

PHOTOGRAPHING PAPERWEIGHTS

by Alan Thornton

There are many reasons for wanting to photograph paperweights. Perhaps to record your collection; or to share a new find with friends; maybe to ask for advice on identification; or put an advert on an auction site.

Anyone who has photographed paperweights will have discovered that it is not easy to produce a good representative image. The very nature of the polished, lens-like surface of the paperweight leads to reflections of the surroundings and any lights used for illumination, and that tends to obscure the design. Also the glass of the paperweight can distort the appearance of the design when it is viewed at an angle. Furthermore, some paperweights seem to present a greater challenge than others - for example those with a dark ground colour.

So, what must you do to get a picture like that of the Baccarat closepack shown in Figure 1 ?

The good news is that it is not necessarily an expensive process, although it is much easier with a digital camera than a conventional film camera. The bad news is that you may have to take a little time to determine what works best for you.

This article is not for experts - it covers some basic ideas for typical collectors with typical cameras. But regardless of your camera, there are certain key things to get right, and you should be able to determine what is causing your problems by careful examination of your images. Figures 6 to 11 show a poor image, and how to get better results.

First, you need to get rid of the reflections, any strong shadows, or uneven lighting. That is best achieved by putting the paperweight inside a translucent, featureless box, which has a small hole through which the picture can be taken. You can buy ready made boxes, or - as I and many others do - make a box from a translucent plastic container.



Figure 2 A translucent light box made from a 5 litre plastic container, and a small plastic stand.



Figure 1 A good quality image of an antique Baccarat closepack.

I have used an old 5 litre white spirit container; but now use a waste paper basket! I also use a small stand to raise the paperweight a little into the air and allow some light to reach the underside - this can be an advantage for clear or translucent paperweights. The small stand shown in Figure 2 originally held a Christmas chocolate - from Thorntons, naturally! I know some collectors place a mirror beneath the weight for the same purpose.



Figure 3 A translucent light box made from a waste bin, and garden fleece to soften the edge reflection.

This set-up works for top-down images, and also profile images if the paperweight is set on edge on some form of stand. To take angled images I use a translucent plastic crate (Figures 4 and 5), and usually set the paperweight on a graded grey background which I print onto glossy photopaper.



Figures 4 and 5

The set-up I use for angled images, with a graded grey background. The garden fleece can be drawn forwards to help stop reflections of objects in front of the set-up.



Figure 6 A poor quality, dull image showing reflections.



Figure 7 Original image taken in translucent box.

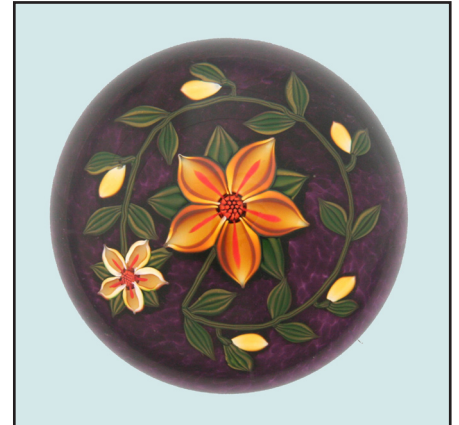


Figure 8 Levels adjusted - blue colour cast obvious.

Second, you need the paperweight to be well lit, preferably with natural light. That is not so easy when the paperweight is inside a box. However, a sufficiently translucent plastic box should allow enough light through in bright conditions to let you take your pictures. The crucial thing is that it should be opaque enough to stop reflections of objects around, but transparent enough for good illumination. The box itself will be reflected in the paperweight, so it should be featureless on the inside!

Even then you may find that you only get your best results on bright but overcast days - bright sunshine can throw sharp shadows. If the light is poor, you are likely to suffer from camera shake unless you use a stand. Also, if you do not have enough light you will get a 'grainy' image with poor resolution of detail. If you have to use an artificial light, that can be hard to position so that reflections do not ruin the image: trial and error is the only way. It is not uncommon to see reflections of lights in 'professional quality' images.

Third, you must remember the limitations of your camera. Tempting as it is to get very close to the paperweight, there is a minimum distance at which you will be able to get a properly focussed image. Just what that distance is depends upon your camera and lens, but may be as

much as 1 foot. Any closer than your minimum, and the image will be blurred.

There is also the issue of 'depth of field' - not all of the paperweight may be in focus at the same time when your camera is at the closest position, so you may need to move a little further away to get a better image! This depends upon the camera, its lens, and how bright the object is, so again you may need a little trial and error - but that is easy with a digital camera.

Fourth, when using a digital camera, make use of image processing software. Most computers and most cameras are sold with some relevant software, which will help you rectify certain problems and improve the image. One of the best pieces of software is Adobe Photoshop, which can be expensive in certain versions, but it is not necessary to have professional quality software to make significant improvements to your images.

Here are some of the more important properties of the image that you may want to adjust, and which most software packages can offer. Remember, work on a copy of your original image, and you can tweak and twiddle to your heart's content, see what happens - and then reject the results if you don't like them.



Figure 9 Colour balanced and image sharpened.



Figure 10 Cream background.



Figure 11 Graded grey background.

To illustrate the points I have shown images of a Perthshire paperweight which has a dark translucent purple ground - it is not easy to photograph, as the ground can appear black unless some light is allowed to come from underneath by placing it on a clear support.

Figure 6 shows the paperweight photographed on a white window sill with no effort to avoid reflections. A poor quality image, of a type not uncommon on eBay!

Figure 7 is the basic image I obtained by photographing the weight in a translucent box on a bright day. No reflections, but poor contrast: the white background appears grey.

The brightness and contrast, which is often too low on the unprocessed image, is the first thing I adjusted. Are the 'whites' in the image truly white - and are the darkest parts 'black'? Sometimes this adjustment can be called 'levels' and offer more flexibility of adjustment, allowing you to set 'grey' tones as well as the black and white limits. The result is seen in Figure 8, which whilst brighter and more lifelike, has a distinct blue tinge. This tinge is a function of the source of the illumination, and of the sensor in the digital camera.

The colour balance. Often the lighting can make the image appear too blue (natural light) or too yellow (artificial light), but any apparent colour cast is affected too by your computer screen and by the settings of your printer - you may need a different colour balance for an authentic appearance on your screen, and on your prints - and there is a degree of personal preference in this aspect.

Sharpness. This is a complicated matter technically, but fortunately it is not necessary to understand the theory! Sharpness concerns the brightness change at edges of features in the image, and most software lets you adjust the 'sharpness'. This affects the crispness of the image, and you may well want to increase the sharpness to make your images appear more lifelike. But don't overdo it - you can make images look artificially sharp. Figure 9 shows the image after I have adjusted the colour balance and sharpened it slightly.

There is no 'correct' setting for any of these aspects. You need to experiment, and to remember that the optimum adjustments may vary from image to image. That is one good thing about digital images - you can play around with a copy as much as you like, and still have the original available if you want to start again!

Software also allows you to crop the picture, so you concentrate on the part you want. And you can replace the background with something that is more appropriate. The finished images in this article have had the slightly uneven grey background replaced with others.

Figures 10 and 11 show 'final' versions of the photograph. I have copied the image of the paperweight alone and placed it on a background - plain cream in Figure 10, or graded grey in Figure 11.

Alan Thornton

January 2020