How to Photograph Your Art for Prints
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NOTE: Check your camera's manual and follow the directions about adjusting for White Balance, which is the color temperature of sunlight (white light), as each camera is different. If you are unable to do that, set your camera on "Auto."

Equipment Needed:

- digital camera with zoom feature, and instruction manual
- tripod
- white board (full matte finish sheet to extend larger than your painting)
- level (optional)

1. Find a bright spot outside that is not in direct sunlight, but just inside the shade line. OR set up 2 Ott Lights (5300K) or other daylight simulating lighting indoors.

2. Place your white board on the floor, and check that it is level. If not, shim it with pieces of paper to make it level. (Important, or your painting will look out of focus.)

3. Place your painting on the white board. Be sure it is even to all edges of the white board, or the angle will be off when you take the picture. (You will not be able to correct this misaligned angle when you print the photo.)

4. Place your tripod and camera directly over the painting so that the camera is pointing downward, and is level to the white board. *See Note below for option.

5. Focus your camera, and check that there is equal distance on all edges from painting to edges of white board. (If not, adjust it. You will not be able to correct this misalignment when you print.)

6. Set camera to AUTO and take the picture.

7. Check photo by using REPLAY. If it is out of focus or misaligned, correct and re-shoot. Take several shots, just to be sure you've got a good one.

8. When you get home, download your photos to your computer. Insert it into Photoshop Elements. Make color adjustments to get the colors in your photo to be as close as possible to your original painting. (See "Other Helpful Information" below.) Print a small sample to check, and make further adjustments if necessary until it's as close to the original as possible. If you have a calibration program, calibrate your monitor colors to your printer colors. See your monitor's manual for directions.

*Note: To take your photo vertically, set your original painting on an easel. Then set up your tripod and camera so that it is at the same angle as your painting, i.e. if painting is at 30°, then your camera/tripod must also be at 30°. IMPORTANT. If the angle isn't the same, parts of your painting will appear out of focus in the photo.

OTHER HELPFUL INFORMATION

Note: Don't let all this technical talk scare you. If you know how to use Photoshop Elements, all this will make more sense.

For prints up to 8 x 10", a 5 mega-pixel camera using simple mode with auto-focus, auto-exposure and auto white balance settings, is adequate. Using a tripod isn't mandatory if you have enough light and a steady hand. Do not work in direct sunlight; an overcast bright day is best. When using a tripod, a small level helps setting the camera parallel to the art.

Your photos will probably have a blue color cast, which is easily corrected in Photoshop Elements, if you have white or light gray in the photo. That is why your art should be placed on a white matte or light gray paper or cloth, and some of that should appear in the edges of your photo. By clicking on the white or gray area using the "Remove Color Cast" function in the photo editor, you will get needed correction to the colors in the art photo image.

Your camera and printer use the standard Red Green Blue (sRGB) color profile and the photos are output in the .JPEG format. (If TIFF is available, it creates huge files with little or no improvement in photo quality.) There is no way to know what the color temperature of the daylight is that the camera senses, but the computer display is 6500°K and sunlight is between 5000°K and 7000°K – the "remove color cast" function brings the photo's color temperature (white balance) to approximately that of the monitor, so it will have truer colors. For indoor photos, fluorescent light may be OK.

Although not part of the photo process, you should be aware that the computer's display is probably not going to accurately display the photo image if there are dark or saturated colors, which present a major problem in making art prints. Accurate displays are very expensive and need to be calibrated for art use that makes them incompatible with normal use (low brightness and contrast settings and a dimly lit room.)

If your .jpeg image on your monitor is very different from a printed copy, monitor calibration may help. There are several test images used for calibrating monitors and printers that will let you know where the discrepancy may lie, but the printed copy is usually the accurate one.

After you download the .jpeg image to your computer and correct cast, try printing a small print (4x6" or so) to see what may need fixing;

- use matte paper (example: Epson Matte Presentation Paper). The print will look washed out on plain printer paper)
- use photo setting
- use SRGB to the printer (if it uses CMYK, the printer will convert)

Corrections to the .jpeg file should be mainly for contrast and brightness, and possibly saturation. Since the photo is of a piece of flat artwork, there are no shadows or highlights to correct, and there are no mid-tones or black or white levels to correct. Unless the photo was under or overexposed, it should have proper balance. It is very difficult to correct exposure defects.

Windows XP and 7 have a display calibration utility, but laptops have limited ability to calibrate the display.

THE EASY OPTION

This is the quick and dirty alternative to the above, but the results will not be as good. Take your original (if it is smaller than 11" x 15", to Office Depot or Staples, and have it copied. Ask them if they can take an inkjet copy rather than a copier copy. The quality will be much higher if it's done on an inkjet copier. You can bring your own 110# card stock, or buy theirs. However, an 11" x 14" copy is as large as they can make on their equipment, which will fit into a 16 x 20" mat/frame. If you have a 13" x 19" inkjet copier at home, you can make prints up to that size that will fit into a 20 x 24" mat. If you try it both ways, you'll see the difference in the quality of the print when you follow the directions above. You won't be able to tell the original from the print. The extra effort is worth it.