



Techniques for Digital Photographers

FIGURE PHOTOGRAPHY

Billy Pegram

Amherst Media®
PUBLISHER OF PHOTOGRAPHY BOOKS



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Introduction

When Amherst Media® asked me to write a book on figure photography, I was initially going to write and illustrate a “nude” book. However, there are many fine books of this genre on the market. The subject has been published by museums, art educators, and in great detail by Amherst Media® in conjunction with many of their great photographers.

I’ve been a commercial fashion photographer for over twenty-five years, so I have worked with

the human figure throughout my whole career, creating everything from highly stylized catalog work to erotic figure studies. Therefore, I decided to approach this book as an informative piece that would show not only the practical aspects of nude photography but also the thought process behind the creation of a photo image. I wanted to emphasize the details that need to be considered when creating an image but also the marketplace for that image. Therefore, this is *not* a book on theory. In fact, I’m sure there are some theorists who will disagree with my comments and suggestions.

Instead, the purpose of this book is to assist photographers to pre-visualize their figure work and create figure images that have a purpose.

Furthermore, the book is structured in such a way that it will allow you to assist models in developing their own style in the modeling world. You’ll see examples of several different categories of figure work and the qualities associated with them. There are endless ways to visually capture the beauty of a model, and I’ve tried to show a wide range of them—as well as the techniques required to create them.

This book contains a great deal of practical information that I have found beneficial when working with models and clients. It is geared to help you, professional and hobbyist photographers alike, to create more pleasing images.



A Short History of Figure Imagery

Since the first caveman used a piece of charcoal to scratch on the walls of his dwelling, man has been fascinated with the depiction of nudity. The nude has been a consistent theme in both religious and secular art throughout history. It is classic, timeless, and universal. In the hands of the artist, the perfection of the human form is glorified.

The earliest known nude art piece is a tiny statuette popularly called the Venus of Willendorf. It depicts a corpulent female and, as is typical of much early art, she is probably a fertility symbol of some kind. Classical art history of the nude, however, begins in Greece—although the nude male and the nude female were treated quite differently. The Greeks used nude male figures of ideal proportions as a way of memorializing both real people, such as champions at the Olympic Games, and to portray their gods and godlike mythical heroes. The female nude didn't appear until around the 4th century BC, when sculptors began to depict the goddess of love, Aphrodite. A double-standard persisted through the Roman era and, to some degree, into modern times.

In approximately the 13th century, depicting the female nude became not only respectable but also a major theme in the visual arts. Over the next several centuries, Italian artists represented female nudes as idealized forms, used

mainly for depicting grand historical scenes of both mythological and religious natures.

Slowly, over time, the classical, idealized nude form gave way to a more frivolous, lighthearted approach. By the Impressionistic period, well into the 19th century, female nudes with glowing sensuousness and in modern settings were very popular.

With the development of photography as an art form, it was only natural that the nude would continue to take center stage and to evolve along with society's changing moral and aesthetic standards. Today, as witnessed by the images in magazines such as *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and others, nude photographs can be sublimely beautiful, delightfully playful, or downright erotic.

Take your pick. In the end, images that make a statement, grab attention, and create an emotional impact are successful. Photographic techniques are secondary to the image and its emotional quality. The final result is a communication between the creator of the image and the audience.

Location Selection

Step off the seamless paper and add dimension to your work. Locations, whether exotic or simple, will add to the message of your images.

Why am I shooting? What are my goals? Who is my viewer? Is this a commercial image or an expression of my art? All these questions must be asked before you can proceed in planning a shoot. That's especially true when dealing with location work, since planning is necessary just to get to the location and be ready to deal with unknown conditions.

If your first answer is, "I just want to get to a great location and see what I can record," that's wonderful. However, to establish yourself as a commercial figure photographer you must become proficient and consistent in your work. You must be experienced enough to adapt and adjust to changes in the backgrounds, lighting, and environmental conditions.







