How to Photograph 2-D Artwork:
Using Artificial Light

INTRODUCTION

Photographing 2-D artwork accurately can sometimes be tricky, but having good reproductions of your art is critically important when presenting it to others. Many applications require digital representations of artwork. Because art varies so much in color and tone, simple cameras can sometimes have a hard time representing it accurately. Automatic cameras are always trying to compensate for things that are too bright or too dark. This poses a problem when your artwork is supposed to be either bright or dark. The method outlined here should aid you in getting a good digital representation of your work for use in portfolios and applications.

YOU WILL NEED

A digital camera with some adjustable controls

Tripod

2 clamp lights with incandescent bulbs (preferably soft white, 100 watt) and something to clamp them to such as a light stand or chair.

A classified page from a newspaper with a black "X" marked across it.

STEP ONE: Setting up your camera

A digital camera with some adjustable settings works best, but any point and shoot will likely do because most have some degree of adjustability. Review the owner's manual to locate some of the settings if you are unfamiliar with them.
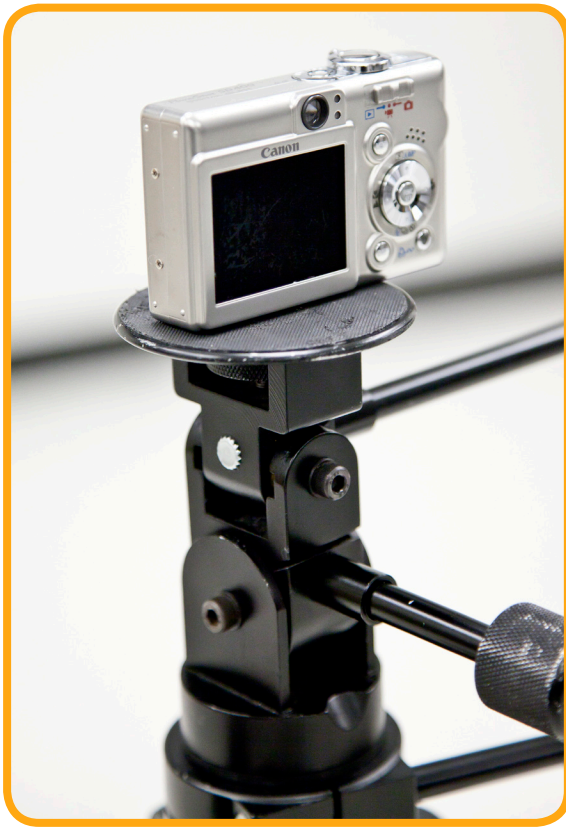
P Turn the camera's exposure mode from "AUTO" to "P" ("Program".) For some cameras this is in the Function Menu, for others it could be a dial on top of the camera.

ISO Change the camera's ISO setting to the lowest possible value. It is usually 50, 100, or 200 - depending on the camera.

☀ Set your camera's White Balance (WB) for incandescent light. (usually indicated by a small icon that looks like a normal light bulb)

⚡ Turn the flash off.

Finally, mount your camera to a tripod and set aside.

STEP TWO: Setting up your lights

While daylight can work well, the best way to get predictably consistent results is with artificial light. This set up is a very basic lighting arrangement for photographing 2D artwork mounted on a wall. You will need a space that does not have any daylight from windows, and you will need to turn off any other lights in the room so that he only light in the room should be the light coming from your clamp lights.

Make sure both lamps have the same bulb type in them. Preferably a 100W soft white incandescent bulb, but 60W or even 150W will also work.

The lights need to be set up equidistant from where the artwork will be mounted (see illustration). They also need to be the same distance from the wall. You can clip the lights onto the backs of chairs, or anything else that will allow them to be at the same height and position. The height of the lights also needs to be at the middle of the artwork to be photographed.

NOTE: The distance of the lights from the wall is not critical, though a 30-45 angle to the wall is a good start. Try not to place the lights much further from the wall than the camera position. They should also be far enough to the side to prevent reflection. The important factor is that the arrangement be symmetrical to ensure even light on both sides of the artwork.

