

Pictures to be proud of

Tips on taking digital photos of your pieces for publication

By Bob Hawks

Much has changed in photography since I started working full-time as a commercial photographer in 1948. Even though I spent most of my career shooting transparencies (slides), I've now embraced digital photography as a marvelous advancement.

Recently, I helped the Northeastern Oklahoma Woodturners Association set up a simple lighting system for our Tulsa-based chapter. After two or three hours of coaching, Bob Galloway, a member of our chapter, has now taken over photography duties for the chapter.

Bob, an amateur photographer, also photographs each "Show and Tell" piece at our meetings and then posts them to our chapter web site (www.wneo.com).

Just because a photo looks good on a computer screen doesn't mean that it will measure up for publication, photo prints, and gallery standards. This lighting system may help you and your chapter make a leap into professional-quality digital images you all can be proud of.

Photos: Bob Hawks



Set up your studio

This basic set-up (known as tabletop photography) works for photos of most turned pieces. By using photoflood bulbs, you can see exactly what each light source is doing and make adjustments accordingly. The lighting set stores compactly.

I set up my tabletop studio in my garage where I can shut out all other light sources. You may have the ideal space in your basement where you can control other light sources. Yes, turn off all the other lights in the room.

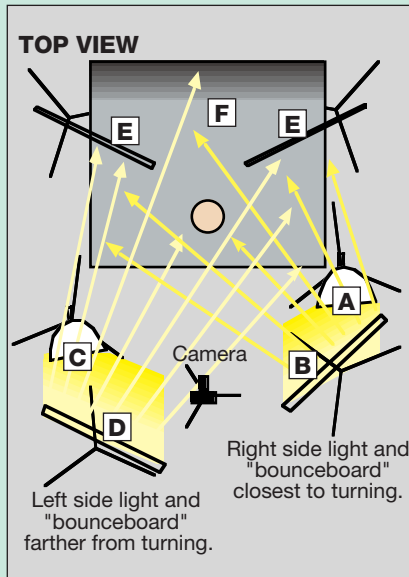
The background is seamless neutral gray photo paper, and available at most good camera stores in 53"-wide x 12-yard rolls. Roll it out and tape it to a wall (a height of about 6 feet works for me). The front edge of my drafting table (a card table also works fine) is about 4 to 5 feet from the wall. This distance creates a smooth sweep from front to back. Be careful not to put bends or creases in the paper, as it will show in your photographs. With sensible use, a roll should last through many photo sessions.

The lights I use are standard 10" photoflood reflectors with 250-watt 3200k medium screw-base quartz halogen lamps, which will last for about 100 hours. You can purchase your reflectors and bulbs from a camera store. Workshop or painter's lights available from home improvement stores are not satisfactory.

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Are you ready for a tabletop photo studio?

Bob Hawks, a mostly retired commercial photographer, set up his Tulsa chapter with this lighting kit. Unless noted, you can buy the pieces at most photography stores. Tom Lottinville at Camera Gallery in Tulsa (918-252-3652) helped Bob put together this kit and has agreed to work with AAW chapters and individuals on a similar package (excluding the foamcore).

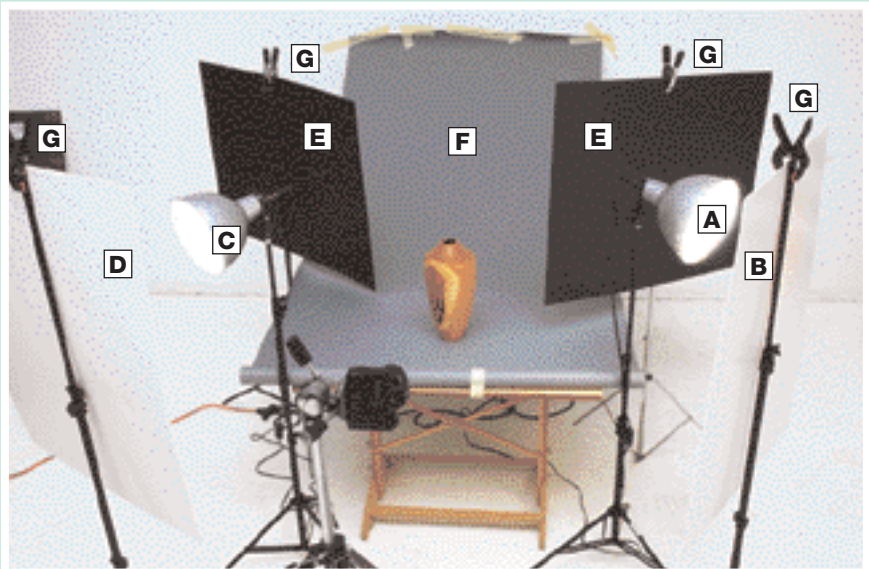


Bob's setup

- 2 10"-diameter reflectors and 2 telescoping stands (\$135)
- 4 additional telescoping stands (\$60)
- 2 250-watt quart halogen bulbs (\$30)
- 53"-wide x 12-yard roll of neutral gray seamless paper* (\$36)
- 4 1/4"-thick foamcore board sheets, (2 white, 2 black) from art supply store, each 2'x2' (\$20)
- 4 spring clamps (\$17)

Total price: \$298

*The seamless paper is available from several manufacturers and in many colors. The photos shown here were shot on Pursuit Gray by Superior; Slate Gray is similar. For ease of handling, cut the background roll with a handsaw to about 40" wide.



