



IN THE BEST LIGHT

PHOTOGRAPHING Your Artwork

Affordable tips and techniques for better quality photos

Many contests and shows require you to send in photographs of your carvings along with your application. But not everyone can afford to hire a photographer to take professional photos of their carvings. A poor-quality photograph can make an excellent carving look bad.

To get a good photo of a carving, you need to take several things into account. The most important four are **image resolution**, **lighting**, **focus**, and **background**. We've taken some excellent carvings by experts in their field and photographed them properly—and poorly—to show how a few little tricks can really improve your photographs.

Photography checklist

- High enough resolution
- Lighting shows details and depth
- Carving is in focus—or most interesting part of carving is in focus
- Carving is separated from background
- Background is not distracting or busy

Resolution

Resolution is the most common problem we run into when someone submits a photo for publication. Resolution is the density of an image—and pertains more to digital photography than to traditional prints or slides.

Resolution is measured in two ways—by the number of pixels, or dots of color, in an image, or by the actual size of an image and the number of dots per inch (DPI). For example, a photo downloaded from a standard web page may be 5" x 7" on the screen, but may only be 72 DPI. In order to print something in a magazine, we need at least 300 DPI. When it is printed, a 72 DPI photo looks grainy and out of focus at 5" x 7". In order to get the resolution we need, the photo must be shrunk down to the size of a postage stamp.

Most computers show the size of a photo in pixels. For most publications, your photo needs to be at least 1200 x 1500 pixels.

For a 5" x 7" photo to be reproduced properly in the magazine, you need at least a 3 mega pixel camera, but a 4 mega pixel to 5 mega pixel camera is preferred. While many



If your carving is tall and thin, like Mike Shipley's Sea Captain, take a vertical photo. Both these photos are 5 x 7s, but the horizontal orientation sacrifices resolution by wasting the real estate of the image.



people have camera phones, the resolution of these cameras is too low to reproduce in the magazine.

If you do use a 3 mega pixel camera, do not use the camera's zoom function. Just get closer to the project. Without getting into the technical details, the zoom function on these cameras will usually give you a lower-resolution image.

When you have a digital camera, look up how to shoot the highest quality photos.

You will not be able to store as many photos on your memory card, but we need to have large files in order to reproduce them in the magazine. TIFF files should be close to 5 megabytes in size, and JPEGs should be about 1 megabyte—at the minimum!

Also take the orientation of the photo into account. If you have a short, wide carving, take a horizontal photo. If your carving is long and thin, take a vertical photo. You want to try to fill as much of your viewfinder with the carving as possible, and still get the entire carving in.

Most cameras convert the photos to JPEG format (.jpg). JPEG files are a standard file that most computers can read. At *Woodcarving Illustrated*, we can also read TIFF (.tif) and Kodak files (.dcs). Unfortunately, bitmap (.bmp) and EPS (.eps) files usually will not work on our system.

72 dpi			300 dpi		
Image Size	Pixels	File Size	Image Size	Pixels	File Size
4 x 5	288 x 360	303.8k	4 x 5	1200 x 1500	5.15M
5 x 7	360 x 504	531.6k	5 x 7	1500 x 2100	9.01M
8 x 10	576 x 720	1.19M	8 x 10	2400 x 3000	20.6M

The chart above shows how different sized photos convert to pixels.

All measurements based on RGB file in TIFF format.

A single soft light source at a hard angle to the subject is the best way to light a relief carving. This photo of a relief carving by Lora S. Irish shows how the main light, properly positioned, highlights the details of the carving and adds the shadows needed to show depth.



Lighting

One lighting concern is the white balance of the photograph. Natural light, incandescent light, and florescent light each takes on a different color. Incandescent light tends to be red-toned and florescent light tends to have a blue tone. If using a film camera, there isn't much you can do, but most modern digital cameras have a white balance adjustment that will compensate for the lighting.

If something is lighted poorly, the carving either looks one dimensional and flat, or the shadows obscure the carving's details. With computer software, we can sometimes lighten an image up, but this often degrades the image.

It doesn't take professional-grade equipment to do an acceptable job of photographing a carving. Pick up a couple adjustable desk lamps at a home improvement store, fit one with the largest bulb it can handle (usually



Digital cameras have a "white balance" setting in place to compensate for different lighting conditions. If you choose the wrong setting, the photos will take on an odd color.

Shot with only a camera's on-board flash, the carving looks flat and one-dimensional. If you light a relief carving poorly, it ends up looking more like a line drawing than a carving.



between 60-75 watts), and put a slightly smaller bulb in the second lamp. Add a white sheet or piece of cheesecloth to soften the lights, and you are set.

Carvings need either a one-light or two-light system. The first light is a fill light. This should never be the camera's on-board flash, as they are usually too harsh, but an independent light as described above. The fill light should be positioned to light the front of the carving fully, but shouldn't be strong enough to cast shadows on its own. The other light, usually one that is adjustable, is the main light. The main light crosses the subject and casts a few shadows. It may seem odd to add shadows to a photograph, but these controlled shadows add dimension and depth to the photo.

