1

Exploring Portrait Photography

A portrait is a likeness. They've been etched on cave walls, minted onto the sides of coins from every age since the Bronze Age, and sketched, painted, and photographed since the beginning of recorded history. Naturally, styles and fashions have changed over time, but the portrait endures as a form of art, communication, and keepsake. We like to remember those we love, admire those we find beautiful, commemorate those we find valuable. The photographic portrait may well be one of the more important social tools we have.

But don't let this notion daunt you. The very reason photographic portraits are so important is that they are made so often by so many people. Indeed, more pictures of people are taken every year than any other subject, and more and more pictures are being taken each year. Whether you want to document your child's life, your brother's Olympic training, or the life of the man who keeps the last lighthouse lit, portrait photography is for everyone. Everyone.

If you have a basic understanding of photography — and you need only a basic understanding, and a willingness to learn a few simple but specialized techniques — not only can you take portraits, you can take *great* portraits.

Digital portrait photography is a blast! Oh, all photography is fun, of course, but digital photography offers you not one but two unique opportunities. In the first case, digital "film" is free once you own the reusable storage media, so you can practice and take as many test shots as you need; in the second case, the gratification is instant.

There's no big secret; a faerie doesn't sprinkle pixie dust on professional portrait photographers. It's much simpler: there is a collection of tools and information, that when combined together with experience and creativity, allow the photographer to make the best decisions when planning shots. The result is, as you might expect, better shots.

Whether you're sitting on the amateur/professional fence and considering starting a small portrait business, or you just want to take better photographs of the people you know, you need to understand the same basic principals. Whether you do it with an expensive professional lighting setup or a few old lamp stands and some clip-on reflector lights — or even with the sunlight and a piece of tinfoil — the ideas remain constant.

You need to know how to set up your digital camera, compose an image to best advantage, pose your model (whether it's Christie Brinkley or your granddaughter), and handle or manage the lighting. Then you need to know how to take that image from the camera to a frame or a computer monitor in a finished, professional state. That's it. Sounds easy, right? Well, it really is.

At its very root, photography is a science and therefore governed by certain immutable physical laws that actually make it easier to learn. Why? Because these laws, or rules, never change whether you are making a snapshot, a casual portrait, or a full-on glamour setup with a tiara and a feather boa. And once you have these basics rules down, you will find that photography does the most amazing thing: it becomes art.

Take a Better Snapshot

We all take snapshots, of course. And with any luck we will all continue to do so happily into our photographic old age. But a snapshot is not a portrait. Although it may well capture a moment or an event, a brilliant smile or a funny face, it has not been planned. And therein lies the difference. A snapshot is an opportunity. A portrait is an executed plan.

It's no secret that if you point your camera at enough things, you will get some good (and perhaps even great) shots. I have one or two I keep in frames on my desk that might well have been blessed by those faeries I mentioned earlier, I was so lucky to have gotten them. I wouldn't want to live in a world without snapshots, frankly, and never plan to stop taking them myself. What would the first day at the cottage or the last day of the high school be without a few carefree snapshots to stick in the family album?

Though you may not want to post-process your snapshots, they will be improved by the information in this book. From the information in the next chapter on equipment to the chapters on lighting and composition, your snapshots will improve because you will have a better understanding of the basic rules of photography—the ones that are the same no matter what style of picture you are trying to take (see Figure 1-1).

Figure 1-1: A snapshot is not, by any means, an inferior style of photograph—it is simply a distinct one. Usually taken without any specific planning or forethought, a snapshot is a moment captured. And some of them, like this one, are magical.
© Victoria Slater

A friend once said that the snapshot was the scribbled love note, the casual portrait the love letter, and the formal portrait the dedicated sonnet. "But love is love," he remarked.

Fact is, you might be buying this book because you want to take better snapshots, and you're never going near a studio as long as you live. You know something important: The shots you will want to remember later are the ones of the people you knew and loved. Those snapshots you took that summer in Nantucket and the ones of Junior when he was a chubby toddler and not a college graduate. And you want them to be as good as they can be.

This book is about making your people pictures as good as they can be, whatever you call those pictures.

