

Exploring Portrait Photography

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Portrait photography is fun and can become downright addictive. Armed with a good digital camera and a little or a lot of knowledge, portrait photography gives you the chance to capture a slice of history in a person's life. When you photograph someone, you're telling a story. Done right, portrait photography reveals a lot about a person. Whether you're shooting a formal portrait with a background, photographing someone on location, or capturing a candid portrait, you're telling your viewers something about your subject. A portrait should be a flattering likeness of your subject, which can be a bit of work. Portrait photography may seem like a daunting task, but it's extremely rewarding. In this chapter, I show you the various facets of portrait photography and give you an inkling of what's to come.

Becoming a Portrait Photographer

A portrait is a picture that conveys a likeness of a person, especially his face. When someone views a good portrait of someone they know, the subject is instantly recognizable. When someone views a great portrait of anybody, even a stranger knows something about the subject. A great portrait reveals a person's character, attitude, outlook on life, and so much more. When you create a portrait, your job is to reveal something about the person you photograph. When someone else looks at the photo and says you really captured the person's essence, you know you've done your job.



Capturing a portrait that reveals more than a person's physical likeness is easier if you know the person you're photographing. However, you can still create a great portrait of a relative stranger if you take your time and establish rapport with the person. Creating a compelling portrait is more than just taking a picture. Talking with your subjects will reveal things they're interested in. When you see the person's expression change after talking about something they're interested in, ask a couple of questions about the topic, and then start photographing.

After you engage your subject to bring out her best, another task you must tackle is getting your subject to relax. Unless your subject is a professional model, she's going to be shy in front of the camera. The smiles may end up looking forced, the facial expressions phony, and so on. It's like trying to get someone to smile after they've received a letter from the IRS telling them to report for a tax audit. Unless you're shooting candid portraits of people at work or play, a portrait photography session takes time. As a portrait photographer, you must slow down, relax, and take your time. Give your subject the time she deserves. If your subject can't seem to relax and is preoccupied with other thoughts, reschedule the shoot at a time that's convenient for your subject.

Your job as a portrait photography is twofold: getting your subject to put on a happy face and knowing how to capture that happy face digitally for posterity. To do those things, you must get to know your equipment — know how to light your subject, choose the right camera settings, and so on.

Your first foray into portrait photography may be an outright disaster. If you're not familiar with your equipment, you won't be able to devote time to your subject. If you spend too much time fiddling with your equipment, your subject will quickly lose interest, and you won't be able to capture a natural portrait. Let's face it, some people need to be the center of attention, and this is especially true when you're capturing a portrait of a person. Be prepared ahead of time, and your photo shoot will flow.



If you're shooting a formal portrait, always set up your equipment and backdrop before your subject arrives.

Photographing Friends and Family

Photographing people you know and love may seem like a piece of cake, but sometimes knowing the people you're photographing makes the job harder. They may trivialize your interest in photography. They may look at you and think, "There he is with the camera again." This is when you need to take control and let your subjects know that you're a serious photographer, and your goal is to make them look their best. In these situations, you end up being coach, cheerleader, and task master.

Anybody can take a picture of a person. All you need to do is grab a camera, point it at the person, click the shutter, and you've got the shot. (Hmmm . . . guess that's why some digital cameras are called *point-and-shoot*.) The way to get a good portrait is to find a great location, use the proper equipment with the right settings, and work with your subject(s). You're the artist. You'll have to tell your subject how to pose, tilt her head, and get her to put her best face forward. Natural smiles are a good thing. Forced grimaces do not make good portraits. When you're shooting a portrait of a person on location, you need to pick the best area based on the scenery and available lighting. This may involve taking lots of pictures to get a few good ones. But that's the beauty of digital photography. You can see what you've got on the LCD monitor and know whether you've captured the quintessential portrait of your subject or a picture that's a candidate for the trash bin.

If you're shooting a formal portrait of someone you know, you need to set up the shot, arrange the lighting, and choose the proper camera settings. In addition, you need to tell your subject what to do, pose him in a pleasing manner, and then put him at ease. Yes, it is a daunting task. That's why the pros get big bucks for creating professional portraits.



