Booklet #6: The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs

SOME THOUGHTS ON PORTRAITURE

by

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PREFACE

The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs (NVACC) is an informal organization started in 1997 by Joseph Miller with the assistance of Dave Carter and Ed Funk. Our purpose is to promote communication and cooperation among camera clubs. We accomplish this by (a) publishing a monthly calendar of the member clubs' activities; (b) conducting training seminars for photographic judges; (c) maintaining a registry of trained judges who serve the clubs' monthly competitions and critiques; and (d) maintaining a directory of speakers who have been recommended by the various clubs. You can learn more about NVACC by going to our web site at www.NVACC.org.

This booklet is one of a series that was developed by NVACC during the period 1998-2008 to capture the considerable expertise of the many accomplished photographers in Northern Virginia and share it with others. Over recent years, we have seen significant change in the photographic art form and very rapid technical advance in both the media of photography (film and digital) and the tools (cameras, lenses, computers, and software). For that reason, the detail of some of these booklets may seem "dated", although the ideas and techniques presented transcend "progress" and the digital-film divide. Watch the NVACC web for new booklets as well as revisions that incorporate new technology and ideas into the existing ones.

Originally, our booklets were made available through member clubs for a small fee that covered the cost of reproduction. Now, however, the booklets are available on www.NVACC.com where individuals may download one machine-readable copy and one print copy per page for personal, noncommercial use only. Written permission from NVACC is required for any other use.

If you would like to know more about NVACC or have questions or suggestions concerning our booklets or services, please feel free to contact us at JoeMiller@NVACC.org.

Some Thoughts on Portraiture

Someone, undoubtedly the proverbial "wise sage," once said that a portrait is a picture of a person in which the nose is not quite right. That works well for paintings and drawings, but photographers don't have the luxury of correcting the nose. (With digital image processing anything is possible, but that is beyond the scope of this discussion.)

A portrait can be an extremely intimate experience, for both the subject and the photographer. With portraiture there are some questions and psychological issues to be considered before taking the photographs. How you answer these questions will largely determine a number of other factors to be considered later.

- Why are you making the portrait?

- What do you want the portrait to be? What purpose is it to serve?

- Who is it for? Is it for you, the subject, both, or neither. What does the subject want the image to be? Who does it have to please?

- What is the subject's self-image? Does the subject want to be photographed as he or she would like to be seen or as he or she really is, warts and all? The two are rarely the same.

- What is your relationship to the subject, friend, family member, enemy, lover, or customer?

- What personal baggage are you bringing to the photograph? Biases, prejudices, etc.

With all of these questions to consider, it is usually helpful to spend some time with the subject to get some understanding of expectations if the portrait sitting is to be a success. Learn to read between the lines.

Portrait Style:

Portraits generally fall into several categories and a couple of subcategories, formal and informal (possibly candid) and studio or an environmental setting.

If you have the luxury of a studio, you can exercise more control over the final image because you can select the background and control the lighting to achieve the effect you desire. On the other hand, beautiful portraits can be achieved in a natural setting with light provided by open shade.

Choice of setting will have a lot to do with determining other selections such as film, lights, etc.

Cameras and Lenses:

Almost any camera/film format is acceptable. The 35mm camera is certainly the most popular, but many professionals prefer the larger negatives provided by 2 1 /4 x 2 1 /4 medium format cameras or 4x5 view cameras. The larger negatives provide greater sharpness (not always desirable in a portrait) if extreme enlargement is necessary and it also makes it possible to do retouching on the negative rather than the print. This is a big advantage if many prints are to be made from the same negative.

Moderate telephoto lenses usually provide the most pleasing perspective. The slight foreshortening is more flattering and natural than the distortion caused by using a wide angle lens up close.

For 35mm cameras use a lens in the 85mm to 135mm range. This provides a comfortable working distance between you and the subject. Lenses in this focal length usually focus close enough for you to get a tight head shot if desired. Lenses for medium format cameras are usually in the 150-l80mm range and for 4x5 view cameras, 300mm and longer is recommended. If in doubt, err on the long side, not the short side.

If you must use a shorter focal length lens, try to stay away from close head and shoulder portraits otherwise distortion will render the subject looking something like a beach ball with eyes! (Depending on your relationship to the subject, this might be desirable!)

Filters:

Modern camera lenses are extremely sharp. This is not always desirable in a portrait. (People may have earned their wrinkles, but they frequently don't want to show them off!)

There are a number of ways to soften the image using soft focus devices over the front of the lens. Such things as Saran wrap, cellophane, black stockings, and Vaseline smeared on a skylight filter work quite well. Each will give a slightly different effect. Experiment to find out what works best for you.

There are also a number of special filter made by the various filter manufacturers. They vary from the Softars made by Schneider which come in three grades and are obscenely expensive, but extremely good, to simple diffusion filters that cost no more than a normal filter.

Film Selection:

Choice of film usually starts with the desire for color or black and white. (If you want to be famous, shoot black and white. If you opt for rich, shoot color!)

