Random Shots

Shooting Shots Part III

by Robin Preston

Fig. 1

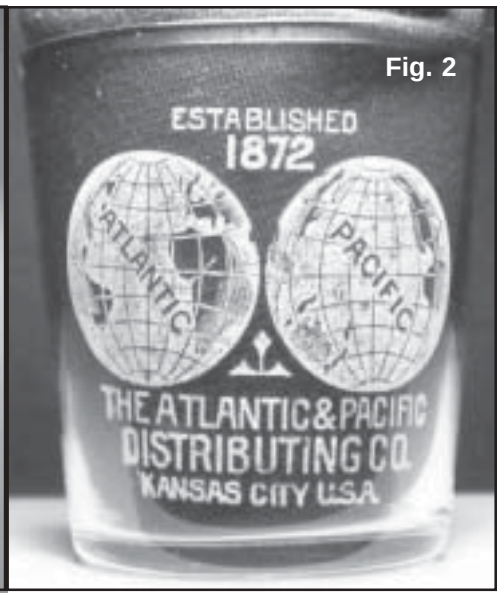

Fig. 2

This is the final installment in a three-part "*Shooting Shots*" series that discusses some of the issues one faces when attempting to document a shot collection photographically. In this issue, I'll provide some specific ideas about how to bring out the best in your shots, however photogenic (or not) they might be.

I should preface this edition with two disclaimers. First, while I developed some sense of how various lighting conditions affect the final image during my nature photography days, I make no claim of expertise. Don't be afraid to experiment on your own because it's more than likely that you'll produce images that are better and more compelling than any you see here. Second, I'm a cheapskate. I'd far rather spend money on glass than photographic gizmos, so if I can get by with a camera and tripod and a clean background (even if only the sky: see below), then so much the better. I'm assuming that you feel similarly, but if you have the funds, you could probably put together a small photographic studio for just a few hundred dollars and that would add to the convenience and reproducibility of your documentation sessions.

Our review of good, bad and ugly images in the last installment taught us that creating a pleasing photo of a glass requires that we mount the camera on a tripod, provide a uniform and contrasting background, and be aware of potential reflections. So what next?

Before beginning any photo shoot, you should make it a habit to wash your glasses. Even if kept in a china cabinet, glasses are magnets for airborne dust and grease, so fill a plastic tub with lukewarm water, add a dash of liquid dish detergent, and wash very gently using a new sponge or soft cloth. Under *NO* circumstances should you use scourer or abrasive pads. If you're considering putting them in the dishwasher, call 1-800-911-SHOTS to receive professional intervention. Rinse and allow them to drain, then pat dry with a lint-free cloth (rubbing weakens the label, even if ever-so-slightly). All this takes time, but if you want a photo you can be proud of, then the glass has to be dust-free and glittering.

I'll cover three different photographic scenarios, 1) shooting indoors with natural light, 2) shooting outdoors with natural light, and 3) shooting indoors with artificial light.

Before launching into full documentation mode, I would strongly suggest a period of experimentation using a duplicate *Sunny Brook, Rieger's O! So Good, Kellerstrass*, or other expendable glass you have at hand, with the exception of a *Hayner*. That's because cylinders bounce reflections at more acute angles than the more common shots: you need to practice with a regular glass before tackling other forms.

1) Shooting Indoors, Natural Light

I work indoors almost exclusively because the light is directional and easier to control. It also avoids the need to take along a snow shovel and a hot Thermos during winter months. The indoors/natural light technique is the most difficult to pull off successfully and can be endlessly frustrating, but it does produce exceptionally flattering images with inky, liquid contrast and sun-kissed rims.

There are several issues we need to address: suitable backgrounds, the quality of the light source, and how to minimize reflection and achieve maximal contrast between label and backdrop.

