



Mimi's Handbook for Dollmakers

Photography —

by Jim Winer

Introduction

Photography Counts!

Selling your dolls or patterns is easiest when the buyer can look at the doll in person. Unfortunately, neither you nor your dolls can be everywhere at once. A good photograph is the next best thing to being there—particularly when it can be delivered instantly over the Internet, or when it runs in a magazine or on a web site for free.

We get many photographs of beautiful dolls that we just can't use in printed materials or on the web site.

Like most other magazines, the pictures we choose to print are those that are the best photographs—not necessarily the pictures of the best dolls. Similarly, the dolls we pick as winners in contests usually are those that have the best photographs—not necessarily the best dolls.

This non-technical article will help you solve or avoid five common problems with doll photographs. By just using a checklist of five simple items, you can immediately improve not only your doll photographs, but many of your family pictures as well.

Even if you're not interested in taking better photographs yourself, the information in this article will help you deal with other photographers when you need beautiful photos for admission to a show or color advertising, or when you need spectacular photos for free newspaper or magazine publicity.

What Type of Camera

Film Cameras

- Use 100 speed film for outdoors. Use 400 speed film and a flash for indoors.
- Don't store your film or leave your camera in a hot place like a closed car.
- Buy your film fresh before you are going to use it.
- Process your film soon after you use it.

Digital Point and Shoot Cameras

- Point and Shoot digital cameras work the best for most people.
- If your point and shoot digital camera has a portrait mode, or a close up mode, use it. It may improve the focus and color balance.
- How you compose your picture is more important than the particular technology of your camera.

Digital SLR Cameras

- If you know how to use the camera's features, you can get better pictures. How you compose your picture is more important than the particular technology of your camera.
- Turn off the flash and use good photographic lighting instead to make your pictures look better.
- If your digital SLR has a portrait mode, or a close up mode, use it. It may improve the focus and color balance.
- Take time to compose your pictures while looking through the lens. It will improve your ability to see.

Cell Phone Cameras

- Cell phone cameras have inexpensive low resolution sensors and inexpensive fixed lenses. They trade the ability to take photos in poor lighting for the ability to have sharp focus.
- Cell phone cameras are difficult to hold and use while composing pictures. They are much more useful for "spur of the moment" pictures than posed pictures.
- Photos taken from cell phone movie clips are not suitable for enlargement on web sites.

Learning to See

The hardest part of photography is learning to really see what is right in front of you. The biggest improvement that you can make in your photography comes from learning to see the finished picture in the viewfinder before you push the shutter button. It doesn't cost anything and you can do it by the numbers until you learn to do it automatically.

Five Easy Steps

Here are five common things that can go wrong with pictures of your dolls, and how to avoid the problem by looking before you press the button.

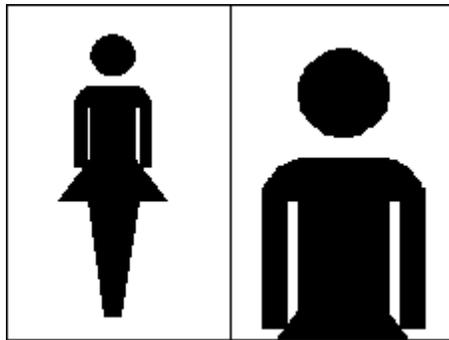
- Composition & Perspective

Your photograph is intended to show your doll to its best advantage. This means that your doll should be the main subject of your photograph. It should be seen from the correct angle and should take up most of the picture.

- Begin by deciding from what angle to take the photograph. For a baby doll or a toddler that is looking up, you can take the picture from above. That is where you would see it from if it were a real person. You would usually see an adult from eye level, so that is where you should photograph an adult doll—from its own eye level.
- When you talk to another adult, you usually stand between two and twelve feet away from them. Put another way, at the closest, you are one-third of the person's height away, and at the farthest you are twice the person's height away from them. When you take a picture of an adult doll, you should try to keep these same ratios in mind. The distance between the camera and the subject controls the perspective. If you position the camera between one and two times the height of the doll away, the picture will look more three dimensional and real. It may not be possible to stay within these distances. Some cameras won't focus when they are that close to the subject.

