

Shooting Sculpture and Jewelry

notes

Overview

Shooting sculpture and jewelry presents several challenges not found with flat artwork. There are a number of techniques that will highlight the form, design, and style unique to dimensional art.

In this lesson, you'll learn the three steps to success if you shoot your own sculpture and jewelry:

- The **lighting** must emphasize the form and texture
- The **composition** needs to define the shape and design
- The **presentation** should show the function and style

Lighting

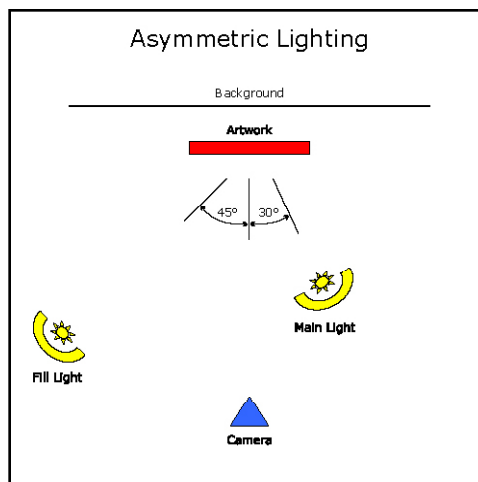
The lighting you use when shooting your art can emphasize the form and texture of the work. The most important techniques are:

- **Asymmetric lighting** to create shadows that give an object form
- **Back lighting** to make the work stand out from the background
- **Diffuse lighting** to soften shadows or reduce glare

When shooting flat artwork, the best lighting setup provides even illumination over the entire work without shadows. With dimensional art, however, the lighting must introduce shadows for the viewer to see the form and texture of the piece. This is done using **asymmetric lighting**.

Place one of the lamps closer to the center of the artwork relative to the other lamp. This "main light" creates a primary shadow that gives depth to the dimensional aspects of the piece and reveals the texture of the material.

Positioning the main light to the left or right of the center of the work will change the direction of the shadow, and moving it farther to the side will increase the width of the shadow. You can also place the main light above the center of the piece to change the angle of the shadow.



Place the second lamp farther from the center of the artwork. This "fill light" will soften the shadow from the main light without creating a second strong shadow. Moving the fill light closer or farther from the piece will affect the relative intensity of the shadows. Try different positions for both lamps until you are satisfied with the result.

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An additional technique is **back lighting**. This is done to visually separate the artwork from the background and make it stand out.

Position a third lamp above and behind the piece to illuminate it from the back. This “back light” will create a “rim of light” along the edge of the work where it meets the background and provide visual separation. The back light also will soften the shadows behind the piece created by the front lighting.

Moving the back light closer or farther from the artwork will change the intensity of the separation. Again, you will want to experiment with the position of the light until you are satisfied with the result.

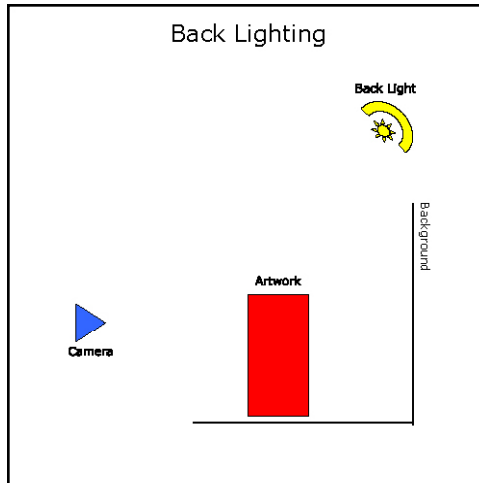
Both of these lighting techniques use light sources that cast well-defined shadows with relatively distinct edges. This is effective for showing texture, and it can complement angular or more robust works. Strong shadows, however, may be distracting with rounder or more delicate art. In this case, **diffuse lighting** should be used to soften shadows or reduce glare.

To diffuse the light, position a piece of white nylon or polyester fabric between the lamp and the artwork. The amount of diffusion can be changed by moving the nylon closer to the work (more diffusion) or closer to the lamp (less diffusion). Alternatively, smaller items can be placed inside a tabletop light tent.

Composition

For dimensional works that hang or lay flat, the composition is straightforward. The piece should fill the image so it is as large as possible. If the form or surface texture is difficult to see, plan to take one or more close-up images of smaller areas to show these details.

