

# Setting Up for Photo Success

by Kathryn Robicheau, Virtual Threads

You can take great photographs of your stitching using natural light or household lamps. This article focuses on setting up your embroidered works, a.k.a. subjects, for photography with less, or no, glare, fewer harsh shadows and better colour/contrast.

## Camera Tips

There are so many cameras and camera options that they can't be covered here. So, make friends with your camera manual or the features of your cell phone camera. The more you know about your camera, the better your photos will be. Here is some general, common information about cameras.

Many cameras have the following settings: auto, landscape, macro, portrait, sports and night. If you must choose one of these settings when photographing your embroidery, try the auto setting first. You can also try macro for close-up details. Be careful with portrait mode; be sure to check that the whole subject is in focus because your camera might read some of the subject as background.

- ▶ Set your camera to the highest resolution possible, sometimes shown as "best" or "highest."
- ▶ Do not use the camera's flash; turn it off if at all possible. Cover it with black electrical tape if you can't turn off the flash feature (test to make sure that it blocks the flash fully).
- ▶ Do not use digital zoom; use only optical zoom. Digital zoom may look fine on your camera view-screen, but it will not look good at full size.
- ▶ If you have additional options, practice how to use these ones:
  - Set the ISO/ASA to 100.
  - Use manual settings to use your camera's "aperture priority" or AP mode, f/8 or higher.
  - Set the white balance, choose "custom" and follow directions for your camera to do so, or choose the correct lighting type for your setting.

It takes a lot of practice to keep a camera steady and many of us move the camera when we press the shutter release, even with a tripod. When we use our phones to take photographs, we move them even more since we use a pushing motion. We can improve our photos by using the self-timer that most cameras have built in. Check your camera manual to find out how to use the self-timer feature; most have two options for

the length of time. The longer option is great for rushing to get yourself from behind the camera and into the photo!

## Tripod, No Tripod?

The best way to improve your photography is with a tripod. If you are choosing one to buy, here are a few tips. Make sure that it is heavy enough that it will not tip over easily, it allows you to rotate your camera from landscape to portrait and lock it into place, it lets you tilt your camera forward and lock it into place and it is height adjustable.

With practice, some of us can become better at learning how to hold our camera steady. If you don't have a tripod, you can make use of a firm, level and stable surface that is at the correct height. Place a piece of non-slip shelf liner to create a safe surface for your camera.

Here is a list of tips for using your body or your body-plus to steady the camera.

- ▶ Plant your feet about shoulder-width apart, rest your elbows on a table top, counter, fence, car roof, chair back, etc., to form the third part of the tripod.
- ▶ Sit down on a chair or bench with your feet flat on the ground or floor. Lean forward and rest your elbows on your thighs/knees.
- ▶ Sit backward in a chair. Rest your elbows on the chair back.
- ▶ Lean against something stable like a wall, tree, sturdy post, etc.

A few other pointers: hold your camera so that your left hand is supporting the lens of your camera or your cell phone, hold your camera or cell phone close to your body, and hold your elbows close to your body.

## Plan Ahead for Photography

The best stage for taking photos is when stitching is finished and the piece is mounted but not yet framed, or if the piece won't be framed, when it is prepared and blocked before it is finished into the final object. Ideally, take photographs without glass. Most of the time, the glass becomes a mirror for everything that's in front of it. If you must take photographs with the glass in place, make sure that it's clean. Of course, you'll want photographs of your completely finished pieces for a good record of the finishing details for insurance purposes.

In most cases, the embroidery is the star, so use a plain background to let it shine! If you want to emphasize a small piece's size, you can include a common object such as a coin or a ruler in the photo. Sometimes it might make sense to add

some props to your photos – depending on the purpose of the photos. For example, include a pair of embroidery scissors with a project that has a pocket or tab to hold them in place, a few pins in a pincushion, an ornament hanging on a branch, etc.

### Handy Household “Plus” Gear

- ▶ two lamps with the same type of light bulb
- ▶ white foam core: full sheet(s)
- ▶ white Bristol board: full sheet(s)
- ▶ small tables, boxes, books, etc. (to set up lights, prop subjects and camera if no tripod)
- ▶ non-slip shelf liner
- ▶ glass cleaner and lint-free cloth (spray the cloth lightly, support the back of your piece as you wipe the front)
- ▶ level (optional)

### Light

The best light for taking photos is natural light. A north-facing light source, an overcast day or shaded area on a sunny day work really well and help reduce shadows and glare. Both a carport and garage (door open) can provide good light in a covered location. Depending on how bright it is outside, you may still experience glare and reflections on the glass. If so, you will need to use lamps.



