
Your Bottom Line

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Backgrounds invade the foreground

A revolution in studio photography is at hand! Image-makers are placing increased emphasis on stylized backgrounds in their portrait and commercial work, and the results are proving to be highly profitable.

For the past 75 years in the portrait industry especially, a prevalent philosophy dictated that the background never distract from the subject. In their zeal to keep backgrounds simple, image-makers seldom considered that an appropriate backdrop might indeed enhance the subject, and in turn sell more portraits.

During past years, however, a tremendous surge of interest in creative backgrounds indicates that they are finally coming of age and becoming part of the repertoire of most studios.

Current technology creates endless possibilities for varying backgrounds. Finished photos, taken with only a minimal amount of studio space, look as though they were taken in a huge studio or in the subject's natural environment. Babies are photographed with nursery backgrounds and children in schoolroom settings. High-tech abstract backgrounds surround teenagers. Images of families in cozy living rooms or mature couples in front of glowing fireplaces come out of studios more often.

Today's creative-backgrounds craze started with the use of colored venetian blinds behind subjects, but now effects ranging from realistic scenes to computer-generated graphics are widely used.

For example, Denny Company reports very brisk sales of their new canvas backgrounds painted to look like laser rays, and a number of other canvas-background producers are following their lead. Illinois photographer Scott Tallyn's lectures show photographers how to create a whole studio full of background "sets."

Charles Lewis and Joe Craig, who deserve at least partial credit for the tidal wave of interest in creative backgrounds, also promote a wide variety of props such as actual venetian blind sets and colored flood and spotlights. Bogen Photo, Hensel Flash, Balcar, and Norman all market

optical flash spotlight systems. These either produce circles of white or colored light, or project interesting patterns when fitted with Rosco disks.

In addition, the special-effects front projection system is enjoying more popularity than ever before. Special-effects projectors can create backgrounds from 35mm color slides, gels, and Rosco-type disks. While many photographers still use their projection equipment for scenic backgrounds, most are using them to produce various abstract and computer-generated backgrounds.

Front projection allows photographers to create backgrounds right in the studio, and puts them in control of all the elements, regardless of the season, or outdoor wind and lighting conditions. The projection system involves a high initial investment, but also enables photographers to design a variety of background types.

Variety is the key word in the significance of backgrounds to photographers and their customers. Young people want highly-creative imagery in addition to the traditional look used for their parents and grandparents. Clients often complain that so much of the work they see coming from professional studios looks the same. They also comment that regular studio photography doesn't rival the images they see in magazines or on MTV.

The new emphasis on backgrounds in routine studio photography helps alleviate such criticisms. After all, a portrait-maker has but three ways to vary his work. First, he can manipulate the posing; second, he can manipulate the lighting; finally, he can change the background. Background variations expand the photographer's creative potential, enabling him to create posing and use lighting that would be inappropriate on a plain formal-canvas backdrop.

The movement toward interesting complementary abstract backgrounds started with Washington photographer Wah Lui, who was preaching background variety using drapes, fabrics, and wallpaper 15 years ago. He pioneered special-effects

front projection, using it to design the abstract images he wanted more easily.

Lui was years ahead of most photographers. Although his customers loved his results and his business expanded to a dozen highly-successful studios, many professional photographers scoffed, preferring instead to stick with traditional canvas backgrounds.

Success with customers, however, convinced me of the significance of backgrounds when I first started my career in professional photography. I was one of the first wedding photographers to encourage brides to have their formals taken outside in nearby parks. The resulting images were so popular that they helped our business grow at a phenomenal rate, and gave us a decided edge over our competition. Some brides even went as far as to change their wedding dates after seeing our sample albums, just to have their candid photos taken outside in good weather.

Obviously backgrounds mean a lot to our customers. Spurred by their enthusiasm, I became one of the first photographers to use the front-projection technique, and enjoyed success with this method as well.

Some photographers complain that they don't want clients buying their work because of the background. But profit is profit; moreover, our job is to please customers first, and ourselves second.

There is no question that creative backgrounds will play an increasingly important role in American portrait photography. Regardless of your own personal tastes, if creative complementary backgrounds are important to your customers, they will also be important to your bottom line profits. ■