If you're a snapshooter, you can improve your people snapshots by learning the basics:

✦ How to arrange your subjects in the picture to keep them clear and in focus

✦ Where to put yourself to capture the right moment

✦ How to work cooperatively with the light to get the best results

✦ How to find the right backgrounds and use the correct angles to catch features at their best and minimize problems (see Figure 1-2)

✦ How to use basic digital camera techniques to help you make decisions and get the right settings for each condition

✦ How to use common items like white plastic bags and poster boards to "do it like the pros" and improve your portraits

Figure 1-2: The particular joy of the snapshot is the ability to capture loved ones in a perspective that is uniquely yours and will always resonate with you. You can vastly improve snapshots when you have a good understanding of basic photographic composition.
© *Siobhan Connally*

Create a Casual Portrait

And if you're *dreaming* about a studio and your fondest wish is to hang a shingle that says "Portrait Photographer For Hire," you also came to the right book.

The primary distinction between a snapshot and a casual portrait is planning—and this distinction can be a very fine line, indeed. So, you need to know the same things, in other words. You just need to learn to control things a little more. Yes, it's true: photographers can bend the world to their will. (Well, a little . . . with the right lighting.)

If you take your camera to the beach to capture a few shots of your kids in the sand to send to your mother, you've certainly engaged in some planning. If you take your camera to the client's golf tournament and plan to capture a few casual portraits for an agreed upon fee, you've engaged in about the same level of planning.

Or have you?

Whereas a snapshot is an "as is, where is" proposition usually taken in whatever circumstances one finds oneself, a casual portrait is generally planned to a fine enough degree that you have with you a few tools to assist you; something to reflect, deflect and/or create light.

Then again, if you use your car floor mat to block the bright light, or an empty chip bag as a makeshift lens hood to catch the middle daughter diving off the floating dock, you've certainly fulfilled the requirements of using tools to assist you in getting the desired result.

As you can see, spending any real time trying to explain or quantify the difference between a snapshot and a casual portrait ends in the same unsatisfactory place. In fact, you'd be hard pressed to describe any quality distinction between Figure 1-1, Figure 1-2, and Figure 1-3, if any exists at all.

The casual portrait, a classic example of which is shown in Figure 1-3, has all of the qualities of a good snapshot and none of the drawbacks of a formal portrait. This is why casual portraiture is in growing demand, even in areas where the formal portrait was once the norm.

The reason you can't tell the qualitative difference between the first three figures is because there is none. Each is beautifully composed, each is properly exposed, each is lit appropriately, and each is cropped with good taste and an eye for design. The difference is only in intent and planning. As I said in the beginning, the rules are always the same and so they work for all styles and all intents. All that changes is the way you put things together—and how deliberately.

Figure 1-3: Casual portraits, like this classic example, are the most in demand these days because they provide a genuine glimpse into not only the physical aspects of a person but can often capture his or her personality as well.
© *Stephen Strathdee*

Casual portraits are characterized, primarily, by non-formal poses. Or, in many cases, no real pose at all. They are intended to provide a characterization of the models by showing them in such a way that would seem familiar to the people who know them well (see Figure 1-4). Casual portraits are the kind the wedding photographer takes at the reception hall or during the bride's preparations. They are the kind taken at company functions for the corporate newsletter.

Casual portraits are also the kind mothers take or want taken of their children, spouses of one another, and pet owners of their pets, as shown in Figure 1-5. They can be slightly posed ("Tilt your head up a little, please") or at least directed ("Can you move about a foot closer to the light while you braid her hair?") but they are never formally posed or directed to any great degree. They're not fully candid, of course—the people always know they are being photographed—but they are meant to portray the model naturally and representatively.

