



ANNABEL WILLIAMS

**LEARN FROM THE EXPERTS**

# Portraiture

## The Amateur Photographer Masterclass with **Annabel Williams**

**Annabel Williams** takes two readers out onto the streets of London to show them how to use the urban environment to achieve successful portrait shots. **Tom Doyle** reports

**EVERYBODY** is a portrait photographer. Whether you're staring at the screen of a smartphone while your friends pose on a night out, or you're snapping intimate portraits of stars for a cover shoot, the aim is to capture your subject in a way that reveals something of their personality.

The trouble is that most people are naturally guarded. Profile pictures on social-media sites show that people are very careful about how they want to be portrayed, and will fight to retain control

of their public perception. Portraiture is therefore perhaps the most common, yet most elusive, genre of photography. Everybody does it, but few do it well.

It's handy, then, that we have Annabel Williams to show us how to get things done with this *Masterclass*. AP readers Sue Kennedy and Helen Schryver have been given the chance to work with Annabel, who will be explaining how to tease those top portrait shots from reluctant faces.

The location is an overcast London Bridge.

The sun is fighting a losing battle with the clouds, making the elements a challenge. However, Annabel remains positive.

'Shooting in the right light is fundamental,' she says. 'We'll get a lovely soft light today, but we are also likely to get wet. Such is the life of a photographer. Protection for your camera is vital, so make sure you have some kind of cover for your kit. This is particularly important as we enter the colder months.'

It's immediately clear that Annabel is confident and personable, and it isn't hard to see why her shots seem so natural. Perhaps the most important piece of wisdom that she offers our attendees is that preparation is the key to a successful portrait shoot. 'You should have 90% of the work done before the shutter is pressed,' she explains.





Your AP Master...  
**Annabel Williams**



Annabel Williams is one of the world's leading portrait photographers. She is passionate about working in a very simple way with natural light and has forged a successful career as a photographer and tutor. Combining previously acquired skills as a special-needs teacher has allowed Annabel to understand the psychology of people and utilise those skills to get the best possible images of them. She is based in the UK and the USA. For more details, visit [www.annabelwilliams.com](http://www.annabelwilliams.com).

The AP readers...  
**Sue Kennedy**



Sue uses a Canon EOS 5D Mark III. She shoots portraits, but her passion is landscape photography. 'It was nice having a creative day to enjoy myself,' she says. 'It was great to pick Annabel's brain and adjust my work according to her advice. I'm going to take away plenty of tips and tricks.'



**Helen Schryver**

Helen uses a Canon EOS 7D and enjoys portrait photography. 'It was so much fun, useful and incredibly informative,' she says. 'Working with Annabel has had an immediate impact on my photography as she encouraged us to experiment with different ideas and techniques.'



OLIVER AWELL

# PREPARATION

**ANNABEL** arrived in London the day before the shoot and spent time looking around for good locations. Although she identified a few intriguing areas, she stresses that it's important to keep an open mind when searching for a prime location.

'It's good to have a vague idea and a bit of a plan before you get going, but I usually veer off that route,' says Annabel. 'So while I'll have a definite idea of where I want to shoot, I'll still be on the lookout for other locations as I'm wandering around. It's important not to be blinkered, and to keep your mind and eyes open to fresh ideas. You never know what you'll come across.'

While other photographers may spend days tweaking their camera's settings before a particular shoot, Annabel's style is unashamedly less technical. She deliberately sets up her camera so that it is a 'point-and-click' affair, ensuring she can spend more time concentrating on the model.

'If I want to capture something quickly, I need to be

able to pick up my camera and take the shot – I don't want to be struggling with settings and miss it,' she says. 'I've set the aperture to f/5.6, and I'll use the zoom to pick up whatever I need at a particular moment.'

One of her obvious, but handy tips is to fit your camera with a screw-in protective skylight filter. They may be expensive, but your camera and lenses are more so, and if you're carrying it around all day it may get damaged.

With a busy location such as London Bridge on a weekday morning, it's only natural that subjects will be more nervous as inquisitive eyes pass by every few seconds. Therefore, preparation is crucial. Despite the plethora of people milling about, secluded areas mean that models will be more relaxed, confident and ultimately produce better pictures – which is good for them and good for the photographer.

By establishing a relationship with her subjects, and picking out good clothing combinations and suitable locations, Annabel ensures the maximum shooting time and the minimum of fuss, thus creating a more relaxed atmosphere for everyone involved. 'Once your background is sorted, the pictures are almost done – they just need to be shot,' she says.