Background: Because most pre-pro shots have a white frosted label, they can be shown off to their fullest advantage against a dark background. Black is as dark as it gets, although it sets a somber tone that, while ideal for photo-documentation, can become positively funereal if used to excess. Since writing a short instructional piece for www.pre-pro.com advocating the use of black, eBay has been inundated with white-on-mourning shots and the gloom is almost palpable! Ideal backgrounds include black, navy blue, claret red, and forest green. I periodically visit local craft stores such as Jo-Ann Fabrics or Michael's and head to their fabric and felt section in search of new backdrops. Buy a piece at least 3-foot square to allow plenty of room for maneuver.

You could also use picture-framer's mat board (more expensive but the fine texture of the surface is difficult to beat) or poster board (patchy and usually has a distracting sheen), and then visit The Home Depot or Lowe's and buy a couple of spring clamps to lock the sheet on a convenient table top **[Figure 3]**. The ideal photographic background is seamless: the fabric or board transitions from horizontal to vertical in a smooth three-foot arc that contains no distracting folds or creases. Use a pile of heavy books to provide support for the seamless at the rear.

Lighting: If you've ever seen a rainbow, then you'll understand that natural light is a mix of seven different colors that meld into white. Reproducing this mix artificially is not difficult but it does require additional expenditure so, given the cheapskate caveat above, I use natural lighting for virtually all of my photographs.

Remembering the tendency for shot

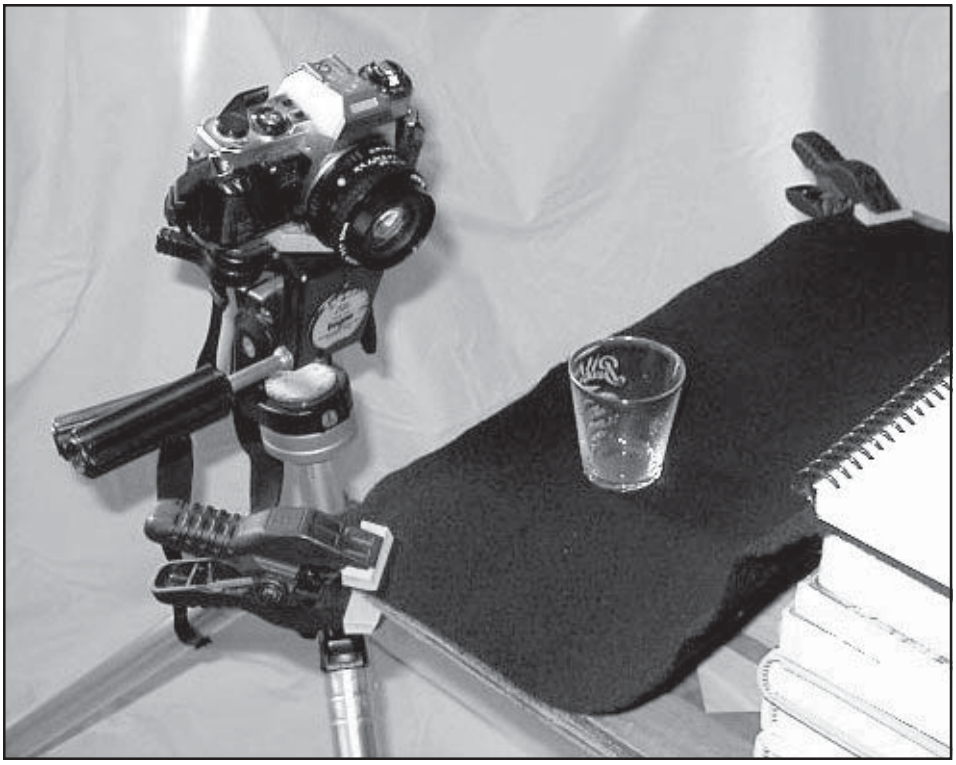

Figure 3: Setting up for a photo shoot.
Mount your camera on a sturdy tripod and create a seamless background using fabric, construction paper, or poster board. Immobilize the leading edge of the seamless with clamps to prevent it moving unexpectedly during the shoot. A pile of books provides a convenient support for the rear of the seamless. The sole source of light is a window immediately above and behind the camera at a distance of 3 or 4 feet. The tripod shown is made by Bogen and has a three-way pan-and-tilt head. I'm using my digital camera to document the set-up: the old Pentax 35 mm SLR is just for demonstration purposes!

