

DE-MYSTIFYING DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY

by Vivian Kapusta

The reality of entering today's juried and judged quilt shows is that you need to have excellent photos of each quilt that you are hoping will be accepted in the show. Quilt shows require you to submit a full view photo and a close-up for each quilt. Shows generally want the photos submitted on a CD. To increase your chances of having your quilt accepted, you need to be able to take good quality digital photographs, use editing software and be able to transfer the data to a CD. You have made a wonderful quilt, now you need to show it!

Never used a digital camera? Have no fear. Once you purchase your camera, you will find they are very user friendly. The automatic setting will adjust your camera to the light and focus the lens – all you need to do is point and shoot. The bonus is that you will never have to buy film or wait to have it processed. Take many photos, examine them with your software to choose the best. You will have the choice of printing the photos yourself and putting them on a CD or taking the memory card to a photo shop.

Your task:

- accurate colours of fabrics
- a full quilt photo showing all edges and laying flat to the wall
- a close up to highlight detail of stitching

Here are some guidelines to help you take great photos:

Digital photography of quilts is similar to film cameras. The truest colours are obtained from photos taken out-of-doors on an overcast day or in bright shade. The quilt needs to be hung so that it lies flat and square. As well as a dowel hanger on the top, a bottom hanger will stretch the quilt and keep it square. An alternate method is to stretch the quilt and pin it to a design wall. If you must take the photo indoors, you need lighting from the top and each side to show the "hills and valleys" of the quilting. The best background for the wall is a deep neutral grey. Wide grey fabric can be pinned to a wall for a background. If using a flash, use a diffuser and bounce the light off the ceiling. If the flash is too bright, it will not show the quilting.

Choosing and using a digital camera:

Purchase your camera from a reputable photo shop and find a salesperson who can advise you on how to use it. Consider joining a camera club and find someone who can help you with settings and options for shooting your photos. Continuing Education and local Colleges offer courses in photography and editing photos. Choose a camera that has at least 5 mega-pixels with different options for shooting. Automatic, landscape and macro (close up) are the ones you will use most.

Settings for your camera: Take your photos at the best quality setting. You will get fewer photos, but you will get more clarity. Begin with the "auto" setting. Then try "landscape" for the full quilt and switch to "macro" for close up shots. If you are shooting inside, alter the light. Florescent lights will give a cool cast and incandescent lighting gives a warm cast. Keep notes as you learn to change the camera settings and familiarize yourself with your camera.

For sharp photos, use a tripod. If a tripod is not available, use both hands to hold the camera steady and a gentle finger on the button. If you do not have a steady hand, you may be able to purchase a remote for your camera to take the picture. Aim at the centre of the quilt to avoid distortion of the quilt shape. Line up the edge of the quilt in the viewfinder, your quilt must be square in the photograph. Some cameras have an option for a grid or crosshairs in the viewfinder, making it easier. A small lens on your camera can cause bulging edges on the quilt. To avoid distortion, take the shot from a distance and crop the unwanted background while editing.



BEST DETAIL SHOT: close up setting, in brightly lit shade – all threads show

One caution when taking close-ups: small cameras have a *focal point* that will give clear shots. If you are too close to the quilt, it will be blurry. Check it out: take several photos and record the different distances. Examine the photos and choose the one that is clear. Check your notes and never go closer than that distance.

Next, your friendly computer:

You are in control if you do your own editing. The camera will have a USB cord to use when downloading photos to the computer. The camera will also supply a CD with basic software to edit your photos. You can purchase editing software with more features. *Adobe Photoshop Elements* is a versatile software, adequate for most situations. You can also find free software on the net. Each one has different capabilities and limitations.

You do need a computer with adequate memory to process the photos. Take time to read the manuals, use a highlighter. As you take photos and work with your editing software, your skill will build. This is where a course would be useful. Any software will allow you to magnify your photo to find the best photo. Blurry pictures are caused by insufficient dots of colour. **You need to take the photos at the highest resolution (quality).**

Working with the software:

Word to the wise #1 – do not make any changes to a photo without using the "save as" or "duplicate" option. That will make a copy and the original photo will remain intact. You are now free to experiment.

Leave the photo number intact at this point and add a name, example: DSC 202 quilt name and dpi. Before you put the photo on the CD, remove the photo number. **Shows will require you to save as a JPEG for your CD entry. A note about JPEG:** it is the most commonly used format. For most snapshots JPEGS give good quality as long as the light source is good.

They are easy to email, print or put into a slide show.

Detail shot: auto setting, in the shade – fairly clear



BEST DETAIL SHOT: shade, close up setting (small quilt), colours are true

Bright sunlight, embellishments show shadow, colours are faded

External flash, bounced off ceiling – colours good but a little dull

Fluorescent and some daylight – colours are dull

Inside daylight, small flash – dull colours and blurry

Photo Examples: a small art quilt with paper origami embellishment.

Camera: Nikon 5 mega-pixels D70s

Light sources were varied. No 'manipulation' of colour or brightness or contrast

Photos were saved for this article at 3" wide and 300 dpi.

Some cameras have sharpening and compression features that can make the photo more clear.

Word to the wise #2 – made a mistake? Don't like the change you made? Go to edit in the menu and go down to undo. You can only do this if you haven't done another operation.

Some of the editing you will want to do on your photos: Your first operation is with the CROP TOOL. You can remove unnecessary background. Crop the photo to the edges of the quilt. You can also CROP to show a close up shot, although you get a clearer image if you take this photo on the close up camera setting.

Second, work with IMAGE RE-SIZE (size the photos) quilt shows usually ask for 4" x 6", unless it is for poster. The smaller you make the photo, the clearer it becomes. You can work in pixels, inches or centimeters.

Third, also under IMAGE SIZE: adjust the dpi (dots of colour per inch). Quilt shows usually ask for 300 dpi.

If you are sending to a show by email, do not click on yes if they ask if you want photos made smaller. Send only one photo as an attachment with an email. Make sure the subject line of the email is clear: the show,

your name, title of quilt.

Additional operations:

ROTATE: you can turn your photo. Photoshop Elements has a useful tool to automatically rotate a quilt photo that is a little tilted. You do this before cropping.

COLOUR: you can adjust the brightness, contrast and saturation. You want colours that are accurate to your quilt. Compare side by side. Shows may reject a quilt that is different from the photo.

FILTERS: you can have fun here, experiment with automatic changes that can be made. The most useful will be sharpen if you want stitching to be clearer.

Final check: Move your cursor over the photo file and get a little data message in a square: dimensions, date, camera, type of file and size. For a good quality shot, the kb should be 700 kb to 1 mega bite at approximately 4" x 6".

I hope I have encouraged you to experiment and the jargon is de-mystified. I am not a professional, but have taken pictures for years and my skills have built through trial



What not to do: tilted and taken below centre point causing distortion of the shape of the quilt



Dappled sunlight: difficult to focus on details

and error. You spend mega time and effort on your quilt, so take the time to get to know your camera and software. And ...when you make a quilt, document each stage from auditioning fabrics to final binding. You will be creating a storyboard to show the steps of your process in quilt making.

Once you have a shot that showcases your quilt, you are ready to put it onto a CD and send with your entry!

One last comment on shows – there are two types of shows: shows that look for excellence in skills and shows that focus on a theme. An excellent photo will increase your chances in both cases. The rest is 'in the hands of the gods'.