Figure 1-4: Set apart from formal portraits by informal poses that occur naturally, the casual portrait is meant to capture an expression or action that is characteristic of the person.
© Victoria Slater

Figure 1-5: The casual portrait is the most common type taken, by amateurs and professionals alike, because it is generally the most pleasing to the client or model. "It's so me!" are wonderful words for a photographer to hear.
© Jennifer Mitchell

You can improve your casual portraits by learning more techniques:

- ✦ How to use metering to make better portraits
- ✦ How to use techniques like DOF (depth of field) and POV (point of view) changes to improve results
- ✦ How to exercise control over light and make it work for you
- ✦ How to create silhouettes, catch action, and freeze moments
- ✦ How to use basic and advanced digital camera techniques to get the right exposure every time
- ✦ How to use filters, reflectors, and basic lighting tools

Formal portraiture is slightly different, of course. But the basic rules are the same. What changes and makes them formal? More planning, more control, and a certain adherence to standard poses and lighting norms. Well, that and a few other things.

Set Up a Formal Portrait

Every CEO needs at least one serious-looking headshot, and all brides and grooms want a few perfectly lit and lushly colored portraits with sparkly highlights on their rings. There will always be yearbooks, graduations, and people who prefer a more formal style of portraiture. There will always be team pictures and Little League windups. There will be staff photos and families (with pets!) and you will surely need to know how set up formal portraits and deal with arranging groups.

Formal portraiture is not now and never will be "dead"—even though it is no longer the norm for the most common portrait scenarios (couples and kids). It will remain a steady business for photographers because part of its nature is archival; it is meant to provide documentation. And, of course, people, businesses, clubs, groups, teams, and bands will always want and need this service. I know a man who makes his living doing nothing but making headshots of real-estate agents and other salespeople who use them on their business cards and promotional materials.

Again, the basic photography rules are the same. The "formal" in the formal portrait refers to a level of control by the photographer, not the nature of the photograph. In fact, many "formals" are quite fun and can even be casual in general appearance, even though everything about them has been carefully planned by the photographer. As was the main difference between a snapshot and a casual portrait, it is planning and control that distinguishes a formal portrait from a casual one.

The portrait in Figure 1-6, for example, was made in a studio with photography lighting and a carefully considered costume and pose. Metering was done, lighting was adjusted, several poses were tried, and many shots were taken. It was a session.

Figure 1-6: The primary benefit of working in a studio is that you can exercise a great deal of control and try many different things. Although you can create casual-style poses in the studio, they usually have a different look to them than those captured with no posing instruction from the photographer.
© *Istoica.com*

With this control and planning, naturally, come a whole new set of tools and techniques. When you're snap-shooting or taking casual portraits, you are at the mercy of the conditions around you and you are, basically, making the best of them. In formal work, the model is sitting in your studio, under your lights, and you can make it light, dark, or anything in between. For that matter, you can make the model light, dark, or anything in between. But why stop there? You could drape your model over an old armchair (Figure 1-7) or have your models do something related to their profession, such as the portrait of noted photographer Rannie Turnigan, who is looking at a roll of film (Figure 1-8).

Figure 1-7: You can create your own version of classic poses and design your shots so that the lighting depicts any type of atmosphere you want. Here the lighting is all glamour, and the model's pose is exactly what you expect a glamour girl to look like: carefully casual.
© *Istoica.com*

Formal portrait photography doesn't have to be boring, staid, or even predictable. Even though you will use the same techniques and follow the same basic rules that photographers have been using for years, the end result can be as fresh and innovative as you want. The same principals that make the CEO of Big Corporation look responsible and distinguished in his standard head shot will make your dancer model look stunning in her pas de chat.

Figure 1-8: Beautifully composed and backlit, this formal studio portrait of photographer Rannie Turnigan captures not only his profession, but both the studious and fun aspects of his nature.
© *Istoica.com*

Improve your formal portraits by learning advanced techniques:

- ✦ How to pose and compose — from individuals to large groups
- ✦ How to use posing and lighting techniques to overcome model challenges such as large noses or eyeglasses
- ✦ How to set up your own studio lighting and use photography lighting techniques
- ✦ How to shoot in all light types and use color, props, and backgrounds to best advantage
- ✦ How to deal with shooting in public venues, in bad weather, and with mixed light
- ✦ How to deal with models and conduct a professional portrait session

Formal or studio portraits present the serious portrait photographer with the most important of all things: control. You will certainly get a few great shots when you're at the beach with the kids. You will surely come up with some amazing casual portraits while you follow the bride around on the morning of her wedding. You will use all your knowledge and skill and make good decisions in each of those cases and, doubtless, you will have some wonderful photographs. But the nature of the photographer in the studio is akin to a child in a toy store. There are just so many things to play with! Light! Color! Props!

