

# A touch of the hand

## Posing hands for classic portraiture

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Hands are one of the most complex, malleable areas of portrait posing. The placement of the subject's hands can emphasize or completely detract from the facial expression and the general mood of the image.

Posing hands is, literally, a touchy issue. It's the one time during a session that I approach and actually touch the client. Positioning the subject's hands myself is usually the best way of getting them in the desired location. I equate this contact to a handshake greeting, polite and rarely offensive to anyone. Often I'll even massage or gently press the hand to coax it into the desired relaxed position.

Hands naturally express feelings. Use this quality to convey subtle meaning through gestures, like stroking the face of a loved one to show tenderness, or portraying a male subject's introspection by having him thoughtfully stroking his beard, or showing trust by having a small child clutch a single finger of a loving parent's hand.

Often I begin by simply eliminating the hands from the portrait. If these devilish clusters of little sausages are detracting from the image, I place them behind the subject's body in a full-length shot, or behind the head or neck in a close-up.

Just as you often pose men differently than women, you treat masculine hands in certain ways. A relaxed fist works well with men. Ask the subject to form his hand and fingers around a short, slim object like a golf pencil held diagonally in his palm. This works well in traditional poses such as hand on knee, resting on a prop, or with the subject standing, resting on the back of chair. In seated poses, you can roll the hand in the lap to allow a downward slant of the fingers falling between slightly opened knees. Bending and flexing the wrist-joint can improve the pose, making it appear more casual and believable.

With feminine hands, you have myriad options, so don't get mired in thinking the traditional rules are set in stone. In general, allow the wrists and elbows to bend. It's my philosophy that everything that can bend should bend in posing a feminine subject. A slight bending of the elbow and wrist create harmony with the curves of the feminine body.

The body is seldom static, so it looks unnatural—even boring—to have the subject's limbs posed symmetrically with his or her weight evenly distributed. You might ask a bride to place her weight on her back foot, allowing for an artistic placement of her show foot. Have her raise her hand to her veil as if to lift it. She could make a graceful arc by lowering her shoulder and arm to the hem of her gown to raise it slightly, perhaps to show off her slippers.

In many cases, we can think of the hands and feet (even the fingers of a hand) as having two distinct roles, one for work and one for show. For example, having one leg do the weight bearing while artistically highlighting the other.

The small feminine touch area of a woman's hand—the soft pad on the underside of the tip of the index finger—offers wonderful posing versatility. Mindful of this area, you can see the entire hand taking graceful shape as the subject dips her wrist to gently touch some object. The touching index finger becomes the show finger.

When it's fitting for the mood, ask the subject to slightly raise her index finger while keeping the other fingers of the hand together. This is a classic element taken from ballet and traditional art studies.

In general, when the hands are positioned above the subject's waist, direct the fingers upward. Feminine hands look smaller with the little finger side of the hand to the camera. If the hands are positioned below the waist, direct the fingers downward with the thumb side of the hand facing the camera. With the palm or the broad back of the hand facing the camera, the viewer's attention is drawn to the hands rather than the subject's face.

Hiding a hand behind the body in a full-length pose, or behind the head or neck in a close-up can simplify the hand posing and improve the portrait. Take care not to create an amputated look—it's better to conceal a hand than to "sever" half an arm. The elbow is a poor location for cropping.

With children, I find it nearly impossible to pose empty hands. They need to be holding an object to control those fidgety digits. Appropriate objects include small books, miniature bouquets and teddy bears. Props of an appropriate color and vintage can enhance the portrait in addition to keeping the little hands occupied.

To learn more about posing hands, observe how it's done in portraits that please you. Keep a clip file of hand and body poses you wish to emulate. This skill can be invaluable to your growth and success in portraiture.

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