

Portraits

By Reg Graham FPSNZ

Taking people pictures is one of the great joys of photography. Sensitive handling, it can be rewarding and fun for both subject and photographer, in spite of the usual reactions of ‘I hate having my photo taken’ and ‘Oh, why would you want to take a photo of me?’ It’s mostly down to your **attitude** and **personality**. We’ve all been subjected to the control-freak wedding photographer whose time is money and people are just a nuisance in the process – take warning from those mistakes and you’ll find that your subjects are likely to be cooperative and even enjoy the process.

First, it might help to ask what a portrait is. The short answer is; I don’t know. Definitions are elusive in this area. Are we talking about the formal head-and-shoulders image that hangs in the boardroom or do we also include the casual snap of the family at the beach? And all the possibilities between? Do we have to confine the definition to photos of single subjects, or two or can we include groups? And so on.... I prefer to avoid the issue and simply settle for ‘people pictures’ and let the viewers make their own decisions.

What is much more important is your **attitude** to what you do as a people photographer. Empathy with your subject can make all the difference between producing a result that conveys a great deal about the person(s) or a two-dimensional, characterless record.



Is this a portrait? An environmental portrait – here Cilla McQueen is in one of her favourite spots.

FORMAL OR CANDID

When you decide to take a portrait, you presumably want to show the subject through your camera/eye – your interpretation of what is in front of you. For a worthwhile photo, you need to consider what you want the result to look like – an easy, relaxed view of the subject or a formalised, carefully arranged setting. You must choose, also, what you want to include in the frame – just a close-up head with minimal background, or the subject in a context or ‘environment’ to express something more about character, occupation, and so on.

I think it is very important, initially, to be clear about your intention, even though you may change your mind/technique during the photo session.

Much, of course, depends on how well you know your subjects and their background – it is very difficult to go in ‘cold’ to a portrait session. If you have to, it is wise to make sure that you have a chat-and-relax before you start. Even then you will probably find that your first few shots will be less than great.

Always put yourself in the place of the subject and try to imagine what that piece of glass pointing at you feels like. On the other hand, though, I often find it very hard to take good portraits of the people I know best!



Daylight indoors – subject close-up and looking straight into lens gives a strong result. 400 ISO rating was useful here.

END USE

Before you start, consider also what you or the subject wants to do with the result of your taking their photo. What size final photos will be required? What format/shape will be needed? Colour or black-and-white? Mounting, framing, or just for a photo file?

Will you work with 35mm or does it need a larger format (I’ll stick to 35mm for this discussion, since that will be the format used by at least 95% of users)?

TAKING A FORMAL PORTRAIT

Let us suppose that you have been asked to take a more or less formal photograph of a friend or acquaintance. You know the person to some extent and feel that you can go straight into a session. Much will then depend on what equipment and setting you have or choose to use. If you have a studio- type set-up, that will dictate how you visualise your result – if you haven't, you will need to decide what conditions to work under; outdoors, or indoors with natural light, or with artificial light, or with a mixture of both.

If you are using a studio set-up you will probably be using flash, brollies, softboxes and the other accoutrements of the professional photographer, but most of us haven't got those luxuries so we make do, and often excel with minimal equipment and using the settings and light that normally surround us.

First, the choice of an indoor or outdoor situation leads to very different results. Generally, outdoors suits photos of children and younger people while indoors often provides the lighting and background most effective for older people. This of course, is simply a rule of thumb, but I think you will be surprised how well it works out in practice. If you use outdoors for your portrait, there are a few basic don'ts:-

- avoid strong frontal sunlight because it both upsets the subject and produces awful, unflattering results
- it is usually effective to take portraits in full sun against the light but be very sure that you are not getting flare in the photo from the angle of light hitting the front of the lens (a really good lens hood or even a piece of black card to act as a lens shade is worth while)
- if you are working in sunlit shade be careful to avoid sun speckles on the face and clothing – they usual dominate in the final print
- try to avoid 'busy' backgrounds – choose a plain setting without strong, distracting highlights and preferably ensure that the background is out of focus
- Don't place your subject against a brick, stucco or similar wall – ensure that they are well forward of such backdrops or you are liable to get 'mug-shot' effects.

If you are working indoors, there are a few things to note:-

- it is probably wise to use a fairly fast ISO rating (400 or faster) because you will be working in reduced light
- window light usually gives good modeling and a pleasant portrait ambience – how you place the subject in relation to the direction of the light makes a great difference to the effect; experiment with various angles to see which suits your purpose best.
- You may like to combine window light with normal artificial light. This can be very effective. Again, make sure the background is unobtrusive and free from flare-outs of brightly lit objects.
- Finally, look through the viewfinder and check carefully not only how the subject is looking but also what is going on behind and around.
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Whether working indoors or outdoors it is usually a good idea to use a wide aperture on your chosen lens as much as possible, in order to throw the background out of focus. This will isolate your subject from distracting objects and surroundings – unless, of course, you specifically wish to enhance your portrait by setting it in an identifiable environment..

