Introduction to Portraiture

Kanata Seniors' Centre Camera Club March 5, 2021

Manfred Mueller

What is a portrait?

A photograph of a person, in which the face and its expression is predominant.

Modern Portraiture

- May or may not show the whole face
- May include animals
 - Pets, Domestic Animals or Wildlife
- May be of more than one person
 - "Group shots"
- May show something about the subject
 - Environmental Portraiture normally work or play environment
 - Props
- Wedding, baby and graduation images are often portraits

Equipment

- Cameras
- Lenses

Camera / Lenses

- For single subject
 - Short to medium telephoto lens
 - Full frame equivalent of 70 200mm
 - For outdoors focal lengths up to full frame equivalent of 400mm
- Groups / Speciality Point of View (PoV)
 - Wide angle to short telephoto lens
 - Full frame equivalent of 24 70mm
- Minimize distortion physical distance to subject
- Stay out of subject(s) personal space

Directing your subject

- A portrait is a collaboration between the photographer and the subject
 - Often the subject / model has ideas as to what they want in an image
 - This is especially true for experienced models
- The photographer has to learn how to direct their model to get the desired image
 - Use verbal and non-verbal communications
 - Give the subject continuous positive feedback
- Respect your subject's personal space
 - Getting too close to your subject is the fastest way to end up with a bad shoot
 - Never touch your subject! (without permission)

Orientation

- Portraits are often done by holding the camera in a vertical or "portrait" orientation
 - The human body is longer than it is wide, so works well in this orientation
 - Suitable for display on phones, tablets and print media
- When images are primarily displayed on a computer screen, some photographers prefer using a horizontal or "landscape" orientation
 - Much more difficult to use this orientation outside of the studio



Portrait Orientation

Also called vertical orientation

Landscape Orientation

 Also known as horizontal orientation



The "Classic" portrait shot

- This is probably the best place to start
- Once you have mastered this, it is easier to move on to more complex shots

- My favourite outdoor shooting area at home is a covered south-facing porch at the front of my house
- Having the subject looking straight at the camera is quite common in portraiture
- If the subject makes contact with the face or other parts of the body, make sure that they just barely contact it
 - Deforming the touch points looks strange
- Most portraits are taken at the subject's eye level of a few cm above or below the eyes



- No need for the subject to look straight at the camera
 - Looking straight ahead along the nose works well
- "Cheesy" smiles do not make for strong portraits
- Clenched jaws don't either.
- Lips that barely touch work well
 - I tell my subjects to allow a small gap that they can blow a bit of air through



Standard Crops

- These crops are commonly used in portraiture
- All of the five crops shown are the same image, only the cropped area changes

Full body Shot

- Not as commonly used in professional portraits
 - Amateurs often default to this crop
- Subject can be standing or sitting
- Face has the least amount of space
- There has to be a good reason to include feet and / or footwear
 - Weddings often use this crop to show off wedding attire



Three-Quarter Shot

- A very common crop
- Gets a better view of the face and is still effective in showing off the clothing
- Crop above the knees



Head & Chest Shot

 A waist-height crop shows the subject's torso and head.



Head & Shoulders Shot

- This is a fairly common portraiture crop that is fairly close up and concentrates on the subject's face.
- The shoulders are included to anchor the head to the image



Head Shot

- This is a very specialized portrait and is often used in photo identification documents
- Anyone who is a model will have a number of head shots that they use as part of their resumes.
 - The top of the head may or may not be cropped
 - The crop (unless the subject is balding) shows a contiguous hairline



Lighting

- Indoor Natural Light
- Outdoor Natural Light
- Artificial Light
 - Usually Small Flash / Speed lights

Indoor Natural Lighting

- North facing window
- "Golden Hour" light
- Indirect light

- This is my favourite indoor portrait area in my house.
- There is a large south facing window to the camera right, just behind me.
 - Not suitable on sunny mornings
- There is a very large north-facing window straight ahead and above the stairs



Same location on another day



Outdoors – Natural Light

- Overcast day
- Closed shade subject under overhead cover
 - May need supplemental light
- Open shade subject in shade but with open sky above
 - Can have hot spots on parts of the face
- Golden Hour
 - Ensure that the skin colour is "correct"!

Avoid hard mid-day sunlight!!!

Artificial Light

- Generally flash is used
 - Small flash that is "bounced" off a wall or ceiling
 - Direct flash provides unflattering light
- Ambient artificial light is generally of low intensity and not ideal for portraiture
 - Try to stay away from fluorescent or LED lights of any kind!
 - They generally result in poor colour rendering accuracy
 - Other than the very expensive lights made for photography

 Kino Flo, etc.

