging a light-blocking panel above the work. A piece can also be digitally cut out and then I can create the background in Photoshop.

For larger work, limited space, and shooting in a shop, you can use bed sheets and/or white foamcore as a backdrop. You can overexpose these irregular backgrounds with additional lighting focused only on them, so they will appear smooth and all white. Don’t fret about dirt smudges or seams.

When you calibrate exposure time, start with the lights off. When taking shots, turn on the background lights and it will appear bright, smooth, and white. Using a shallow depth of field (wide lens aperture) will also put these imperfect backgrounds out of focus, which helps smooth them out.

If you don’t have a clean backdrop, you can also use a shallow depth of field, and set something consistent behind your work, like stacked wood or your row of hanging tools. Place your work as

far away from the background as possible and keep the attention on the piece. Many smartphones have an automatic setting (live focus) or filter for this blurred background effect, and it works great.

Composition

Depending on the size of your work, capturing an entire piece can be a challenge. Start with a straight-on, overall shot, then take $\frac{3}{4}$ views from both sides and above. Follow up with more angles and details, with drawers or tops open, half open, etc. Include details, too, especially of any fine craftsmanship that can't be seen in an overall shot, including fine joinery and inlay.

When you present your images on your website or in a jury/award application, consider how they will look as a grouping. Make sure the backgrounds are all the same, too.

Lighting

Most cameras have an auto white balance feature that keeps this step simple. The camera will calibrate on a white surface, then adjust and compensate for warm (yellow) or cold (blue) lighting. Light temperature can later be adjusted in post-production too.

A good intro lighting set includes a backdrop hanging rod system, and two side and one overhead soft box lights, all on adjustable tripods. I can set up my entire lighting system in 10 minutes.

Start by turning off all surrounding room lights and block out any window light, if possible. Next, I place my two soft light boxes on either side of the piece, pointing at a 45-degree angle toward the work, and lift them high enough to point downward, also at about 45-degrees. It's important to use soft lighting and pay attention to shadows and reflections, which will be exaggerated in the photo. Your eye won't be able to see this in real time, and reflection and glare can ruin a shot. Be sure to carefully review the image on the camera screen or better yet on a PC or tablet.

To help with glare, sometimes I shoot through a black wall of fabric or I place a frosted shower curtain in front of the lights to soften the white reflections on glossy finished pieces.

I also place white foam core on the floor just out of the camera frame tilted toward the work to reflect ambient light and fill in shadowed areas. I use another single light, 45 degrees off the back, to accent the back edge, a technique called rim glow.

Good lighting is critical and can be time consuming. Look for hot spots, dark shadows, reflections, and glare, and move your lights around to soften them out. Take lots of pictures.

File saving and post-processing

Be sure to save your pictures in the largest file format that you can. High-end cameras allow you to save in multiple formats such as RAW, TIFF, and/or JPEG. (JPEG is a condensed format that contains all the information needed for editing, but each time you save a JPEG, you lose information, so avoid resizing and saving multiple edited versions.) Work in larger formats and then save smaller files for your website and submission to juries or judges. You never know, they might ask for a larger file for the cover of a magazine.

Knowing how to edit images in a software program like Photoshop is a good skill to have, but if you are not accomplished at it, avoid it or use it very sparingly. Judges frown upon touched-up images, especially ones that are poorly cut and pasted on a fake gradient background. Don't do this. Really. Don't.

With a little practice, patience, and a few tools (new tools!) you can show your work off with high-quality images that will make you stand out from the crowd and even might get your work on the cover of a magazine or win you the grand prize.

About the Author:



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Scott Grove is an art furniture maker, sculptor, and YouTube personality who selectively teaches and lectures, most notably at the Marc Adams School of Woodworking and The Chippendale School of Furniture in Scotland. Visit ImagineGrove.com and/or scottgrove.com.

As a third-generation artist, Scott Grove designs and creates furniture, sculpture, architectural reproductions, photography, murals, play spaces, interiors, films, and other art using multiple media and many disciplines.

For over thirty years he has developed unconventional methods in his approach; Grove's large variety of work is known for layers of artistic expression. His pieces are often a combination of uniquely carved textures, radiant veneers and finishes, and found objects. His work creates a desire to touch each piece for a sensuous, pleasurable experience. Sophisticated and elegant with a touch of whimsy, his art raises a sense of wonder and delight.

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