- If you have a zoom lens on your camera, you can decide where to take the picture from first, and then use the zoom lens to change the image size to fill the frame. If you do not have a zoom lens on your camera, you must decide where to shoot from based on how well the doll fills the picture. In both cases, be careful not to get closer to the doll than the lens can focus.

The doll should fill about two-thirds of the picture. If you are taking a picture of the whole doll, there should be some space both above the head and below the feet. If you are taking a shot of the head and shoulders only, there should be plenty of space above the head.



- Check the Background

Before you take the picture, look at the areas around and behind the doll. When you look at the doll in person, your eye will pick out the doll and ignore the background. In a flat photograph, the doll and the background both appear the same distance away—your eye doesn't get the usual clues to help it pick out the doll. As a result, the background may be much more prominent in a photo than it is in real life— unless you do something to help the background disappear.

Remember, your picture is supposed to be of the doll, not of the background around it. The wrong background can cause many kinds of problems:

- The background should be as plain and simple as possible. Clutter makes it difficult to see the doll.
- Only one or two dolls should be in a single picture unless the purpose of the picture is to show the relationship of the dolls in a group. If there are too many dolls in the same picture, all of them will become unimportant and only the grouping will stand out.

Group shots are only suitable for a family of dolls, for a dramatic scene or diorama, or when the same basic doll is shown with a variety of costumes.

- If the background is not plain enough, it may contain something more interesting than the doll.

The combination of the background and the doll can be distracting. For example, if there is a flower in a vase behind the doll, and the vase is hidden by the doll's body, the flower may look like it is growing out of the doll's head. (My favorite example is a doll in a flower print dress photographed in a garden. I can't see anything except the doll's head.)

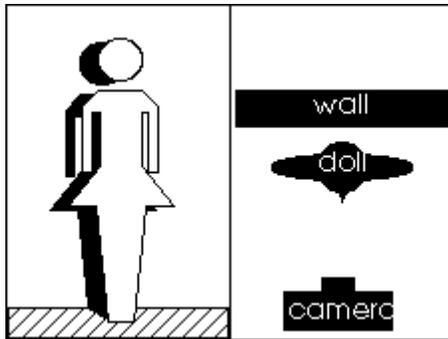
All of these problems will be visible in the view finder of LCD screen of your camera. Look through the view finder with your other eye closed, or look at the LCD screen with both eyes. See if there is anything distracting above the doll, to the left of the doll, and to the right of the doll. If necessary, move the doll or change the background.

If you're photographing your own dolls, it's easy to move the doll or change the background. But, if you're at a doll show, or even a friend's house, you can't just go moving things around. In that case, look through the view finder and then try moving over to one side or the other before you take the picture. Do whatever you can to make the picture better. In Let's Talk we frequently trim away the background from the pictures of dolls we take at trade shows and show only the doll instead of the whole picture.

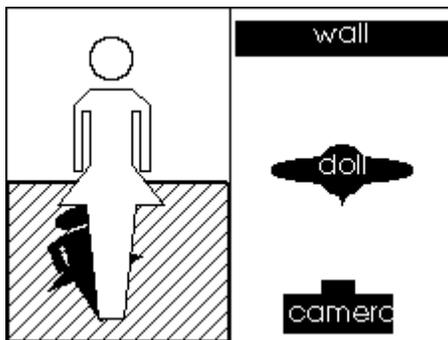
- Shadows

If you are taking pictures indoors, you will most likely be using a flash. Usually, your flash will be built into your camera or will attach to the top or side of your camera. The flash is a very bright light that is on for only a short time while the picture is being taken. Bright lights make dark shadows. Because the flash is on for a very short time, it is difficult to tell where the shadow will fall.

