

THE KNOWLEDGE

This issue, in our regular guide to all aspects of the industry, professional photographer Tony May explains why shooting jewellery is such a specialised art, and offers his tips on hiring photographers or, for the creatively adventurous, doing the job yourself...

How can I ensure the best results when photographing jewellery for advertising or display purposes?

In photography, as in jewellery design and manufacture, the results depend on the skill and creativity applied to the task. The quality of jewellery images in printed brochures, advertising and on websites varies widely.

Jewellery photography is recognised by professionals as demanding specialist lighting skills and techniques, along with a painstaking and meticulous approach to working with a very small product. Digital retouching is used extensively to achieve high quality results. For these reasons, many photographers avoid tackling jewellery.

The most demanding application is the creation of high quality images of fine jewellery for use in print or for use at larger sizes on the web. The highly polished nature of the metal, the small size and curved nature of the pieces means that they reflect everything around them and what is being photographed are reflections of the studio environment and light sources. Photographers use a variety of light shaping

tools, diffusing materials, reflectors and black card to control the environment around the jewellery, to put light where it's needed and to define edges.

Capturing the radiance and the cut of faceted gemstones and showing off the colour of coloured stones only adds to the complexity of photographing jewellery. Pieces are typically reproduced several times larger than they actually are and so the smallest marks and imperfections are magnified.

Contemporary pieces and fashion jewellery, made with less reflective materials such as opaque stones, brushed metal, ceramics or beads, do not present quite such a difficult lighting challenge, although the quality of the results will still reflect the expertise of the photographer. Larger pieces require less retouching than smaller pieces reproduced at the same size.

Creating small images for website use is where some jewellers opt to produce photos in-house. However a survey of websites that



use images from prestige brands alongside images produced on a low budget will illustrate that, even at small sizes, differences in the quality of photography can be obvious.

If you are looking to find a professional photographer, organisations such as the British Institute of Professional Photography (www.bipp.com) and the Association of Photographers (www.the-aop.org) are professional bodies with qualified members and websites containing searchable directories of photographers. If you are working with a design or advertising agency they should be able to identify and commission a suitable photographer, but bear in mind that the photographer selected must be able to demonstrate their ability to photograph jewellery. Put simply, those looking for high-end results will seek out jewellery specialists.

You should ensure any photographer you choose carries insurance to cover goods while they are kept on their premises and you should ensure that arrangements for the delivery, collection and security of the jewellery are understood and agreed in advance.

Most photographers or studios will quote a day rate. As copyright remains with the photographer, the rate includes a licence for the client to use the images. Uses such as high profile advertising campaigns will attract higher rates. Photographers will ensure that model releases are obtained for lifestyle images, and will deal with the casting of models in conjunction with the client and the agency where a creative agency is involved.

For larger projects, photographers may be happy to negotiate the day rate, or to quote a fixed price against a well-defined brief. For repetitive volume work, this might be a price-per-piece and some photographers do offer a price for pictures intended for web use only.

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All images courtesy of Tony May

The digital imaging and lighting equipment being used in studios producing high-end work will cost tens of thousands of pounds. Camera systems that allow tilts, swings and shifts of the lens and the digital sensor allow the plane of focus to fall so that, for example, a pendant and chain that have been laid across a background will be sharp from front to back. Retouching of images is done at workstations with colour-calibrated monitors and may be carried out by dedicated staff.

Pieces to be photographed should be immaculately clean and free of marks. Samples that have been handled repeatedly will inevitably have fine scratches. Under the unforgiving glare of studio lights, these will show up in the image along with any tiny specks of dust and manufacturing imperfections that are not obvious to the naked eye.

When producing images for print, it should be remembered that printing requires three to four times more resolution than displaying the image at the same size on screen, so it needs to look great on screen at four times the size it's going to be printed at.



Those confident enough in their existing photographic skills to want to produce their own images will need a minimum level of equipment and technical skills and be willing to develop lighting techniques. A camera capable of shooting digital images in RAW format with a close-up macro lens, and proficiency in image processing and Photoshop, or an alternative image editing program, are essential.

You will need a tripod or studio stand, lights, light modifiers,

background, supports and a range of bits and pieces to support the jewellery in still life images. Forget on-camera flash. The accessory sold as a 'light tent', 'cube' or 'cocoon' consists of white light diffusing plastic or material to surround the subject and control reflections, and is promoted as being suitable for jewellery photography. However, unless it is used skilfully with other light modifiers, the resulting images it produces can look flat and lifeless, and coloured stones and dark surfaces will look washed out.

Good images will reflect the value of the product, the style of the piece and the prestige of the brand, but whatever their purpose, images will always reflect the skill, effort and budget that has been invested in producing them.

Tony May is an award-winning commercial and advertising photographer who produces images of jewellery and accessories for advertising, brochures and website use. He was Advertising Photographer of the Year 2007 and Commercial Photographer of the Year 2007 in the Yorkshire Region of the BIPP. He can be contacted at Tony May Images, on 0113 239 2422, via email: info@tonymayimages.com or through his company's website: www.tonymayimages.com

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