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tim kelly

POSING PRINCIPLES

for timeless portraits

BY MICHELLE PERKINS

For more than 20 years, portrait photographer Tim Kelly has been recognized throughout the industry as a **master printer, a digital pioneer and an esteemed educator**. At the heart of his acclaim, however, is an exceptional body of portrait work known for its clean lines, subtle tones and delicate simplicity. Melding classic lighting and composition with a contemporary sensibility, Tim's portraits have a quality that makes them almost timeless. The following are some of the guidelines he suggests for achieving top-quality results.



Above Left: *Tight three-quarter-length portraits like these are among Tim's best sellers. "People like big heads," he says. "When they're looking at the images and making selections on a monitor, they 'ooh' and 'ahh' when a big, beautiful face comes up. This is my way of giving them more face—plus the design element of hands. I just bring the hands closer to the face. Then you have a headshot feel but with the elegance of a three-quarter-length image."*

Above: *"When a subject is sleeveless, it's more of a challenge—I can always win though," Tim laughs. Here Tim opted for a square frame. He then posed the arms to create a square, raising her left hand to her face so that your eye keeps turning back to the focus of the image. "Normally you can't get away with a pose like this, but in a square-in-a-square image, it works," Tim says.*



Far left: Some clients opt for their own clothing choices. This young woman chose a colorful sleeveless top. Through careful posing and lighting, Tim made it work—so well that he was able to create an entire album from the session.

Left: Long sleeves, black shirts, soft lighting and a background that is in key with the clothing—it all adds up to a good start for a portrait. “We were showing how we could control the lines and the background to force the eye to go where it needs to go,” he says. In both portraits the body leans sharply toward the main light, but the head remains vertical. “Photographers are always taught head tilts, both masculine and feminine,” says Tim. “Those rules do apply if you choose to use them, but there are higher laws. I find that leaning bodies are my best friends in terms of design. With any subject, male or female, if you can keep the head vertically straight, you can put the body in any direction you want. That’s a rule-breaker that always works for me.”

Start With Window-quality Lighting

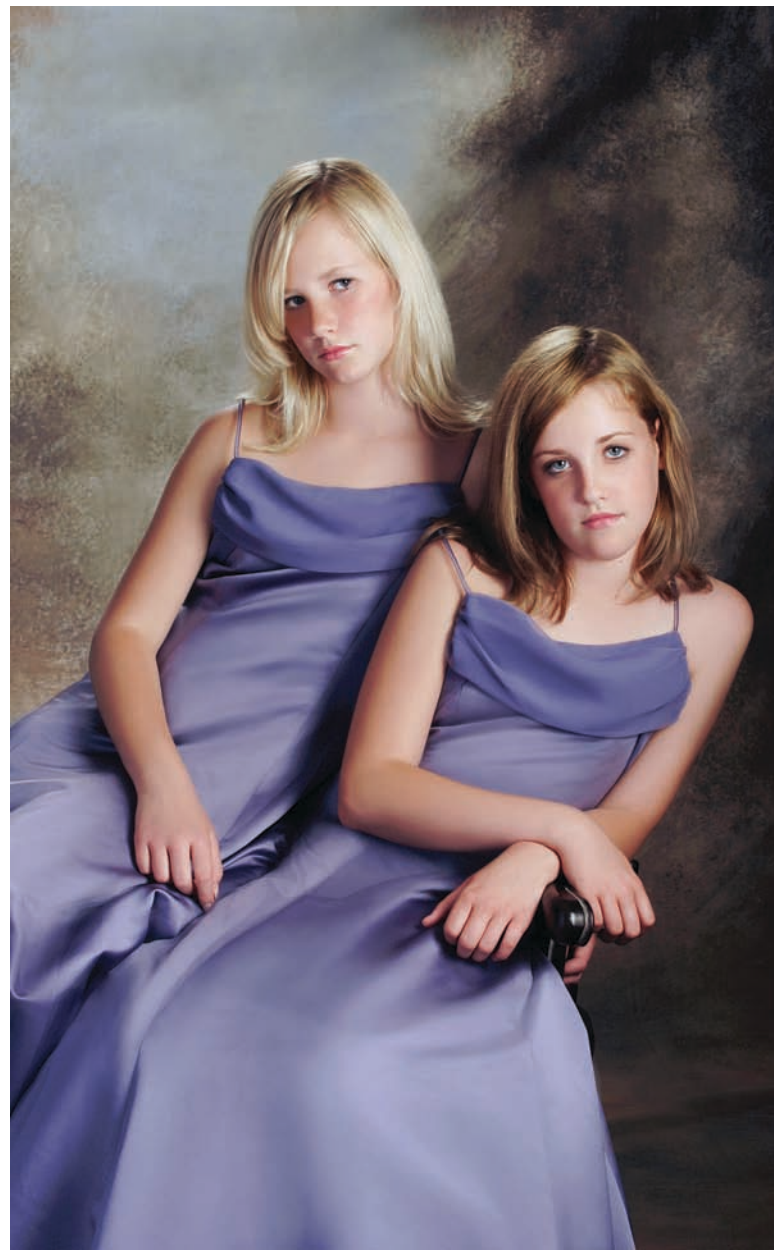
When it comes to posing, Tim’s techniques are rooted in classic training. “I worked in a studio back in the 60s and 70s—then, precise posing really mattered, more so than today. When we were doing portraits, we had to do it by the rules because lighting was much more narrow and film was much more expensive. It was very structured, and there were foundational things you had to know so you didn’t waste your time or your film,” he says. “With large [soft] boxes simulating window light, we can now get away with a lot more. It’s very forgiving, but also very believable to the viewer. I can easily create more natural-looking situations, then pose the subject into that light.”

