

# **Taking High Quality Slides of Your Pots**

**A Primer in 2 parts**

## **Part 1: Obtaining the Necessary Equipment**

by  
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High quality slides are the lifeblood of today's potter. Whether we like it or not, slides (or in rare cases prints) are the route to entry to craft shows, galleries and exhibitions where our pots are sold and our reputation is built. That said, having slides made by a professional photographer is both costly and time consuming; although it is an absolute necessity if we don't know how to get professional quality ourselves. Pots must be accumulated several months ahead of when the slides are needed. Sometimes shipping, and the risk of breakage, is involved. Your time is also required since the best results are usually obtained when you accompany the pots to the photographer's studio and participate in the process. For most potters, it becomes something one can do only every year or two and, therefore, the work represented by our slides is often not our latest or best and we don't keep a good photographic record of most of our work. Wouldn't it be great if we could have our own setup that was cheap, easy to use, dependable and gave professional results. Well, we can! The photo of my pot shown in this article was taken using equipment and procedures exactly as described in this series of 2 articles.

### **Equipment Needed**

Let's start with the basic equipment. The list is pretty short.

1. A good, manual, 35 mm single lens reflex (SLR) camera body.
2. A lens—preferably a macro lens, but other types can suffice.
3. A high quality background
4. A tripod
5. An electronic flash
6. A soft box—I'll describe how to make one from foam core board
7. A table on which to work that backs up to a wall.

That's it. In the succeeding paragraphs I will expand on the above items and give you some hints where and how to acquire them cheaply or give instructions for making them.

### **The Camera**

Let's start with the camera body. The ideal camera for this type of work is a basic, manual 35 mm SLR camera. There are any number of good brands; however, unless you already own such a camera, wait to decide on the brand until you search for a lens as the camera and the lens must be made for each other. Single lens reflex is a necessity—point and shoot cameras or rangefinder cameras will not give you satisfactory results because you can't see exactly what you are putting on the film. With a SLR camera you see in the viewfinder exactly what you are photographing. By a basic, manual 35 mm I mean 1) manual focus, not automatic, 2) no built-in flash and 3) manual exposure control. If you already own a SLR camera that has the automatic features and/or built-in flash it can be used providing these features can be turned off. One feature you do need, for the technique I will teach, is a camera that has electronic flash synchronization (often called "X" synchronization), but most SLR cameras made in the last 40 years have that. If you want to buy your camera new, you will have some trouble finding one.



Figure 1. *This photo was taken using the equipment and procedures described in this article.*

Today, nearly all the camera stores carry heavily automated models and manual cameras are a special order, low profit item for them. The camera store employees won't have a lot of interest in helping you and will probably try to trade you up to an automated model. Don't let them unless you also must use this camera for other purposes where those features are needed. For our purpose of photographing our pots, the automatic features will just get in your way. One specific model I am aware

of that would fill the bill nicely and is available new is the Ricoh KR-5 Super II. It is available from Porter's Camera in Cedar Falls, Iowa (800-553- 2001) for \$154.95 (I will refer to Porter's repeatedly because it has an excellent catalog, gives good service and serves the U.S. and Canada by mail order. I don't own stock and I get no commission from them. I'm sure there are other excellent sources.). Vivitar has a similar model (V3300SE) for \$144.95. What do I use? I use a Konica Autoreflex T3 (vintage 1970) that I bought used for \$110. And that brings me to the best source for a camera of this type. Buy it used from your local camera store or from one of the regional photographic equipment shows that are held on weekends near big cities. Most camera stores have about 5 feet of their counter space devoted to the used cameras they take in trade; check them out carefully for some real bargains. Another excellent source for used photographic equipment is Shutterbug Magazine. It is published monthly and is available at larger news stands. Perhaps the best source for a camera of this type, in today's world, is to bid on one on ebay.com. This basic manual 35mm SLR camera, most useful for our type of photography, is exactly the type of camera that people bought back in the 1960s and they are now being traded in or sold so their owner can acquire a fancier, more expensive model. Another obvious source is your friend's or family's closets. There are an awful lot of cameras of this type sitting unused in a closet. If you do buy one used the price is usually in the vicinity of \$50-100 without a lens. Try to get a 30 day return option in case you find it doesn't function correctly. This type of camera is, however, very reliable. There just isn't very much to break.

### **The Lens**

Now on to the more complicated subject of a lens. You really should try to buy your lens at the same time or before you buy your camera body. In any case, the two have to be made for each other. The ideal lens is a "macro" lens. Macro lenses have the feature that they can focus from a few inches to infinity. Most non-macro lenses focus from about 2 1/2 - 3 feet to infinity. When you are taking pictures of, say, a teapot you will need to have the lens (if the lens has a normal focal length of about 50

mm) about 15-18" from the teapot in order to fill the frame of the slide. Macro lenses do this job superbly. Unfortunately macro lenses are expensive and are only occasionally available on the used market. I was able to find a used Konica macro lens for \$135, but a new one would have cost about \$300. While Porter's lists a Vivitar macro lens for \$150, I would look hard for a used one in good condition. Again, ebay is perhaps the best place to find a used macro lens. Focal length and "f-stop" of the lens are not critical. Focal lengths in the range of 40-100 mm are fine if you can focus closely enough to fill the frame with the smallest pots you will want to photograph. You will normally only use the higher f-stops (like f11 or f16) in order to get good depth of field. Therefore you don't need to pay extra for a lens that will open up to f1.4 or even f2.8; f3.5 or f4.5 is fine. If you can't find or afford a macro lens a backup option is a standard lens with a close-up lens attachment. A standard lens can normally be used for pots that are 12-15 inches in their major dimension. For shooting smaller pots you can buy a series of 3 close-up lenses of various strengths for about \$50. You will not, however, get as good a depth of field with a close-up lens and you will likely be disappointed with the results.

