



**LEARN FROM THE EXPERTS**

# Portraiture

## The Amateur Photographer Masterclass with **Annabel Williams**

**Annabel Williams** takes two readers out on location and shows them how to arrange a simple portrait shoot with the minimum of fuss. **Oliver Atwell** joins them

**MOST** of us have tried our hand at portraiture, whether it's on holiday, at a wedding or during a stint of street photography. Yet portraiture can be a tricky genre. What we imagine to be a simple pursuit soon turns out to be a minefield of technical considerations, as well as a real test of just how confident we are as photographers. Directing people isn't exactly the easiest task in the world.

'Rather than working with "real" people today, we're going to be using a couple of models,' says Annabel. 'The reason for this is that it gives us the freedom to lay down the basics of arranging a simple location-based portrait shoot. However, directing people is an important part of any successful portrait

shoot, so we'll also touch upon that today.'

Annabel will demonstrate to our two readers, Jenny and Izzy, how to set up their cameras, look for the best lighting, choose the correct background and how best to compose and frame their subject.

'Whenever I lead a workshop, there are four key things that I always say are the most important aspects of portrait photography: rapport with subject; light; background; and equipment – in that order,' says Annabel. 'In many ways the camera is the least important thing that you need to take a picture. It needs to be set up simply so you don't need to worry about it. Digital technology has made things so much easier for the portrait photographer that we don't have to spend

too much time messing around with the technical side and can instead focus on composing our shots.'

While it would be easy to imagine that shooting people on location is a vastly different discipline to shooting in a studio, the two share many common factors. Light reacts the same no matter where you are, and learning how to work in different conditions will significantly build your confidence as a portrait photographer.

'Today, we'll be using a variety of locations and you'll see that light is never the same in two different places or even at two different times,' says Annabel. 'It doesn't matter under what conditions you're shooting – even a dreary day can give you interesting shots. You can always work around the light, no matter what it is.'

So, with that final thought in their minds, Annabel, Jenny and Izzy move off into the city (accompanied by their two models Chynna and Chi) to see what the streets have to offer. 

Your AP Master...  
**Annabel Williams**



Annabel Williams is one of the world's leading portrait photographers. She is passionate about working in a very simple way with natural light and has forged a successful career as a photographer and tutor. Combining previously acquired skills as a special-needs teacher has allowed Annabel to understand the psychology of people and utilise those skills to get the best possible images of them. She is based in the UK and the USA. For more details, visit [www.annabelwilliams.com](http://www.annabelwilliams.com).

The AP readers...  
**Isobel Murphy**



Isobel is a keen photographer with a particularly strong interest in portrait imagery. She uses a Canon EOS 7D. 'The workshop with Annabel was amazing,' she says. 'We had so much fun, but learned a lot too. Annabel has a very relaxed style of teaching, which helps a lot with the practical side of photography.'

**Jennifer Peel**



Jennifer is a keen portrait photographer and has been keen to attend an Annabel Williams workshop for a long time. She shoots using a Nikon D300. 'It was a really good experience to watch Annabel shoot, and to see how she directs her models into poses to get the expression she wants,' she says. 'I've learned how to get a variety of shots by making small changes to the pose and changing position to get a different backdrop or angle.'



OLIVER ARWELL

# CAMERA SETTINGS

**IN PREVIOUS** Masterclasses, we've often talked about getting to know your camera's settings and how working in manual mode means having total control over your exposures. However, Annabel prefers to take a different approach with her camera, and suggests that worrying about technology and settings should not be something that takes up the photographer's time.

'When you first start you should never feel self-conscious about working in auto mode,' says Annabel. 'There's a lot of snobbery about working in this way, but there's no need for it. The auto mode is there to help you so you can concentrate on taking a great image. Once you're comfortable with your equipment, you can start exploring how best to take control of exposures.'

While Annabel encourages people to explore the capabilities of their camera, she also recognises that doing so can get in the way of actually taking images.

'I don't believe that you need to know too many things about how your camera functions in order to take great pictures,' continues Annabel. 'It's great photographers who take great pictures, not great cameras. Photographers, particularly those new to image making, can get tied up trying to figure out f-settings and what every little dial and button does on their camera. As



TERESA PERINI

far as I'm concerned, that's counter-productive.'

