

a continuing conversation:

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In this Tim Meyer portrait, a classic Rembrandt lighting pattern is used.

Learning Portrait Lighting from the Masters... The Old Masters

BY GLENN RAND AND TIM MEYER

WHEN WE GO to museums, while we like to look at photographs on display, it is the old masters—Rembrandt and Da Vinci, among others—from whom we learn to perfect our portrait lighting.

One could argue that these great masters, as painters, had the advantage of choosing exactly how they wished to render light. Still, they had the knowledge of how light reacted with materials and subjects and used it to great advantage—their paintings were never flat. This ability to see and depict the reality of light is one of the key developments of Renaissance painting.

Of course, a major difference between photography and painting is that for pure capture, photography must have the lighting exist at the moment of exposure. Painting, on the other hand, offers the opportunity to adjust intensities in specific parts of the image at any time. While this type of modification is possible with photo software, original lighting cannot easily be faked. Photographically, there needs to be a sense of the actual light, which can then be modified to create images with the lighting qualities of Renaissance paintings.

So let's look at what we can learn by studying the paintings and processes of the masters. If there is a direct tie to the masters, it comes from Rembrandt van Rijn. We teach and discuss lighting in his name by labeling open 45° lighting "Rembrandt lighting." This is a dramatic lighting pattern that produces fullness to the face, accents the contour of the subject and shows textures. There are four major factors we can see in Rembrandt's paintings that are important in contemporary photographic portraiture.

First and most obvious, this style of lighting places the main light quite high, and on the side of the face turned slightly away from the viewpoint. Because of the angle from which the light strikes, a small triangular highlight on the shadow side of the face, directly under the eye, is created. The position of the lighting provides the image with more texture, as the light interacts with the subject, casting itself at a shallow angle.

Next, Rembrandt often used a body positioning that turned the

face slightly away from the light source. This is called "broad lighting" in portraiture. This body positioning creates depth by creating open shadows and allowing distinct shadow transfer edges to give fullness to the face. This, when combined with the open 45° lighting, provides rich details on the face and strong formation of shadows showing facial details.

Third, Rembrandt used background lightness to give portraits

both depth and contour visibility. We see this in his early work, although it often changed in later paintings. Ultimately, he used many different background light techniques. The background light establishes and emphasizes the shape of the subject. The brightness of the background light can be used to help establish information about the subject beyond the detail in the head and shoulders. In addition, the brightness of the background establishes depth in the image. Rembrandt also used vignettes in his images to place visual emphasis on the subjects. This is true of both single and group portraits.

Lastly, Rembrandt hung a large white cloth overhead in his studio. This cloth was attached to the top of the prime window used for lighting the subject, and it was draped across the ceiling. This arrangement, along with a series of small windows,

directed fill light into his subjects. These fill lights assured that sufficient shadow detail was available for the image.

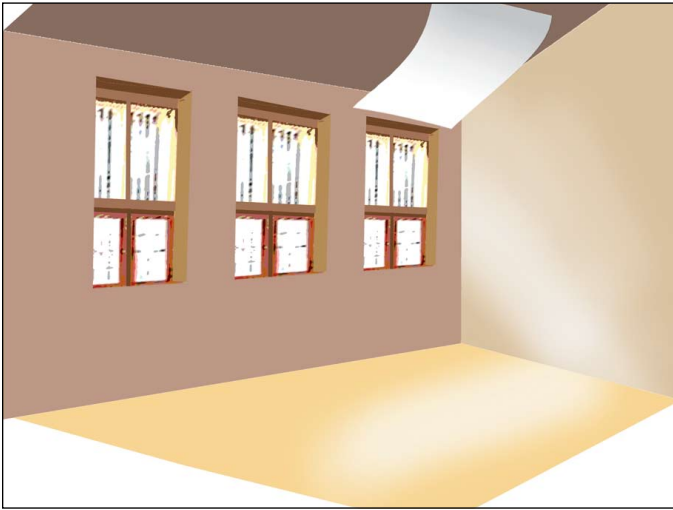
The masters, through various techniques, would portray more or less detail through illumination and brush strokes in order to direct the viewer's gaze. Photographically, a soft, non-directional light behind the camera can be used to control exposure of detail; alternatively, flags can be used to subtract light. We can also use selective focus to diminish details, or with today's Photoshop tools, we can emulate the selective focus of the master painters.

Rembrandt and the Flemish Renaissance masters demonstrated a studio approach to their paintings and the control of light. The Italian masters were also observers and portrayers of the light in their paintings. In one example, Leonardo Da Vinci describes an

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"Portrait of Marten Looten," 1632, by Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn; oil on panel; 36.5 x 30 inches. Photo used courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art; gift of J. Paul Getty.




Rembrandt's studio had a row of windows on the north side of the room. This provided a consistent diffuse light. The subject would be situated near the far wall with the light coming down at a steep angle. The sheet of white cloth hung over the first window created overhead fill. Rembrandt would situate his easel in the center of the studio to choose the point of view, with the light being controlled on the subject. The darkness or tone of the paintings was a choice of the rendering of the scene. Rembrandt often closed the bottom window shutters to control the light. Some have suggested that he closed down the other shutters to control the direction and overall intensity as well.

approach that could apply to on-location photography. In 1480, Da Vinci wrote, "Notice, in the streets at the fall of the evening when it is bad weather, the faces of the men and women—what grace and softness they display. You should paint at twilight when it is cloudy or misty, for the light is then perfect!"

Da Vinci and his contemporaries recreated the lighting effects they observed through careful observation and expert technique. To portray the soft light Da Vinci describes above, he might have employed *sfumato*. This method involves using varnishes and transparent oil paints to soften color transitions, producing hazy, smoky or diffuse effects. Photographers can achieve similar effects through careful lighting. For example, some studios have north-light windows, which provide soft, cool light. The use of softboxes can also produce similar results.

Another technique we can borrow from the masters is *chiaroscuro*, which refers to a light-dark contrast that suggests volume in the subject. (Though often confused with Rembrandt lighting, it is not the same.) Chiaroscuro is any angular light, short or broad, that creates the sense of volume through the creation of highlights and shadows. This can be accomplished in many ways; one such example would be to use large parabolic reflectors to give a broad source, angled into the subject.

Renaissance artists also explored how depth could be portrayed effectively. They observed aerial/atmospheric perspective, the last lighting concept we will discuss here. Aerial perspective is the way atmosphere's density and humidity desaturates objects in the distance and lends them a bluish color cast. Thus, when we desaturate our backgrounds or tone them bluish gray, they will appear to recede, allowing our subject to move forward visually. 

Glenn Rand and Tim Meyer are faculty members at Brooks Institute of Photography where Tim is the chair of the portrait program and Glenn is acting chair of graduate studies. Tim has been honored as a master portrait and wedding photographer and is a Fujifilm Talent Team member. Glenn is a frequent contributor to Rangefinder and author of several books on photographic topics.