Relax your subject and get her to laugh by telling her that the area in front of your camera is a "No Blink" zone.

When you decide to pursue portrait photography seriously, let your friends and family know your goals. They'll be more supportive and won't think you're being a nuisance when you ask to take their pictures. In exchange for a portrait session, tell your subject he'll get an 8 x 10 print of his favorite picture from the shoot. You can get quality prints from online printing companies such as Mpix and Shutterfly. Another good idea is to create a small photo book of your best shots. Then when a photogenic family moves into the neighborhood, you can introduce yourself as the neighborhood portrait photographer. You can also use your brag book at parties and social functions. When you show people a photo book of your best work, they'll know you're a serious photographer. Sweeten the deal with a free print and you've got another subject. I carry a 4-x-4-inch book of my portrait work with me at all times. Showing it to friends and colleagues has resulted in many interesting photo opportunities. For online printing and photo book resources, see Chapter 15.



Your best shots generally come at the end of a session. Let your subject know ahead of time how long your session will run. As the session moves to a conclusion, your subject will become more comfortable in front of the camera.

Creating candid portraits

Candid portraits are wonderful. You capture people doing what they do best, having fun or just being themselves. When you shoot candid portraits,

you're like a fly on the wall. You've got the camera ready to go with all the right settings dialed in. Then when you see your subject doing something interesting, compose your picture, click the shutter button, and you've got an interesting photo.

You can create a candid portrait anywhere. If it's your nephew's first birthday party, make sure you've got your camera ready when he gets a piece of his birthday cake. You'll end up with wonderful portraits of a laughing child with a mouthful of cake, frosting-streaked hair, and gooey fingers. Remember to capture a photo of the tyke's parents hosing him off after the party. When the child grows older, his parents will appreciate the portrait, and the now-grown child may be interested in it — or embarrassed beyond belief.

To capture good candid portraits, take your camera with you wherever you go. In time, your family and friends will get used to the fact that you've always got a camera tethered to your neck, so they won't always be on guard, which makes it much easier to catch them in the act of being themselves.

If you have a digital SLR (single-lens reflex) with a zoom lens that looks like a bazooka, you'll have a hard time being the fly on the wall. If you fall into this category, I suggest getting a good point-and-shoot camera as a second camera. My Canon digital SLR looks quite intimidating with a telephoto zoom attached, so I have a small Canon point-and-shoot that I take with me when I'm running errands, or visiting friends. The point-and-shoot is relatively innocuous, so I carry it with me wherever I go, even into restaurants. You never know when something interesting will happen. When I see something that piques my curiosity, I capture it digitally with my trusty point-and-shoot. I show you all you need to know about buying a second camera in Chapter 3.

Creating formal portraits

Formal portraits are used for many things. Sometimes your subject wants a formal portrait to hang on the wall. At other times, a formal portrait is used for business purposes, such as a company brochure or business card. If one of your friends or relatives needs a portrait for business purposes, you can get the job done. A head shot or head-and-shoulders shot is the accepted format for formal business pictures. You can create formal portraits using a makeshift studio in your home, on location, or in your subject's office. (See Figure 1-1.)

When you photograph any portrait, it's important to light your subject correctly. An on-camera flash is never a good option for formal portraits. If you must use a flash, it's best to bounce the flash off a white surface such as a nearby wall or the ceiling. You can also use a bounce card. Better yet, use two light sources. Portrait lighting is covered in detail in Chapter 7.



Figure 1-1: Creating a formal portrait at your subject's workplace.

Capturing a slice-of-life portrait

Sometimes you can tell a lot about a person by photographing possessions that are special to the person. When you create this type of portrait, you don't even need the person in the photograph. People who know the person will automatically connect her with the photograph based on what's in the photo. I call this a slice-of-life portrait. In essence, it's a still life that tells a lot about a person, without really showing the person. I show you some techniques for creating a slice-of-life portrait in Chapter 9.