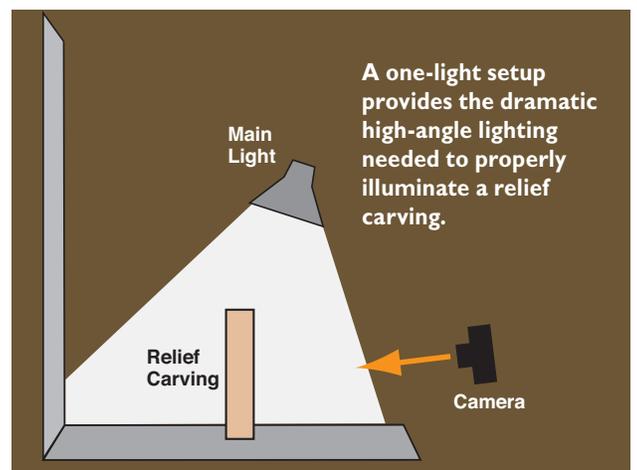
To make this a little more complicated, you light a relief carving differently from a carving in the round.

Shadows are even more critical for relief carvings. The point of a relief carving is to cast shadows in different parts to create the illusion of depth in a relatively thin piece of wood.

For the photo above, the main light was positioned

over and slightly in front of the carving to cast the appropriate shadows into the undercut areas. If the shadows are too dark, you need a little more light. Hold a piece of white poster board at an angle to bounce more light into the deep areas.

You do not want a fill light when photographing a relief carving. It is very difficult to position the main light and the fill light so the fill light doesn't overpower the main light. If the fill light does overpower the main, the relief carving looks more like a line drawing. That problem is compounded by the light-colored wood used in this carving. The strong flash glared off the light wood and washed away the details of the carving.





A good photo of a carving in the round shows details and dimension, such as the sailor's slight slump, folds in his overcoat, and the carved pipe. A two-light system was used for this photo.

A slight change of camera angle adds great visual appeal.

Here the sailor carving was shot from the front with only the on-board flash. The details are washed out and the carving looks very flat, and not that interesting.



The glare off the glossy finish of this carving by Alfie Fishgap is bad enough to obscure the painting details.



The lighting techniques change when photographing a carving in the round. Use both the main light and the fill light to capture the depth of a carving in the round.

Set the main light so it shines on the carving from slightly above. It should shine across the carving—highlighting some parts and shadowing other parts. The fill light should shine across the entire piece.

It sometimes helps to shift the pose of the carving to highlight details, instead of shooting the photo straight on.

The last lighting concern is glare. The usual culprit for producing excessive glare is the camera's own on-board flash. Many carvings have a glossy finish—and if the finish is glossy enough to reflect ordinary light, then the bright light of a flash will appear as a glare to the camera.

Override the camera's flash unit when shooting any glossy subject. If you are not using a flash and glare is still a problem, change the angle of your main light or the subject itself, as it is most likely reflecting light directly into the camera lens. Also check to see that your fill light is not too strong.

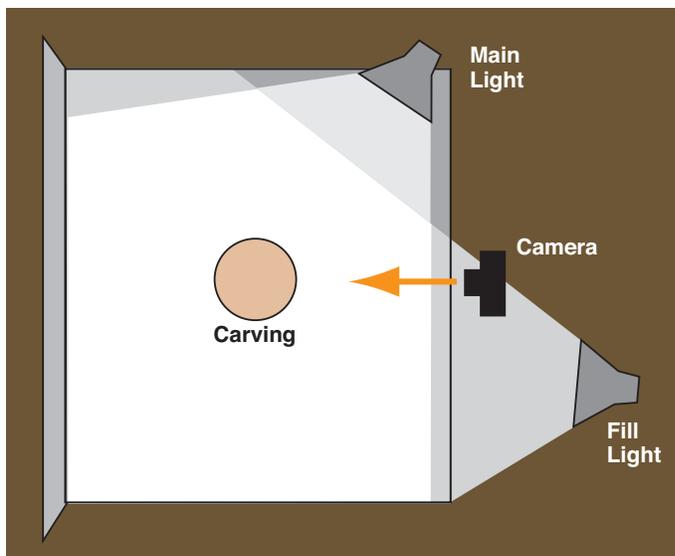


Poor focus will render a photo useless regardless of high resolution and good lighting. An image that is out of focus cannot be digitally corrected.

Focus

Most people have what are called “point and click” cameras with an auto focus feature. No one wants to fiddle around with a lens to try to get something into focus. But auto focus cameras tend to pick one spot on the piece and focus on that specific part throwing the rest of the carving out of focus.

For the most part, cameras have difficulty focusing on a subject when you are very close to it, or using the zoom function too much. If pulling back a little bit doesn't help the camera focus on the entire subject, hold a \$1 bill in the center of the carving—where you want the camera to focus—until the camera's auto focus locks in. Remove the bill and snap the photo.