Really, I'm always tempted to make that evil laugh sound (*mwah ha ha*) when I find myself in my studio with some time and a willing model. I believe I *have* rubbed my hands together and made a wide-eyed "what can we do today?" face.

The only totally true thing I know about art is that it pretty well universally turns out better when the artist knows how to use the tools that create it. Could Gainsborough have given us the Blue Boy if he didn't know how to mix paint or use a brush? Unlikely. Portraits such as the one shown in Figure 1-9 are not hard to create. Quite simple, in fact, if you have and know how to use the right tools.

Even though you will likely have to take the most traditional of studio portraits from time to time (that distinguished CEO, those real-estate agents), you will also have the chance to turn your studio into a funhouse and stretch your creativity as far as the walls will allow.
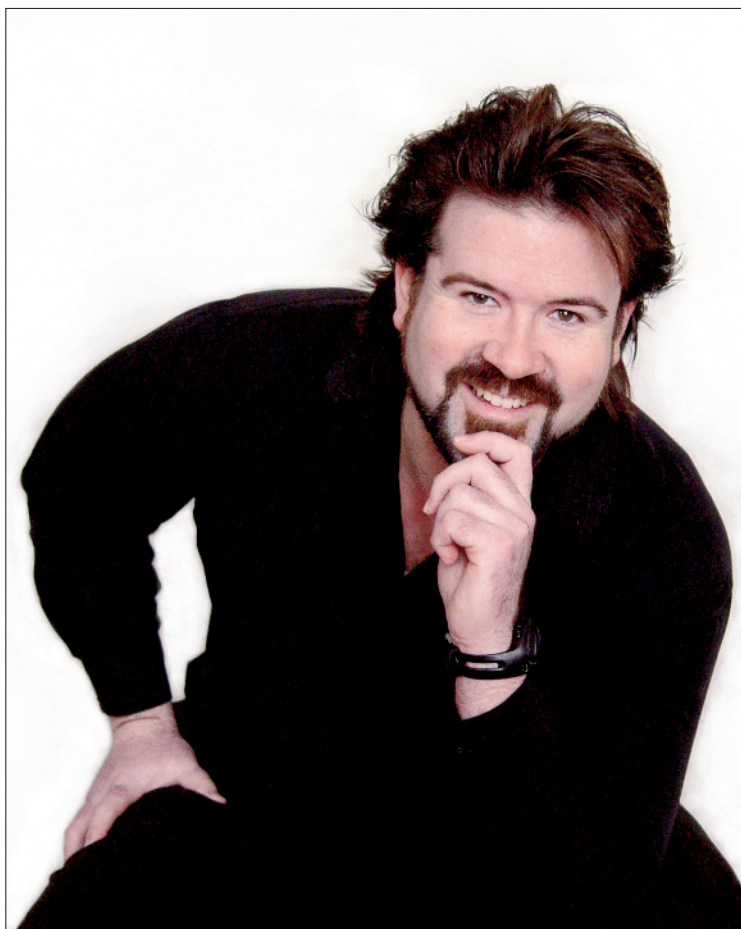
Figure 1-9: Beautifully high key and brimming with vitality, this studio portrait of Ottawa artist Gary Corcoran manages to mix the best aspects of the casual portrait (a sense of intimacy with the model) with the best aspects of studio work (even lighting).
© *Cheryl Mazak*

Self-Portraits

"Every photograph we make is part of a learning process. We turn our lens on our respective worlds, on the people who inhabit it, on the new places we discover, and on the scenes we've created. We find truth and we create fiction with our cameras. It seems a natural thing to turn the camera around and examine ourselves, or even to recreate ourselves."

This very wise passage was written by a photographer named Laura Kicey who takes, as you might have guessed, amazing and wonderful self-portraits (see Figure 1-10) — among many other subjects and themes, of course.

