

How to Photograph Glass – for CGS, by Richard Jackson



A photograph taken under studio lighting conditions for Vikki Stacey Glass Sculpture, upon a white piece of reflective perspex.

Glass photography requires a combination of technique, skill, and knowledge. If you want to photograph glass, you should know that the glass will reflect any light or objects that are within your room as a whole. While this can be a challenge, there are a few techniques that can make this process a little easier.

As a glass photographer, even I find glass a difficult, but very rewarding subject to photograph. It all comes down to this - removing the reflections. This is the ultimate goal and provides a professional appearance without the distractions of a room's reflections or unappealing bright highlights.

Keep in mind that there still needs to be some reflection, or the product won't look like glass any more. These tips are not about removing light altogether of course - it is about manipulating the light to work for you and not against you that is important.

What you Should Consider Before Starting

- What sort of work do you produce, what kind of style would be appropriate to set it off?
- What is the image for, is it a primary sales image, an image for marketing purposes, or perhaps an exhibition entry?
- Do you want to create a bright or dark image setting?
- Consider the design – is it flat, curved, or multicoloured?
- Embrace the imperfections, and other physical facets of your work.

Your decision on what you want out of the image will have a bearing on the approach you take when carrying out your shoot. Imperfections within the piece need to be picked out and embraced for it is these that make your work memorable, unique, and marketable.



A simple image, with a tiny bit of context via the studio's own fireplace and a couple of props. Taken for June Doveton, Dove Glass. This kind of image is of the sort that could be achievable with natural light from a window source. Particularly for the clock as it's completely flat.



This image uses much less in the way of light to illuminate the work, as it includes it's own light source, something which must not be overshadowed by using too much additive light. Work by Tim Carter Glassware.

Choosing to Create a Bright or Dark Image for your Work.

Before we go on to discuss the most important aspect of lighting a decision needs to be made about what you want to achieve. If you are using natural light from a window within your home you'll unlikely be able to achieve a darker type image, but if you are using artificial light sources there are two elements to consider.

Firstly what difference will it make in terms of the mood? Is there a reason you would prefer one

over the other. A brighter image can be more widely distributed and can appeal to a wider audience, it helps placing your work in a context more easily, and can of course include props to show your work in a home as an example.

But a darker image can be used not only to create a different mood, it can appear more sophisticated, really make colours pop, and reveal more detail as there's more contrast to its surroundings. If you are using artificial light sources, and have access to lighting modifiers then it actually becomes easier to work this way as you can add lighting more selectively. If you're producing an overall bright image, there's lots of light and it can bounce around the setting. Whereas in a darker image you are in much more control and can effectively paint with the light over the revealing elements of the object. As you will no doubt be aware exhibition submissions are quite often of the darker variety.



Again this example was taken for Vikki Stacey Glass Sculpture, and is bright all over with a relatively subtle circular gradient due to the type of modifier used for the primary light.



This image is much darker, and although 90% of this image is lit by the Christmas lights and candles, there is still studio strobe lighting used to illuminate the front of the pieces. Most of the light comes through the glass itself illuminating the glass in the way it would be meaning the image remains true to the environment where the product would be used. This helps tell the story of the product and place it in within a context. Taken for Ann of Dragonfly Dichroic.

Introducing Light in Glass Photography

Introduce light in a controlled manner that will illuminate the glass. You can enhance the image by introducing light from multiple angles, depending on the shoot's style. While there are many techniques to do so, finding the right angles will elevate your image.

Lighting and angles will help you enhance the glass's qualities, such as texture, colour, and shape.

Equipment and Materials

- Cleaning fluid and tissue to clean the glass.
- Canned air or [bulb blower](#) – perfect for removing dust in any hard-to-reach place.
- Tripod.
- [Diffusion material](#) to be used for the background and table if it's not already the desired setting.
- Cotton gloves so you don't get dirt or fingerprints when handling the glass.

Preparation and Setup

Using light on the glass will show every speck of dust and fingerprints. Clean the glass, dry it with tissue and use the bulb blower to remove any more particles. Once you have chosen an area for the shoot, ensure that you have...

- Clean the area well. Note that acrylic/Perspex sheets have a static charge which can and will attract dust.
- Make sure the table or surface you are putting the glassware on is stable. An unstable table can also cause blurry images, not to mention putting your work at risk of falling.
- Turn off the room lights, and any photographic lighting too. By starting in a dark room, you control the amount of light on the object and can introduce it selectively.

Light Quality and Control

Choose between two different light qualities – hard and soft light to create a visual mood.

