CALLIGRAPHY & LETTERING ARTS SOCIETY

CLAS Photo Guidelines

Taking good quality photographs of your work is something anyone can do with quite modest equipment by following a few simple steps. Even a reasonably modern phone is capable of good results if used with care, though of course, if you have a dedicated digital camera – a DSLR (Digital Single-Lens Reflex) or good 'point and shoot' – then it will give more flexibility and potentially better results.

For most requirements, e.g. web/email use and printing up to A3 for an assessment submission, the following guidelines will give excellent results.

The only exception to this would be if you want to photograph your work in order to produce inkjet giclée fine-art prints for sale, as this brings a lot of other issues into play, including colour management and printing profiles. If this is your aim, then you would be advised to consult a professional copy and print service, one familiar with and experienced in making prints for the art market.

Broadly, to photograph your work, two main things are required

1. Good, even lighting (there are a couple of exceptions to this, detailed later)
2. Ideally, a means of holding your phone or camera steady and level, and centred over the work you are photographing

LIGHTING

Daylight

For most purposes, the ideal light is bright, overcast daylight, as it is a good diffused source and bright enough to give good results, even if you have to hand-hold your phone or camera. Obviously, everyone's situation will be different. If you are fortunate enough to have large windows in your studio or workroom, that's ideal, but light from any window will be fine, providing it lights the piece you are photographing evenly. Very large work could be placed on the floor or hung on a neutral-coloured wall.

Using reflectors

To ensure the light is even across the whole piece, carefully place white pieces of card (or expanded polystyrene) on the opposite side to the window, and possibly at each side as well, making sure you don't end up blocking light from the work or creating shadows. Using simple reflectors in this way is a cheap and effective method of getting good, even lighting across the whole piece. Don't use anything other than pure white as a reflector, as you will introduce colour casts into the resulting images.

If you have no suitable windows, work can be placed anywhere that receives a good area of daylight – French windows (though watch out for shadows cast by the glazing bars), an open door, open garage door or (perhaps the ideal solution), a conservatory or greenhouse. If necessary, you can always cover windows with a diffuser – e.g. tissue or thin material – but make sure they are white so they don't give a colour cast. You could consider taking photos of work outside if the weather is suitably still and fine.

Exceptions

The two exceptions referred to above are where gilding is involved, or if the work has a very textured surface. If these types of artwork are photographed using the above method, then the results will not show the work to best effect.

Gilding in particular can be tricky, as small changes in the position or angle of the work relative to the camera can make quite noticeable improvements in the overall result. Unfortunately, there is no one solution for this, as the type of work varies so much.

The only way is to try slight changes to the angle of the work and carefully watch through the camera or phone until the result looks best. If using (e.g.) tungsten lights, then providing the overall lighting remains generally even, that's fine, but with daylight the optimum position that shows the gilding may well mean the work is not then parallel to the camera. This is something that can be corrected in image processing software on a computer (perspective control), providing it's not too far out of parallel. If it is, some distortion of the image may occur.

The same applies to textured or 3D subjects. Depending on how important these textures are, experimenting with lighting may give better results than trying to use daylight and simply moving the work around.

With both examples, there is no simple, single solution – it's a case of try it and see. Fortunately, you do get immediate feedback with digital photography. In all cases, whether camera or phone, make sure the flash is switched off, as it will cast shadows and affect the colour of your photo. Make sure the camera lens is clean – it's all too easy to get fingerprints on mobile phone camera lenses.

HOLDING THE PHONE/CAMERA STEADY & LEVEL

While hand-holding your phone or camera is possible, it is not ideal for two reasons

1. It is difficult to ensure you have the work and the camera parallel to each other, and centred on the work
2. It is very easy to end up with unsharp results due to camera shake

The chances of camera shake are more likely if using lighting other than daylight, as the light level will generally be lower.

Obviously, the best option is a camera tripod, but it must extend high enough to allow the tripod legs to be kept clear of the work (you might also need to ensure no shadows are being thrown across the work from any of the legs).

A clamp that holds a mobile phone and can be attached to a tripod would be the best solution if you are using your phone camera. They are not expensive and are easily available.

Apart from holding the camera steady, a tripod enables you to ensure the camera is level and to centre it on the work to make sure the photograph is perfectly free of distortion, i.e. the sides are parallel to each other. If you find that camera shake is still an issue, consider the use of the timer function for a hands-free trigger.

Many cameras, including those in phones, have settings that enable gridlines in the viewfinder or screen. These will help you align your photograph to avoid distortion.

USING A SCANNER

One other option for copying work is to use a scanner (obviously, this will not work with textured or 3D works), and it is generally not successful with gilding, as the gold often just looks black as the light is reflected back off it. It might be worth trying a scan, but you'll need to ensure the glass is very clean, as scanners do pick up dust and other marks on the glass. Set the resolution to 360dpi for a good quality scan.

The resulting scans will probably need some work in image software before an acceptable result is achieved. Also, as with cameras and phones, generally the better the scanner, the better the result. Even if you try the scanner method, I'd still suggest using a camera or phone to see how the scanner result compares.

DPI (Dots Per Inch) is a term used to indicate the resolution of an image. The larger the number, the more detailed the image, but also the larger the file size. 72 DPI is fine for websites, presentations and social media. Use 300/360 DPI for most printing requirements. Keep around 1200 DPI for your source image and archiving, as this will allow you to zoom in for detailed close-ups.

This is just a brief outline of how to photograph your work and obtain good quality results. For those wanting more information, there are many websites that go into a lot more detail than can be covered here. Useful search terms are "how to photograph my artwork".