How to Photograph your Fine Art with Professional Results

What you need:

Digital Point and Shoot camera that has a “manual” mode setting. Digital SLR is OK too.

An inexpensive photo tripod to hold your camera.

Four clamp on lamp holders with reflectors.

Four household spiral fluorescent bulbs.

Two movable five foot tall vertical stands to clamp lights on to.

An easel to hold your artwork.

An 18% gray card.

A room with about eight feet by eight feet of clear floor space.

What is this all about?

Taking quality photographs of fine art is one of the “holy grails” that many artists seek. Especially those that wish to exhibit their work in galleries and juried art fairs, display their work in the internet, create catalogs of their work, or just archive the work they have done over the years.

Those that are uninformed think that there is some great mystery involved, something that takes expensive equipment and years of photographic training. Baloney! It is all about what you as an artist work with all day long. It is all about LIGHT! Nothing more, nothing less. Have you ever noticed that your artwork looks different when viewed outdoors, by a table lamp, or in the kitchen? Why? What is different about all those different locations? LIGHT! The light is different due to the type of lighting used. Outdoor light has a blue cast to it, table lamps with incandescent bulbs are orange and fluorescent bulbs can be just about any color you want. Each light source has a slightly different color depending on what the source is and how it was made. With all these different light sources, it would seem that we have a big problem. How do we choose the correct one to photograph art with? With film cameras that was the primary cause of suicide in photographers – just kidding. With film you had to have just the right light, the

light that the film was designed for. But we are using digital and frankly we just don't care what light we use. That's right we just don't care.

Why don't we care?

We don't care because digital cameras are REALLY SMART. Film and film cameras are as dumb as a box of rocks when it comes to the color of light. Digital cameras are "brainiacs" compared to film. All you have to do with a digital camera is tell it what color your light is and it does the rest. No sorcery, magic or PhD required. All you need is an 18% gray card and some lights that are all the SAME color or shade of white.

White is White – isn't it?

Yeah right! If you believe that I have a bridge for sale. Grab a canvas for oil painting, a sheet of watercolor paper, some copy paper and maybe a sheet of drawing paper. Which one is white? They all are, right. Wrong! White is a reflection of all colors equally balanced, that is, in a perfect world. Our world is not perfect, the colors are not reflected equally resulting in some shade of white just like the blues you use in your artwork. No such thing as a standard blue or WHITE. Humans tend to be pretty smart as a group. If we can't figure out what white is how can a digital camera?

18% gray = White. What?

Digital camera makers long ago had to have a standard by which they could calibrate their cameras. They needed something that the engineer/camera designer in Japan, the photographer in South America, or the Artist in Ocala, Florida could use to tell the camera what shade of white the light was that was falling on the subject. So they decided to use the century old standard exposure card, the 18% gray card. Gray? I thought we were talking about white? What about white? It turns out that as long as you choose something that is the same color everywhere it really does not matter as long as it reflects all colors back to the camera equally. An 18% gray card does this beautifully. The 18% gray card is a STANDARD world wide. Any 18% gray card produced anywhere will reflect the same balance of colors back to your camera. It is our digital Rosetta stone! The key to perfect colors.

That was the most complicated part of the whole thing– the rest is EASY!

Get your camera. Read the Manual.

Sorry but you have to read your camera manual. You have to know where to set the WHITE BALANCE. From here on out it is all simply a matter of mechanics. Turn a few

knobs or drill through a few menus. All digital cameras are slightly different and I can't specifically tell you how to set your camera. All I can do is give you the knowledge and set you off on your own.

There are four things about your digital camera that you will have to be able to set. Open up your camera instruction manual and figure out how to do the following:

Manual Mode

Somewhere, somehow, you can twist a dial or change a menu item to place your camera in manual mode. This means that the camera allows you to make some choices that are otherwise done automatically. Automatic mode in most cases is great but not when you are taking photos of art.

