

The bride's gown, the rules, optical distortion and lots more

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...

The bride's gown, the rules, optical distortion and lots more.

When ever the subject of "rules" come up there is always a firefight on the boards- I know, because I just participated in a few threads took that direction way and I, for one, can't stand the odor of burning flesh or burning egos. I too am opposed to excessive, obsessive, stringent or severely limiting application of all rules, especially if the tent to stunt one's creativity and turn people into "one note" photographers who can only approach things from one viewpoint.

There are, however, certain rules that should be applied to certain aspects of our work simply because ignoring those principles cause problems that negatively alter the images that we make, by sending the viewer the wrong message or photographic statement. Let's take time to examine one aspect of wedding photography where applying the rules makes a lot of common sense; rendition of the wedding dress and full length portraiture of the bride.

To start with, I think that every serious photographer will agree that a photographic image makes a statement. Most classical workers say that simplicity in a photograph, an image void of distractions, makes the best and clearest statements. Some practitioners of low key photography advise dark backgrounds and darker clothing so that the viewers eyes are directed the motif of the portrait which is the likeness of the subject's face. Therefore a viewer of a well executed portrait of a woman should get the message "a beautiful woman" if the viewer is familiar with the subject, he or she should say "ah - a beautiful portrait of, say, Mary Ann. If, however there is a disunity of lighting, distortion of the image, an "out of key" prop or background, or a bad camera angle, the viewer might say a number of things such as: "This doesn't look like Mary Ann", "There is Mary Ann holding a giant obnoxious yellow sunflower.", or "There is Mary Ann- looks like she has gained some weight" or :there is Mary Ann sitting in front of a mish-mash painting that someone smeared on the wall". If, however, Mary Ann appears in a bright red full dress military uniform, that is perfectly in keeping with the concept because her portrait can make a different yet simple and concise statement: "Army Officer" or "Mary Ann in uniform". A subtly lit flag or military insignia in the background would not be a distraction either because it simply reinforces the statement. OK - Let's put this paragraph on the back burner and see how everything comes together later.

Let's have a peak at the wedding gown market strategies and the buying habits of the brides. The contents of most bridal magazines are wedding fashions. The advertisers, makers and retailers of wedding attire, invest in lots of advertising space in major wedding oriented publications because they know that it pays off. Brides put a lot of time, energy, and investment toward the selection and purchase of her wedding gown - it undoubtedly is a priority in the scheme of planning a wedding. Gowns are relatively expensive but most brides "bite the bullet" to insure that they will have the wedding dress of their dreams. It is part of the bride's mystique and involves HER personal statement about her wedding. Keeping that concept in mind, I would think that all of us agree that a beautiful full length image of the bride is in order. I'll go a step further and say that as professional wedding photographers, it behooves us to produce such an image for all our brides, featuring their lovely gowns, veils and flowers, regardless of our individual styles of shooting. Failure to do so would be remiss.

So here is my beef with all the "rule breakers", if you will. I have been looking at the boards for a long time, this section, the print room, the lighting room, and the portrait department and have seen very few nicely executed full length bridal portraits. From a fashion, portrait or wedding photography point of view, I have noticed very little attention paid to the details necessary in making the right statement about the bride and her gown. I know that, for some, abiding by certain rules tent to be stuffy and annoying while other never bothered to learn the basic principles in the first place. So this is what I see almost all of the time when photographers try to "wing it" in the simple task of providing their brides with a nice, clean - elegant full length portrait - a very basic task.

Bad posing and posture

Even if the bride is covered in satin and lace and we don't see her legs as if she were wearing genes, here stance is of the utmost importance. The placement of her feet, start things off on the right foundation or footing. One in front of the other, with the toe of her forward foot, showing and pointed in the proper direction. Her weight falling on her far hip and her forward knee bent will give shape to her dress and provide a comfortable stance where she can easily pivot without falling over or experiencing back pain. Her spine should be at full extension or she will slouch and her dress will appear to be ill fitting. Hands and flower, held too high will hide the details and shape of the dress- a big but popular mistake. Oh - group photographs made, without proper attention to the legs and feet look awful. People stand bowlegged, pigeon-toed and with their legs spread as if they were going to fire a shotgun. It takes only a few seconds to correct this.

Poor Lighting

Bad lighting presents many problems, my least favorite of which is burning out of all the delicate detail in bridal dresses. Flat or improperly planed lighting can minimize or even obliterate the subtle textures or rich embroidery found in many of today's wedding gowns. The simple rules pertaining to the angle of incidence tell us to turn the bride so that her dress is away from the light source and than turning her head into the light. This creates a graceful feminine stance while allowing the light to graze over the gown's fabric, rendering it in fine detail. A simple rule and you kill two nasty birds with one stone while adding elegance to your image.

Here's a lighting problem that might be new to you. You have often heard the theory that people gain 10 pounds in photographs and on television. That seems to be the case because the camera has only one eye and photographic and in TV images you are seeing what the camera sees. We have two eyes which views people from two slightly different viewpoints and that allows us to see around the person you are looking at. If the same images are made on a 3-D camera and viewed the resulting images through 3-D glasses, that optical illusion weight gain would not occur. This problem is exacerbated greatly by flat lighting and bad posing. Knowing the techniques of good lighting and posing will help us shape or sculpt our subjects to appear in a more flattering light.

Distortion

So many photographers ignore the rules of optical perspective. They would take pains to do an architectural image totally free of distortion but think nothing of shooting a bride from too high an angle and using a wide angle lens or zoom position to boot. There are hundreds of images, on these boards and other places, where the full length photographs of the bride, the groom and all the family and bridal party groups appear to be SERIOUSLY FORESHORTENED. The subjects appear significantly shorter than in real life and sometimes seem like they are falling over frontward. It is best to shoot full length individual and group portraits with a normal lens from about the subject(s) waist level. If you use a wide angle lens to include more environment or allow you to make due with tight quarters - you have to be very savvy in making sure you camera is level and not tilted up or down to accommodate a too high or too low camera position.

Bad composition and gown/train management.

I still see dozens of photographs where, perhaps because the photographer is trying to confine themselves to the 8X10 aspect ratio, where the positioning of the brides train is totally mismanaged. The poor bride is off to one side of the composition looking at the wall or the picture frame, so to speak and the train takes up the rest of the image. The bride might be boringly centered in the frame and the gown chopped off and to one side of the bride. For the life of me, I can't figure out why photographers still insist on yanking the train up front and throwing it on the floor in front of the bride or allowed to fall down the stairs. At best it looks like a cat sitting with its tail wrapped around its front paws. There is no line or balance and the designer's concept of the dress has been completely ignored. The train belongs in back of the dress and it can be featured in different ways. You can show it beautifully in a dramatic back profile of the bride. You can step back and make a looser more environmental portrait of the bride with the train at full extension - the 10x10 format can be very effective for this kind of shot. A moderate wide angle lens can be used as long as you level the camera and keep the subject out of any known areas

of intrinsic distortion. I have even used my 40mm Hasselblad lens and made interesting and dramatic full length portraits without any distortion.

When these principles are ignored your photographs will make inaccurate statements. We want a simple and true to life statement: Here is Mary Ann on her wedding day - she is beautiful in her elegant gown! We don't want: Here come the bride all dressed in white and:

- She has gained 10 pounds.
- Her gown looks like a bed sheet.
- She is standing there like a klutz.
- Her gown doesn't fit.
- She has poor posture.
- She must have shrunk. OR
- I am sure she has already killed her photographer.

The rules ain't that bad when you consider the benefits.

Ed Shapiro