- Small flash (speedlight) rotated to bounce of wall & ceiling behind photographer.
- Upper Canada Village



Special techniques

- Profile
- Silhouette

Profile

- A profile shot has the subject looking parallel to the sensor plane
- Ideally the nose and forehead position completely block the eye, eyelashes and eyebrows on the hidden side of the face



Silhouette

- This image was taken using a Dollar Store shower curtain liner placed in front of a large light source
- The subject was placed around 2m in front of the shower curtain.
- A large picture window (preferably north-facing) would make a good light source.
 - Just attach the liner using painter's tape



Environmental Portrait

- An environmental portrait gives the viewer some insight into the subject
- Often used to show a subject engaged in work or hobby

In the Recording Studio

 Just enough of a hint for viewers to understand what is happening



Props

- A prop is an element inserted into a portrait to add interest to the image
 - Props have to used very effectively, otherwise they can overwhelm the subject
 - We don't want the prop to become the main subject!

Props

Props like balloons



Background

 Many photographers are so busy with their subject that they forget about what is happening behind the subject

Poorly chosen backgrounds will ruin a nice portrait!

Mother Nature does the best backgrounds

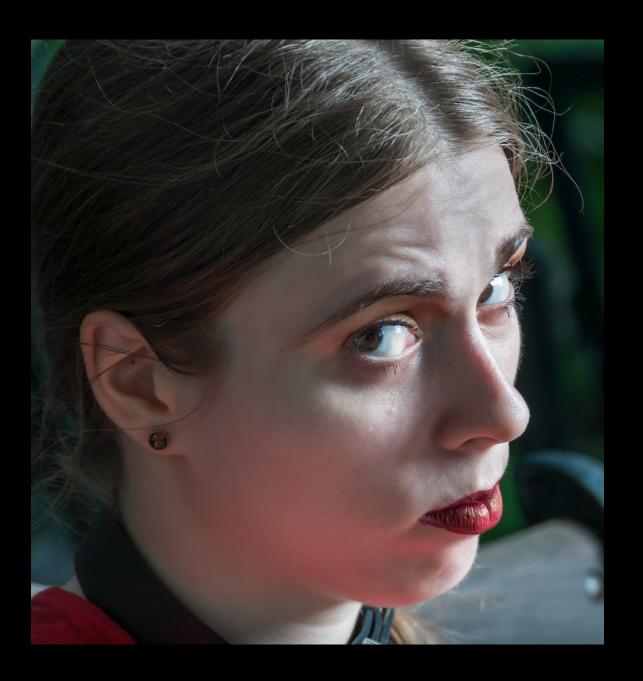
- Fall shoot in Vincent Massey Park
- Long focal length (200mm) and fast lens shot wide open (f/2.8)
 - Beautifully blurred fall leaves
 - Shot from low position



Portraiture Traps & Tips

 These are common mistakes everyone makes while learning how to shoot portraits

Now that you know about them, try to avoid them!



• Three major errors in this image

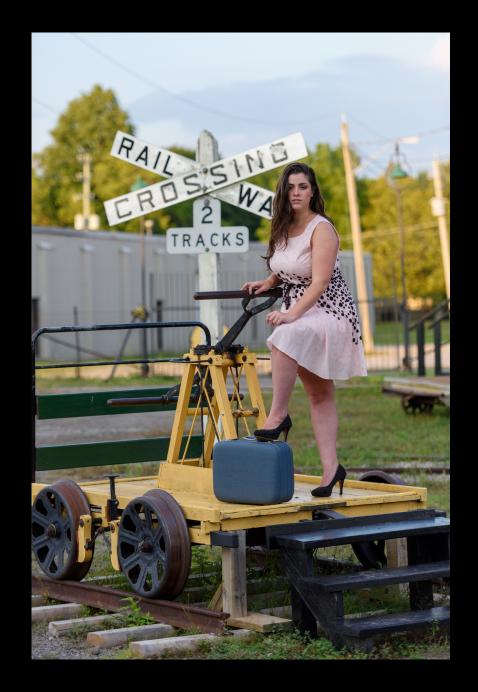
- Eyes turned so hard to the camera left side that the whites of the eyes are very large on camera right side and non-existent on the camera left side
 - Try to get "reasonable" balance of the iris and the whites of the eyes
- Nose cuts (extends past) cheekbone
 - Disrupts the visual flow
 - Makes the eye behind the nose look very strange
- My shooting position is too high



- What's that white thing sticking out of the model's head?
- Check for distractions and change your shooting position or your subject's position BEFORE taking the shot

Busy backgrounds ruin images

- If the background is too busy, the model cannot compete with it
 - Make sure that the background works before you shoot!



Amputations

- These work well when they are done properly
 - Cut above any joint
 - Cut the top of the head above the hairline
- Don't
 - Cut off fingers
 - Or toes





Unexplained Appendages

Whose fingers are those anyways?



Hats

- Hats can be very problematic as they tend to cast a shadow on the subject's face.
- Shooting a subject with a hat often requires supplemental lighting or brightening of affected areas in postprocessing

Eyes

- The eyes, especially the eye closest to the camera, has to be sharp
 - Matrix style focus rarely works well and misses correct focus.
 - Eye detect mirrorless appears to work well
 - For DSLRs using a single focus point and recomposing works very well



Hands

- Watch the hands!
 - Posed from the side they are slim and unobtrusive
 - Posed straight on they can be distracting and even paw or claw like
 - A bent wrist at a strange angle can draw attention to itself and end up being a distracting element



The End!