Figure 1-10: Self-portraiture is, beyond its merits as a bona fide form of art, a wonderful method of training yourself on lighting and posing, expression and nuance.
© *Laura Kicey*

Self-portraits are fun. But more than that, they're excellent learning tools. Van Gogh painted 35 of them in his lifetime, and Toulouse-Lautrec painted so many it is not known how many might actually exist. Reasons for doing them range from self-exploration to learning to light people, combine color, and create poses.

Dr. Joanne Ratkowski, a clinical psychologist and amateur photographer, has developed a following based on her always evocative, often provocative self-portraiture (see Figure 1-11). She, like Laura Kicey, regularly astounds a large group of people with compositions that use careful poses and calculated props. I personally believe this sort of work contains some of the best lessons in portrait composition to be had. Inside of self-portraiture there exists a rather astounding capacity for narrative photography and, as one prolific self-portraitist told me, "I can't write poetry, so I do this instead."

Figure 1-11: Because you will not be shy to ask yourself to perform any manner of pose, and because your patience with the photographer will exceed anyone else's, self-portraiture is often considered the most expressive of all forms of visual art.
© Joanne Ratkowski

Self-Indulgent or Self-Taught?

While there are those who consider self-portraiture to be a self indulgence, I doubt very much I could have ever learned to take photographs of other people if I had not had a cheap, patient, and convenient model (myself, of course). This is why many photographers jokingly refer to themselves as "the model of greatest convenience."

Do not discount the importance of repetition and practice. Photography posing is a very subtle and intricate process. When you consider the number of angles, simple and compound, which make up the human form when it's just standing there doing nothing, you can imagine the way that small shifts in lighting and position can reorder the whole works in unexpected ways. Many portrait photographers, therefore, use themselves extensively and exhaustively to teach themselves the ins and outs of both lighting and posing.

To work with self-portraiture, you need either a wireless remote or a cable release (or you can also use the timer on your camera) and a tripod. A mirror will prove invaluable, particularly if you are able to position it just behind the camera so you can see, more or less, what the camera will see. Aside from having the ability to create really wonderful works of art, you can teach yourself about lighting, posing, and POV (point of view) quickly and cheaply.

The fact is that portrait photography is the way we've told stories to one another since Eastman came out with the first affordable camera in 1900. Collectively, the photographs we've taken of one another are a form of social history. We've taken portraits for our own pleasure and enjoyment and to record not just the moments, but the people in them. This remains the goal of portrait photography: to record people, and not just their faces and physical features, but also their personalities.

Digital photography simply adds a new facet to the craft; a new set of tools to the arsenal. It allows such a variety of options — notably the ability to practice cost-effectively and to process you images yourself on your computer — that I feel quite safe in saying that you can do today with digital cameras what you could not have done when analogue and film were your only choices. The learning curve is radically adjusted in your favor.

Do You Have What It Takes?

I assume you own a camera. If you can point that camera at the subject and press the shutter button, then yes, chances are quite good that you have what it takes to take great portraits.

A young assistant of mine once said, "Your (camera of the same make and model) works better than mine!" Of course we laughed; it was meant as a joke, and she was fully expecting the maternal stare over the top of the reading glasses that she got. But it did get us started on a longish conversation about how the camera was much less important than the knowledge behind it. "Yeah," I replied, "mine didn't work very good when I first got it, either."

You don't need the most expensive or best camera, and you don't need the most expensive or best lighting. Even if you bought the best Hasselblad on the shelf and got the most stupendous set of lights imaginable, you'd *still* have to know how to use them.

Let's further answer the "Do I have what it takes?" question with another one: What do you need to make a great portrait?

- ✦ A camera

- ✦ Enough light to enable your camera to capture your model

- ✦ A model

- ✦ A working knowledge of how to use the camera, the light, and the environment to show the model in the best possible way

Chances are that you have the first three items already. Chances are you picked up this book because you want to tick the fourth off as well. Not coincidentally, that is exactly what this book aims to help you do.

✦   ✦   ✦