Annabel's advice to our readers is to work with the settings that have served her well for the past 20 years of her career. First, set your camera to AV mode. Then set the aperture to f/5.6 and the ISO to 400. Set the camera to 'one shot' and the white balance to auto.

'If you have your camera locked on these basic settings, as soon as you pick up your camera you'll be able to shoot straight away,' she says. 'In that way, you can spend your time working on your backgrounds, directing your subject and ensuring that your composition is as you want it.'

# THE SUBJECTS



ANNABEL WILLIAMS

**WHEN** working with people who aren't used to being photographed, your subjects can often feel a little awkward so it's important to put them at ease. While this Masterclass finds our readers photographing models who are used to being photographed, the same principles apply to make sure everyone is at ease.

'One of the first things that I do is visit my model and get them to lay out a wide selection of their clothes,' says Annabel. 'Then I get them to take me through their outfits and what piece of clothing goes with what. It's a great way of involving your model in a collaborative manner.'

'I always get to know my clients before getting

my camera out,' says Annabel. 'Just sitting down and having a coffee with them can help to put them at ease. However, as comfortable as they may be around you, they may not necessarily feel comfortable being photographed. That's a great concern with many people who want to be portrait photographers – their subjects don't really know what they're doing. That's why I always tell my models that I'm making it up as I go along. This is not a million miles from the truth, though, as a portrait shoot should be spontaneous. Don't be afraid to wing it slightly and admit this – the main thing is to make your model feel better about being photographed.'

# LIGHTING AND COMPOSITION

**WORKING** in a location such as a city can mean that the photographer is overwhelmed by the visual clutter that surrounds them. This can often make it difficult to identify what will make an interesting location for their subject. One of the best ways to approach this problem is to see your model and their surroundings as a simple arrangement of shapes.

'Taking these kinds of images is a lot easier if you can begin to see everything in graphic terms,' says Annabel. 'Everything you see is just a shape, from the models and their clothes to the environment they find themselves posing in. The way those shapes interact with each other is going to determine your composition. Everything in the street is a series of shapes and lines, and you need to fit the shape of the person in with the background. Move the person around until their shape looks good, and don't be afraid to move them back and forwards until you see what works.'

For Annabel, when it comes to the methods of lighting a subject, there's no competition – natural light wins every time.'

'I really feel that flash can often ruin a good picture and studio lighting can be quite tedious to work with,' says Annabel. 'When you're in a studio, you're very restricted to the kinds of backgrounds that you can use and the types of things you can do with your model. Therefore, working on location with natural light will always be my preferred method. When you're out on location, you begin to see how different intensities of light will work with all the shapes we just discussed. You can treat the sun as a natural spotlight. It's just that rather than moving your light, you're moving your subject.'

Finding the right light for your subject can often be a difficult task. Sometimes it can be



JOHN FERRELL

too harsh and at other times completely flat. The trick is to look for areas that offer something a little more flattering.

'There are a huge number of different lighting conditions in a street location,' says Annabel. 'Standing in direct sunlight works well for flawless models, but is too harsh for the rest of us mere mortals and will highlight flaws. However, if you can find some sort of cover, such as a doorway, then that will work a lot better as it will soften the light slightly and give a much more even exposure. Also, areas like that can make for really excellent backgrounds.'

# LOCATION AND BACKGROUND



ANNABEL WILLIAMS

**ONE OF** the really fun parts of embarking on a portrait shoot is exploring all the locations that could potentially serve as interesting environments in which to work. A key consideration is to look for an interesting setting. The easy option would be to find a 'clean and simple' location, but it's also worth looking for something a little different.

'When you look really closely at a location, you'll

begin to see all sorts of interesting shapes, colours and textures that can produce brilliant backgrounds,' says Annabel. 'I'm always attracted to things like brickwork and graffiti as these can really give your images a grungy feel.'

The key thing is to explore, but that doesn't mean having to travel for miles, explains Annabel. Sometimes one location will provide ample opportunities.

'It may take a while to find the perfect background, but keep your eyes open and your mind receptive,' says Annabel. 'It could be that your background choice is affected by your model's clothes or even the skin tone. Make sure the different elements complement one another.'