EQUIPMENT

Almost any functioning camera is capable of taking a good portrait. But obviously some are more suitable than others for the purpose. The following quick summary points out some of the qualities of particular types of camera:-

Point-and-shoot compact cameras

- Although there is a wide range of capability in this class, they are generally the least suited to portraiture
- They usually provide a poorer viewfinder image of the subject than other types, often with parallax problems between what is seen and what is taken, especially in close-ups
- They frequently have limited ability to adjust for special conditions or effects
- They usually have very short focal length lenses (35 or 28mm) which are the least flattering end of the focal range, giving distorted and overly rounded faces at close quarters.
- A consequence also of the short focal lengths is the inability to put backgrounds and foregrounds out of focus to isolate the subject in the frame.

Upmarket rangefinder cameras

- These are very capable types (Leica, Voigtlander, Konica, and many digital cameras, etc) with superb picture taking ability, but close-up portraiture is one area where they are less than ideal, partly because of the viewfinder limitations mentioned above.

Single lens reflexes

- Most agree that these are ideal for portrait work.
- What you see in the viewfinder is what you get.
- There are usually interchangeable lenses to suit exactly the effects you want.
- Zoom lenses on SLRs can be very helpful when you want to make quick changes of focal length for different views of your subject.
- Wide aperture lenses are readily available and these can greatly improve your ability to work in poor lighting and can easily isolate the subject from the surroundings where this is appropriate.

LIGHTING

Lighting is one of the most complex areas of portrait photography. There is such a range of possibilities and there are few rules for guidance. Much the best way is to experiment – try out as many different light sources as you can before you settle to a particular formula. As I said above, you have the choice of daylight, flash, fluorescent or incandescent sources, and each kind has its advantages and disadvantages.

Fluorescent light is generally a pain to work with – it gives a ghoulish green cast to colour photos and is a flat and uninteresting source for b&w. I try to avoid it if possible.

Incandescent light (from ordinary light bulbs) tends to be very orange, so is difficult to correct in colour work, but it is often a very useful main or assistant source for b&w.

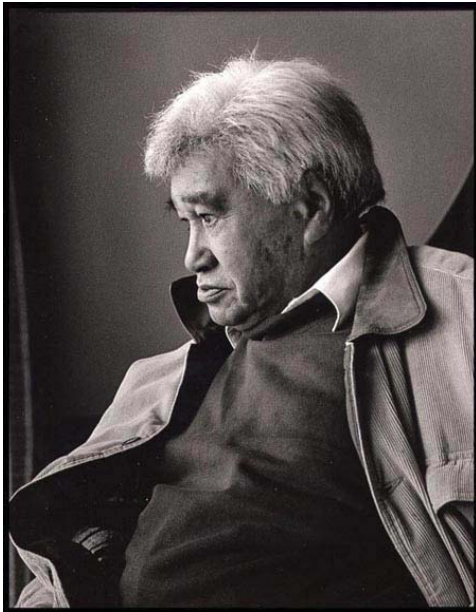
Flash is complex and generally unsatisfactory for portraiture unless you have a full studio set-up where you can control direction and power of light and have it coupled into the

camera's exposure system. You can then also preview the effect you will get with built in supplementary lights. Such a set-up is expensive and needs a fair amount of space, but, of course, it has all the advantages of predictability, independence from weather and time, and repeatability. Most of us are restricted to simple flash-on-camera use and this can have only very restricted use for any sort of serious portrait work – with all the problems of harshness, red-eye, flatness of effect, etc

Daylight, even though it can be frustrating because of constant variations, it is a marvellous source for portrait work. Outdoors, it is a very flexible and interesting source – bright sun in a clear sky can be difficult and harsh to work with but if you move your subject and the camera around until it is comfortable and not too harsh, you can get excellent results.

However, I much prefer to work under cloudy skies (or even dark, thunderous conditions) because then the light can be soft but not flat. And because the light is not coming from one direction you are free to set the subject wherever you like. Daylight indoors is also very rewarding to work with – I certainly use it more than any other source. Window light can be used in so many ways.

You can set your subject near the window for strong lighting effects or further away for softer results; you can turn the subject around and move the camera in relation to the source to get different effects and emphases – experiment. Mixing window light with incandescent sources can also work very well with colour or b&w but again try a variety of these in combination to see what happens.