Photographing children

Kids do the darndest things, especially the young ones. But they can also be like a bull in a China shop, moving every which way but where you want them to move. Getting a child to sit still is like getting a straight answer from

your congressman. And forget about the bit that children should be seen and not heard. If you're photographing young children, you'll hear them: The din can get rather loud. You may also have a failure to communicate. You get your best kid photographs when you photograph a child who knows and trusts you. If you can create a rapport with the child, or for that matter, any subjects, perhaps you will get the shots you're after. Your best bet is to have the child's parents at the shoot. They can stand behind you and get the child to do what you want her to. Maybe.

You'll get some great shots if the child has something to occupy his attention. Props like a favorite stuffed toy, a blanket, or some candy gives the child something to interact with. (See Figure 1-2.) If you know the child, you can get some interesting photos by playing a game of hide and seek. When you find the child, snap a head-and-shoulders portrait that shows his gleeful expression and sense of innocence. If you want to create portraits of your kids, check out Chapter 6.



Figure 1-2: Bribing a child with candy.

Photographing pets

Unfortunately, pets have shorter lifespans than their human masters. When they are no longer with us, photos are all we have to help us remember our furry, feathered, or scaled friends. You can capture wonderful photos of your pet at play, or you can take more formal snapshots of your pet. Your pet's patience and trust in you and your equipment will determine the quality of shot you can get. If your pet is trained, you can capture a great portrait with your digital camera. However, you'll often get the best shots of your pet being his goofy self. If you're photographing a friend's pet, you'll get better shots if the pet knows you. However, it's always best to have the pet's master present. She can tell the pet what to do based on your instructions.

Dogs can be great hams. A dog may pose for you, allow you to place a hat on his head, and so on. On the other hand, a cat tends to be aloof, turning away from the camera when you point it at her. But if you're patient, you can get a great photo of your cat playing, or contemplating what's on the other side of the window. Sometimes all you need to do is grab your camera when your cat's snoozing, call her name, and click the shutter. (See Figure 1-3.) Another great shot you can get is a pet with her owner. The pet will be comfortable with her owner alongside. Kids and pets are also a recipe for wonderful photographs.



Figure 1-3: Photographing your cat can be a challenge.

Creating animal portraits

If you live near a zoo or a wildlife preserve, you can capture some wonderful photographs of animals. Armed with a digital SLR with a telephoto lens, or a point-and-shoot camera with a zoom lens that has a long focal length, you can get some great images. When you photograph at a zoo, you're a safe distance from the animals. However, when you photograph animals in the wild, you must exercise caution. Recently, while I was photographing some gorgeous white egrets at the Venice Rookery, a representative from the Audubon Society told me about the Rookery's resident alligator. When he saw I had a telephoto lens, he chuckled and told me he had to be on the lookout for tourists with point-and-shoot cameras that would try to walk within a few feet of the reptile to take a picture. Alligators may seem lethargic, but they can move quite quickly when provoked. Always keep a safe distance from any wild animal, including cats and dogs that may be roaming in your neighborhood. I show you some useful techniques for photographing wildlife and animals in Chapter 6.

Shooting Portraits on Location

When you decide to capture a digital portrait, the next decision is where to take the picture. Studio-type photographs with a colorful background are great for business photographs and formal portraits. But you can also get some great shots by photographing people on location. I find that people have a tendency to be more relaxed when they're outdoors. Recently I photographed a family at their home. I took most of the pictures outside of their home. The location was fantastic; their house was right on the water with lush foliage in the yard. I also took some photos inside their house, but the ones they liked best — the ones that were the most natural — were those that were taken outdoors. The family eventually ended up using one of the photos for their holiday greeting card.

Photographing people in parks and public places

Parks and scenic parts of town are wonderful places to create compelling portraits of anybody. The background is what makes photographs in a park or on a photogenic city street so special. When you photograph a person outdoors, your subject is the center of interest. A background that is in sharp focus gives the viewer too many details. Your job is to choose the proper lens and exposure settings to render the background as a pleasant out-of-focus blur. After all, you're taking a picture of your subject, not the scenery.