- Soft light – comes from a relatively large source, such as a large soft box placed near to your work. The object will be lit up more evenly in each direction, almost like light on a cloudy day. This type of light can produce an image with a feel for the environment it would be placed in when bought by the consumer, like a lifestyle image.
- Hard light – hard light, which comes from a smaller light source. Will draw much of the attention to the object, and it casts harsh shadows. It does pickup even subtle textures. Glassware photography has much to do with focusing on the object, and with hard light, a dark shadow usually forms, making it pop. As the analogy for soft light is like a cloudy day, dark light is like the sun shining on the object. And of course then it becomes a little more difficult to control the reflections – this is where angles of light come in, and you can experiment with this until you achieve the desired effect.

If you have the right balance between soft light and dark light, you can benefit from both revealing texture, and creating a soft appearance that can help sell the product.

Back-lighting

Back-lighting is when light is used to illuminate your work from behind as it suggests. Sometimes lights directly illuminate from the rear whereas other times it is bounced off the wall behind the piece. To get the best effect possible, make enough space between the white wall and the glass.

The primary advantage of back-lighting is control of reflections, even when the piece is shaped irregularly or curved.



Image created for Ann of Dragonfly Dichroic



A behind the scenes 'snap' showing how lights are aimed diagonally at the background, with the resulting bounced light, creating the back lighting required. A simple white piece paper roll behind the work acts as the wall. Glass by Tim Carter Glassware.

Diffusion

Using diffused lighting will create soft images with no sharp shadows that draw could attention away from the product. Using diffusion to soften the light sources will envelop rather than create unsightly highlights. Diffusion fabrics will help generate the perfect lighting situation. It makes the process effortless, and they aren't expensive. The fibres of the material will produce various forms of diffusion and change the scene's lighting. (note that any creases with the fabric will either show up in the glass or will affect the diffusion).

There are many different types of diffusion materials, you can choose from items to buy in, such as those from Amazon shown earlier in the article. To keep costs down you can also use any of the following.

- Soft box material
- Large sheets of tracing paper
- Perspex or other acrylic sheet



A behind the scenes 'snap' showing a diffusion panel in use in between shots for Twice Fired Glass, and the resulting image shown below...





Where there is a lot of colour, and lots of individual objects props are not really necessary. Accurate diffused lighting is absolutely essential to avoid unsightly highlights and inaccurate exposure. Work by Helen Tiffany Glass

Combining Lighting Types

Combining both back-lighting and diffused lighting from the side or the front can bring the benefits of both these methods into one shot. This can be used after some practice to produce shots that have subtle reflections upon the surface of the piece and also illuminated through the piece from behind.

Blocking and Reflecting Light

To aid your lighting efforts, it's also very useful to be able to add or remove light selectively. Put very simply black materials remove light, and white materials reflect it. I generally use foam-board as you can cut it to the exact shape you need, although you can purchase specialised reflectors and flags also. These are placed within your scene either blocking light from your light sources, using a black 'flag' or bouncing light back in using a white reflector.

It takes a little practice and experimentation to get them in the right place but can make quite a difference to the finished image.

What to Do if You Don't Have Access to Photographic Lighting?

There are various options for this, such as the use of speed-light flashes which are relatively inexpensive. However if you need to purchase lighting specifically for glass work then it would be best to go for full size studio flash units, LED or constant light. These can actually be bought quite inexpensively from various retailers or marketplaces. Nearly all cameras have a built in flash option. Without a lot of modification and creative use these are next to useless in photographing glass as they cannot be re-positioned in the same way that other lighting can.

Natural light, although not always reliable is nevertheless an option of a way to add light to glassware. Set your scene next to a window to give you a diffused light source. There are limitations to this technique, but it can do the job effectively.

If you are using light from a window, one side will be bright against the object, and it will form a shadow on the other side. This shadow may be too dark, so you can reflect the light back into the shadow by using a white card. Foam boards also work well because of their rigid form. Black cards can be used to prevent highlights in your scene.

Turn off all artificial lighting like lamps and fluorescent lighting. By using only one light source, it'll create the perfect white balance right away. Adjust the white balance settings on your camera in manual mode so the white and grey areas will show up in the right places.

There's lots of websites on how you can create your own lighting modifiers, and using basic home light bulbs, <https://www.diyphotography.net> is one such site.

How to Get a Sharp image

Glass can be difficult to focus on, especially if it has a smooth texture. If your camera is struggling to focus on the object, you can place something in the scene. The item will give the camera a focus point, and it can easily get removed before continuing with the shoot.

Using a tripod will also help with the sharpness. Focus on the image and use the self-timer. It'll provide stability, and you can avoid any slight movements of the hand. Depending on how hard you have to push the button, it can still affect the image's sharpness, so utilise that self-timer! You can also use a sandbag to stabilize the tripod to prevent movement.

If you are a regularly produce images, invest in a tripod. Some are inexpensive, but they'll significantly improve your shoot. I've always use Manfrotto tripods but there are many other good brands available too.

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