Annabel also suggests experimenting with depth of field. Having an out-of-focus background can help to emphasise your subject and make him or her much more three-dimensional.

'When I want an out-of-focus background, I'll use a long lens such as a 75–200mm,' says Annabel, 'and that's why I always have my camera set to f/5.6. This will really bring your subject out from the background.'



ISOBEL MURPHY

# USING AN iPhone



ANNABEL WILLIAMS

**'I LOVE** shooting with my Apple iPhone,' says Annabel. 'I'm particularly fond of the Hipstamatic and Camera+ functions. I love Hipstamatic because you never quite know what you're going to get – in fact, it reminds me of working with cross-processed film years ago. With Camera+ you have more control and can do all sorts of things to the picture in a few simple clicks, making pretty ordinary pictures look amazing. However, if you are taking photographs on a proper shoot, where you are controlling the lighting and so on, then just picking up your iPhone can result in some great shots.'

'I am always careful to keep the subject's face more in the centre of the shot when using apps,' says Annabel. 'Apps tend to do weird things to the edges, so you need to check that you don't get colours bleeding into the face, for example. With objects this is fine, though, and just adds to the wacky look, particularly with Hipstamatic.'



ANNABEL WILLIAMS

# READERS' IMAGES

**Annabel Williams** takes a look at a selection of our readers' *Masterclass* images and offers some practical advice



JENNIFER PEEL

JENNIFER PEEL

## Jennifer Peel

◆ **I'M PARTICULARLY** fond of the muted colours in this image. Jennifer has managed to use the buildings behind the model to add another level. The tones and textures complement her hair perfectly. Plus I'm in love with those wonderful boots!

◆ **THIS** is definitely an unusual composition, but I have to say it works really quite well. I like the way the model is looking up, and the buildings in the background towering above her give the image a real sense of scale.

◆ **I THINK** this shot is gorgeous. The light is beautiful because the model is standing under a roof that is creating really good top shade and soft light. I love the out-of-focus café scene in the background, and I particularly like the blurred edge on the left of the picture, which is a curved wall. I think this really helps to make us focus on the model. The blurred wall also links with the lights at the top right of the shot, which helps to balance the photograph.



JENNIFER PEEL



JENNIFER PEEL

## Isobel Murphy

◆ **WHAT** really stands out in this shot is the fact that Isobel has tilted the camera to achieve a dynamic effect. That's a good tip – to experiment with different camera angles. Just tilting your frame slightly can add a real dimension to your photographs. Also, the positioning of the model looks great with the columns towering above her.

◆ **IZZY** has captured a really great moment here and has managed to make the shot look spontaneous, even though we asked the model to do this several times. The model looks really happy, and it makes the shot a lot of fun. I also love the out-of-focus texture and the colour of the background in the top right of the picture. It's amazing to think it's just a café window at the end of a subway.



ISOBEL MURPHY



ISOBEL MURPHY

**'A good tip is to experiment with different camera angles. Just tilting your frame slightly can add a real dimension to your photographs'**

◆ **THIS** is a great shot. I'm particularly in love the model's hair colour and the way that it works with the brick wall behind her. I'm also struck by the way Izzy has faded out the right side of the picture to emphasise the model. The composition works really well and, most importantly, the model looks incredibly relaxed.

Here we can see the contrast between a more formal pose (above) and something a little more spontaneous (above left)



OLIVER ANTELL



ISOBEL MURPHY

## Would you like to take part?

**EVERY** month we invite three to five AP readers to join one of our four experts on a free assignment over the course of a day. The experts are **Tom Mackie** (landscapes), **Cathal McNaughton** (documentary and photo essays), **Annabel Williams** (location portraiture) and **Andy Rouse** (wildlife). Our next confirmed *Masterclass* will be with Andy Rouse in July. If you would like to take part, visit [www.amateurphotographer.co.uk/masterclass](http://www.amateurphotographer.co.uk/masterclass) for details of how to apply. Please remember to state which *Masterclass* you would like to attend and make sure you include your name, address, email address, daytime telephone number, some words about your work and three or four of your images.