glasses to concentrate and reflect back light, you need to be vigilant about selecting a working location that produces minimal hot spots. If the sun is shining straight in the window, then seek out a room on the opposite side of the house. If you choose to set up in your home office, then turn off the computer monitor and the desk lamp. Ideally, you need to find a room with south-facing window and pick a day when there is a thin cover of clouds (bright overcast). If you're shooting around 9 or 10 a.m., so much the better. The light under these conditions is about as perfect as it gets – a soft natural light that produces muted reflections yet your shots will sparkle and the gilded rims will glow. If the cloud cover is thick or heavy with rain, then your glasses will look muddy and sullen. If waiting for perfect light is inconvenient, then by all means skip to the end of the article and use the artificial lighting set-up described there.

Reflections: At this juncture, you should have a camera mounted on a tripod in your window of choice, with *you* positioned between window and camera, and your shot perched on the seamless background **[Figure 3].** Position the camera lens about 9-inches from the glass and zoom in on the label. You'll immediately notice a reflection of the window behind you, and possibly of you also. That's because you're wearing a white T-shirt and creating a hot-spot, so go change into something dark!

In order to get rid of the reflection of the window, you'll need to raise the camera position by a few inches and shoot downward slightly. Look through the view finder or view screen as you do this: you'll see the reflection creep upward and then disappear over the back edge of the rim **[Figure 4]**. Once you start photo-documenting, you'll need to repeat this procedure for every glass because the wall angle varies from one shot to another.

Contrast: The primary goal of our photographic exercise is to render the glass label as clearly as possible. This means maximizing contrast between label and background. Since the light coming through the window is striking the label head on and the background is dark, it should stand out strongly on the view screen. If it doesn't, then there are two likely causes.

First, you may have so much light in the room that the background is no longer sufficiently dark to provide adequate contrast. Perhaps the sun is bouncing in

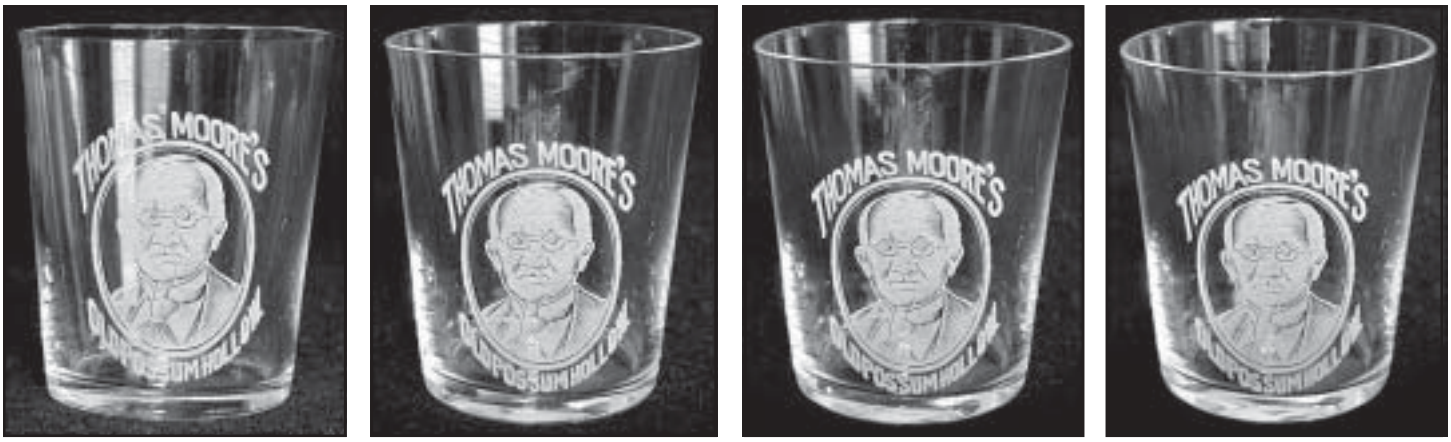

Figure 4. Effect of camera height on reflections.
The camera was inched upward in this series of images to demonstrate the effect on reflections coming off the back wall of the glass. In the first of the series, the details of Mr. Moore's face are lost in the glare of the window reflection. By the third image, we have a nice clean label and yet there's still some sparkle to show that this is indeed a glass.