Go With the Flow

When shooting on location, unexpected opportunities often provide interest, special design elements, or events that can help you shape your figurative images. Adept photographers learn to use changes in their environment.

When creating the image above, I was shooting on a dirt road near a dry lake bed. I had my model and reflectors in place when an obnoxious Jeep driver came to see what we were doing and decided to show off.

He began driving in my background and stirring up dust. As the dust flowed past us, we panicked to cover the open makeup and camera lenses. Our first reaction was to pack up and

leave the area. Then, however, the dust started to spread out, giving the background a much more interesting look—so interesting that when a couple of four-wheelers came by, I asked them to kick up some more dust in the background, which they happily did.

Brief the Model

When shooting on location, brief the model on how she should handle any interactions with Joe Public. More than one of my models has bragged that she was “shooting for a client” or “working on a nude shoot in the desert.” This can cause the person she’s addressing to call the authorities—or, conversely, to phone some friends so they can all stay and watch!

Play, Play, Play

When you're first starting out, see how creative you can be. How can you get the most from the model? How is it best to communicate with her about posing? What light works best for your style? How do you develop your style? What do you want as your message?

Keep in mind that the most interesting images are not always technically correct. Go beyond what the meter says is "normal." Experiment with the color balance, exposure, and any other variables you can conceive of during the exposure and in postproduction. Play, play, play!

Perks and Drawbacks

Outdoor locations help models get into the flow of the session. Since you're shooting with available light, she can see the scene around her. She can also feel the wind, or heat, or sand, or water. She becomes part of the whole. There may also be natural props to sit or lie on.

There are also potential problems, like extreme light conditions, weather, lack of privacy and rest-room facilities, or even a workable makeup station. Pre-planning will help avoid many problems—until the jobs or your budget allow you enough assistants to be prepared for anything.



Networking

A good source for shooting locations is camera clubs that share an interest in your style of work. Some photographers have boats or barns or trains or warehouses that they have repeatedly shot at—but these locations are new to you.

When teaching seminars, I have seen photographer's faces light up when I offer to take them to locations I use around Las Vegas. I also loan them equipment (so they don't have to fly it in) and introduce them to models and makeup people. It is all about sharing in the creative process. (*Note:* I have long wanted to establish a network of photographers to share information about locations in their area, as well as talent and rental resources. One of the biggest problems I face is flying to a region without necessary equipment, because of travel restrictions, and not knowing the best areas to shoot or the talent available.)



Figure nudes created on location can be incorporated into commercial images, such as this poster for a gun distributor.





Privacy and Permits

Privacy is essential. Scout for backgrounds that are removed from public view. These might include private gardens, farms, isolated beaches, or secluded woods.

When using public areas, try to shoot on off days. The middle of the week works well. Tuck yourself off the trail or behind a hidden dune. Be careful; if you are seen, you *can* get ticketed.

I know several photographers who have gotten major tickets from rangers who thought they were shooting commercial images. These rangers want to protect the natural beauty from misuse by big advertising firms.

Many times you will find that a quick call and a permit will get you access to areas you didn't know existed. If you are open with the rangers ahead of time, they may set you up in an isolated area where they don't have to worry about Joe Public running into you.

Shoot Reference Images

As you encounter them, document potential new locations for shooting figure photography. These will be helpful resources when planning future shoots.





Pre-Scout

If possible, visit the area before the session to take sample photographs and make notes about the lighting. Note what props are available and what will be needed. Preparing a storyboard for the model and makeup artists will go a long way in helping you achieve your vision—and it will make it easier to communicate your vision to all involved. That small bit of preparation will also show your professionalism to the team.



Add Props

Simple props such as a hat, ribbons, a stool, a chair, or even a rope can add dramatic design elements to your figure photograph. Fabric probably is the most used accessory; it can enhance the model with color or movement. Fabric can even change the mood of the photograph, making it dreamy or romantic.

Props provide interest and continuity in the image. Sometimes, the props become the subject in-and-of themselves, which is okay as long as you, the photo artist, have decided to make the model secondary in the image. If the props don't add to the image, leave them out. Sometimes a simple image with clean lines is superior to a cluttered one.





