

# Photographing 2-D Art with a Digital Camera

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Photo by Traci Bealka Schultz

## *Seven mistakes artists make when photographing their art*

**I**ncreasingly, online galleries and social media are becoming major sources for artists to show, promote, and sell their art. The need for quality photography has never been more important.

Modern digital “point-and-shoot” cameras are a miracle of technology. They are fully capable of taking quality photographs of your art. They automatically focus, set the exposure, easily zoom in and out and—most of the time—they give you great color photographs. Best of all, you can see an immediate preview of the photo and make necessary adjustments.

But digital cameras are not perfect. If you want quality photographs of your art, expect to invest a little time learning how to use your digital camera effectively.

### **The seven mistakes artists make**

Here are seven mistakes you might be making when photographing your art, and what you can do to correct them. These are simple mistakes to correct, but uncorrected, they can keep you out of galleries, exhibits, and art fairs. Most important, poor photography will keep your art from selling.

**1** **One of the simplest mistakes artists make is failing to align the camera straight-on with the artwork**, thus distorting the shape of the art. Have you ever tried taking a photo of a building only to have the building look like it’s leaning backwards? That’s a perspective problem known as *keystoning*, and it’s caused by the building and

the camera lens being on two different angles. The same effect can happen when photographing art. If you are off to the side, above, or below the painting you get a keystoning effect. **To avoid keystoning you need to position yourself so the camera is centered in the middle of the painting.** The camera lens needs to be at the same angle as the art. When you are off to the side or shooting up or down, the artwork will be distorted.

**2** **Another type of distortion is associated with zoom lenses.** Barrel distortion comes from using the wide-angle end of your zoom lens. This can cause the image to curve, creating a slight fisheye effect. **To avoid this barrel distortion, set the camera’s lens in the middle of the zoom range.**

**3** **While you are correcting for these distortions, make sure you fill the frame with the artwork.** Taking a tiny photograph of the art in the middle of the image gives you a low-resolution image that needs to be cropped before using. By cropping you are lowering the image resolution and limiting the size the image can be reproduced.

With a zoom lens on a digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) type of camera it is pretty easy to fill the frame because you can precisely adjust the zoom until the frame is filled. With point-and-shoot cameras it’s a little more difficult. The built-in motorized zooms never stop exactly where you want.

**Select a focal length in the middle of your zoom range (to avoid barrel distortion) then physically move your camera closer or further away from the art until you fill the frame.** For both consistent alignment and filling the frame, set your camera on a steady tripod and the job will be much easier.



The image at left is correctly centered. The middle image illustrates when the camera is off to one side, and at right, the camera is aimed up at the painting. (Mistake #1) Off-centered photos turn the painting into a trapezoid shape. The right image was also taken with the zoom set to wide angle, and you can see how the edges of the art are curved because of barrel distortion. (Mistake #2)

**4 Blurred and out-of-focus images will make your photographs unusable.** No one wants to look at images that are out of focus. There are two causes of out-of-focus photographs—failure to hold the camera steady and the camera can't focus on the artwork.

Taking photographs with point-and-shoot cameras under low light conditions, such as indoors, is especially difficult. This problem is easily resolved by using a tripod. ***If you want sharp photos, make a modest investment in a tripod to avoid camera blur and improve your ability to fill the frame and properly align the image.***

These are correct setups for both a point-and-shoot camera and a DSLR camera. A tripod holds the camera steady, the camera is at the same angle as the painting, and the lens is pointed at the center of the painting.



The problem with the point-and-shoot camera's failure to focus properly is a little more difficult to resolve. Auto focus systems make it much easier to get sharp photographs, but when it comes to photographing 2D flat art, sometimes the auto focus does not work very well.

And that is because auto-focus cameras need something of contrast in the image to figure out where to focus. Many of the point-and-shoot cameras only focus in a small area in the center of the viewfinder.



This view of the LCD Viewfinder on a digital point-and-shoot camera shows the little rectangle in the middle where the camera is focusing, or in this case, not focusing. Something of contrast needs to be in the rectangle for the auto focus to work correctly. (Mistake #4)

If you lack contrast or the focus area is filled with solid color, your camera's auto-focus system may not work. It will just whirl back and forth looking for something to focus on. You could switch to manual focus, but the small LED screens on point-and-shoot cameras make it almost impossible to manually focus.

***Find something of contrast in the painting to focus on. Once in focus, re-center the artwork in the frame and take the photograph.*** Since focus systems on different camera brands work differently, it's a good idea to review the instructions in your camera's user manual. They may offer better techniques to focus on works of art.

**5 Sometimes you can't see the artwork because of glare and reflections.** Glare and reflections are caused by photographing art when it's framed behind glass or plastic, or when the painting has a glossy varnish. Highly textured oil and acrylic paintings with a glossy varnish are especially prone to having severe glare and reflection problems.

