

Simple Photo Tricks by David Reed Smith (December 2002)

Introduction

There have been several articles published lately on how you can take “almost” professional photographs of your turnings. This isn’t that sort of article. If you need professional photographs because your living depends on getting into a prestigious gallery or craft show then you should actually hire a pro, not read another article.

But if you need photographs for your web site or to illustrate a magazine article you probably can’t justify hiring a pro, but want something better than a flash picture with a point and shoot camera.

This article describes two easy and inexpensive ways to get photographs of turnings that are only a step or two down from professional.

Flatbed Scanner

To get an image of small articles that don’t have a lot of height you can just plop them on a flatbed scanner and scan them. This technique is great for such things pens, refrigerator magnets, lace bobbins, or in my case, tatting accessories (see photo below.)

The lid of the scanner will usually lie at an angle so you’ll get a nice graduated gray background. You may find you get better results by turning up the resolution (dpi) for your scan and then reducing the image size to the quality you need with software. You can’t control shadows, and you may get some reflections from the inside of the camera, but this is so easy you should try if first. It seems almost criminal to get images this effortlessly.



Two tatting accessories. This image was obtained by simply scanning with a Flatbed Scanner.

Dining Room Light Box

Bowls and vessels won't balance very well on a scanner, so unless you're unduly proud of the bottoms you'll need another technique for larger articles. I've had very good luck with my dining room light box.

It produces a seamless background and diffuse lighting, with just enough shadow to give definition. You don't need much equipment. You need a room with more or less neutral-colored walls that has a large window. White walls and a south-facing window would be ideal, but not essential. Most of the light comes from the window, not off the walls, so anything but hot purple would probably work. Besides a room, you need a camera, a tripod, a sheet of poster board, and something to prop the poster board up.

The photo below shows my setup to photograph a vessel. I've set it on the dining room table so I don't have to crouch. It faces the patio doors for plenty of indirect light. As it's somewhere near noon, I don't get harsh light direct from the sun. The vessel sits on the front of a sheet of poster board. The back edge is propped up with a two liter Pepsi bottle. As I'm not getting a placement fee, I must point out that Coke, juice, or any heavy article that's a foot high or so will work. Use poster board. Paper, even heavy white Kraft paper, will wrinkle instead of curving gently and may look mottled if backlit at all. The camera is mounted on a tripod to reduce motion. You can increase your odds of a sharp picture by using a cable release or timer.



Dining Room Light Box. An easy set-up to get photographs with a seamless background and diffuse light.



The photograph produced by the set-up above. This is a red oak vessel about 11 inches high and 9 inches in diameter.