A FIRST CLASS OF PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY

Let's start with two big ideas that all photographers need to know:

- You have to master two fundamental skills that help take better pictures: reading light and controlling focus. Luckily these are the only two big items that you need to worry about.
- You need to be able to visualize where you want to go with an image when looking at a scene, or have an idea in your mind, and pick the correct technical steps to take you there.

There are endless technical distractions, like carnival barkers enticing you into a side show, that for the most part will not be necessary in making a wonderful image. Stay focused on the basics.

I.   BASIC CAMERA SETTINGS

The following three techniques are essential to take a satisfied portrait photo:

- Focusing on the eye

    Eyes should be the only sharpest point in a portrait image; otherwise the figure will look dim and lose his/her original shine. If the left eye and the right eye are about equidistant from the camera, then I prefer to focus on the left eye; otherwise, I focus on the nearest eye.

    There are two ways to make the camera accurately focus on the eye. One way is to change the autofocus (AF) mode to ONE SHOT (for Canon DSLR, you need to set the aperture priority mode first) or AF-S (for Nikon DSLR) and aim the single focus point over the nearest eye through the viewfinder. The other way is to turn on the live view and use the face detection function (only for some models). The camera will automatically find the subject's face and display the face region on the screen. Remember, you need to press the shutter button halfway to activate your autofocus, whichever way you may choose.

- Reflecting the skin tone

    Bright skin tone makes the figure look healthy and pretty. In order to vividly reflect the skin tone, we need to help the camera judge what the true white is under different light sources. You can achieve this goal by setting the white balance properly and brightening up the subject a little bit by compensating the exposure.

    For white balance, there are five main modes: auto, daylight, cloudy, tungsten light, and white fluorescent light. If you really have no idea about your situation, choose the auto mode; otherwise pick the most matching one. For exposure value, I always set it to +0.3 or +0.7 for portrait shooting. Remember to set this back to 0 as it will continue to effect all future exposures.

    Last but not least, it is highly recommended to select the subject's optimal image characteristics (Picture Style for Canon DSLR and Picture Control for Nikon DSLR) to portrait mode.

- Freezing the precious moments

    ISO refers to the camera image sensor's sensitivity to light. A low ISO value (<200) takes longer to expose the same light than a high ISO value (>1600). But lower ISO settings show less digital noise than high ISO settings. In other words, lower ISO settings create much more clear and sharp photos. If you figure is still, then choose lower ISO (i.e., <200). If you figure is moving, then consider increasing your ISO to allow faster shutter speed so that you can freeze the precious moments of your figure.

II. IMAGE COMPOSITION

There are two typical types of portrait photography: head shot and environment portrait. The composition guidelines for them are different.

Let's talk about head shot composition first.
- Set focal length to 85mm (for full-frame DSLR) or 50mm (for APS-C DSLR) if applicable, before moving yourself to a better position
- Prefer to take vertical orientation photo
- Leave enough space to the top, the left, and the right of the figure
- Place the face around one of the four points of intersection, after enabling the gridlines in the viewfinder

There is no standard guideline for environment portrait composition. Prime normal 35mm (or 50mm) lens and zoom wide-angle lens are the two most popular lenses for environment portraits. The former provides the most comfortable view of angle for human eyes and the latter can be used to take striking portrait photos as it distorts distance, which makes nearby objects appear very large and objects at a moderate distance appear small and far away. Keep in mind, always place the face around the center of the image when using the wide-angle lens.

III. SUBJECT ISOLATION

In order to show how impressive your figure is, you must make sure that the figure stands out enough to be noticed as the main focus. In optics, we refer this to depth of field, which is the distance between the nearest and farthest objects in a scene that appear acceptably sharp in an image. A small depth of field emphasizes the subject while de-emphasizes/blurs the foreground and background.

There are typically three methods to make less depth of field:
- Increasing the aperture (decrease f stop value)
  Go to the aperture priority mode (Av for Canon DSLR and A for Nikon DSLR) and set f stop to f/2.8 or f/4 because they are the two most widely used f stop values in portrait photography.
- Increasing the focal length

Rotate the zoom ring to >85mm (for full-frame DSLR) or >50mm (for APS-C DSLR) if applicable because 85mm is the best start focal length for head shots, as a smoothing and beautiful background could be created in that way.
- Decreasing the camera's distance to the subject
Sometimes, you are unable to set an aperture f stop value less than f/4 or a focal length greater than 85mm, this is the last method you could use to isolate the figure. It is most happened when using wide-angle lens for environment portraits.

IV. LIGHTING EFFECTS

Basic camera settings, composition, and subject isolation make an image technically look good. Further, with the help of lighting effects, you are able to incorporate your own emotion and feeling into the photo.

There are three types of lighting for portrait photography:
- Frontlighting (the light source is in front of the subject)
It makes the figure brighter, but it also brings shadows which hide the soft texture of the skin.
- Backlighting (the light source is behind the subject)
It makes shining hairs, creaming skin and an outlining effect that separates the figure from the background, but it also brings an overexposured background.
- Semi-backlighting (the light source is behind the subject with angle)
It is trade-off between frontlighting and backlighting. Thus, it is widely used in portrait photography.

You need to change your position to control the light and experiment with different lighting effects by shooting test images.

V. FIGURE

Where a professional model meets a professional photographer, beautiful work rises up. By communicating with your model, you can try different facial expressions and body poses for fun.
- Facial expression

- Cute: wear black-framed glasses, close eyes, play hairs, stretch tongue, etc.
- Cool: look far into the distance, don't smile, etc.
- Smiling and grinning
- Grimacing
- Hard-looking

- Body poses
  - Cute: bend to a squat, twist body, lean forward, etc.
  - Hot: lie down, lift up hip, show s shape body, etc.
  - Straight and diagonal
  - Onetwofree: run, jump, etc.

VI. SUMMARY

The recommended technical steps for portrait photography:

1. Warm up and chat with the figure
2. Find out the light source and change your position to control the light
3. Look for the best background, foreground, and surroundings
4. Choose the lens
   - Head shot: prime normal or prime telephoto
   - Environment portrait: zoom wide-angle or zoom normal
5. Set the right white balance
6. Set the exposure value to +0.3 or +0.7
7. Set the subject's optimal image characteristics to portrait mode
8. Set the ISO value to <200 (for outdoor-still shooting) or around 800 (for indoor-still and outdoor-moving shooting) or >1600 (for indoor-moving shooting)
9. Go to aperture priority mode and set the aperture f stop value to f/2.8 or f/4
10. Set the AF mode to ONE SHOT (for Canon DSLR) or AF-S (for Nikon DSLR)
11. Set the focal length
    - Head shot: 85mm (for full-frame DSLR) or 50mm (for APS-C DSLR)

- Environment portrait: <50mm (for full-frame DSLR) or <35mm (for APS-C DSLR)
12. Place the subject
    - Head shot: on one of the four points of intersection of gridlines in the viewfinder
    - Environment portrait: around the center area
13. Aim the single focus point over the nearest eye and press the shutter button halfway to activate your autofocus
14. Completely press the shutter button