Using daylight indoors again – here a single window gives a pleasantly “rounded” light

TAKING THE PHOTO

Once the subject is at ease, you can begin to take some shots. A portrait session can consist of anything from one exposure up to a hundred – it's largely up to you. I very often find that the first few shots are less than ideal and, while I don't waste materials, the first shots are frequently lacking in character and liveliness.

I usually work quite quickly and move around freely to get a variety of views.

Some photographers find it easy to chat non-stop to subjects while working. I don't. I find all my energies are devoted to pressing the button at the appropriate moments. I don't want my subject to be talking too much either – trying to take photos during chatter seldom leads to great results. I also usually take both serious expressions and smiling or laughing ones, even though I might have a pretty good idea in advance about what will suit the subject/me best.

Asking people to smile can produce some gruesome outcomes but it is worth persisting. Try to get a happy expression as it begins to fade – this usually gives a more pleasant photo.

Keep a careful eye on what your camera is doing during the session. It is very easy to concentrate so much on the subject that you fail to see that the focus, exposure, depth of field, lighting effect, etc. might have strayed from what you intended. For instance, in indoor situations the shutter on an auto camera might have dropped to dangerously slow speeds (under 1/30 of a sec) so that you will find camera movement in your prints.

Should your subject look into the lens or look off-camera? This is a hard one to answer. For me, and I guess for the vast majority of portraitists, I finish up with about 80/90% of final prints with subjects looking directly into camera. I'm not sure why this is – perhaps it tends to disclose more of the inner workings of the subject? But one certainly can't be dogmatic about where to look – many of the world's best portraits are in profile, or at least $\frac{3}{4}$ view. Again, try a variety of ways.

Tripods.

Studio portraiture and tripods go together for several obvious reasons. Outside the studio it is different matter. I hate them – I find them far too restrictive. They don't give me the rapid flexibility that I want when I take people pictures. They make me feel stiff and awkward and I think they tend to be a bit daunting to the subject – they seem to say 'now sit up and behave; I want your full attention and this camera on top is going to do the business'. I much prefer to keep the camera as a an incidental part of the procedure and use it as discreetly as possible – I often take approx 70 exposures in a half-hour session and subjects are usually astonished to find that so many were taken.

COMPOSITION

The layout of your subject's features or body within the frame is almost infinitely variable – and some arrangements will be better than others for a particular person. The general rules about placement of a centre of interest in the photographic frame do usually apply to portraiture but obviously there are different constraints from those that apply to landscape or other types of picture taking. The size and placement of a close-up head within the available space is pretty much your choice, limited only by the effect you want and perhaps the equipment you are using. Always remember to 'think vertical' for portraits – vertical format is standard for portraits, so use a 'landscape' format only after you're sure that it is the better alternative. (Many beginning photographers seem to take horizontal portraits, probably because the camera feels more comfortable that way.)

If you are taking more than just a face, it is very important to consider carefully what is happening to the hands, legs and general disposition of the body within the frame.

Hands, as we are often told, are especially important and can convey a great deal about the subject Consider not only how they relate to the rest of the image, but make sure that they are not too brightly or too darkly lit in relation to the face – the final result can be

made or broken by such detail. But also don't be hide-bound about these things – break rules and conventions whenever you feel confident that you can achieve something better.



“More than just a face” —Ralph Hotere in his own surroundings.
His work and his clothing contribute to the whole

PROCESSING AND PRINTING

There are no real differences in this aspect from what you would want with other types of photography. But I find that minilab processed portraits are frequently printed too light so that they have washed out highlight skin tones and sometimes poor colour correction for skin —don't hesitate to return unsatisfactory prints and ask that they be reprinted. Labs usually do this for free and are usually very happy to print in future to your specific requirements. If you have your own computer with enhancing software (or darkroom) you have a whole world of possibilities before you.

PRESENTATION

Whether your finals are 6"x4" minilab prints or 16"x20" professional enlargements you need to present them in a suitable form. It is worth getting some mattes made into which you can fit your favourite size of print so that you can show them to full effect. It makes a tremendous difference to the result, more especially, I think, with portraits than with any other field of photography. Don't forget to consider mounting and matting more than one print of your subject within the one frame – it can be very attractive and revealing to see more than one view of the person.

FINALLY

I think it is well worthwhile to take frequent revisions of your style and technique by looking back at some of the great portrait photographers – some of my gods are Snowdon, David Bailey, Annie Liebovitz, Karsh, Philippe Halsman, Cecil Beaton, Richard Avedon, and many others.

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