Turn off the flash

You absolutely CANNOT take photos of your art with the on camera flash. Forget about it! Figure out how to turn off the flash. Most cameras have a way to do this with a button that you press. When the flash is off you will probably see a circle with a lightning bolt in it. When the flash is off it will have a diagonal line through it.

Custom or Preset White Balance

READ YOUR MANUAL and figure out how to set Custom or Preset White Balance. This is fundamental to this whole operation. If you can't do this just quit now.

Exposure Compensation

Exposure compensation is a fancy term for making the photo lighter or darker. Adding (+) compensation makes the picture lighter, subtracting (-) makes it darker. Does not change the color. Adjust until you just start losing detail in your highlight (bright) areas and then back off a bit.

Nuts and Bolts. Here is what you need:

Digital Point and Shoot camera that has a "manual" mode setting. Digital SLR is OK too.

4 to 8 megapixels is just fine. Megapixels and quality are not related. If you are shooting for the web or for a letter sized pages, 4 megapixels are fine. If you are going to do a 24" x 36" canvas ink jet print – find a pro to shoot it. You ain't going do it with a point and shoot.

An inexpensive photo tripod to hold your camera.

Go to Ritz Camera, Best Buy or Circuit City. Buy an inexpensive one. Whatever you can afford. You have to have one but it does not have to be pro quality.

Four clamp on lamp holders with reflectors.

Visit Lowes or Home Depot. Get 4 clamp on reflector lights. About eight bucks each.

Four household spiral fluorescent bulbs.

Buy 4 in the same pack so they are EXACTLY alike. This is VERY important. Look for a package marked Daylight, Soft White etc. The package should mention some sort of color temperature. The unmarked ones are sometimes very green in color cast and hard to balance.

Two movable five foot tall vertical stands to clamp your lights to.

Anything you can clamp your new lights to and move around. A tall chair works great. A 5' tall 2x4 and a 24"x24" piece of plywood screwed to one end is perfect.

An easel to hold your artwork.

You are an artist! You must have at least one laying around.

An 18% gray card.

The "Rosetta Stone". Get one from a local camera dealer. They may have to order it for you. Less than 20 bucks for two. Also get it on line. BHPhotovideo.com, Adorama.com. Search for Gray Card or Grey Card. Kodak and Delta are good brands.

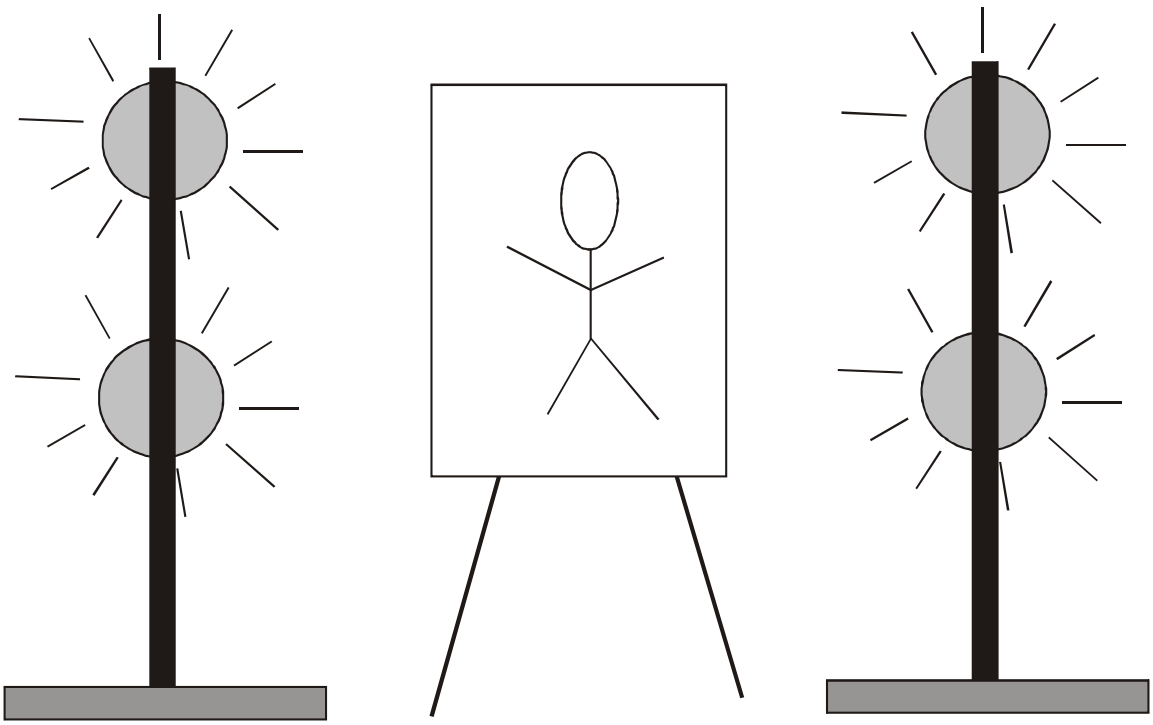
A room with about eight feet by eight feet of clear floor space.