One piece of advice, if color prints are your objective, don't shoot slide film. Prints made from slide films are generally too contrasty and therefore not flattering. Some color films

such as Kodak VPS are made specifically for portraits and are color balanced to provide accurate flesh tones.

Any good medium speed film (ISO 50-200) will usually do fine. Extremely fast films are grainy; this can be an advantage if you take advantage of the characteristics to create a special mood or feeling.

The environment in which you will be photographing also has to be considered. If you will be shooting in low light situation, you will have to choose higher speed films than if you are working in good light.

Unless you are trying to achieve a specific effect, stay away from extremely slow films. They tend to be contrasty and may render more detail than you or the subject wishes. (See the earlier questions regarding who this portrait is to please!)

The Environment:

Choice of location is critical. The location can set the mood, provide the lighting, and dictate the choice of film and cameras.

The most obvious choice is between studio and "environmental" settings. By environmental, I mean almost anything other than a studio. This could be an office as well as an outdoor setting.

Assuming you don't have access to a studio, it is very important to choose your location carefully. You will need to consider privacy, background, variety of settings, the natural light, what time of day provides the best (desired) light, weather, distance, etc.

If you intend to do many environmental portraits, spend some time just scouting locations. By doing so, you can get the answers to these questions and provide the subject with a variety of situations conducive to obtaining the type of portrait desired. You will learn which locations are best for which shots and under what conditions.

Clothing:

Choose clothing to compliment the portrait. You generally want the face to be the lightest part of the image. This means that you would be advised to stay away from whites or things that will photograph as white and bright colors or patterns that might clash or draw attention.

For a head and shoulder portrait, a dark turtle neck sweater is one of the best choices. If changing facilities are available, ask the subject to bring several changes of clothing. This will offer you some alternatives if something doesn't seem to be just right.

Makeup:

Women should wear their normal makeup. Remember that the camera can render incredible detail so the makeup should be carefully applied.

Always have transparent powder with you when doing a portrait. The powder comes in two shades, medium to light and dark to medium. A final touch with transparent powder can be used to take the shine off makeup and make the complexion look more silky and smooth.

For men, it can remove the "five o'clock" shadow. This is particularly important when photographing a man with a dark beard. No matter how recently he has shaved, he will look like he needs to shave again.

Hair:

If the person has long hair, or if the hair is particularly fine, suggest that they not wash their hair immediately before the sitting. Newly washed hair can be difficult to control. If they must wash their hair immediately before the sitting, suggest that they use some styling foam or a little hair spray to keep it under control. A touch of hand cream can be use to control an unruly hair.

Studio Lighting Equipment:

Studio lights fall into three categories:

- Tungsten - cheap, hot, and change color temperature as they age. (Not an issue except for color where you would have to use tungsten film or a correction filter)

- Quartz halogen - more expensive, not as hot, don't change color temperature as they age. (Same as tungsten)

- Electronic strobe - expensive, cool, constant color temperature, daylight balanced, (i.e., no special film or filter requirements)

Lighting:

Lighting falls into two categories, broad and narrow, and has a profound effect on how the subject's face appears in the image.

Broad lighting places the lit side of the face toward the camera. This adds width to the face and is particularly effective with someone who has a narrow face.

Conversely, if the shadowed side of the face is toward the camera, we have narrow lighting. This tends to narrow the face and is good for people with round or heavy faces.

Natural Lighting:

Open shade is the preferred natural light. It's generally flattering and easy to find. A hazy overcast day is often one of the best for outdoor portraits. Avoid harsh direct sunlight. If you photograph with color film in open shade on a sunny day, you should use a IA or an 8IA filter (the 8IA is slightly warmer) to take the cool edge off the light provided by a blue sky. With color negative films this isn't as necessary as with transparency film since subtle color corrections can be made in the printing.

Background Considerations:

In the studio you have a choice of backgrounds. Seamless paper comes in a variety of colors, but you can also use things like a painter's drop cloth. It doesn't need to be expensive to be good.

On location (i.e., outside the studio) you have to integrate the background into the image. This is both a challenge and an opportunity. Just make sure that the background complements rather than competes with the subject.

Learn to really look at the image in the viewfinder. Look for trees coming out of the person's head, complex, cluttered objects that might compete, and bright spots that might draw the eye away from the subject.

Posing Considerations:

Portraits usually fall into the categories of head and shoulder, 3/4 length, or full length. The closer you are to the subject the more important it is to use a moderate telephoto lens. (See earlier comments on lens selection.)

Also, the closer you are to the subject, as in a head and shoulders portrait, the more important becomes the camera's position relative to the subject's eye level. The psychological aspects of the portrait can be quite dramatic.

A camera position below, at, or above eye level will have a profound effect on how the viewer feels about the portrait. A slightly low angle will give the portrait a more dominant feel, as if the person is looking down at the viewer. Eye level will provide a more neutral feeling for the viewer, one of equality. A higher angle, where the viewer seems to be looking down at the subject, will create a more subordinate feeling in the viewer toward the subject. A high angle can also be useful in minimizing the effects of a double chin.

Conclusions:

All these topics are to give you guidelines and food-for-thought. Like all "rules," they should be examined and challenged.