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Two Articles on Photographing Your Art

(Articles from another Potters Guild newsletter.)

Hints for photographing your pottery at home

By LINDAMAU

1. Keep the background simple! No wrinkled tablecloths or patterned bedspreads. You can purchase a few yards of fabric at Hancock Fabrics or Joanne's. I like neutral gray.

2. You can get good lighting from available light outdoors on a cloudy day. No bright sunlight; the shadows are too distracting.

3. I photograph my work in the garage with a digital camera. I have 'color balanced' florescent bulbs in the ceiling (available at OSH) using either my gray fabric or a gradated photo background. (Fototone Graduated Background, No. 609, Thunder Gray, $50 bucks at K&S Photography, Palo Alto.)

4. Try turning off the flash. It makes too strong a shadow. Available light or overhead light seems to work better for me.

5. Try different angles and elevations on your set-up. If you want to show "volume" in a container, raise the angle to see inside the pot a bit.

6. Take lots of shots and throw out the worst. Label the digital images with the name and size of the piece. Years later you may want to know.

7. If you have a simple, easily available set-up that you can do at home, you are much more apt to photograph your work before it disappears in a sale or show.

8. You are all artists. Take your work seriously or no one else will either. Keep a portfolio of your work. It's always interesting to look back on your own growth as a potter.

The following article was written following a presentation to their membership.

Dan, Jill, and Susanne brought and assembled the light boxes that they've been using so that members could take a look before the talk started and pick up handouts. The main presentation was kicked off by Dan. When Dan decided to start taking his own photos, he first researched magazines such as Ceramics Monthly and books such as the Lark series (500 Teapots, 500 Cups, etc.) to see how the pros do it and to figure out what styles he liked. Susanne and Jill agreed that looking at other people's photography gives you lots of great ideas on how to stage your own work. Dan explained how he then learned through some trial and error, using the basic resources– a light box or tent, the right lighting, a gradient background, a digital camera, and a tripod – to take r

espectable product shots of his own pottery. And today, with sites such as EZcube (www.ezcube.com) and TableTopStudio (www.store.com) tabletopstudio-store.com) offering supplies for do-it-yourselfers, he reinforced that it's gotten pretty easy to take quality digital photographs.

Light box or tent

Dan and Susanne both brought their EZcubes. These light boxes come in different sizes ranging from 20" to over 50". For Dan, whose functional work rarely is larger than 15-18", the 30" cube works great. Jill's box is a kit that velcros together and came with the lights. Dan demonstrated how you can also close up the front up of the box to further control the lighting inside the box. Just insert the camera through a slit in the front panel to take shots of glossy pots, which can be challenging. Light boxes are typically under $100; Dan got his for much less, and members mentioned that it's common to see them offered on EBay, Amazon, or other online sites. Another member cautioned that there are a number of knockoffs made from lower quality materials, so be sure you know what you're buying if it isn't from the manufacturer's site.

Lighting

Dan and Jill both recommended compact fluorescent lights rather than incandescent or tungsten lights because they have a cool tone that won't warm up the color of the subject being photographed. Position lights outside both sides of the light box or tent to flood and diffuse light evenly on the inside of the enclosure. Clip-on shop lamps, floor lamps, and desk lamps all work well. The light box will diffuse sunlight too, if you choose to work outdoors with the sun. Finally, if you're not ready to purchase a light box, Dan commented that he's photographed his work outdoors on a cloudy day, and he's gotten good results that way as well.

Gradient background

To greatly enhance the final photographs, all presenters recommended buying a gradient background for your light box. The background is paper, vinyl, or other material, graduated from light to dark— generally black, grey, or blue. Dark pottery looks best against a lighter background, and vice versa. Jill commented that the material provided with her kit kept wrinkling, so she has been using different colored card stocks. Dan and Susanne purchased the vinyl material for their light boxes; it's flexible, comes in various sizes, and is easy to trim. Different members have used Gorilla tape to keep it up, hung it up with bulldog clips and pins, or attached it by applying Velcro strips. Linda Mau mentioned that she uses a few yards of fabric, which she simply hangs in her closed garage and drapes it behind a card table sitting directly below a large color-corrected fluorescent fixture. Once she's finished taking her photographs, she simply rolls the sheet up and puts it away till next time. One problem Dan noted with the gradient background is that it scuffs and scratches easily, so avoid putting rough materials on it or using it where clay dust can collect on it and scratch it when being brushed off. Dan estimated he replaces his about once a year, costing about $50. If you're careful, though, it can easily last longer.

Digital camera
Happily, most folks today already own a digital camera, and if not, they are relatively inexpensive. Dan's recommendation was for a 4-or 5-megapixel to do general-purpose work. He reminded everyone that the beauty of digital photography is that the photographs are basically free— you can take dozens of shots and only keep your best ones.

Tripod
You'll need a tripod to hold the camera steady. Tripods don't have to cost a lot (one member noted that you can often find them at thrift stores), but Jill recommended getting an adjustable one to easily position the camera at the right height for the shot. Dan suggested using a cable release to avoid moving the camera when you push the shutter; another member programs a 2-second delay as her solution to not jiggling the camera. There was a lot of lively discussion about the challenges of photographing ceramics.

Here are some of the tips that were offered by the presenters and audience members:

- Don't hold the camera too close to your pot— it's tough to focus, and the piece will look distorted.

- Grouping pieces is tricky. Objects that match can appear different sizes depending on the angles.

- Pots with a matte glaze are much easier to photograph than glossy ones. Some people use a dulling agent to reduce the gloss (one suggestion was hairspray, another is a product sold by Keeble & Shuchat); others prefer the glossy look and try various ways to get good photos (such as shooting through the front of the closed light box, as mentioned above).

- No flash!

- Record the size of each pot you're photographing, and when you edit the photos, enter it as part of the information for that photo. It's invaluable data, especially when submitting them to a show. It's also a good practice to rename your photos so they can be easy to identify — and it makes them searchable among the many others on your computer.

- One member keeps a log while she takes her photographs to keep track of how she's setting up her shots—how far away, the lighting, etc—so that if she really likes that set of shots, she can set up the next group of photos in that same way.

- If you're having trouble with photographing a piece-- Dan commented that bowls, for example, can be difficult— take a look in magazines or online galleries to see how the pros do it. Photograph your piece from a lot of different angles, then delete all but the best ones.

- Newer EZcubes have a rod in the back of the box for suspending wall pieces and other hard-to-position pottery.

As the speakers were concluding their talk, Jill commented that she's noticed that some pots she may not have been thrilled with have looked much more attractive on her computer after she's photographed them using her light box! So— it's clear to see that it's gotten a lot easier to take high-quality digital photos of your work and there are lots of resources available.

Go on out and start taking some photographs of your own!