You need room to work!

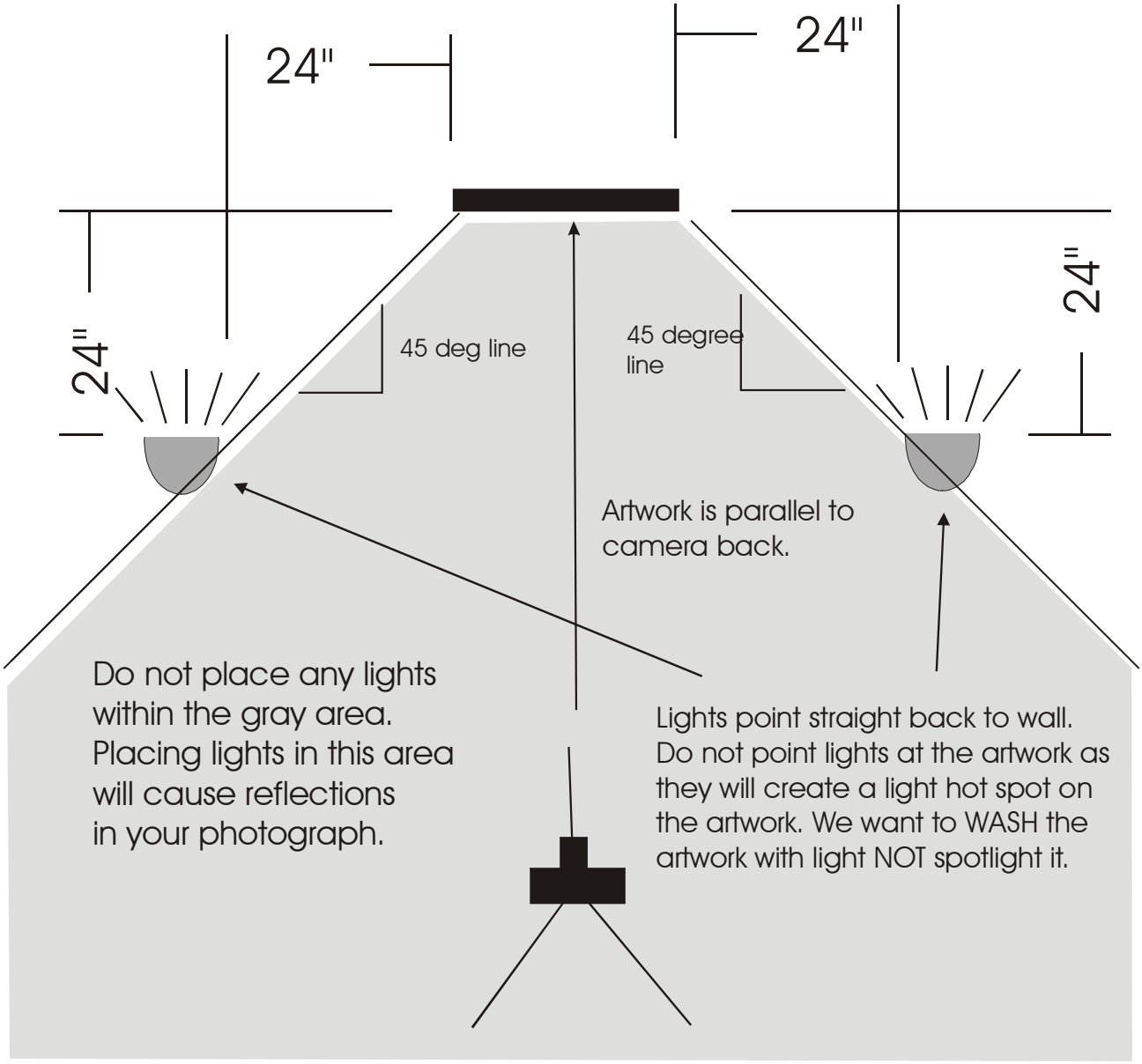
All the rest is mechanical. You have to setup your lights according to the diagrams, set your camera and shoot.

