

Introduction to Portraiture

Kanata Seniors' Centre Camera Club

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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 be 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 post-processing

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!