off the neighbor's siding, or perhaps you have a wash of light entering via a side window. This can usually be fixed by blocking out windows, adjusting blinds, starting earlier in the morning when the sun is less intense or, if necessary, changing the shooting location.

Another likely cause is that the label on your glass is so badly faded that there's nothing left to document. In such cases it may be advisable to try the artificial light option described at the end of the article, since it can make even weak labels readable.

2) Shooting Outdoors, Natural Light

Before beginning a photo shoot outdoors, walk out into your yard and find a location that is as far away from anything bright (cars, flowers, sheds, climbing frames etc.) as possible. That's the place to set up your table and tripod.

Having taken steps to minimize potential sources of reflection, the only issue we need to be concerned with is finding a suitable background. The seamless arrangement described above is less effective when used outdoors because the ambient light is no longer directional. While it will still provide a clean, distraction-free backdrop, it will be bathed in the same light as the glass and this limits the ability to create contrast for the label.

There are alternatives however. Stand in your shooting location and make a slow 360-degree turn. Can you locate an area of deep shade or, failing that, a stand of shrubs with dark-green foliage? The greater the distance between you and the shaded area the better, since any texture will blur into a pleasantly mottled backdrop once the camera optics are tightly focused on the glass. **Figure 5** shows how effective this can be: it's a rare *Royal Stag* from Ahrens-Bullwinkel Co. of San Francisco, part of the Rich Lucchesi collection. The practice of holding a glass between thumb and forefinger is generally discouraged because it both introduces distracting digits and causes motion-induced blur. You should use your tripod and raise the shot to a convenient height above the table on a Plexi display stand, an inverted Pyrex baking dish, or perhaps even the base of an up-turned tumbler.

The sky can also provide a convenient backdrop, although the shooting angle may end up being extreme. Unless you happen to live on a mountain top, you'll have to create a support for the glass that is above your head and then direct the camera lens upwards to avoid ground-level clutter.

Figure 6 shows three examples gleaned from internet auctions that demonstrate how well this technique can work. The Birchwood at left has been photographed against the clear blue sky of a summer's day: the only distracter is the image of a red barn sneaking in at lower left. The shot vs. sky technique works particularly well at high altitude and during the winter months because as humidity levels drop, the closer to an ideal blue-black the sky becomes.

The altitude effect is demonstrated in **Figure 6 [middle]**. This gorgeous photograph of a *Cedar Run* glass was created by *Random Shots* penman and Denver, Co. resident, Howard Currier. The image was captured around noon with the label in full sun so that it stands out bright and crisp against the dark mountain sky. The contrast between label and background would have been enhanced even further had Howard inserted a polarizing filter in front of the camera lens. Polarizers are available for around $20 at any camera store, but in a pinch one can also use a Polaroid sunglass lens if it's not prescription. Hold the sunglass lens in front of the camera lens and then slowly rotate it while observing the effect through the view screen. When you hit the sweet spot, the sky will drop to an inky blue and the shot itself will become much crisper as a result of the filter damping reflected glare.

The *Julius Raible* **[Figure 6, right]** has been photographed to great advantage against a deeply overcast sky, which is surprising given that this would appear to be an example of "white-on-white" syndrome that I railed against in the last *Shooting Shots*. The difference here is that the clouds have the sun behind them and hence are acting as a light source. This creates the necessary contrast between background and a label that is in relative shade.

3) Shooting Indoors, Artificial Light

If you need an all-weather, 24/7 way to document shots, then this is the most convenient, although it presents its own special challenges related to the light source.

