

## Introduction to Watch Photography

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Have you ever felt enamoured with a watch when you saw its image in a magazine or on a website? These wonderful watch images are made with a combination of good equipment as well as proper techniques both during the shoot as well as post processing. With the proliferation of better quality digital cameras today, the capability of capturing of a great image is made much easier.



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There are many compelling reasons for watch fans and collectors to photograph their watches. You may wish to photograph them just to share with your friends or to have them as your desktop wallpaper. You may even plan to use them one day to advertise your watch for sale.

For most of us who are watch fans or collectors, photographing watches is a natural progression as it allows us to objectively view and appreciate the timepieces in a clinical manner and especially with the right equipment, capture aspects of a watch that the naked eye will not normally see.

Visit any of the thousands of watch resellers, websites and forums on the internet and you can see watch photographs of all kinds of quality. Many, if not most, could have been easily improved by the right photographic technique.

There is a common belief that to take great watch photographs a high end digital SLR cameras and equipment is required. In truth, for most cases unless you need or wish to apply special techniques and or to printing in high resolution large format, mid to high end prosumer compact cameras are capable of doing the job. More sophisticated camera equipment will raise the probability of acquiring better images but there is a steep diminishing marginal utility as their capability to improve the quality of the images is not proportionate with the increase in cost.

As most households have at least a reasonably good compact point and shoot camera, this article will demonstrate the techniques of watch photography with the use of a prosumer. Figure 1 is an image of a watch taken with the 4 megapixel Canon G3 Powershot. Nevertheless, the techniques discussed are relevant to those who own and use Digital SLRs as well.

## WHAT EQUIPMENT TO USE?

Generally, watch photography is a combination of techniques of macro (or close up) and still life photography. The basic equipment for macro and still life are shown in Figure 2.

### 1. Prosumer camera or better

First, you need a mid to high end prosumer compact camera with good macro capability (prosumer cameras now have almost all of the features of DSLRs such as full manual, aperture priority, shutter priority and manual focussing etc.). Alternatively, a DSLR with a dedicated macro prime lens will also do the work nicely.



I am often asked how many megapixels are needed. The answer will always be – depending on what you plan to do with the images. Unless you plan to print larger than A4, a 4 megapixel prosumer is sufficient. To prove this, for this article, I use my aging 4 megapixel Canon Powershot G3. Newer models like the Canon G7 features excellent lens capability that allows the camera to be brought up very close to the subject. My aging G3 has a macro mode but needs the use of an optional third party macro lens attachment on a barrel mount for it to focus up close to the subject.

### 2. Tripod

Another critical piece of equipment is a stable tripod. The tripod will keep the camera shake free for long exposures. Even in some short exposures the slightest movement can cause motion blur on the image. Also, the closer you get to the subject, the more obvious the motion blur. For truly sharp images, invest in a good quality sturdy tripod. But even a small inexpensive desktop tripod which I used here will improve the sharpness of your images.



### 3. White sheets of paper

A secret key ingredient is the use of different sized sheets of matt white paper. Figure 1 was captured with the use of the common art paper used by school children. It is used as the base and gradient background. It also comes in useful for carrying out white balancing and generally diffusing light. Children's art block will do nicely.

#### 4. Lighting and Location

Another key part to photographing watches is finding a suitable diffused lighting and location to shoot. Diffused sunlight is the best working light for watch photography – unless you can afford to acquire studio lighting equipment. If you do not have good quality artificial lighting equipment, a table or working area at comfortable height at least 4 feet away from an open window will do.

If at all possible, make sure that the table is white. If you have a dark coloured table, you can cover it with large sheets of white paper but make sure it is cleared of anything that could reflect light. Sometimes, even stationery such as a red stapler can show up in the reflections.

If at all possible, locate a window that faces the north or south so that there will not be direct sunlight shining through the window. The light falling on the subject watch in such a set up is what is commonly known as diffused light. Remember that you want to have white light not the colour you get at sunrise or sunset. I find that the best time to shoot is on dry days between 3pm to 6pm.

#### 5. Miscellaneous

Cake bases or cardboard wrapped in tin foil to use as light reflectors. Technically any reflective surface would do but it should not reflect but diffuse harsh lighting. Good glass cleaning cloth to wipe away smudges and finger prints on the watches as well as a blower and brush to remove dust particles. Unfortunately for watch photography the sharper the image captured the more likely you will see the small specks of dust in the picture. Removing the sweat stains and dust before shooting will give you images that you are less likely to delete.

#### *HOW TO CAPTURE THE WATCH?*

##### 1. Set up the right background

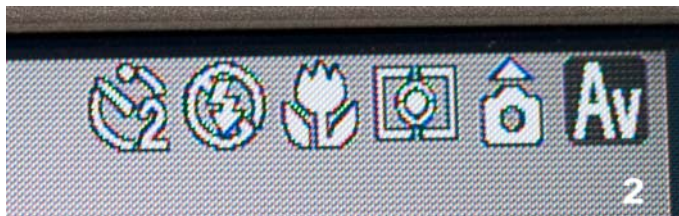
Use the white sheets of paper as the base and extend it so that it creates a gradient background within the camera frame. In my demonstration here I use the white sheets of paper that is propped up on a LCD monitor to give a smooth gradient transition as well as remove any distracting sharp background angles.