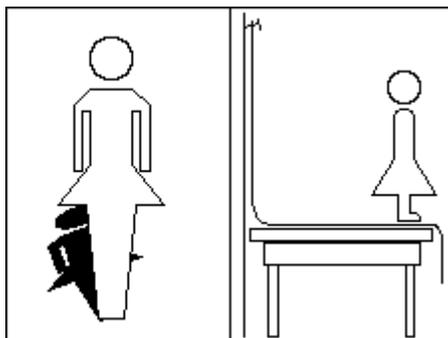
Because the flash is a little bit to one side of the lens, and a little bit above the lens, we can predict that the shadow will fall a little bit to the other side of the doll and will be down a little bit. The front-view and top-view diagrams below show where the shadow will fall.



One way to control the shadow is to move the doll farther away from the background. In fact, if you move the doll far enough away from the background, the shadow will fall entirely on the floor. This is shown in the front-view and top-view diagrams below.



Now the only problem that remains is that unsightly line where the wall meets the floor. A professional photographer would use "seamless paper" (a wide, heavy paper) to create a special, rounded effect to hide the sharp corner where the wall and floor come together. You can get the same effect by using an ironed table cloth or a piece of fabric pinned to the wall and spread on to the table where you are photographing your doll. The front-view and side-view diagrams below show you how to put the cloth up.



There are three things to watch out for when using a table cloth or piece of fabric as a background:

- Use a solid color, not a print or pattern.
- Make sure that no creases or wrinkles show in the picture.
- Make sure that you are close enough so that the edge of the cloth doesn't show in the picture.

The best colors for the cloth are medium blue, medium tan, and white. Remember that the cloth is farther away from the flash than the doll is, and therefore gets less light from the flash than the doll does. The cloth will appear darker than its usual color. You may have to experiment a bit before you get exactly the effect that you want.

- Contrast

When the doll and its background contrast with each other, it's easy to see where the doll ends and the background begins. If the doll and the background were the same color, it would be difficult to distinguish between them.

There are two kinds of contrast that help your eye see the difference between the doll and the background: color contrast and brightness contrast.

- Color contrast means using different colors for the doll and for the background. For example, a light-skinned doll in an orange dress against a blue background is very easy to see. If the same doll were wearing a dark blue dress against a dark blue background, the dress would seem to disappear in the same-color background. The head would seem to be floating in space. In this case, orange and blue have color contrast and pink and blue have color contrast, while dark blue and dark blue do not.
- Brightness contrast is just as easy to understand, but much harder to see. Colors that are different may have the same brightness or gray value. For example, a light blue dress against a dark blue background has brightness contrast (but not color contrast). A dark red dress against a dark green background has color contrast, but not brightness contrast. Because this combination of two different dark colors does not have brightness contrast, it is much harder for our eyes to see.

Of course, if the picture is printed in black and white, the problem gets much worse. My favorite is the picture of the pink doll in the navy blue dress against the black background. Trying to print this in a black and white magazine results in a ghostly floating head and hands.

To make your doll easier to see, use both color contrast and brightness contrast. Make the doll and costume a different color than the background, and make one light and the other dark.

- **Focus**

Nobody likes a fuzzy looking picture. To show your doll off to its best advantage, your pictures must be in sharp focus. Don't assume that an autofocus camera will always work correctly. If you are too close to the doll, the camera won't focus. Check the booklet that came with your camera to determine the closest that the camera can focus. Also keep in mind that the little autofocus box in the view finder must be pointed at the doll and not the background since it is the doll you want in focus and not the background.

If you have a manually focusing camera, be sure that you know how to operate it properly. There will usually be some kind of focusing aid such as a split-image. Learn what the focusing aid is and how to use it.

Indoors, use a flash. Without a flash, an automatic camera will keep its shutter open longer to get more light, and the camera may shake.

Experiment a Bit

One of the nicest things about digital cameras is that you can look at the pictures on a computer — so that it doesn't cost any money making prints to take lots of pictures to get the one you want.

Make notes as you take the pictures. When you get results that you like, look at the notes to see how you did it. It won't take you long to become a much better photographer.

Checklist

Good pictures are easy to make. Until you learn to do it by habit, use this checklist to do it by the numbers:

Good Pictures Are Up To You

- Composition and perspective.
- Check the background.
- Watch out for shadows.
- Make sure the contrast is good.
- Focus carefully.