You set up the shoot in essentially the same way as described for the indoors/ natural light scenario above. Although you don't need a room with a window, the addition of daylight to the lighting mix does help make the final image more natural-looking, but remember to be on your guard against reflections. If you're in windowless room, an overhead light can be safely left on while you work.

The main source of illumination for the glass is going to be the clip-on halogen desk lamp that I recommended in the Part I of this series. I prefer a clip-on because it's easy to position and the pool of light it creates is small and easy to control **[Figure 7]**, but you could substitute any number of alternatives. Position the bulb directly above the glass at a distance of an inch or so, but don't turn it on yet.

Adjust the height of the camera until the lens is on a level with the glass, then inch it close enough to the glass so that it fills the view screen, yet not so close that you lose the ability to focus on the label. Depending on the ambient light and proximity of surrounding objects, you may notice multiple bands of reflection marring the label **[Figure 11, left]**.

Now turn on the desk light on and adjust its head while observing the glass in the view screen. You'll discover that when the lamp is shining directly down and slightly forward of the glass, the label will light up with surprising intensity **[Figure 11, center]**. If the base has become a fierce white hot-spot that obscures the lower lines, drop the camera position slightly and it should shrink to a silver sliver.

Use of a desk lamp has two advantages. By flooding the glass with light, the background drops into a dark, contrasting pool **[Figure 7]**. It also has the advantage of providing a highly directional light source that reflects vertically off the base toward the ceiling rather than horizontally off the walls of the glass back toward the camera lens. This allows one to document the label in its entirety, unmarred by reflections.

There are two potential downsides to using this technique. The first again relates to reflections, or lack thereof, as shown in **Figure 8.**

The figure shows two images of the same *Sunshine Old Reserve* glass from L Sonnenshein of Chicago, Ill. The first was created under artificial lighting and while it captures the label fully, the glass appears lifeless. The image on the left made use of natural lighting and, while the reflections make some parts of the label more difficult to read, the glass sparkles with life. Glasses are *supposed* to be filled with reflections.

The second issue relates to color cast. I recommended using halogen lamps not only because their output is intense, but also because the color of light emitted by halogen bulbs is closer to daylight than light from a tungsten incandescent. As mentioned above, we perceive daylight as white, but in reality it's a mix that spans the color spectrum from red to violet. Common household bulbs emit light that is weak in the blue-violet range. The intensity of the light is such that our visual cortex ignores the predominance of orange and red and interprets it as white, yet the strength of the hue is readily apparent when one records it on film or a monitor. The *Bull Dog* shot glass from Bowen, Goldberg & Co. in **Figure 9** is a classic example. This wonderful glass was photographed on a field of black, but an incandescent bulb has rendered it muddy. To my mind, the warm background does nothing to detract from its appeal, but it is something to be aware of.

It is possible to anticipate and correct for color shifts using specially-designed filters. One example is shown in **Figure 10**: they're inexpensive and easy to obtain online or from a local store: just hold it close to the camera lens when snapping photos.

Figure 11 provides a pictorial summary of how a pre-pro glass is rendered by standard lighting, after turning on the halogen desk lamp, and with the inclusion of a color correction filter.

Figure 10: A Cokin P020 correction filter adds blue to the color mix of light emitted by artificial bulbs and creates a more natural palette. A range of different hues are available that complement most light sources.

Exceptions to the rule.

While the techniques described above will suffice for 95-98% of your collection, there are two groups of glasses that won't give of their best when photographed against a dark background. The first includes picture glasses in which the applied image was been rendered in negative. There aren't too many of these, fortunately, but the *Old Bard* shown in **Figure 12** is a classic example. It's clearly a wonderful glass in the white-on-black version **[Figure 12, left]**, but the figure holding the shield doesn't seem quite right. It's only when the label is observed against a white background that we understand why: it's etched as a negative. To create the photo at right, I waited until the sun was shining directly into my home office window and then photographed the glass against a blank piece of printer paper.

