

You got your doll.

The one you've wanted for so long.

The one you've dreamed of.

She's beautiful.

Now you want to share her with the world.

For her, a picture won't do. You need a proper portrait. My intent in this short discussion is to give you an introduction to the art of portrait photography as applied to dolls; hopefully just enough so that you can create a portrait of your new girl that will do her justice.

Light.

As a photographer you are interested in three properties of light; it's brightness, it's size and its color.

Lets discuss size first. A very small light source is considered a "hard" light because it creates a shadow with a well defined edge.. Although very large, the sun is considered a hard light source because it is a long way away. You can convert a hard light to a soft light by placing some sort of diffusing element between the light and the subject. Alternatively you can use a reflective surface to reflect some of the light into the shadowed area to lessen the contrast. If you're indoors you can lower a translucent window cover. If you do that though, be aware of how it will affect the color of the light. Unless it is a white shade this is probably not a good idea. Better would be to choose a window that the sun is not shining directly through such as a north facing window. The ultimate soft light is outdoors on a cloudy day. The light comes from everywhere and there are almost no shadows at all.



Figure 1a
Key light only, no fill.

Figure 1b
Key light with reflector.

Figure 1c
Key light with fill light added

The three images in figure 1 were all illuminated with the same key light, a fairly hard light which is casting quite well defined shadows on her face.

Figure 1a is taken with nothing to fill the shadows which are unacceptably dark.

Figure 1b shows how a reflector lightens the

shadow which still remains rather harsh.

Figure 1c replaces the reflector with a second light. Now we have complete control over the darkness of the shadow. This two light setup, key light and fill light, is the basis of portrait photography.

As I'll discuss a bit later it is important to have some facial shadows so while soft light is desirable, like all good things it can be carried too far.

Figure 2 continues the series from figure 1. The difference here is that I introduced a diffuser between the light and my model. The diffuser was a white umbrella. Umbrellas are a common light modifier and can be used either as reflectors or as diffusers. I prefer them as diffusers; they are closer to the subject and therefore have a greater effect.

Figure 2a is without the fill light and Figure 2b is with the fill light present.

So far our model has been facing the camera directly which has kept her nose pretty much centered on her face. If she is not facing directly towards the camera then there is another variable. Should the key light illuminate the side of her face which faces the camera or the side of her face which is away from the camera causing the side of her face which faces the camera to be the shadowed side. There is, of course, no right answer to this. If the key light illuminates the side of her face which faces the camera it is called broad



Figure 2a
Soft key light

Figure 2b
Soft key light with fill

light as it appears to widen the face. See figure 3b. If the key light illuminates the side of her face which is turned away from the camera it is called narrow light as it appears to narrow her face. See figure 3a



Figure 3a
Narrow light

Figure 3b
Broad light

Figure 3c
Rembrandt light

Notice that in both figure 3a and figure 3b the shadow cast by her nose is surrounded by light area although in figure 3b it is merging with the shadowed area of her cheek. If these

shadow areas merge it reveals a triangular highlight area on the otherwise shadowed cheek. This specific light is known as "Rembrandt" lighting after the famous Dutch painter.

Side light is usually referred to as split lighting as it splits the face into two halves; the bright, highlighted side and the dark, shadowed, side. It is most usually used for dramatic lighting effect as in figure 4 here. While figure 4b exhibits pure split lighting in figure 4a there is a hint of a highlight on his far cheek which suggests Rembrandt light.

Lest I give you the idea that you need expensive and extensive lighting tools to achieve good doll portraits let me pause to assure you that this is not the case at all. If you are attentive to the lighting on your doll you may well be able to take really good portraits with no specialized lighting at all. When I started photographing my BJDs I worked



Figure 4a
Rembrandt lighting

Figure 4b
Split lighting

on our dining room table in the ambient room lighting. By closing some window coverings and opening others I was able to create soft directional light. flattering for portraiture. The photo to the right is an example. This is the first portrait of one of my earliest girls. The only light source is a north facing window.

If you want to obtain some lights to provide better control of your results you need not spend a lot of money on them. My lights are LED panel lights. Though the specific ones I use are no longer available a quick search on Amazon will turn up a plethora of them. Mine are about the size of an iPad and provide variable brightness. They cost me ~\$100 ea and the stands for them another \$25 ea. Variable brightness is valuable as it allows you to adjust the key light and fill light to provide the lighting ratio to give you the best portrait. Some LED panels provide variable light color. This is so they can be used with daylight or with incandescent lights without messing with your white balance. Mine do not provide variable color though they did come with amber filters. I have never used them.



Since I've brought up white balance let's discuss it for a moment. One of the joys of digital photography is that you have the opportunity to correct the white balance so that the colors in your image are true to the colors in your subject. This is actually more important in portraiture than it is in nature or travel photography. Most modern cameras have automatic white balance correction and while they usually do reasonably well they don't really sense the color temperature of the light but rather make the overall color of the image average to neutral gray. If you're image has large areas of strong color they can provide less than desirable results.



Today all SLRs, many point and shoot cameras and even many cell phone cameras allow you to shoot in RAW image format. If your camera allows it, learn to use it and use it, exclusively. RAW image capture saves the output from the sensor directly. JPG images have been processed by the camera. White balance has been applied and your camera has quite likely changed the color information and applied it's own idea of what will make the image pleasing. Then it saves it in a compressed 8 bit/color format. Your RAW image is 12 or possibly 14 bits/color and you get to set the color balance yourself. You will need a color reference card. This is a neutral gray reference card. The one I use is by Whibal. Take a photo of it in the same light that you will be using for your photograph. Then in your RAW image processing tool click on it with your color balance tool. Note the setting and apply it to your images.

