# *Simple Tips for Better* PHOTOS

Kurt Hertzog

Photographic equipment has continually improved and become less expensive. Our camera phones are more capable than the professional equipment of just a few years ago. With technology continuing to change by leaps and bounds, it is easy to believe a good camera is all you need to take good photos. But people forget the magic has never been in the tool; it has always been in the hands of the user. Without bombarding you with complicated photographic concepts and terms, here are some very simple tips you can do to improve your images. These suggestions are easily done at little or no cost and can improve your results, regardless of the camera being used or the subject of your photo.

## Select and control lighting

Choose a location where you can select and control the lighting for best results. Snapping a photo of a turned object on the bed of your lathe might suffice if you only want a quick shot to help you remember your work, but that kind of location doesn't allow you to control the lighting for optimal results.

A location allowing indirect natural light is great when available, but it is not always feasible, such as at night. Using light fixtures, illuminating your turning from the front but slightly off-center usually works well. A single light source angled 45 degrees from center and 45 degrees in elevation works for nearly any photo subject. It is much like the light coming over your shoulder, lighting your subject and creating some controlled shadowing, which is necessary to achieve a sense of depth and dimension.

Avoid using your camera's flash whenever possible. It offers harsh lighting with bounce-back glare and unflattering shadows. Also check for any glare that may be caused by your light sources. Repositioning the object or the light fixture can help eliminate or at least minimize glare. Soften the light if needed by positioning diffusion materials between the light and the object. Some easily found diffusion materials are thin white cloth, a sheet of velum, or even a frosted shower curtain.

## Bounce the light




A white foam board is used to bounce light where needed. Note the shadow at left in *Photo 1* and its absence in *Photo 3*.

## Eliminate distractions

4

The infamous picnic table photo. Here, we can't help but notice the tables in the fore- and background, as well as sun spots on the grass.

5

The lathe-bed project shot with distracting wood chips and bedways.

6

Better to use an inexpensive, neutral backdrop such as seamless background paper, so your project can be the star of the photo.

## Unwanted shadows

7

With a seamless backdrop, you might get unwanted shadows. Try redirecting your light source or repositioning the object farther from the backdrop to eliminate this problem.

### Learn to "bounce" light

You don't need expensive or multiple light fixtures to get good lighting. Light can be "bounced," or redirected, using a reflective material, and this affords you another level of control over your lighting. Any kind of light, whether sun through the window or a strobe fixture, can be bounced. A reflective material as simple as white paper or foam board positioned correctly can bounce light into areas needing additional illumination.

This technique can also reduce unwanted shadows by directing "fill lighting" into difficult areas, such as the lower half of a bowl lit from above. The missing light on the underside of the bowl not only hides detail, but also bypasses the visual information about lift.

At little or no cost, materials that bounce light will help you put light where it can best show off your turning. Simply position bounce cards as needed to reflect light to areas of focus. Like bouncing a billiard ball off a side cushion, you can control the angle of reflection. A single light source and a few pieces of white foam board can light your subject well (*Photos 1–3*).

### Eliminate distractions

Unless your photo requires something different for a special purpose, your real subject is your turned object, so feature it alone. Don't dilute it with distractions, as illustrated in *Photos 4 and 5*. A beautiful wooden turning sitting on a bright, multicolor tablecloth on the dining room table forces your viewer to share her attention with distracting patterns and/or nearby items. Situate your subject so it is the main feature in the image without competition, either in the foreground or background.

Using a neutral-colored backdrop with only your turning at center stage will focus the viewer's attention. A plain, neutral gray cloth hung properly can create a seamless backdrop. You can also buy a roll of seamless background paper from a photo-supply store. Hang it in such a way that there is no seam, or crease—just a gradual curve from surface to background (*Photo 6*). This can be done by simply taping it to a wall behind a table and placing the turning on the backdrop rolled out on the table.

Be aware of shadows cast on the backdrop (*Photo 7*). Detractive shadows are often overlooked, yet there are a several easy fixes. It may be possible to move the subject farther from the vertical part of the background (closer to the camera) or change your camera position. By moving either one slightly, you can position the shadow out of frame or at least so it is less distracting.

### Fill the frame

A good rule of thumb is to try to fill about three-quarters of the image frame. This is called "filling the ▸

## Fill the frame

8

9

By positioning the camera closer or zooming in and refocusing, fill the photo frame to about 75%. Some breathing room is good, but an excess of blank space is unnecessary.

## Stabilize the camera

10

If you don't have a tripod, set your camera on a bag or two of rice or a small sandbag, which have just the right amount of give to accept and hold the camera in place.

frame" with your subject (*Photos 8, 9*). It usually creates a pleasing ratio of subject to frame, with a comfortable amount of breathing room around the edges. When planning your shot, move the physical camera position closer or farther away as needed to accomplish this goal. You may also be able to do this by adjusting the optical camera zoom in or out.

Filling the frame also eliminates distractions and helps with obtaining good exposure. When using automatic functions such as focusing and light metering, important and useful data are captured based on the bulk of the image. Filling the frame forces key data to be based on your subject and not distractions.

Trying to enlarge images for display or print when the subject was captured too small can present problems. Better to capture the subject larger in the frame so you won't have to enlarge it later.