The second group includes the rare enamel glasses. Enamel labels were hand-applied as thickly as toothpaste, often being embellished with delicate pastels and garnished with hand-painted gold curlicues. The labels are so dense that they bounce back any light falling on them, causing a glare that smothers texture and bleaches out pastels **[Figure 13, left]**. In order to show these glasses at their best, we have to provide a bright background that competes with the intensity of the enamel. A white background illuminated by soft natural light seems to work well in such cases **[Figure 13, right]**.

Digital fixes

One of the supreme advantages to working with a digital camera is that we have the ability to download images to the computer hard drive and then manipulate them with the appropriate software. Contrary to what you might think, however, skill with a mouse is no substitute for good photographic technique. Images that are ruined by motion cannot be corrected, so you're still going to need the tripod. Colors can be adjusted to compensate for artificial lighting, but only with difficulty and the results never seem quite real.

Indeed, while I do have the full version of Adobe Photoshop installed on my computer hard drive, all I ever do to my shot glass photos is crop them and resize them using a very basic program that came with the camera. Bottom line is that if you're prepared to spend a little time adjusting camera and lighting angles, you'll find that pre-pro glasses are so photogenic that they almost click the shutter for you.

Happy hunting!

Footnote: In the previous issue, I showcased a selection of images notable for their photographic errors. In the interests of fair play, I'd also like to pay tribute to the talents of the many individuals who support their auctions with truly outstanding photographs of shot glasses. The images in the title bar **[Figures 1 and 2]** were both taken from eBay listings and are as good as it gets anywhere. For more details on how they were created, please visit www.pre-pro.com. I'd also be interested to hear and share any tips you might have on Shooting Shots, so please drop by and leave comments in our chat room. Thank you!

Robin is an enthusiastic collector of shot glasses and maintains the collector's website www.pre-pro.com. He can be reached at 245 N 15th St., MS#488, Philadelphia, PA 19102, E-mail oldwhiskey@pre-pro.com.

Figure 11 : A single glass presented under three different lighting conditions. The first image (left) was created in an everyday setting. Light sources include an overhead fixture with six incandescent bulbs, plus muted light from two side windows. While the label is sharp and clear, the glass is bouncing back reflections from multiple sources in the room. The center image was created after a halogen desk lamp centered over the glass was turned on. The reflections have been banished by the intense light, thereby providing excellent contrast between label and background. Unfortunately the glass looks sickly with a muddy reddish-green pallor. Inserting a color-correction filter between camera lens and glass removes the caste and the black felt background is now reproduced faithfully.

Figure 5

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Figure 6

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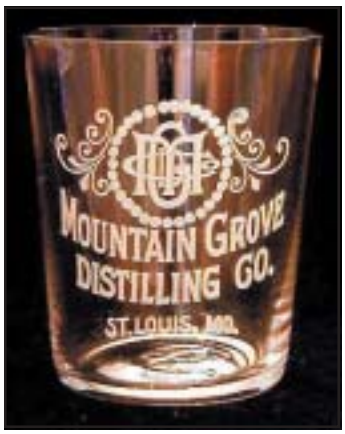
Figure 7

Left: Figure 7 shows how the main source of light for the indoor shoot is a clip-on halogen desk light, positioned an inch or two above the glass. Adjust the light's position forward and backward until the reflected glare disappears and the label is brightly illuminated.

Figure 8

Figure 9



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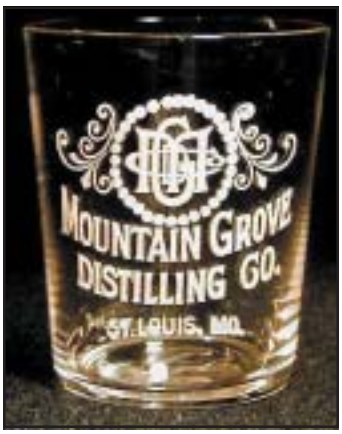

Figure 11

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Figure 12

Figure 13