Backgrounds.

First, what to avoid; don't plunk her down on a table with a cluttered background. Backgrounds should not fight with your subject for attention. Plain backgrounds are always a good choice such as a blank wall. Textures can add interest and dark tones, in general are preferred to bright, saturated ones.

Portrait photographers frequently use something called an “old masters” background. To get a sense of what these look like use Google to search for images of old masters backgrounds. These usually



Figure 5a
Portrait Backgrounds

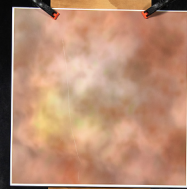


Figure 5b
Doll Portrait Studio

provide a variation of compatible tones with lighter ones predominantly grouped in the center of the background; see figure 5. Figure 5a shows my background mount and several of my backgrounds. Figure 5b shows my posing stool placed in front of a background. This is exactly where I photographed Freya for the lighting studies earlier.

Personally I’m not a fan of plain colors as backgrounds. I prefer a background that provides some visual interest to the image. You can create a suitable background from scratch by starting with a dark brown surface and adding soft black patches. You can do this physically with an airbrush or virtually in your image editor. I find that dark browns make really versatile background.

Likewise I have a few deep blue backgrounds that I use frequently.

The photo to the right here is an example of using a dramatic background. My girl here is Mika Jougasaki. She’s a character from the manga iDOLM@STER: Cinderella Story and quite flamboyant. By posing her in a yellow dress and using a yellow/orange background I’ve tried to reflect that aspect of her character.



For a portrait of a doll the background does not need to be that large. I, personally use 12” x 12” scrapbook paper. You can purchase this at shops that cater to scrapbookers or you can have them custom printed. Most labs that offer photo prints can print in that format but 8”x10” would work as well. Of course larger dolls require proportionally larger backgrounds. For a large child doll such as Patty Playpal you may need all of that 12x12 or even more. If you need larger, while somewhat expensive, you can get photographic prints up to 16”x20”. These are \$11.57 at Walmart. I support my backgrounds with spring clips onto a scrap of plywood held vertical in a bench vise. This allows me to vary the height of the background to accommodate the size of the doll being photographed.

Posing.

Usually when I photograph my dolls I work at getting them to stand on their own. Not for portraits. For portrait sessions I seat them on my posing stool. For a portrait you’re normally only showing their head and upper body so seat them on a stool or stand them on their stand. That way you don’t need to worry about their stability.



Figure 6a
Portrait Session

Figure 6b
Portrait

Figure 6a shows Sophia on the set and figure 6b is one of the portraits from the session. As she is sitting and stable I can move lights or change camera position or even turn her head or the stool she’s sitting on to vary the light or the pose.

While you can pose your doll with both her body and

her face facing the camera directly this will probably not result in the artistic portrait that you're looking for. Turning her body slightly away from the camera provides a pleasing look. She can then face directly ahead or towards the camera.

Experiment with different body positions and different head positions.

Full length portraits

So far I've only discussed classic head and shoulders portraits. Sometimes you will want all of the doll. Perhaps you want to show off her new outfit or compare her with one of your other dolls. Basically, all that changes is the background you'll use. Now you'll need a background image larger than the doll so that she'll look right in front of it.

Fundamentally there are two options, a floor with background or a seamless background that serves as both floor and background. In either option the background can represent a real environment or it can be an abstraction. There is no reason to prefer one over the other.

The photograph to the right is an example of a floor and background. My wife is a doll collector and she sets up seasonal dioramas with her dolls. We cut a plywood cover to fit over our bathtub. For this diorama we have thin sheet of white batting covering the tub. We obtained a winter scene printed on fabric and we hung it from a shower rod. The lighting is our bathroom's normal ambient light. Because I shoot in RAW format I was able to correct the white balance so that Crystal's cloak is properly white.



On my studio posing table I use 20" x 30" poster prints to shoot full length images of my dolls. Fashion photographers have used seamless backgrounds for decades. When I was in college back in the 50s our camera club had 2 or 3 seamless backgrounds and a rack to hang it from. These were 12' wide and 30' or more long. Fortunately we get to use smaller ones with the dolls. I get most of mine from Katebackdrop. Mine are 3'x5' and cost \$24 plus shipping from China. They are printed on microfiber cloth



Seamless - 1

Seamless - 2

On the left are two examples of full length portraits or fashion photos if you prefer of two of my girls posed on seamless backgrounds. Diedre is wearing a traditional Chinese skirt and top and posed on a classic seamless background. The object of using a seamless background is that there is no obvious transition between the floor and the wall. Catalog images are always shot against white seamless. Which raises an interesting point about the second one. This background, though in fact seamless, specifically includes a floor and a wall to create an environment for your model. There are several Chinese companies that sell such backgrounds specifically for doll photography. Go to eBay and search for BJD photo backgrounds. There are

thousands of these; interiors, exteriors, fantasy scenes, anything you may want as a setting for your doll. These are scaled for sizes from 12" fashion dolls to 24" or larger BJDs.

So there you have it. Please keep in mind:

Soft light.

Not too much contrast unless you're trying for a dramatic image.

Mind the background. No room clutter.

A professional portrait or fashion photographer will have more lights than the 2 I use here.

There will be a hair light, a background light, and of course various modifiers. Over 90% of the time two lights are quite enough, I have more. I rarely use more than my basic 2.

Remember that the ultimate goal is to enjoy yourself.

Dolls are supposed to be fun!

Photography is supposed to be fun!

The goal of this little paper is to help you make doll photography fun and produce stunning imagery.