

Lighting tricks using a light tent

By John Lucas

As a photographer I'm always interested in helping people photograph their work. I've viewed thousands of photos on the web and have noticed some problems that creep up often. I'll try to answer some of those. This is for the more advanced people who are already getting acceptable images and want to improve them. I was of course using professional lighting gear here but the principals are the same if you use quartz work lights.

One problem is flat images. By flat I mean that they don't look 3 dimensional. This shows up as platters or boxes that look flat instead of round or convex. There is usually a loss of detail in the textured areas as well. If we take a simply 2x4 and photograph it there should be 3 distinct planes in the photo. This can be done by moving the light until you can see each plane as a different brightness. In this photo you'll notice the top is slightly brighter than the left side and the right side is darker than both.



Light ratio's are more difficult to do on rounded object inside a light box. Using the same lighting as the 2x4 the vase is a little brighter on the top and left and darker on the right but not as extreme as the 2x4 even though the light was not changed. The photo on the left is a straight shot and the one on the right has had a bounce card added to brighten the front. You can see that although the bounce card did brighten the front it flattened the piece a little because I've lost some of the ration.

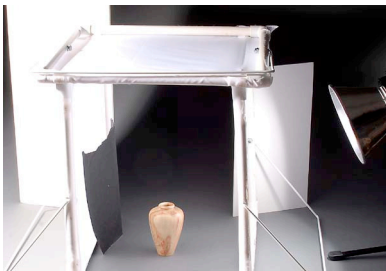


In the example above I used a white card angled in such a way that it bounces light back into the dark side of the object. You'll also notice in this photo that the light is above and to the left. This helps create a more natural light. The card on the left side is simply blocking stray light from hitting the background. I am using a gray background that extends back about 5 feet. This makes it easier to have the faded background look.



Sometimes you want more ratio than you get from this setup. This is a very small light box that consists of 3 self standing panels. Because they are so close to the piece you will always get flatter looking lighting than you may want. One trick I use is to place a black card inside the box to limit the amount of light bouncing from that panel.

The photo on the left is a little too bright causing the color to wash out. I put a black card in there and move it around as I watch the light on the piece. When I get the affect I want I take a photo. The photo on the right has much more color in the red.



You may notice that there is a second light in this photo. The one on the right was added to show a different problem before I realized that I had not shown how to use a black card to take away light. Photographers call it negative lighting.

Solving Hot spot problems

Hotspots or glare spots can be a really bad problem especially on really glossy pieces. Here are a few tricks that might help. I didn't have a really shiny piece handy so I hope my photos are good enough to let you see the problems. Notice the hotspot in the top left of the piece.



Most people put the light too close to the panel. This creates a hotspot in the panel that the shiny surface of the piece can see. The first solution is to move the light back so it illuminates the panel more evenly.



Notice how close the light is in this shot. Compare that to the position of the light in the first series of photos. If you can't move the light back you can put something between the light source and the object to change the reflection. I use a black card, wire screen or sometimes even white copier paper.



The placement of the piece of black paper is critical. You have to get your eye exactly between the camera and the vase. Then you move the black card around until you see it in the reflection. It's easier if you think of this as a bank shot in billiards. You can imagine a line from the camera banking off the reflection in the piece and hitting the light. This is exactly where the card should go. The shape of the card is also critical. Too big and it darkens more than just the reflection. Too little and you don't block enough light from the reflection.

I like wire screen because it's less sensitive to size and you can add all the layers you need to make the reflection the right brightness.

Another trick I use when the reflection comes from the top panel is to break it up with torn pieces of paper.



Here is a before and after photo using the black card. The photo on the left has a highlight. The photo on the right has most of the highlight blocked by the card. Since the card wasn't exactly the same size as the highlight there is still a tiny reflection. I think this looks better than getting rid of all the reflection but you will have to be the one to decide on your images.



The light tent idea is an easy way to get a decent photo. It isn't fool proof, and probably not the way a professional photographer would shoot your work. If you are trying to get into the high end shows I Highly recommend finding a confident commercial photographer to create a good looking photo for you. Here is an example of of the same piece shot with more professional lighting techniques.



I hope this has helped. I know the examples weren't as extreme as I would have liked but this was done in a hurry between 2 other shoots.