A two-light setup is the simplest way to give quality lighting to a three-dimensional subject. A crossing main light will cast defining shadows, while a soft fill light will prevent the shadow areas from losing detail.



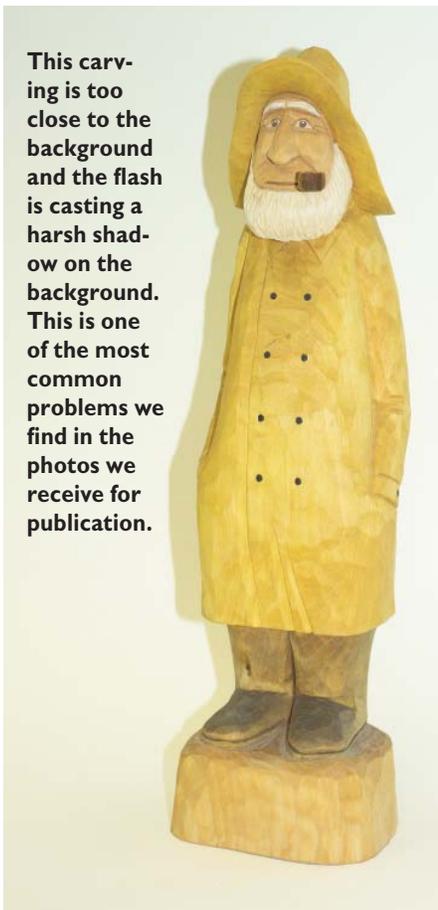
A light background with a light carving makes it difficult to see where the background ends and the carving begins.



A busy background draws the eye away from the details of a carving.



Not only can textures and color be distracting, but counters, cupboards—and outdoors, cars and trees—can draw attention away from the carving.



This carving is too close to the background and the flash is casting a harsh shadow on the background. This is one of the most common problems we find in the photos we receive for publication.

Tips

Background Material

A terrific photographic backdrop for small carvings is a good sized sheet of matte laminate used for making countertops. It will flex to create a stage and background, cleans up easily, and will never crease or tear. Although laminate comes in hundreds of colors, it is best to use neutral shades. It is available at most home centers in limited colors, or can be custom ordered.

Background

A good background for a photo doesn't draw the eye away from the carving.

The carving should be the focal point of the photograph. The texture and lighting should focus on the carving. That is why it is important to think about what is behind your carving when snapping a photo.

A good background makes the carving stand out. That means, for a light carving, choose a dark background. A dark carving shows up best against a light background.

Try to pick a plain background. Poster board, a bed sheet, a canvas dropcloth, or some sort of fabric all work well. If you are using fabric, be sure it is clean and free of folds or wrinkles. A roll of photo background paper is your best bet and can be picked up at a photo supply store. Make sure paper backdrops do not have tears or creases. Avoid putting the carving on a piece of carpet—the camera will pick up any color variation in the carpet and the carpet's weave will distract the eye.

If you are photographing a carving in place—whether it is a large carving that can't be moved, or a carving you'd prefer to shoot in a rustic setting—take a look at what is around it. When shooting outdoors, pay attention to parked cars, power lines, chain link fences—anything that will distract from your subject. If you want to photograph your carving in the shop, try throwing some cloth over your extra tools or move the carving to the least busy part.

Whatever you choose as a background for your carving, make sure the carving is far enough away that your lights don't cast a shadow onto the background. This shadow is almost as distracting as a textured background.

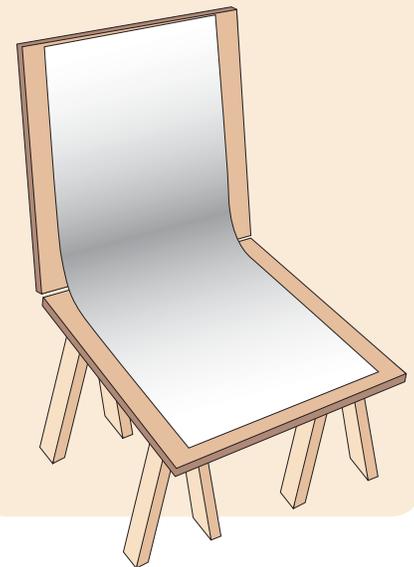
Above all, find a place to photograph your work. Resist using the sofa or kitchen table as a photo studio. If you have room to carve, you have room to shoot.

Tips

Plywood Photo Studio

Crosscut a sheet of $\frac{3}{4}$ " plywood into two 4' x 4' sections and join them with three utility hinges along one edge. Set it up on sawhorses and open it up to rest one half against a wall. You now have a portable photo stage that folds flat when not in use, but provides sturdy support for backdrops and carvings when needed. You can cut handles into the plywood to make it easier to carry.

When not in use as a photo studio, you can use it to store and protect flat items like drawings, plans and blueprints—or use it as workspace for gluing, assembling and painting or finishing your carvings.



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