I have provided a more complete checklist below. You can print or photocopy the checklist and use it whenever you take pictures.

Remember that good pictures mean your work must be good. When you can see all the details clearly, it is important that the doll be well made and finished. Good photography can help you improve your dolls by making it easier to see what you have done wrong.

Mimi also uses pictures of children and adults to help her get the proportions of her dolls to be anatomically accurate. Making dolls is always a good excuse to take good pictures of your grandchildren—the same principles of photography apply. Learn them and all your photos will be better.

Film Cameras

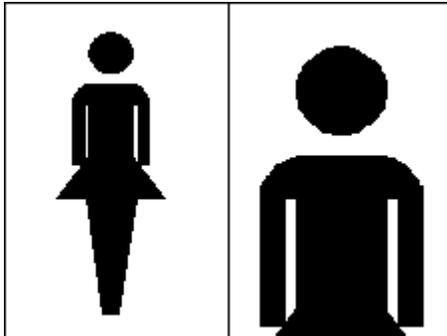
- Use 100 speed film for outdoors. Use 400 speed film and a flash for indoors.
- Don't store your film or leave your camera in a hot place like a closed car.
- Buy your film fresh before you are going to use it.
- Process your film soon after you use it.

Digital Cameras

- Use a Digital Point and Shoot Camera or a Digital SLR Camera. Do not use a Cell Phone Camera.
- Use "portrait" or "close up" mode.
- Don't try retouching photos. It will usually make them worse.

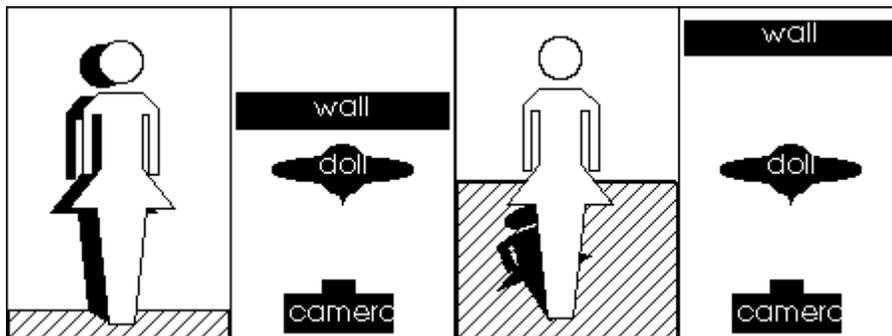
Techniques

- Composition & Perspective
 - Shoot a baby from above, an adult from its own eye level.
 - Position the camera between one and two times the doll's height away for a more 3-dimensional and real look.
 - Use the zoom lens to make the doll fill about 2/3 of the picture. Leave plenty of room above the head.

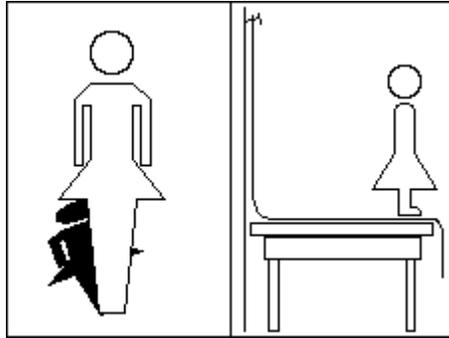


- Check the Background
 - Avoid clutter.
 - One or two dolls maximum.
 - Use a plain background.

At a doll show or a friends house, try moving yourself if you can't move the doll.
- Shadows
 - Move the doll away from the wall to cast shadows downward.



- Use a hanging cloth to hide the floor line.



- Contrast
 - Use contrasting colors for doll, clothing, and background.
 - Use lighter and darker colors to help make the doll and its clothing stand out from the background. The best colors for the background are medium blue, medium tan, and white or off-white.
- Focus
 - Don't get closer than your camera will focus.
 - If you have manual focus, learn how to use it.
 - Use a flash indoors or your camera may shake while the shutter is open.

Better Pictures

Remember that these same techniques apply to both dolls and people. Make a copy of this checklist and keep it with your camera. Use this checklist and take your pictures by the numbers until taking good pictures becomes a habit.