

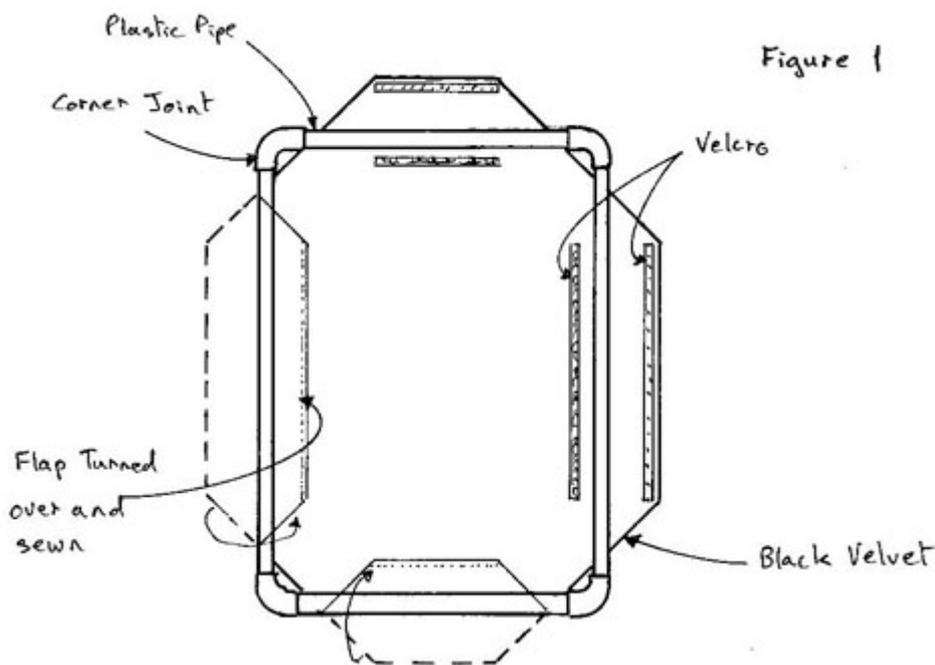


Making a Background

To make a frame for a portable background it is possible to use plastic piping or conduit tube obtainable from DIY stores like Wicks, Homebase or B & Q.

Cut two short lengths of pipe and two longer lengths. It is convenient to have these in the ratio of two to three (full-frame 35mm format). These should then be joined with four corner joints to form a rectangle.

The background material (I use black velvet as it absorbs nearly all of the light falling on it.) should then be cut larger than the rectangle frame and the corners cut off as shown in figure 1.



One long side and one short side should then be folded over and sewn so that the plastic pipe passes comfortably through the ensuing sleeves. The other two sides should have Velcro sewn as shown. This allows the material to be stretched in both directions when the background is assembled.

The whole assembly can be taken apart and stored in an artist's tube which may be obtained from an art shop such as Berkhamsted Arts and Crafts. This keeps the material clean and, if it is rolled around the plastic pipes, reasonably free from creases.

This background can be used outside "in the field" but I shall describe how to take flower portraits inside using "window light".

