

How to photograph silver – an amateur's guide

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I am now recommending using a macro lens (confusingly Nikon call this a micro lens) which enables better focus on smaller objects taken close-up. These are quite expensive but I have found the Nikon compatible Sigma DG Macro HSM to be very good value.

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When I first started out as a dealer in antique silver, without doubt the hardest aspect of my new career was photography. I tried using professional photographers but they were expensive, involved frustrating delays and ultimately took photos that I was not very happy with.

It turns out photographing silver is just about the hardest thing to do in the world of photography. It requires a specialist professional photographer – not easy to find. It is not just the myriad of reflections you have to deal with, but getting silver to look like clean shiny silver in a photograph is in fact very tricky.

Over the past five years I have crawled up, as well as down, the learning curve. I have reached the point where I am finally satisfied with most of my photographs. By popular demand, and with the time and boredom created by “lock-down”, I thought I would share my experience with you.

This write up is full of links so that you can see what I mean by clicking on the highlighted blue areas. There is a photo of my set up at the end of this article.

I am still learning, and if anyone would like to offer improvements to this approach, do please let me know.

Equipment needed

1. You need a decent camera which can take close-ups and has the fitting to allow remote flash photography. Any [Digital SLR](#) will do. I use an oldish Nikon D800. I have now found that a Macro lens is better than a traditional Zoom lens, allowing very good close up detail, albeit that you lose zoom capability with a fixed Macro lens. This means you must manually position yourself and the object at the correct distance to fill the photo (though of course editing also sorts this out).
2. You need [remote strobe flash lighting](#). Two lights are more than sufficient, I normally only bother with one.
3. You need a [tent](#). Depending on the size of pieces of silver you are photographing I find something c 60cm square sufficient. Do not get the ones with built in lighting – that won't be sufficient for silver photography.
4. Make sure your camera has the right connector (or blue tooth) to connect to the lighting you buy which should come with a long cord to fit to your camera.

Equipment optional

1. You probably don't need [lighting stands](#). I find they are cumbersome and take up a lot of space for no great benefit. I just prop my lights against an open draw or wall
2. A [tripod](#) is useful but personally I find my hand is steady enough and the shutter speed fast enough, that the tripod makes little difference to the final photograph. Just another piece of clutter / expense.
3. Depending on the tent you have, you probably want to find some extra black sheeting so that you can vary the colour inside the tent and white sheeting so that you can cover the open side of the tent (make a hole in the sheet/material for the camera lens).
4. There are any number of lens filters I have been told will help my photography of silver. I have found most are detrimental, and none helpful.

Camera setting (speed and aperture)

1. You should probably have the camera set to auto not flash – don't ask me why but the flash setting on my Nikon at least makes it harder to get a good photo.
2. The Auto mode you need should use a [shutter speed](#) of about 200 (1/200th second exposure – any faster than that and I capture an image of the actual shutter - I suspect a modern camera could go even faster) and an [aperture](#) of c F22. F22 is a very small aperture (1/22 – that is smaller than, say, F4 which is a 1/4). This is as fast as I can get with a flash and the smallest aperture. This will minimise the effects of any shake in the camera and ensure a good focal range. [ISO](#) is the other variable. I use 4000 (which means the lens is very sensitive/detailed) but in all honesty it seems to make no difference what I use – unlike the speed/aperture settings which make a huge difference.

White balance

1. What is [white balance](#) I hear you say? It only took me three years to figure this out. It turns out it is the most important aspect of taking a good photo of silver. For reasons unclear to me, cameras don't automatically know what colours/white look like –so white may be a bit grey, a bit blue, a bit yellow/sepia (if you like your porcelain you will know there are many different types of white). Start with auto white balance and see what happens but it may be you have to mess with this function to get good shiny silver photos. I have to shift my Nikon so it reads white as blue white (as opposed to pinky or yellow sepia white), which in turns means it sees silver as shiny, not grey or white etc.
2. The other aspect of white balance is to make sure that, in the actual photo you are taking, the camera has enough comparative colours to know what colour silver is. If you take a photo of silver on white, the camera may not figure out what is white, what is grey and what is silvery – and you will end up with a very flat grey toned image. So you need to introduce some black into the photo. Often a little in frame that also reflects off the silver is best. Don't worry about whether the background is

consistent – often a bit of black and white in the background is key. I describe below how to cut out the image onto a digital background.

The set up

1. So place your silver object in the tent, place some black around it, and connect up your lighting. Use auto focus. Point and shoot. Easy.
2. In fact you are going to want to play around with a number of factors. The lighting should be just over exposed and diffuse in my experience. So I use a thin white cloth I lay over the lighting to varying thicknesses to get that right. If you over expose slightly, then when you photoshop (see below) you can typically get a really good effect. Don't underexpose.
3. The direction of your lighting matters. Bouncing the flash off the ceiling, so your flash should be pointing up, tends to work best. But if you are shooting a circular or vertical flat surface (teapots or boxes etc), the light bounces off the silver away from the camera lens, so you may need to more directly point lighting at the face of the object.
4. Look out for any unwanted reflections off the piece. If you are using a tent, that is open to one side, normally the camera and yourself are the problem. Hence shoot through a sheet with a slit. Or angle the piece and yourself to avoid reflection.
5. Vary the position of camera so you are showing the piece at the best angle – often a lower view is better than higher.
6. Sometimes auto-focus won't be able to focus on silver so use manual focus or focus onto an area of decoration or edge so that the camera can "see" the silver.
7. Sometimes it helps to sit the object on a clear stand.

Photoshopping

1. The best advice I ever got was from a photographer who told me my photos were fine but my [photoshopping](#) was poor.
2. Photoshopping is vital to get the realistic effect of shiny silver you are after – it's not about creating a deceptive photo
3. Adobe is considered the best and you will need a subscription to access the necessary functionality.
4. Most photos require no more than a [gentle tug on the Adobe curve](#) (a clever device that works contrast, brightness, exposure etc together harmoniously). This should bring the shine to your silver photo.
5. I only understand about 0.1 per cent of what Adobe Photoshop offers but it seems to be enough.

Background

1. Your photo should now look very good but it may well be that the background is a mess and/or not the colour you are after.
2. Hence I recommend you use [Clipping Magic](#) (it is partly free, but you may need to subscribe depending on usage).

3. Clipping Magic is an idiot proof way of cutting out photos onto any background. Simply upload to it and its own programme will probably get you a cut out that is c 90 per cent accurate straight away
4. You will need to mess around with Clipping Magic's manual functions a little too perfect your cut out.
5. Adobe Photoshop has the same facility which I am assured is in fact far better – except for the small detail that I find it impossible to use.
6. If you want your silver to look modern/exciting a dark background is normally best.

Comparative photos

Photo with poor white balance. No black to allow camera to distinguish silver from white/grey



Photo with good white balance. Black reflected from two sides. But background not cut out so creases visible



Photo with good white balance now cut out onto grey digital background



Set up