Base the Style of the Pose on the Clothing

“I tell folks to bring several outfits—more than I’m going to use,” says Tim. Some people know exactly what they are going to wear; others need some guidance. In this case Tim advises them to bring in anything long-sleeved and dark. “If they do that, we’ll have a great session,” he says. Beyond that Tim emphasizes the need for them to bring a selection of looks. “If we ask for enough, we’ll always end up with something nice,” he says.

“The clothing dictates where you’re going with the pose,” says Tim. “If the clothing is formal, we’re going to go with a formal pose. Formal poses don’t have to be stiff, but they have to be done in such a way that the clothing, the background and the attitude all match.”

Right: Here, the poses create a gentle S-curve that leads your eye to the faces. “The arms and hands would not normally be considered elegantly posed,” he notes. “What matters though is that we get to the face first, then the hair, then the hands. If it goes in that order, it’s going to work. This had the expression I wanted and the color harmony is there. The diagonal bodies are so strong against the face tilts that you don’t really notice the hands.”






Left: The posing Tim uses when employing props must feel natural but look refined. “Every digit is taken care of,” he says. “Even without props you have to do this, or it’s just going to look sloppy.” Notice how Tim had this young lady push her left wrist in, yielding a graceful curve.

Below: “Portraits like these are the easiest thing in the world to do once you know what side of the face to shoot,” says Tim. “This is determined by studying the face, looking at the sizes of the eyes, etc. For me, more often than not, the side of the face left open by the part in the hair is the one.”

about going up there and putting things where they need to be, telling them what I’m doing and why.” The key moment then comes when he lets the subject relax the pose. “If you have someone holding a pose for more than 30 seconds, it gets stale,” he says. “I often have people take the pose apart and redo it. That’s usually when it’s right.”

Above All, Flatter the Subject

Overall Tim’s goal is to create portraits that people feel good about. “I like to feel like I can get great things out of any person—any size, any shape, any age—and I know I can because I’ve done it a thousand times and I know how to correct every feature. That’s why people come here. That’s why photographers are paid what they are—we know how to make people look great.”

To learn more about Tim and his portraits, visit www.timkellyportraits.com, where you’ll also find an extensive selection of Tim’s acclaimed instructional materials for professional portrait photographers. 

Michelle Perkins is a professional writer, designer and image retoucher. She has written for PC Photo and is the author of Beginner’s Guide to Adobe Photoshop, The Practical Guide to Digital Imaging, Color Correction and Enhancement with Adobe Photoshop, and her latest book, Professional Portrait Lighting: Techniques and Images from Master Photographers (all from Amherst Media).

Analyze the Face

“I analyze the face and the hair to determine how I’m going to begin my design,” Tim continues. “I’ll usually start with a basic two-thirds headshot on both sides of the subject. After I get an idea which side of the face I like better, I often spend the rest of my session on that one side. If somebody has a good and bad side (or a good and better side), obviously you’re wise to spend your time on the better side. If you can assess that in the first three minutes, why not?”

Provide Assistance as Needed

When refining poses, Tim doesn’t see a problem with direct assistance. “I definitely handle everybody and move them around,” he says. “I don’t try to do it from afar. I have no qualms

