Photographing Flow Blue

About a year ago, I took a photograph of an Oregon mug I have in my collection for Betty Reed. She asked me how I took my photos because she liked the end product. I told her my set-up isn't special, and it isn't. Recently she asked me to write an article for the FBICC web site to describe how I take my photos. I'm not a professional photographer, but I have taken some photos during my career as a Graphic Designer and watercolor artist. I will give a quick review of how I shoot photos.

I think the most important thing about taking photos of Flow Blue or cut glass (another item I collect which has photography challenges all its own) is control of the light source. Normally I use three lights, but one of my lights recently went to heaven after a long life. I haven't replaced it yet. I use Ott lamps which mimic natural daylight. A person could probably also shoot photos in a large bay window, sunroom, using whatever light source you choose as long as you can control it. Controlling it means having control over excessive glare, strong shadows, and obtaining an overall even light source. If using a bay window or natural lighting, white board can be used to reflect light into a three-sided "photo box" to give you more even lighting, natural lighting, often a white board can be used to reflect light into a three-sided "photo box" to give you more even lighting.

"Faked for this article" three light set-up to illustrate how I would set that up. I would position myself either in front of, or beside the middle lamp to avoid the post to take the photo.

My "photo box" consists of three pieces of foam board. I tape the back corner edges with packing tape in a couple of places to hold them together. My set-up is always temporary and this is quick and easy. A person could also use cardboard and tape some white paper to the cardboard instead of purchasing foam board. The goal is to have a white surface that reflects light. I usually have foam board and that is why I use that. For this photo shoot, I purchased a roll of white freezer paper since natural lighting, often a white board can be used to reflect light into a three-sided "photo box" to give you more even lighting. It would be available at most local grocery stores if you decide to try your hand at photography. Instead of freezer paper, I have also used white fabric, ironed, so that there aren't distracting wrinkles in the

photo, as well as 11x17 white copier paper for small items. White poster board would probably work too. The poster board would probably allow a nice bend in it if it is a lightweight ply. In this set-up I folded the freezer paper in half, so it would be opaque, and taped it to the top part of the foam board, then made a nice gradual curve to the table top, where it was taped again. You'll notice in the cropped, final image (top far right), that the background is seamless due to this curve. You want the focus to be on the item being photographed and not the background. Of course, it's more a matter of aesthetics than anything. A seam really wouldn't be the end of all time.

In my controlled situation the lights are pointed towards the outer walls of the photo box, to reflect light back towards the item to be photographed as seen in the top left image. At this point it is a matter of adjusting the lights to lessen any shadow areas or lessen excessive glare on your Flow Blue. The goal is to obtain an evenly lit environment. Nothing is ever perfect though. Notice the rather strong shadow in the pictured Oregon mug. The light adjustment will vary from piece to piece because Flow Blue forms have different shapes and will thus reflect light differently.

I always take photos without flash. After your careful lighting adjustments, you maintain your "look" without a flash shot. The camera I use is a digital Canon 35mm. I think a cell phone camera will work just a well if you aren't going to enlarge your photos much. I was very impressed with my cell phone images until I took its images into Photoshop and saw the quality difference between my two cameras.

I have included a cell phone flash shot of what not to do. The world won't end if you shoot photos with background items showing, but simplicity is best. Often people don't isolate an item when they take a photo and background clutter is distracting. This Scott's Bar Tureen was taken inside my kitchen cabinet.

A very distracting glass is apparent and a screw also shows on the cabinet shelf. Obviously the isolated tureen shot in the right image is the better shot. Obviously I need to declutter my cabinet too!

After taking photos, I then use Photoshop CS5 to adjust my raw photos. Betty asked me to go into further detail regarding those adjustments in a separate article for the web site which will be forth coming.

In my opinion the most important things to remember when you are taking pictures:

- Show only what you are taking a photo of
- Use a nice curved background so you don't have background lines in your photo
- Control your light source
- Adjust your photo so that you have a lighter image which will print properly without printing too dark

Taking photos just requires some practice and trial and error. I'm sure you will be successful. Good luck with your photography!