##### 2. Camera settings

*Select the maximum JPEG file size or RAW format*

My preference is to shoot in RAW format which allows me to adjust more elements in the file including level of exposure than

Jpeg. My Canon G3 allows me to capture in RAW but many of the top prosumers today do not have that feature. If so, you need to select the highest file size so that the basic file will have more data to work with when post processing is carried out. The advantage of Jpegs is that it is able to capture a lot of information on a relatively small file but unfortunately, a lot of information is removed or lost each time the file is saved.



### ***Turn off built in Flash***

The built-in flash must be turned off as it will automatically fire if the ambient light is deemed insufficient by the camera. Unfortunately built-in flash causes all kinds of problems for watch photography. Burning out of bright areas and overly sharp contrast are just some common issues. By turning off the flash, it allows the diffused white sunlight to do its magic.

### ***Select Self-timer***

A common mistake shooting long exposures is to use the camera trigger button. Even on a tripod, pressing on the button will inevitably translate into camera shake.

A perfect way to avoid camera shake on the tripod is to use the camera's built in self-timer. Simply configure the camera to fire with the self timer with the shortest available pause. In Figure 2, you can see that my camera's self timer is configured for a 2 second pause.

### ***Select Macro Mode***

For watch photography, as mentioned earlier, a camera with good macro focus capability is needed. The normal focus mode of digital cameras will not allow you to focus well with your camera positioned close to an object such as a watch. Macro mode is generally symbolized by a flower graphic and when selected, your camera will allow you to focus on the subject closer to your lens than usual. Do note that in macro mode the camera by default will choose a large aperture so that your subject is in focus but the background is blurred.

### ***Select Aperture Priority***

The size of the aperture – or the window to the sensor that captures the image – affects the depth of field of the picture. If you choose a small aperture (or a big number) you will get a large depth of field which means that almost everything in the frame will be in focus. The problem associated with small aperture is that the camera will leave the aperture open longer for more light to enter into the camera to obtain the correct exposure.

On the other hand, if you choose a large aperture (or a small number) you get a thinner or narrow depth of field which allows you to isolate parts that are sharp and others are blurred. Conversely, larger aperture allows for faster shutter speed as more light enters the camera. In macro watch photography, for an image of the whole watch, setting between f4-8 will work nicely. For even closer captures such as movement images, f11-16 is recommended. Any aperture bigger than f8 for very close images, often result in only a very small part being in focus.

A word of advice, always avoid the biggest or smallest aperture capability of the camera as the performance on each end of the aperture spectrum is where the camera tends to perform below its best.

### ***Select Manual Focussing***

If you choose to have shallow depth of field, it is critical that you focus using manual mode. This is to make sure the right part of your shot comes out in focus. Further, the auto focus capability of most digital cameras does not perform well in close up, especially when shooting small objects.

### ***Set White Balance***

A key element to successful watch photography is setting the custom white balance on the camera to correct any variation of colour in the light. Custom white balance adjusts the camera to the light you are using to give you accurate and true colours of the watch being photographed. Although almost all digital cameras will come with pre-program options or the "Auto White Balance" preset, there is usually at least one custom white balance option. It is recommended to do a white balance calibration even if you are shooting in white natural sunlight and select that custom mode for the shoot. Unfortunately, if your camera does not have this custom white balance feature, the images will have a variety of colour variations which results in inaccurate images.

### **3. Taking your shot**

After completing the settings on your camera, you are now ready for the shoot itself. However, this is where some effort is needed. One of the most difficult aspects of watch photography is the management of reflections off the watch while positioning it in an angle to bring out the best of the watch. One way of reducing reflections is to turn off any other light in the room or remove any bright object that reflects off the watch.

For beginners, a fair amount of trial and error is needed to adjust and repositioning of the watch. Use the LCD screen to observe how the light reflects off the watch in the LCD after each shot. So, do shoot as many as you possibly can. Also use the LCD screen to check the sharpness of the focussing by zooming in. Do try shooting at slightly different apertures, with different compositions and focusing on different points of your watch.

In the demonstration shot Figure 1 here, I positioned the watch face between 60 to 80 degrees from the perpendicular to the window so that there would not be a reflection in the crystal or dial.

The three close-up images in the collage here were taken with the Canon Powershot G3. The bottom right image shows how I positioned the watch and camera with the use of the desktop tripod for a really close capture. The open window with afternoon sunlight is coming in from the left.



## ***PROCESS AND PRESENT THE IMAGES***

All digital images captured needs to be processed to some degree. Fortunately, prosumer cameras today are packaged with some editing software. The Canon G3 came with Photoshop Elements 3 which is relatively simple to use. If you do not have editing software, I would recommend the following free download software - Irfanview (<http://www.irfanview.net/>) or Gimp (<http://www.gimp.org/>).

Editing software allows you to carry out the following basic processes - *crop, adjust for exposure, sharpen* and to *resize*. Unfortunately, the process of editing watch images would take a whole new article to cover. There are however many useful and educational websites that teach or advise users how to edit digital images and the common techniques will apply to watch photographs.

I hope I have succeeded to demystify the process of how watch photographs are taken. Do remember that it takes practice to improve your images, so be patient and keep shooting!

Do visit my watchblog at <http://watchinghorology.com> to see other samples of my watch photographs.