Change It Up

When working with a model on location, if you find that the background lighting or other factors are influencing the images in a negative way, shoot a few images and then move on. Change the angles or change the lighting; do something to give you a chance to succeed.

Don't ever let the model see your frustration, though. It's best to explain that the lighting has changed negatively or that there are people in the distant background—whatever the case.

In no case should you make the model believe that she is the problem, even if she is. You may have to shift the camera position so her hips look better, but *she* is never the problem.



Model Selection

Many magazines and web sites specialize in a certain look, ethnicity, or style. Look for ones that promote a style you are at ease creating and a genre of models you appreciate. Study your target market's styles; they have often spent years developing their look, and their clients like it. Working within your style and marketing to clients with similar styles will help sell your images in a very competitive market.



Indoor Locations

Indoor locations require more refined lighting skills. However, a few simple techniques (covered in the next section) will go a long way toward capturing the images you desire.

There are many advantages to using a special indoor location—you have better security control, there are no weather issues to worry about, and there are generally convenient areas for makeup and changing (as well as nearby rest

rooms). Additionally, you'll usually have less travel time and the wear and tear on your equipment will be minimized.

Look for windows and doorways; consider using staircases and parking garages. Experiment with poses, lighting, locations, and props as you begin to create your own style and identity.

The erotic indoor image below was used as a billboard promoting a bar in Las Vegas.



Lighting and Exposure

What makes lighting “good”? What is the “correct” exposure? The answers are largely subjective. For example, the automatic exposure mode can give you what the camera’s *software* considers to be a “perfect” exposure—but that may not always be the effect *you* desire. The look you want might be darker and moodier than what the camera chooses or, conversely, lighter and more airy.

Likewise, direct sunlight and diffused sunlight produce two very different looks. Which of

those looks (whether hard, direct light or soft, diffused light) might be right for the image you envision is up to you—at least on shoots where you’re creating images for yourself.

When you’re working for clients, of course, your objective will be to create images that meet that client’s requirements. You must be able to previsualize your images and be able to repeat your results. Additionally, you’ll want the images you deliver to have a creative edge that will stand out enough to get you published.





These two images are the same. The second one was simply darkened in postproduction to give it a more dramatic effect. This is one way to impact the exposure and look of the lighting after the shoot.

Approaches, Part 1

When working with the nude, a photographer can take several approaches to lighting:

1. Use the surrounding backgrounds and lighting that are available at the time of the shoot. Shoot in doorways and shadow areas, or seek out hard light for more dramatic effects.
2. Schedule the shoot to assure the desired type of lighting for the images to be created. Shoot at one of the golden hours (just before the sun goes down in the evening or just as it rises in the morning). Be flexible and shoot on a cloudy day.
3. Take total control of the lighting in the photograph. Use flash to overpower the sunlight. Add reflectors, gobos, or scrims to modify the light. Move the shoot into the studio and add only the light you want.
4. Understand how the image can be altered in postproduction. Learn the endless possibilities of digital manipulation—and how they can impact the exposure and some aspects of the overall lighting effect.

Read the next section for more on each of these approaches—and their impact.

Approaches, Part 2

Each of the aforementioned approaches is valid. What is important is learning how and when to use the methods. This will allow you to reach the maximum potential of any given situation.

Approach 1, using whatever light is available, is a free-flowing way to work—and in many ways the most fun. Understanding how to best use your equipment and take control of situations is a necessity for success with this approach.

Approach 2, scheduling a photo session at one of the golden hours, will give you a great chance to create images with a warm glow and a beautiful effect. I like to start at the morning golden hour and keep shooting until the sun becomes too contrasty for my desired images.

Approach 3, adding to or modifying the light, gives you the most control of your images; your results are predictable and more consistently marketable. However, it requires additional equipment and expertise. In many situations, however, simply adding reflector or fill-in flash can add punch to an otherwise flat image.