A: Right side photoflood and telescoping stand. **B:** Right side white foamcore board and telescoping stand. **C:** Left side photoflood and telescoping stand. **D:** Left side white foamcore board and telescoping stand. **E:** Black foamcore board (gobo) on telescoping stands. **F:** Seamless paper. **G:** Clamp.

Set up your lights on stands as shown in the illustration on page 31. Then place your stands for the bounce boards as shown. Finally, position your camera and tripod where shown on page 31.

Now, for the camera

The first thing to consider is the color balance of the light source you are using. Most cameras have an auto setting, but your digital camera should have a manual white balance capability that renders the image much more accurately. If you've seen photos that have a green or yellow cast, the white balance—or lack of white balance—played a role in the appearance.

I like to raise the camera just high enough to define the opening in the top of the piece. If the camera gets too high, it will

The digital camera

Here's what you'll need to get the job done:

- Digital camera with 3 megapixel or higher capability.
- Zoom lens that will go to 80mm or longer. If you photograph tiny pieces, you'll need a lens with macro capability.
- A sturdy tripod.

foreshorten the image and make it look squatty.

I've had best results with a lens between 90 and 120mm focal length. The longer the focal length, the farther your background can be from the turning, which gives more control over the background.

Your digital camera should have several selections for

resolution. Use the highest available (or the next step below RAW if that's among your settings). If your camera has a manual focus available, use it because sometimes the autofocus has trouble focusing on the surface of a smooth turning.

Exposures will probably run a little more than 1 second. If your camera has a cable release socket, use it. If not, use the delay self-timer to avoid shaking the camera when you release the shutter. If your camera has an aperture (f-stop) control, set it at 1 or 2 stops from the widest aperture, which is the smallest number. This will keep the front and back of your piece in focus.

If your camera has only auto exposure capability, it will shoot at the widest aperture. This is adequate except for small pieces.



Set the first light

Bounce one light into the white foam board and watch how it adds shape to the turning. This first light should cast a soft shadow. The light should be 45 to 65 degrees from the camera. Your eye will tell you what looks best.

Never ever turn the light directly onto the piece or use the flash on the camera!



Add a second light

Turn on the second light and it will cast a second shadow. Instead of a round shape, your turning will look flat like the photo at left. See how the shadows on each side of the base are nearly equal? To give your turning shape, you want one shadow to dominate.

Processing your digital images

If you have a photo program in your computer, download the photos. Before you begin correcting an image, open the file and immediately resave it in a tiff format. Unlike the default jpeg format, the tiff format doesn't attempt to compress the image each time you save, so you'll end up with better images down the road. If your original photo was a jpeg, it will be saved at a resolution of 72dpi (dots per inch); I like to convert them to 150dpi (this size prints nicely).

You'll no doubt want to rename the photo something other than the number assigned by your camera. Then make a copy of your original image and add "Rev" to the file name. By establishing this routine, you can

always go back to your original unaltered image if you get lost in the correction options.

If you submit photos of your work for a gallery or competition, be sure to read the requirements carefully. Many publications—including the *American Woodturner*—require high-resolution images (file size should be 750 KB to 1.5 MB).

If you need to convert a digital image to a 35mm slide, most camera stores will know a resource to make conversions (about \$8 per slide).

If you're not interested in photographing your own work, perhaps you and a turning buddy can send a batch of pieces to a commercial photographer. Take a copy of the journal to show the photographer examples of well-photographed woodturnings.



The outside studio

An alternate for studio lighting is to set up outside in the shade or on a cloudy day. All you have to do is make the same set-up without the reflectors and lights. This will give you a very soft flat light; however, you will not be able to darken the background. The obvious hazard to this set-up is the weather.

Bob Hawks (bobhawks@sbcglobal.net) has belonged to the Northeastern Oklahoma Woodturners Association since 1988. In addition to shooting the photographs for AAW juried competitions, Bob has taught photography at Arrowmont. His turned vessels are sold through www.guild.com and several galleries.



Balance the lighting

Back off the second light until its shadow just disappears as shown in the photo at left. I think one shadow is desirable because it helps define the shape of the piece.

Except for very dark woods, I like the background to be darker than the piece. This sometimes is not possible with very small or flat pieces. Place another card behind the light and reflector on each side as shown on page 31. Photographers call these gobos and they block as much light as necessary behind the piece to get the best separation possible between the turning and background. Black cards (made from black foamcore board) work well here.