Making The Portrait

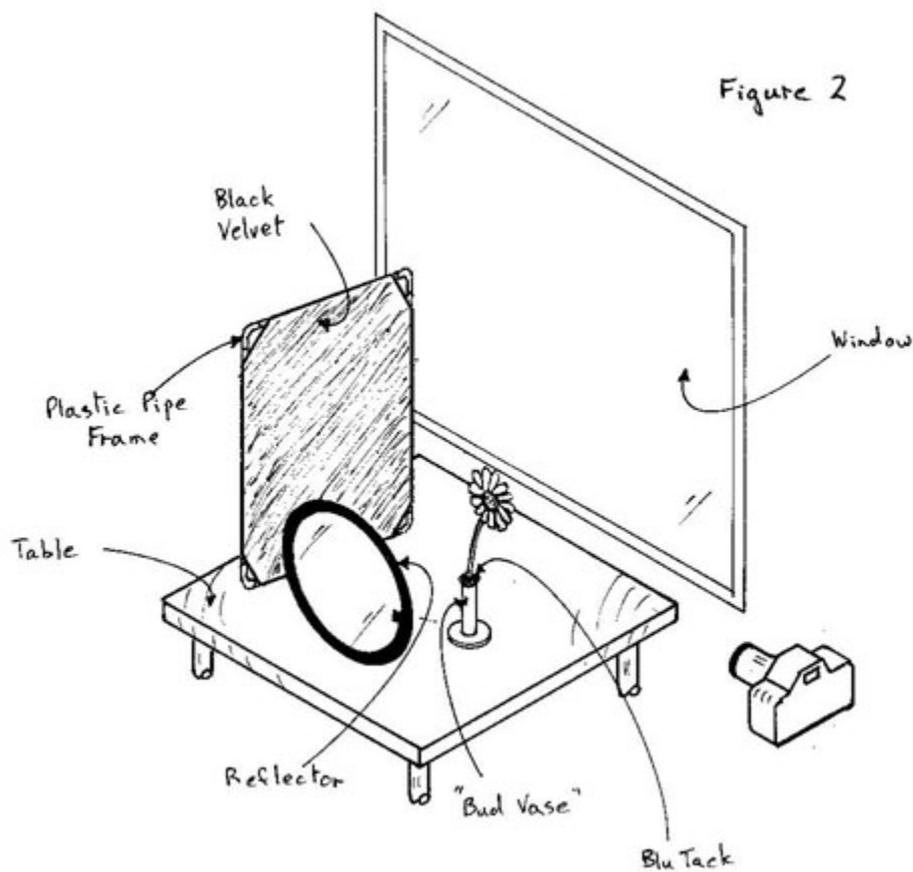


Figure 2

A table is placed near a window which preferably faces North as this means that direct sunlight does not enter the window. If the window faces South then, if it is sunny, the light must be diffused. This can be done with tracing paper or thin white material. Net curtains, which are sometimes mentioned in books and magazine articles, do not work as they produce patterns of the net with bright sunlight. You can, of course wait until the sky is overcast!

The background is placed at an angle of slightly greater than a right angle to the window so that it is shaded. This improves the “blackness” of the velvet.

The flower is supported some distance in front of the background. The support can be a narrow bud vase as shown in figure 2. To keep the flower still, Blu Tack can be placed in the top of the bud vase. A convenient, if somewhat expensive, method of support is a Wimberley “Plamp” which can be obtained from Warehouse Express.

To fill in light on to the flower from the opposite side to the window a reflector is required. The best of these is the 30cm Lastolite Sunfire/White or Sunfire/Silver collapsible reflector which costs a little over £10 from Speedgraphic. The Sunfire side gives a slightly warmer fill. If this is too expensive, an effective reflector can be made using stiff card covered with cooking foil. Either use a piece of foil larger than the card, scrunch it up, then flatten it out before gluing to the card; or use the non-shiny side of the “unscrunchd” foil.

The best way to assess the correct exposure is to use a hand-held exposure meter. Take an “incident” reading by placing the meter near the flower and pointing it toward the window. Another incident reading pointing towards the camera should enable you to judge the balance of the lighting. The difference between the two readings should not be more than about one stop.

If a hand-held meter is not available, use the in-camera meter to take a spot reading from an area of mid-tone

on the flower – a green part is usually satisfactory.

Whichever assessment is used, it is advisable to bracket your exposures to ensure a good result.

To obtain the maximum depth of field you should select the smallest aperture setting on the lens you are using. Remember, you get greater depth of field with a shorter focal length lens but the downside is that wideangle lenses are likely to give distortion and require a much larger background! For close-up work you need a macro lens (expensive) extension tubes (less expensive) or supplementary lenses or lens reversing rings (the least expensive). The latter of these work best at small apertures – but you want this for greater depth of field anyway!

If a coloured background is required, you can either make a coloured velvet panel or stand a piece of coloured card in front of the black background. The best way to obtain a white background is to use a good quality lightbox but this can be very expensive if a large area is needed. Another way is to tape a piece of A3 tracing paper to the window surrounded by black paper or card. The flower is placed in front of this and the reflector is used to bounce light from the window back on to the flower. The lightbox or tracing paper panel should be over-exposed by at least two stops to ensure that it appears white in the image. A spot reading from the flower and from the background should show a difference of at least two stops. The exposure should be taken from the flower reading.

(Tracing paper and coloured card may be obtained from art shops. Avoid card with textured surfaces.)

Postscript

Following my talk on "Flower Portraits Using Natural Light" on Monday 15th March 2010, I had a sort of Blue Peter moment! Only instead of taking one "earlier", I took one on the day following the talk. This was taken using Fuji Astia 120 film in a Bronica ETRSi camera fitted with a 105mm macro lens. I had the film processed by Peak Imaging and got them to prepare an image by scanning the film on to a CD so that it could be viewed online!



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