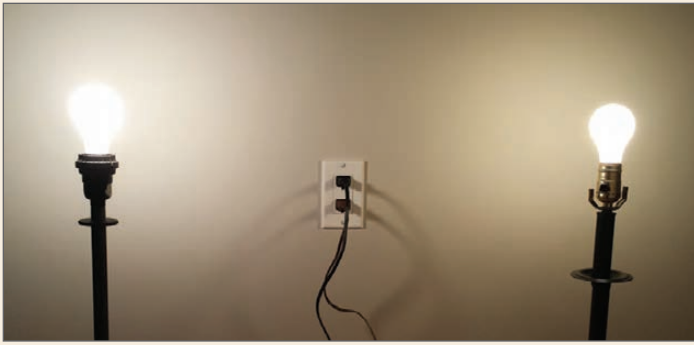
*Set-up One: This room is very bright, even with the blinds lowered over the doors. I had my ironing board set up to use, but the room was just too bright. Items behind the camera were reflecting back light from the door and window. And, the light behind my subject caused my subject to be “in the shade” and therefore, too dark.*



*Set-up One: I have set up my subject opposite the door and window, on the loveseat to the right of the camera in the previous photograph. There is so much light in the room that I am reflected on this piece that is under glass. Using lamps will not be able to counteract the brightness from outside. Lavender Sparkle Butterfly designed by Alison Cole, stitched by Kathryn Robicheau.*



*Set-up One: This light works really well for the framed piece without glass. However, make sure that shiny frames don’t have bright white “flares” that are caused by reflections of the bright outdoor light source. And, make sure that your shadow doesn’t make the centre of the subject darker than the edges. If either of those happens, use the lamp setup shown on the next page. Unknown canvas embroidery, designer unknown, stitched by Fia Vanderlee.*



The light bulb on the left is marked as “cool” and the one on the right “warm.” You can see the difference and how each affects the colour of the grey wall behind them.

## Lights, Camera, Click

### Hanging and Propping Items

1. Choose a good light source or a location near your lamps and electrical outlets.
2. Hang or prop your subject so the middle is at chest level or level with your tripod’s height that you can comfortably reach.
3. Hang or prop your subject on a flat background surface, ideally with a smooth neutral grey, black or white background.
4. Level the subject and make sure it is perfectly vertical.
  - a. If subject is tilted forward, use small bits of a non-slip liner or plastic eraser to bring out the bottom of the item as necessary.
  - b. Measure from the floor up to the middle of the subject.
  - c. Adjust the tripod so that the camera lens is at the measured middle height and perpendicular to the subject. Or raise your arms and hands to get the camera to the correct height.

### Non-hanging Items

1. To limit bending or kneeling, use a table to set up subjects that can’t be hung. If possible, set the table against the wall because the subjects to be photographed need to be propped up at an angle so that you can take a successful photo. I use my ironing board because the height is adjustable and it’s easy to move.
2. Use a piece of Bristol board or foam core as a background for your subject. Bristol board works well when an item is propped because it can be curved.
3. If there isn’t a wall nearby or the item can’t be leaned at a steep angle, use a flat surface that can support the weight of the subject.

4. Elevate one end of background support as much as possible, keeping it stable and without causing it to slide off. The goal is to be able to match the angle of the camera lens to the subject, so the higher, the better. It is difficult to set up a camera to point straight down.
5. Non-slip shelf liner, sticky tack or a small straight pin or two can help hold the subject in place.
6. Check your camera settings and, whether using a tripod or not, tilt the camera so that the lens angle matches the subject. This way, the subject will be square in the photo.



*Set-up Two: This light works really well for the subject with glass. The only light source behind the camera is the ceiling light that can be turned off and the room isn’t too bright. The one small window in this basement room is high and at a right angle to the subject. In this photo, you can see how the subject is propped against the shelving unit and how the Bristol board is curved to avoid a line across the background. You can also see that the glass in the frame is reflecting various items in the room due to the overhead light. The lamps are at the proper height, even with the middle of the subject, and at a 45° angle to the subject. The camera is centred between the lamps, angled to be parallel with the angle of the propped subject, aimed at the middle of the subject, and the camera and the subject are both level.*

