



Lesson 1 exploring light/discovering style

Don't Overwhelm, Enhance!

B y B r u c e D o r n

Exploring Light

With the following illustrations, I'll share how I approached a variety of lighting challenges during the creation of a bridal fashion editorial entitled "Vintage Glamour."

The intent of this series is to equip you with the cognitive and structural tools necessary to begin your own personal exploration of light. If you are willing to invest the long-term effort, your personal observations, experimentation and eventual

instinctive responses may well evolve into a unique and recognizable style, creating a look that is yours and yours alone.

Before you can master something, you must know it. To know something, you must acknowledge its nature. Start by simply noticing and rejoicing in the quality of light. Get spiritual about it. Absorb and reflect.

Notice how the sun—so hard and bright and very far away—manages to offer so

much variation. Study how this singular light source reflects off of things, how the light rays bounce about and pick up all manner of color casts en route.

The convoluted textures and warm hues of a sandstone cliff become one sort of reflector, while the cold white side of a delivery truck creates quite another. An overcast day comes in nearly infinite variations, each with a unique character and mood. A ceiling of cirrus clouds—which



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cinematographers call “high silk”—diffuses light, rendering very distinct shadows. A heavier blanket of overcast also illuminates, but can quickly become cold, directionless and somber. What exactly is going on up there?

In the process of noticing the quality of light, you will also come to appreciate the effects of the direction of light. As you observe and learn, try to separate the effects of each characteristic. Our ultimate goal is to mix and match both in the service of concept.

How does light change direction? Once again, reflection plays a key role in the lighting of nature’s stage. The angle of incidence equals the angle of reflection. If you’ve ever played pool and used the cushions to send the cue ball rebounding to a specific point on the table, you’ll instantly understand the concept of bounced light. Through the random or specific placement of reflective surfaces, the illumination of a single source can easily do the work of many.

And what about the importance of a light source’s intensity? At the core, we’re simply looking for enough intensity to render

the scene while allowing an f-stop, shutter speed and ISO setting we find appropriate. Beyond saying, “Enough” and “Man, it’s freaking dark in here!” there isn’t much else. Think instead about how light intensity affects a given scene’s contrast range.

Contrast refers to the range of tonal values between the darkest shadows and lightest highlights we hope to record. Undiffused midday sun reveals a range of contrast that is difficult for current digital technology to capture within a single exposure. Not to worry; a highlight-biased exposure choice and cleverly illuminated shadows can make even the highest-contrast scene much more pleasing to the eye. You’re going to hear this again and again throughout this series: Expose for the highlights and light for the shadows.

Quality, Direction and Intensity: These are the essential characteristics of light. Observe them, understand them and finally, strive to master them.

Concept: Tastefully supplement ambient light with the simplest of tools.

Action: When I walk into a shooting sit-

uation, the first thing I do is take notice of the light. Hopefully the direction is good or its character somewhat interesting. Maybe there’s something intriguing going on with the light’s color cast, for example.

Lesson 1

This hallway had very dark overtones punctuated only by a series of small stained-glass windows. I felt I could create an interesting portrait if I could find a strong perspective and employ a dynamic point of view to emphasize the drama of the hallway’s architecture.

I decided I would prefer to shoot at an aperture of $f/2.8$. After metering, I determined that the window light could support my desired $f/2.8$ with a shutter speed of $\frac{1}{60}$ if I set the camera’s ISO to 640.

A quick test frame indicated that this exposure worked fine for rendering the window and its attendant architectural glow, but was woefully insufficient for illuminating the bride. What I needed to add was a splash of tungsten illumination to open up the shadows and add a bit of modeling to Kelly’s face—something that alluded to a



nearby practical source such as a candle or wall sconce would be nice.

For the lighting novice, working with the easily visible light of a continuous-source instrument makes perfect sense. This

Mini-Fill units, which I use with either 100-watt 3200K or 50-watt 4700K lamps. Remember that when dimming tungsten sources, the color temperature will plummet as quickly as the output.

Camera & Lighting Gear

Camera: Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II

Lens: Canon 85mm f/1.2

Light: Frezzi Mini-Fill dimmable Sun-Gun

Exposure: 1/60 at f/2.8 at ISO 400

Other: Lee Filters 261 diffusion, Gobo Arm with Magic Finger, Light stand



scene was the perfect opportunity to use one of those nifty little 12-volt Sun Guns.

With care to consider appropriate diffusion, this setup is quite simple and direct. Most Sun Guns are based around 20–100-watt projector lamps, and their undiffused beams are almost universally nasty. I always use a mini softbox or a layer of Lee 261 Full Tough Spun to improve their character.

While there are a variety of brands to choose from, I prefer the dimmable Frezzi

Lastly, try feathering the edges of the cone of light onto your subject. I usually start by wasting some of the illumination well out in front of the face, then slowly pan the beam back towards the subject until I like both the look and the intensity.

Be brave. Try things. With continuous light sources, what you see is what you get.

This lesson is an excerpt from Bruce's lighting tutorial *Exploring Light, Discovering*

Style. With an entertaining story arc that reveals Bruce's thought processes and staging techniques, this CD-based eBook encourages and empowers readers to explore artificial light and discover their own signature style. Each of the 15 finished photographs is accompanied by clear text, exact technical specifications and an animated 3D virtual set. Master these advanced lighting techniques and you'll soon leave your competition in the dark. The eBook is available at www.idcphotography.com. Also visit www.thedigitalphotographyedge.com to learn more about Bruce Dorn and Maura Dutra's nationwide seminar tour. 

Bruce Hamilton Dorn of iDC Photography has 20 years of Hollywood filmmaking experience, which has shaped his cinematic-style wedding coverage. As a member of the Director's Guild of America, Bruce's previous career involved casting, coaching, filming and glamorizing "real people" for such clients as McDonalds, Sony, Budweiser, AT&T and Ford. Bruce, along with his artistic partner and wife, Maura Dutra, now offers this award-winning expertise to a very select group of artistically inclined wedding clients.