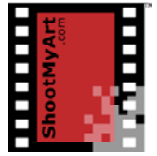
With sculpture and jewelry, though, how you compose the image will define the shape and function of the piece and give it visual interest and energy.



About Depth of Field

When shooting dimensional artwork, be sure that the entire depth of the piece is in focus. The “depth of field” is greater with a smaller lens aperture.

If your camera has manual settings or an “aperture priority” mode, use the highest “f-stop” setting (the smallest aperture). Alternatively, use a higher ISO speed, a slower shutter speed, or move the lights closer to the work — any of which will cause the camera to use a smaller aperture and increase the depth of field.



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Try to avoid putting everything in the center of the image.

Several of the basic composition techniques are:

- **Asymmetric** - Position the work off-center in the image, especially if the piece has a somewhat irregular shape or one part of it is larger than the rest. This adds visual interest.
- **Diagonal** - Place the artwork on a diagonal in the image rather than parallel to the sides. This gives the work a different perspective.
- **S-Curve** - Arrange flexible items, such as necklaces, in a curving S-shaped pattern instead of a circle or straight line. This adds energy to the art and permits a closer view of details.
- **Cropped** - Crop images of pieces with common shapes, such as bowls and plates, to show only a portion of the whole. This provides a closer view of the design.
- **Point of View** - Shoot the work from slightly to one side or looking down somewhat rather than straight-on the front. This shows more of the overall piece and gives it greater depth and interest.

You can experiment with combinations of these techniques in the same image, too. Look for a composition that catches the viewer's attention.

Presentation

How your sculpture and jewelry is presented in the image can show its function and style more effectively. There are several approaches to consider for presenting your artwork:

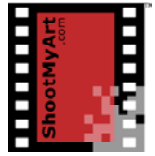
- **Studio background** - A solid-color studio background is traditional, and most artwork looks good against one. They are readily available, inexpensive, and can be cut to size or rolled up and re-used. Alternatively, a muslin or graduated background (from light to dark) will also work with many pieces and may enhance the image. Be sure, though, that there is enough contrast between the work and the background.
- **Natural setting** - A natural setting behind your piece, such as weathered wood or vegetation, can give the image more visual interest, but be careful when choosing the background. It should complement the design and style of the item, with tone and colors that provide contrast. Avoid backgrounds that are busy and may distract the viewer from the artwork.

About Background Colors

The color of the background behind your artwork is particularly important with dimensional work. A neutral grey background will work best most of the time.

Avoid using a black background because it will eliminate the shadows around the piece that give the perception of depth and will cause it to appear flatter.

Avoid using a white background because it is distracting and will cause the colors to appear duller and less vivid to the eye.



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- **Tabletop arrangement** - Shooting on a tabletop (against a suitable background) is common for sculptural work. This approach also can work well for many jewelry pieces. Arrange several pieces together for an interesting composition and to guide the viewer's eye.
- **Hanging arrangement** - Jewelry can be shot on a mannequin or a display form (against a suitable background). This may be preferable for items that need to hang or drape to properly show their shape.
- **Professional model** - For some jewelry, the shape and design may call for using a model. A good model can add style and energy to an image, but can also distract from the work, so use caution. Select a model who complements the style of the piece, and remember that hair and makeup also must be appropriate. Using a professional model will yield the best images. Avoid working with friends and family as models (however well meaning) because viewers of your images will compare them to the professional models they see published in magazines. If you use a model, be aware that the first thing most viewers see instinctively is the face, not the jewelry. Consider posing the model's head in profile or cropping the image to include only a portion of the model's face.

About Model Releases

A model release is a contract that gives you the right to use the images for marketing or other commercial purposes. By signing, the model agrees that the images may be used in brochures, advertisements, publications, and on websites.

If you work with a model, always explain how you plan to use the images and get a signed model release — regardless of whether the model is being paid or working for free.

Additional Resources

Photographic Equipment

Adorama.com – Full-range supplier of photographic equipment

BHPhotoVideo.com – Full-range supplier of photographic equipment

CalumetPhoto.com – Full-range supplier of photographic equipment

Lighting

Photoflex.com – Lamps, lighting kits, and light control accessories

SmithVictor.com – Lamps, lighting kits, and light control accessories

Backgrounds

FJWestcott.com – Muslin backgrounds and light control accessories

PhotoTechInc.com – Graduated, seamless paper, and muslin backgrounds

SavagePaper.com – Seamless background paper and stands

Tabletop Studios

CloudDome.com – Light tents and accessories

EZcube.com – Light tents and accessories