Set it all up

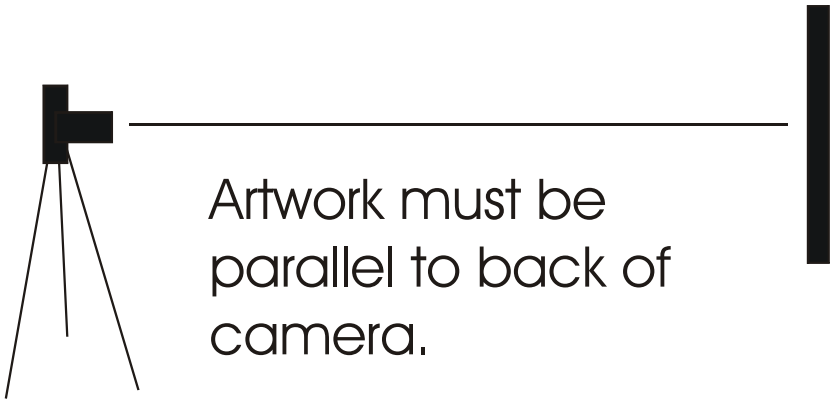
Setup your lights.



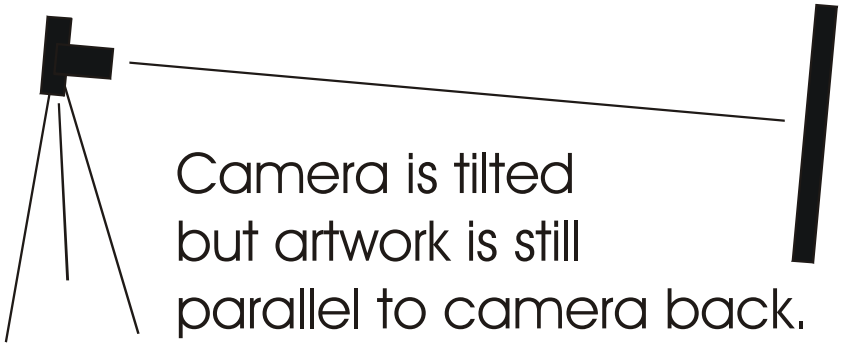
Evenly wash the surface of your artwork with light from your reflectors. Point the lights at the wall behind your art so the light washes across the work.



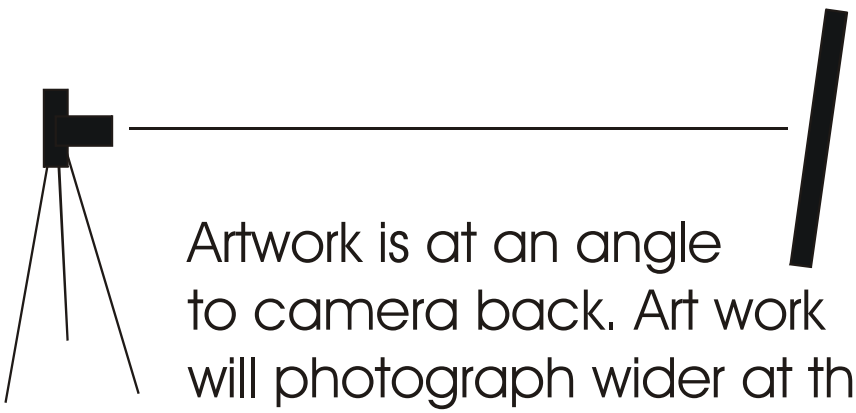
Avoid the Parallax problem!