Of course, when you shoot outdoors, lighting is very important. If you shoot in adverse lighting conditions such as direct sunlight at high noon, your subject will have harsh shadows on his face, which will reveal wrinkles, or character lines, if you will. If your subject is female, showing skin texture is never a good thing. Shooting at the right time of day usually ensures that you'll get

a pleasing portrait. If the lighting is harsh, find some shade and use fill flash. (See Figure 1-4.) I show you how to enlighten your subjects with fill flash in Chapter 7.



Figure 1-4: Using fill flash to shed a little light on your subjects.

Photographing subjects at work and play

Another location in which you can photograph people is where they work or play. If you have a friend or relative who's an attorney or architect, you can get some wonderful shots in his office, but this type of photo shoot can be quite challenging. You've got to work with the office lighting, which may be quite harsh, or use an external flash unit. In an office, distractions are abundant during business hours. If your subject gets an important phone call, she'll have to take it. This destroys the flow of the photo shoot. If the phone call is from an angry client, your subject will not be very photogenic when she returns. I remember photographing an attorney who had to answer an important phone call. The photo shoot was going great up to that point, but when he returned, I couldn't get him to relax. His mind was on what transpired over the phone, not on the photo shoot.

Another great way to tell a story about your subject is to photograph him doing his favorite hobby. If your subject paints watercolor, for instance, photograph him while he's painting. (See Figure 1-5.) The resulting photograph tells viewers a lot about your subject. Your subject will treasure the photograph for years to come.



Figure 1-5: Capture a portrait of someone at play.

Capturing Portraits in Your Home

If you're like me, you have a camera nearby at all times. And even if you're not like me, you should consider having a camera nearby at all times. You never know when a digital-photo moment will present itself. All you need to do is be observant.

Capturing candid photos in your home

Your job as the card-carrying photo geek is to digitally record the family history. You can be your own candid camera director, and your family and friends can be your stooges . . . er, I mean *subjects*. A candid portrait can be

funny or serious. A candid portrait is not posed. As a photographer, you train yourself to look for interesting situations. When you're at home, these happen when you least expect them. For example, you can capture a candid portrait of your wife in deep concentration as she prepares a meal. The possibilities are endless if you keep your eyes open.

Using studio techniques in your home

If you've been bitten by the studio bug, you want serious portraits with formal backgrounds and studio lighting. Renting a studio is expensive. However, with a bit of work, you can convert a room in your house to a home studio within minutes. All you need is a blank wall, a background, and some means of lighting your subject. Using these techniques, you get a portrait that looks like it was photographed in a studio. (See Figure 1-6.) I cover home studio techniques in Chapter 9.



Figure 1-6: Creating a studio portrait at home.

Visualizing Your Photograph

Anybody can point a camera at something or somebody, press the shutter button, and create a photograph. The resulting photograph may or may not be good, but that's not really photography. True photography involves more than just random chance. True photography requires you to study your subject and then visualize the resulting photograph in your mind's eye. When you visualize the photograph, you know the focal length needed to capture your vision, the camera settings to use, and the vantage point from which to shoot your image. Only when all these decisions are made do you point the camera and press the shutter button.

Editing Your Work

After you get to know your camera like the back of your hand, and after you gain confidence in some of the techniques in this book, you'll start taking a lot of pictures of people. This is where many amateur photographers lose it. They download gobs of photos to their computer hard drive and just leave them there. Computer image-editing software enables you to sort through your images and organize them. After all, do you really want to search through a couple of hundred — or thousand — photos to locate the image of Aunt Molly that you photographed sometime last year? If you use Photoshop Elements to download and organize your photos, and follow the workflow I suggest in Chapter 10, you'll be able to find specific images in no time flat.

Back in the days of film, photographers edited their work in darkrooms. An image-editing application like Photoshop Elements is your digital darkroom. Within your digital darkroom you have the tools to retouch your photos and much more. This comes in handy if you capture some great pictures of your son that are perfect with the exception of a few pimples. You can easily remove the pimples and apply other enhancements to the photo using the techniques I show you in Chapter 11. After you've edited your images to pixel perfection, you can print them using Photoshop Elements and a printer attached to your computer as shown in Chapter 12. Or you can use an online printer like one of the ones I mention in Chapter 15.