## Time for the Camera

1. Look through the eyepiece or on the screen to see if the subject is square or distorted, that is, if the top and bottom or left and right edges appear to be different sizes. If so, adjust the camera angle and move backward or forward as necessary, until the subject is square in the camera viewer.
  - a. Generally, there is a square, or series of squares, in the viewing area of your camera, use it to check for distortion.
  - b. Some camera view screens show a larger area than the resulting photo. Make sure that the subject fills the screen, but confirm that the image isn't cut off and that there is a bit of background all around the subject in the photographs.
2. Set up the lights at a 45° angle to the art and far enough back to make sure they are not in the photo.
  - a. Check that there are no or minimal shadows, move lamps as necessary.
  - b. If there are areas of glare, try moving the lamps further from the piece.
  - c. Check that no colours (from your clothing or other items in the room) are reflecting onto the piece. If so, remove or cover colours that are reflecting.
3. Take a photo (remember to use the timer feature if you have it).
  - a. Check the photo on your computer if at all possible.
  - b. Zoom in to check that the subject item is:
    - i. In focus, without blurry edges.
    - ii. Level or square in the photo.
    - iii. Evenly lit. Are all sides about the same brightness, or are some really dark or light?
    - iv. Clearly visible, not obscured by reflections.
  - c. Make any necessary adjustments to your set up.
  - d. Take another photo, check, repeat as necessary.

**For those of you who have had “photography instruction” from Alison Cole, the “under the table” move she suggests blocks the glare or reflection from the overhead lights. The “kick off your shoe” move tilts your subject to the correct angle. The floor is usually a fairly neutral background.**



*Set-up Two: After turning off the ceiling light, reducing the height of the camera a bit and moving the lights a bit further left and right, I was able to take this photo. There are no glare spots or reflections on the glass. The frame is level in the photo and a bit close to the top but usable. The Bristol board edges are a bit crooked, but that can be cropped out.*

Don't take down the light and camera set up until you have the photos you are happy with. With all of this work of setting up, you might want to photograph several subjects at a time. Remember that practice is very helpful. Fortunately, with digital cameras, we don't have to wait or pay for developing!



*I transferred my photo from my camera to my computer and opened it in photo editing software. (Photographs submitted for publication can be edited by the publication's staff.) I was able to crop the image and, despite the frame being close to the top of the photograph, I'm happy with this photo and would submit it without reservation.*



After all of that setting up, you might as well make it worthwhile! I used my set up to take this photo of a cushion, too. The green square outlining the cushion demonstrates that the cushion and the camera are at the same angle. Pansy cushion designer and stitcher unknown.

### Extra, Extra!

People are attracted to beautiful embroidery as a whole piece; however, they get a better sense of it from close-up photos and photos taken from a low angle that show texture and dimension. There's a reason everyone wants to touch fibre and textile works; it's the texture!

Photos of in-progress embroidery, the threads and the materials are also admired by those of us who have a passion for embroidery.

Think about what you like to see when you have a chance to look at embroidered works. Take those types of photos of your own works!

### Sharing your Photos for Publication

Many of us can share our photos straight from our cell phones. That's really handy when you want to send a photo to a friend or post it online. However, the quality will probably not be good enough for printing in a magazine. Check that your phone doesn't compress photos when you share via email, directly from your phone. If your phone does that, transfer them to your computer or a "cloud" service. Submitting them for publication or printing is best done as an email attachment.

### Learn More

There is good information online. Here are a few options:

- ▶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vpj28da03JQ>
- ▶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9u-O2t8pkxM>
- ▶ <https://www.artsyshark.com/2015/04/23/mistakes-photographing-art/>

### Troubleshooting

**Problem:** subject is dark on one side

**Solution:** the lights are not equidistant from the subject, move the light on the dark side toward the middle until the dark area lightens

**Problem:** there is a reflection on the image

**Solution:** a light source is causing glass or shiny frame to act like a mirror; turn off overhead lights, close curtains or have a helper hold up a piece of foam core to block the light source

**Problem:** subject is crooked

**Solution:** rotate the subject until it appears straight in the frame or camera view screen

**Problem:** top of the subject is narrower than the bottom; one side of the subject is narrower than the other

**Solution:** this indicates that the camera is not square to the subject, move the camera to the left or right, or tilt the camera slightly up or down

*Kathryn Robicheau credits her late father, Leo Taylor, with encouraging her love of photography and wishes that she had his ability to hold the camera steady.*

## Researchers Wanted for People Pool

EAC/ACB's people pool provides members with a chance to volunteer their skills for time-limited EAC/ACB projects.

We are currently looking for individuals interested in researching items that are part of the EAC/ACB's heritage collection.

Researchers will use colour photographs of the item so the work can be done from anywhere. Take on one item, or several, it's up to you!

If you are interested in taking part in this project, please send a note to [peoplepool@eac-acb.ca](mailto:peoplepool@eac-acb.ca).