Approach 4 involves taking control of the image in postproduction—and you don't have to become a Photoshop expert to reap these advantages. There are many creative, reasonably priced retouchers on the market. It is definitely to your advantage to know what *can* be done, and the difficulty of the work required to achieve an effect. With this knowledge, you can communicate your vision to the retoucher to ensure correct pricing and accurate results.

The bottom line is this: you need to use all the tools and creative methods available to you to create images that will communicate your vision as an artist.

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Soft and Hard

Photo 1 shows how soft the lighting becomes when a thick cloud covers the sun. Shooting on a semi-cloudy day can be a frustrating experience. With the clouds moving across the sky, you must be able to constantly adjust for a change in exposure and lighting effects. However, with good timing, you can achieve the lighting effect you desire.

Photo 2 shows how turning the image black & white simplifies the shot and adds to its graphic presentation. Eliminating the color brings the image to a simpler form. I once heard a museum curator say that the reason most fine-art work is shot in black & white is that black & white doesn't exist in the real world; therefore, the image is broken into a more visual message.

Photo 3 illustrates how dramatic hard, direct sunlight can be. Notice how the shadows from the building—and even the water—have a sharp edge that adds drama to a simple image.

Quality of Light

The quality of light is generally defined as how hard or soft it is. Hard light is very bright and creates deep, crisp shadows while soft light is diffused, with gentle shadows that give a better range of details.

Direct sunlight, for example, is considered hard because it creates harsh shadows. Especially at midday it should be avoided in shooting people; it causes the eyes to appear dark and lifeless, and also puts harsh shadows under the nose. Additionally, models tend to squint uncontrollably at this time of day, creating more problems. Hard light can also accentuate concerns like large noses, scars, and wrinkles. Conversely, hard light—especially if it is from the side—can help contour a model's body with well-defined shadows. If it is exposed correctly, it can add punch and saturation to an image—but, again, be careful when using hard light on a model's face. (One solution, as seen on the facing page, is to turn the model's face toward the sun to minimize the hard shadows on it.)

Soft light, with its gentle shadows, is normally best for beauty shots. This is because it tends to have a smoothing effect on the skin, minimizing any flaws. For example, I particularly like to shoot when there is a light cloud cover. A light covering of clouds effectively diffuses the hard sun, resulting in soft light. Basically, the clouds turn the sun into one huge softbox. As a result, colors are more vibrant, shadows recede, and the contrast ratio between the shadows and highlights becomes much lower. This light can be beautiful and highly flattering to a model's face and figure.

The Golden Hours

As the sun sinks on the horizon (or rises from it), the rays become warmer in color due to the increased atmosphere blocking the shorter rays and allowing only the warmer, red rays to penetrate. These two times of day are called the golden hours, because of the way these warmer rays beautify the subject's face.

Unfortunately, these golden hours pass very quickly, so the photographer must plan ahead and work efficiently to take advantage of this magnificent light.

This image shows the beauty of golden hour lighting. The body painting was the same as in the previous images.





To illuminate my model against the last bit of light from the setting sun, I added a softbox to camera right.

Adding Light

Out of choice or necessity, photographers often supply additional light to the scene. This can be any light source that is not normally in the scene such as strobes, tungsten, or even car headlights.

What light is added, and how it's added, is largely a matter of taste and individual style. Some photographers love to add lots of light to a scene, using colored gels, spotlights, and other modifiers to produce creative effects. Others strive to create a natural look, as though the great lighting in their image was actually the result of ambient light.

Happily, the variety of lighting tools and effects at our disposal make it possible to achieve

just about any effect you can imagine—and to satisfy the needs of your clients effectively.

Lighting techniques are important and varied, so they are something we'll be looking at throughout this book.

Gobos

“Gobo” is an abbreviation for “go between.” It describes a light-blocking device used between the light and the subject (or between the light and the camera lens). Using gobos will help you control the light that reaches your subject and is very helpful in preventing flare in situations where a light source is directed toward the lens.

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