STEP THREE: Mount the artwork to the wall

The work should be unframed to prevent shadows from the side of the frame and reflections from glass. you can leave work matted, but be aware that part of the artwork might be obscured by shadows cast from the mat and the mat itself.

Art can be mounted to the wall using tacks or pins, but they will likely show in the finished shot unless you intend to crop them out later. You can also use tape on the back of the work if it is not too heavy. A low tack tape like artists tape works well.

Hang the work on the wall so that the midpoint of the art is about the same height as your lights.

STEP FOUR: Taking the picture

With the camera mounted on a tripod, center the artwork in the camera frame. It is better to move away from the art and zoom in a little than be too close. When centering the artwork, be sure the camera is perfectly upright and perpendicular to the wall. You need to be square to the work left and right and up and down. If you need to adjust the height of the camera, move the tripod up and down – do not tilt the angle of the camera.

3

Once the artwork is square and centered in the frame, go ahead and verify your camera settings. Remember, use the lowest ISO value, and set your White Balance to incandescent. Also, be certain the flash is turned off.

Okay, now this is where it gets interesting. In order to address the problems created by artwork that is very bright or very dark, we need to trick the camera into thinking we are shooting something neutral. This is where the newspaper page comes into play. The newspaper serves as a neutral, and the black "x" aids in focusing. Tape the newspaper page to the wall so that it covers the artwork and fills the camera frame.


We are now going to use the camera's self-timer to make the actual exposure. Go ahead and activate the camera's self-timer function. Press the shutter release button to take the picture. The camera should focus on the newspaper and base it's exposure measurement on the newspaper as well. Once the timer begins to count down, remove the newspaper from the wall, so that when the picture takes, only the artwork is in the frame. Be sure to move aside quickly so you and your shadow are not in the way when the camera fires the shot

Check the picture on the camera and move on to the next artwork. Be sure to use the newspaper to start each time.

Artwork photographed on AUTO with no flash. The relatively light artwork came out too dark.
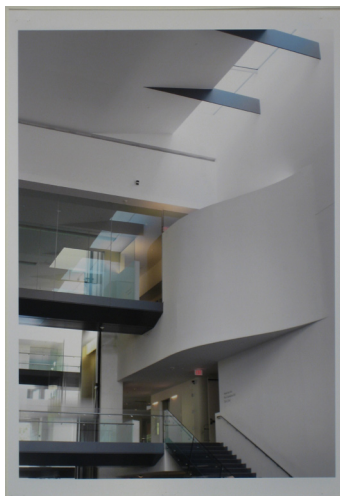
Here, the same artwork looks correct using the method outlined here with the newspaper providing the neutral exposure measurement.

4

NOTE: If your camera has manual exposure capability and you are comfortable using it, then you can set your exposure settings once with the first newspaper trick. Then as long as the lights don't need to be moved, you can use those same exposure values for each shot without having to use the newspaper each time.

Alternative Method Using Sunlight

The procedure for using sunlight instead of artificial light is actually quite similar, but without all the light stuff.
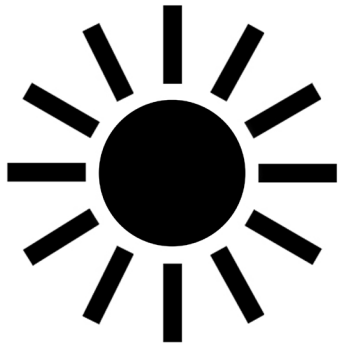
You still need to ensure your camera is perfectly square and per-pendicular to the art. So if you choose to lean the work against something, then be sure the camera is at the same angle.

Keep the sun at your back and be sure the coverage of the sunlight on the artwork is even and there are no shadows from trees or anything else.

You will still use the lowest ISO setting, but instead of an incandes-cent White Balance setting, use the 'full sun' or 'bright sun' setting.

You should still use the self-timer and newspaper trick for making the actual exposure.