Just a word about the brand of lens (and the matching camera body). Most professionals will have invested a lot of money in the top brands of equipment. This is one place we can't match them and still stay within the \$500 goal I have set. We can come close by buying good used equipment and by buying only the features we need. I think it is also fair to say that the differences between mid-quality and top-quality equipment are most pronounced when you are stretching that equipment to its limits, e.g. using the lens wide open or operating at the fastest shutter speeds. I have specifically picked equipment and will specify a setup of that equipment in part 2 that will not require operation at the limits, but will be in the mid-range of the equipment's capability. Under these conditions there will be very little difference in the results produced by, say, a Konica camera which I use and a Nikon which a professional might use. So, let's budget \$125 for a camera body and \$150 for a used macro lens and move on to the other equipment we need.

### **A Background**

I use a graduated Varitone background I bought from Porter's. They have one that is 42" wide by 62" long for \$50. A smaller size is also available and works for pots up to about 12 inches tall. There are several color options; although I think white to black is the most versatile. If you prefer a solid color background they also have those in various colors. With proper care your background will last for years so invest in a good one. To decide whether you want a graduated or a solid color background, look at lots of photos of pots and decide which you think will show your pot off to best advantage.

### **A Tripod**

Get a decent tripod. Plan on spending about \$50-100. You can buy them for less, but you will probably regret it. The better ones adjust more easily and are sturdier, and you will be adjusting it a lot. Again, buy a used one if you can find one. The weekend photographic equipment shows and ebay are great places to look. If you are flush with money you can spend close to \$300 for a full-featured, name brand tripod; however this is more than is needed for our purposes.

### **An Electronic Flash**

You will need a single studio electronic flash unit which you will mount in the soft box we'll describe a little further on. Although you can use a photo flood light, I have elected to go with electronic flash. I

think it is simpler and easier, but that could probably be debated until the end of time by advocates of both type of lighting system. The simplest kind of studio electronic flash screws into a standard AC light socket. I bought a Deluxe Slave/Master AC Flash S-45M from Porter's for \$36. It includes the synch cord to hook it to your camera. If you can afford a little more, buy one with a modeling light like the S-100M unit sold by Porter's. In any case, you need a unit with about 45-200 watt-seconds of power. A light with higher power will allow you to use slower speed film for finer grain as described in part 2. As rough guidance, however, a 45 watt-second flash will require use of approximately ISO 200 film while a 200 watt-second flash would allow use of either ISO 25 or 64 film. I added a socket with a swivel bracket for easy adjustment and a light stand for another \$70; however you can improvise these things if you can do minor carpentry work and your significant other will let you hang things from your ceiling (see the setup section that follows in the second part of this article).

Overall, you shouldn't spend more than \$150 for your electronic flash needs and you can do it for less than \$50 with some improvising. Some things NOT to buy are a flash meter or some other mysterious things called "barn doors", "snoots" or "umbrellas". All of the kind of equipment discussed in this section is sold to studio photographers and will not be available in your local camera store unless you live in a big city that has a store that caters to commercial photographers. Porter's is an excellent source.

### An Inexpensive Soft Box

Soft boxes are used to soften and spread the light and help assure elimination or minimization of hot

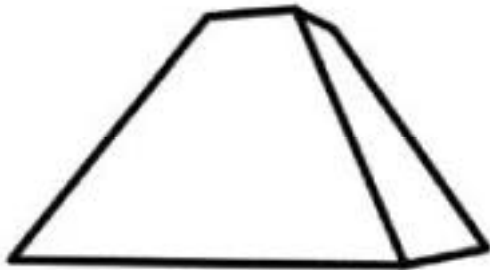


Figure 2. *An inexpensive soft box can be made from foam core board, translucent plastic and duct tape in the illustrated shape.*

spots on your photographs. They can be purchased for \$60-100; however one that will serve our needs can be made from foam core board and duct tape for less than \$15. Get a piece of foam core board that is 30" x 40" and cut 4 trapezoids that are 20" on one base, 6" on the other base and 15" tall. Tape them together with duct tape to form a truncated pyramid as shown in Figure 2. The bottom of this pyramid needs to be covered with white translucent plastic. I used plastic that is sold in quilting stores for cutting quilting stencils; however there are certainly other sources. The important thing is that it is white—not cream or yellow— or the color balance on your photographs may be significantly affected. Porters also sells a material called Trans-Lum which will serve the purpose; however the

smallest roll they sell is 54" x 72" for \$20. Tape the translucent plastic to the bottom of your pyramid and you are almost done. The only thing remaining is to mount your electronic flash in the soft box so the flash head is pointing toward the translucent plastic. My suggestion is to improvise with duct tape and small strips of wood, if needed.

### Summary

Well that's it for equipment. I will assume you can find a table on which to work.. To summarize we should have been able to assemble this equipment for:

Used manual SLR camera body	\$125
Used Macro Len	150
Graduated background	50
Tripod	50-100
Electronic Flash	50-150
Soft Box	15
Total	\$440-590

I would bet most potters will be creative enough to assemble this equipment for less than \$400 with some help from a friend or family member's closet and a little time spent at a used photographic equipment show or bidding on equipment on ebay. In fact, before you buy even this modest amount of equipment, I would recommend borrowing as much of it as you can and do some testing to see if you can get results that will satisfy you. You can also experiment with improvising before you buy. For example, if you have an electronic flash that is intended to be used on your camera's hot shoe, buy an extension cord and mount it in your soft box instead of buying a studio flash. If it works, fine. If you're not happy with the results then go ahead and buy a studio flash. In Part 2 of this article, we'll focus on using this equipment including selection of film and a processor.

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