How To Master Lighting

This article belongs completely to Ed Shapiro, a professional photographer, who contributed a lot to the art. It is based on the content of a topic of forum. I have to thank Ed for covering this topic. I could not find any place where Ed gathered and published his knowledge, so I decided to extend the audience of the forum where he posted this topic. So here it goes…

How To Master Lighting

Lighting IS photography. Excuse my lack of exactness here but I can not remember whether it the word "photography" is rooted in Latin or Greek but - "Photos = Light Grapho = Imaging". Loosely translated, "painting with light" - ergo one can assume that a professional photographer should have a mastery of light and lighting. There are various aspects of light that should be familiar to all serious workers, especially portrait photographers. First there is the PHYSICS of light - where the light comes from, how it is naturally and artificially generated and how it behaves in terms of refraction, reflection and how it effects sensitized materials in terms of creating a latent image on film (exposure), color temperature (how that property of light effects the color rendition of color materials) and how the vis1ble and invisible spectrum of light effects the emulsions that we use. Believe me folks, lacking knowledge of some of these important issues can impede your full mastery of light and lighting. These facts are not the "blah blah yada yada" of photography - they are the very essence of the photographic process and should be taken seriously. You needn't be a rocket scientist or an engineer to have a basic idea of each concept. These are not unneeded or esoteric trivia because each concept is directly linked to a practical and useful portrait technique.

Then we have the AESTHETICS of light. This is the artistic usage of light that involves you, as an artist, having finite control over the effect of the light as it pertains to portraiture in terms of shaping that face, doing cosmetic or corrective techniques and creating an idealized interpretation of your portrait subject. Here too, a lot of technical gremlins rear the scary faces - ratios, calculations, formula, and more things that some photographers want to be bothered with. Bad news - you gotta be bothered with all this if you expect to fully master the nuances of lighting and produce "master lighting". Good news - Once you get over the initial scariness of the theory and get with a little hard study - this thing will become second nature to you and the rest is all creative fun. Now for the really good stuff - THE DYNAMICS OF LIGHTING. This is where you gain total control if your lighting methods. By the addition or subtraction of a mere sliver of light you can change the mood and statement of an entire composition. You can send any message you like to the viewer and control his or her every eye movement within a portrait. You can bring tears of joy or tears of sadness with the simple movement of a light stand. That is where the mastery is defined.

You might have noticed that I have used the word "light" as opposed to "lighting" in a careful manner. Light is illumination - get enough of it and it will put an image on you film or your digital card. Lighting is the art and science of "painting with light".

So… "that's all well and good Shapiro, you might say- "but how the heck do I accomplish all this and where the heck do I go and who will teach me" you may ask. Here I wish I could give you a blanket answer - but alas, there is no such answer. In fact this paragraph is gonna be a bit of a downer for some of us. Yes, you can emulate the work of your favorite master. You have the list and you know who they are and what they have in terms of seminars, books and teaching materials. At first it is better to study with a master who is willing to teach the basics and technical stuff as well as the more advanced artistic techniques. If you enter at the wrong level - you can become very frustrated and disappointed.

You have to enter each seminar or other learning experience with an open mind, an unmitigated willingness to learn and the understanding that you do not want to become a clone of another photographer. The finest output a great photographer entails much more than his or her basic technique. It has to do with their vision and I'll even go as far to say their very being on this earth. Suffice it to say, in my own case, that I will never be a Monte, a Joe Zeltzman or a Yosif Karsh - I just want to be a good Ed Shapiro.

I hate when photographers try to become clones of their teachers and worst of all, form camps and factions where the work of other masters is trivialized because it does not fit into THEIR guru's mould. More bad news- great lighting styles can not be learned strictly from diagrams and text. That is like driving you car and looking at the road map instead of the road while you are in motion- a sure way to disaster. You must get the feel each light and its' effect on faces and the total composition. Even more bad news- very little of the success of the great masters of portraiture is strictly linked to equipment. To say Joe uses parabolics and Moe uses umbrellas is just the tip of a very large iceberg.

There is no magic bullet or simple axiom. You have to take the courses, read the books and most importantly practice and define each element as you go along. You need to develop your own distinctive style using the teachings of the masters that you have observed and studied with as the building blocks.

When I was teaching, I once sat down to write a curriculum of sorts. When it came to lighting, an almost endless list began to appear on my screen. I soon came to realize that unless I could abridge this topic, it would dominate the entire programme leaving little space for anything else. Here on Zuga, I have attempted to write about some of the items on my list. Time and business constraints being what they are limit my writing time. When I do write, it relieves some old frustrations from those teaching hours of yore. I hope you will forgive me.

Ed Shapiro