Reflections ruin this photograph of a painting that is behind glass. There also is a shadow on both the left and right sides, cast by the mat. You can easily avoid these problems—just remember to take photographs BEFORE you frame.



If you work with oil or acrylics, or add a glossy varnish to your colored pencil work, photograph your art before you add varnish. For colored pencil, pastels, or watercolor, photograph your artwork before you frame it behind plastic or glass.

Some colored pencil artists are using vellum for their paintings. The plastic vellum can cause both unwanted reflections and ghosting if not pressed

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The left image shows glare and reflections on a glossy painting caused by lights too close to the camera. At right, the lights are properly spaced at 45° to the camera. (Mistake #5)

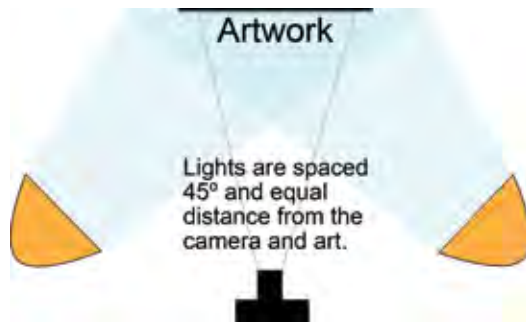
## Photographing 2-D Art...continued

flat against the white backing. *If you are using lights to take your photographs, set the lights at a 45° angle to the camera to make sure they don't reflect back into the camera lens* (see lighting diagram below). Always avoid “on-camera” flash. The flash is much too close to the lens and most of the time the flash reflects directly back into the lens or causes hot spots on the art, very similar to “Red Eye.”

This diagram shows the correct placement of artwork, camera, and lighting.

Using the same kind of lighting as well as spacing lights evenly will give you consistent color and help avoid light reflections.

(Mistakes #5 and #7)



**6** About 80% of the time you photograph your art the exposure will be perfect, but problems occur when you photograph dark (low-key) or light (high-key) art. The camera's automatic exposure system is designed for average (middle range) values and art that is at either end of the value range will confuse the metering system. It will try to compensate for the too dark or too light artwork. Consequently, low-key art is often overexposed and washed out, making it too light, and high key art will be underexposed, making it too dark.

Even the simplest point-and-shoot cameras offer easy ways to make exposure corrections. It's a system called “Exposure Compensation.” *Look for the “+/-” button on your camera to override the camera's auto exposure system.*

The +/- button works differently on different camera brands and sometimes it is hard to find. You may need to read the camera's instructions to learn how your exposure compensation system works. Using exposure compensation is easy to learn, and once you have used it a few times you will find it an easy adjustment to make.

Here you can see the exposure compensation scale on the back of a point-and-shoot camera.

In this situation, the exposure compensation is set at -2/3 of an f-stop, which slightly underexposes the painting and increases saturation.

(Mistake #6)



**7** Another big problem in photographing art is that the lighting can look uneven or off-color. When it comes to natural-looking lighting, you can't beat Auto White Balance (AWB) for improving the accuracy of the colors in your paintings. But AWB isn't perfect, especially if you are taking photos in a location that has more than one light source that gives you “mixed” lighting.

A good example is a room with both warm indoor lights and strong daylight coming through windows. Your camera becomes confused and doesn't know whether to balance for the warm indoor lighting or the cool daylight.



In this photo, the left side is lit from a window, so the color is cool. The right side is lit with an incandescent light, and looks much warmer, with an orange cast. The camera was set on AWB.

*Make sure you use only one light source*—incandescent or daylight—and let the AWB do its job. Indoors I use a couple of daylight balanced 23 watt 5000K Compact Fluorescent Lights (CFLs) in inexpensive shop lamps to photograph paintings. You can buy the CFL bulbs and light fixtures for under \$35 at any Home Depot or Lowes.

If your art is not evenly lit, it's probably because all the light is coming from one direction and isn't falling evenly on the art. This is especially obvious on large paintings. *You may need to find a location where the lighting is even.* Indoors, I like to use two lights equally spaced on both sides of the camera and at 45° to the camera to achieve even light without reflections (see lighting diagram). Outdoors in the shade or indoors with even north light are two other good choices. *If you go outdoors, watch out for reflections and glare caused by blue sky or objects behind the camera.*

**Y**ou have spent a great deal of time learning how to make great art. Learning how to photograph your art will take an investment in time, too. But don't skimp. It will make a big difference in how professional you and your art look when it comes to sales and show acceptances.

*Garry McMichael is a commercial photographer and painter located in St. Louis, Missouri. A few times each year he offers one-day workshops on how to photograph 2D and 3D art. For more information on upcoming workshops visit his website: [www.paintstlouis.org](http://www.paintstlouis.org). You can also see Garry's paintings and photography at <http://garrymcmichael.com>.*

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