Finally, don't be afraid to rotate the camera, using either portrait or landscape mode. The differences in appearance and ability to fill the frame will be enhanced, depending on the shape of your subject.

## Stabilize the camera

Improved low-light capabilities and internal stabilization in modern cameras have dramatically reduced camera shake problems. The need for tripods and cable releases has been greatly reduced. Even so, you will never go wrong using your camera on a tripod or taking advantage of some other stabilizing opportunity when possible (*Photo 10*). With the camera locked down, you'll have plenty of time to examine the lighting, reposition and make modifications as necessary, and compose the picture. Changes in frame ratio, lighting, and background can be made while examining the preview until you are content. This can be done in just a few moments, allowing you to "create" a photograph, rather than just "take" one.

Further, good stability allows you to use a lower ISO and shutter speed. If you aren't familiar with the term *ISO*, it is the camera's sensor noting available light; this is the digital equivalent of film speed, or ASA, typically used by older film cameras. The quality of the image will be improved by using lower ISO settings, even if the camera is taking advantage of these settings automatically.

Learn how to use the camera's self-timer function for hands-free shooting. Setting the self-timer, pressing the shutter button, and allowing the camera to take the image after a slight delay takes any hand shake out of the equation and allows residual camera movement to settle down.

## Focus, focus, focus

Soft focus is reserved for romantic portraits and moody, misty landscapes, not for photographs of turnings. Nearly every camera made today, from phone cameras to high-end gear, has a very fast and accurate focusing system. The focusing problem when shooting turned objects usually results from their roundness and lack of sharp contrast to the background. Most focusing systems detect edges, or changes in contrast, to set the focal point. A bowl, even if it is well lit without harsh shadows, presents a challenge for attaining ample focus.

The two solutions I use are to focus manually or add a temporary focal point to "tell" the autofocus where to look. The manual focus is easy to use and most cameras have a magnification of 5x or 10x while you focus. If you aren't a fan of working manually, you can "fool" the autofocus system. Select the spot you'd like to be the focal point. Place something in that area, either handheld or placed, that contains edges that can be detected by the autofocus function. A pen, for example, held upright at the focal

point, works well. Let the camera focus on the pen you've placed at your desired spot. Begin the exposure using the delay feature and then remove the pen from the field of view. With your camera shutter being depressed, the camera with find and lock focus as well as set exposure. When the delay is counting down to the shutter opening, you will have time to remove your focusing aid from the frame.

## Change your perspective

Many images can often be improved by changing your perspective. Taking photos from the standing-in-front position while looking down from eye level may be the least flattering position. Depending on your perspective, round items turn oval, tall items become shorter, lift disappears, shadows causes distractions, etc. Straight on from the front at table level may be the answer, as might a halfway-in-between position (*Photos 11, 12*). The ability to quickly change perspective once you've set up for photos lets you get plenty of different takes with minimal effort.

As you alter your perspective, you may need to also tweak the lighting direction or light bounce. Not only can the shots from a different position potentially be more pleasing, they also may be used differently down the road. Today your need may be simply to put the image in the club newsletter, but later you may need a photo for publication in a magazine article. Altering perspective gives you various options.

## Take plenty of shots

In our digital age, the cost of taking photos is really only the few moments of time needed to do it. Your initial shot might be perfect, but perhaps not. The screen on the camera certainly isn't to be relied upon to confirm perfect focus. The focus point or exposure may not be exactly what you see in the preview screen. You won't really be sure until you view it on a computer screen. Taking multiple shots of each and every setup is good practice.

While you have the camera, lighting, and subject in place, take additional photographs of slightly different compositions. The orientation and perspective can be changed easily, and additional looks can be created. Taking multiple shots of each setup is cheap insurance.

## Conclusions

You can take stellar photos of your turnings with just about any camera you can lay your hands on. The differences in quality and usability of photographs are rarely caused by the equipment, but more likely by the knowledge of the operator. The simple tips I've suggested cost you virtually nothing once you have a camera but will certainly have an impact on your results.

Of course, post-processing in Photoshop or with other software can improve the final result, but I suggest you strive for excellence as captured by the camera. That makes post-processing work optional. ■

*Kurt Hertzog is a past president of the AAW, past chairman of the Rochester Woodworkers Society, and a council member of the Pen Makers Guild. He has written about woodturning and woodworking extensively for various publications. For more, visit kurthertzog.com.*

## Vary your perspective


11


12

Even subtle changes to your photographic perspective can have a big impact on how your subject is portrayed. *Photo 11* is almost straight on, with the camera low; *Photo 12* is taken from a higher elevation with a fuller frame. The effect is a closer, more intimate look.

## JOURNAL ARCHIVE CONNECTION

**For additional ideas on photography, look to AAW's online archives! See Bob Hawks' Summer 2004 article, "Pictures to Be Proud Of" (vol 19, no 2, page 30); Ed Kelle's August 2012 article, "Stunning Digital Photos Show Off Your Turnings" (vol 27, no 4, page 35); and John Lucas's Winter 2004 article, "Cooler Photography" (vol 19, no 4, page 30). Log on at woodturner.org.**