

Photographers have always cherished, drooled over, dreamed of, the north-facing natural-light studio with its beautiful soft wrap-around window-light. But we are into the 21st century with lots of available electricity to power artificial lighting, so why are we still so stuck on this idea of north-light? Is it really viable for a busy working studio? I don't think so. I believe that it is, in most cases, a romantic idea; it plays on our yearning for nature and all that is natural and it plays on our weakness of something for nothing. But for a busy portrait or fashion/glamour studio it is just not practical. It certainly was practical in the 17th century for studio portrait painters such as Rembrandt and Vermeer who were born a few centuries too early to take advantage of artificial lighting. During daylight hours it gave them fairly consistent light compared to light from the south since direct sunlight was always blocked by the walls and roof of their north facing studios – the north sky always provides a large light source, regardless of weather, so is ideal for creating soft-lit portraits. Now that I've possibly pissed you off for slugging north-light, take a look at Image 001 and Image 002, both are natural light north-lit images... or are they? Look closely... can you tell? One is window-lit with the north sky and the other is a mono-block strobe fired through a relatively large panel placed close to the subject in a windowless studio. If you don't believe me then look at lighting diagrams 003B and 003D then look at Image 003A of model, Sadie May, before I 'dropped-in' the art gallery background behind her).

My argument against north-light, which by the way I'm not really against, is that for a busy working studio it is somewhat limiting: limiting your choice of real estate, limiting usable angles you can shoot from, limiting time of day you can shoot because once the sun drops below the horizon you are done, limiting because brightness can change due to weather conditions, and limiting because you are stuck to a specific part of your studio space to be your shooting area. On the upside you don't have to buy any lighting equipment, set up time is greatly reduced, you have no strobe recycle time, and you can 'paint' yourself as a modern day Vermeer. So what is it about north-light that is so appealing? If you can figure that out then maybe you can recreate those attributes artificially. As far as I can figure, what we love about north-light studio lighting is its soft wrap-around-light quality. Soft wrap-around-light can only come from a relatively large and relatively close light sources. The sky, which compared to us is very large, may seem fairly far from our subjects we are trying to light, but on the large scale that it is on, it is not far away at all. A decent sized window can provide a relatively large orifice through a building's wall to the ginormous north sky – it's really the sky that is the source of illumination, not the window, the window merely opens the wall revealing a portion of the sky to the subject rather than the whole sky and bear in mind that a large north facing window will quickly become a small source if you back your subject too far away from it. In terms of shaping the light, the window's dimensions give the sky a defined shape making it a rectangle, square, or circle. Despite this shaping which should make the light very similar to the light we get from typical lighting modifiers like soft-boxes, the catch lights in a subject's eyes from window-light appears different from typical studio portrait or fashion/glamour lighting since the window sees through to things like trees, buildings, cars, etc, rather than a single solid tone of sky. The resulting catch lights are a reflection of the outdoors and show all the objects

in view outside. You can mimic this by adding shadows to the diffusion material of your lighting modifier or by blocking portions of it with gobos.

In the case of the image of Sadie in Image 001, gobos could have been added between the strobe and the backside of the panel, the gobos would block some light from parts of the panel's diffusion material which would make the rectangular catch lights uneven and broken up, they would be indiscernible from a catch light created by a window. As it was I didn't bother with this since the light disbursement over the panel's diffusion material was uneven which created a 'simply grand' gradation from light-grey to white in Sadie's catch lights. An interesting fact is that the light quality is softer on Sadie in Image 001 than on model, Vendella, in Image 002, even though the 1.8m by 1.2m panel is way way smaller than the north-sky. It's a matter of distance and what gets in the way – the panel is less than a metre from Sadie with nothing blocking it, whereas the sky showing through the window is partially blocked from Vendella by dark buildings and trees thus reducing its apparent size.

I think north-lit portraits can be beautiful and make sense for one who dabbles in portraiture, but going to the expense of creating a north-light studio unless your space already has a good north facing window with space around it, seems unnecessary considering the limitations and that artificial lighting gives you much more control and variety. But for the photographer who does location shooting with minimal gear, or has a north facing window in their home, it is wonderful and it is free!

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At the Societies' Convention this coming January, I will be going deep into lighting and facial retouching with my two programmes, so watch for it, it's going to be a TrippingTheLightFantastic time!!!

Let me tell you a secret! I'm not really a photographer... I'm more of a light sculptor – I bend the light to my will, to my vision using lots of cool geeky lighting equipment then immortalize my creation with my camera. I lecture internationally on lighting, digital photography, and Adobe Photoshop. Check out my Lighting and Photoshop tutorial DVDs for www.software-cinema.com and www.photoshopcafe.com. I'm available for lectures and workshops in your area and can be reached through www.montizambert.com.

Want to learn more cool lighting stuff?

Follow my webpage blog and social media:
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