Artwork must be parallel to back of camera.



Camera is tilted but artwork is still parallel to camera back.



Artwork is at an angle to camera back. Art work will photograph wider at the top. Not acceptable!

Set your camera and start taking photographs

Set your camera to Manual Mode

Turn Off the on camera flash.

Position your lights
Position your lights according to the diagrams and turn them on. They must be on for at least 10 minutes to warm up and color stabilize.

Turn off all the lights in the room.
Close the blinds or curtains. Do not let any extraneous light shine upon your work. Bright sunlight is a NO NO, as are bright fluorescent lights or table lamps. The room should be as dark as possible other than your clamp on lights. Night time is good.

Set the White Balance.
Place your camera in Custom/Preset White Balance mode. There will be a way to actually set the white balance by taking a picture of your new 18% gray card. Follow your camera manual. This is the MOST important step of the process. When you are ready to set the white balance place the 18% gray card on the easel right on top of your art work. Move up close to the gray card with your camera OFF the tripod. Fill the entire viewfinder with the gray card. Focus is NOT important. Zoom in if you have to. Don't shade the card. Press the shutter. If the white balance was set the camera may indicate something like the word "good" in the viewfinder. Once you set the white balance your camera is calibrated. Colors will now record accurately as long as you do not change the lighting.

White balance settings

			
Custom balance by 18% grey card	Flash	Cool white fluorescent	Daylight

Time to take pictures.

Place your camera on your tripod. Align the back plane of the camera with the plane of your artwork so the sides of your work are parallel with the sides of the viewfinder.

Now just snap a photo and look at the result. Make sure your highlights are not blown out. Look at the detail in the bright areas. Can you see it all? If not adjust the exposure compensation until the brightness is good.

Finally look at your pictures on your computer monitor. Look at the highlights and shadows. Make sure the detail is there. If not re shoot and adjust the exposure compensation. Remember, unless you have a color calibrated monitor, the colors of your photo will not look like your art work. Sorry but that's the way it is.

What this WILL do for you.

If you send your image file to a professional lab and tell them NOT to color correct your prints you should get a pretty accurate print color wise.

If you send your image file to someone that has a color calibrated monitor they WILL see accurate colors. Art galleries, magazines, photo labs, professional photographers will have such equipment. Hopefully that juried art show will too – but don't bet on it. A lot of them are run by amateurs.

What this WON'T do for you.

Your photo won't look right on your monitor or your friends monitor.

Unless you have a color calibrated computer monitor your photo will NOT look the same as your artwork. In fact it will look different on every monitor you view it on. The image file that you have created has all the correct colors in it but in order to view it on your monitor with true colors, you have to have a calibrated monitor. That is another seminar and about $250.00 in hardware.

Your photo won't necessarily print on your printer with the correct colors.

Unless you have a calibrated printer and your printer driver is setup correctly you will not get accurate colors. Just a fact of life. But try it – you may get close!

Success! Looks just like the original!

Notes:

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Professional Fine Art Photography

Albert Sanowskis
(352) 591-1080
Fairfield, FL

Website: www.Stroboflash.com

Email: Stroboflash@atlantic.net

Services:

Bound Hardcover Portfolio Books

Fine Art Photography for portfolios, the web, galleries, magazines, and jury submissions.

Sculpture photography.

Technical Photography – subjects requiring high degrees of technical precision.

Commercial Product photography

Portraits

Weddings