# WORKING WITH MODELS

**WHO YOU**

are shooting is fundamental to how they are shot. The two models today are Soroush Pourhashemi (pictured) and Gus Neto, and Annabel stresses that location and lightning are the keys to considering your subject and how they will react to the demands.

Annabel's theory is that a portrait shoot is a two-way street. 'Models think they have to be perfect for you, but that's just not the case,' she says.

'You, the photographer, have to be a person first. When a relationship has been established, the shots will flow.'

In terms of lighting, Annabel suggests that you should be aware of harsh sunlight, particularly as the low autumnal sun begins to draw in sooner: 'Most people's faces can't take harsh sunlight,' she says. 'But due to Soroush's fine bone structure, the "real strength" in his face means he can be shot in harsher conditions than most.'

Both models have slender frames and strong jaw lines. Annabel advises the readers to ask their subject to aim their face down and jut their jaw slightly outwards. 'This takes years off your face – the difference is incredible,' she says.

Rather than a typical straight pose, Annabel instructs the models to give a 'tiny smile', as a full-on smile on request often looks unnatural. 'A small smile gives the picture that bit more feeling if their eyes are smiling as well,' she says.



HELEN SCHRYVER

A quick tip that works wonders is to shoot down onto people, as Annabel believes it adds to the mystique of a picture. With Soroush's intense eyes, it's easy to grab that elusive side of the subject. Of course, these kinds of eyes are always going to be easier to shoot, so it pays to be aware of who you're shooting and how they will react to your methods.

Another simple yet effective trick Annabel uses is to get her subject to

say something stupid. Soroush is forced to yell out 'bananas', but the effect is clear as his face lights up for the next shot, which Annabel captures.

'The trick to making people relax is to not be afraid to look stupid yourself as the photographer,' says Annabel. 'You can look as silly as you need to if it relaxes who you're shooting. Then you're left with a great shot.'

The first difficulty of the day comes when Soroush starts to look uncomfortable while in a topless pose, but Annabel stresses that a photographer should never be afraid to change a shot if it isn't working. 'You have to have the confidence to move instinctively,' she says. 'If it's not working, move it.'

Soroush looks visibly awkward spreading his arms behind him against a glass background, yet Annabel confidently repositions him, working with what's available in terms of the background and gets some interesting shots of him looking more comfortable, yet retaining his mysterious air.



HELEN SCHRYVER



HELEN SCHRYVER

**Above:** While it's important to have key locations in mind, you should always be on the lookout for new ideas

**Left:** A successful shoot relies on a combination of clothing, location, light and a good relationship between the photographer and subject





A strong background can make an otherwise ordinary portrait shot excellent

## IT'S BEHIND YOU

**AS WELL** as the person you're shooting and the clothes they're wearing (or, in Soroush's case, often not wearing), another aspect of a good shot is the background. Annabel picks out a few backgrounds that are ideal, including a vivid yellow security entrance that contrasts well with Soroush's green coat (see left).

While Annabel did her homework beforehand, the chance to find another location while milling around can't be passed up, and she stops on numerous occasions to sample what's on offer. While shooting with model Gus, she takes the chance to utilise some well-placed graffiti in a car park in Suffolk Street (see right). The heart shape will apparently work well above his head, but Annabel warns to be vigilant as to the content of the graffiti beforehand. 'You don't want to find a great location, take beautiful shots and then realise that all your pictures are unusable because you have swear words in the background,' she says.

Another thing to consider is where your background runs in terms of your subject. A striking building near a pub offers a strong green wall set against the dark uniformity of drainpipes. 'Make sure your subject doesn't look like they have objects growing out of their head,' Annabel warns. 'This would

be the same in any location, but in central London, a seemingly tranquil background can quickly become choked with movement and clutter.'

Then Annabel spots some great graffiti, and even though the lighting is poor, the strength of the background, combined with Gus's strong looks, allow the chance for a 'man in a scene' look.

'The shadowing of Gus's eyes doesn't matter so much because of his good looks,' says Annabel. 'Plus, the background makes the shot really quite interesting. The wall may look like junk to some, but for our purposes, it provides a rich backdrop.'



HELEN SCHIRRE

## PHONING IT IN

**WHILE** happily shooting away with a Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III, Annabel also pulls out her iPhone at each location to grab a few snaps. It seems humorous at first as she carefully places the professional camera down, only to wave a pink phone around in earnest. But she insists that with the ever-increasing technology within smartphones, there is no reason not to use them now.

'The apps on offer can give you stunning shots,' says Annabel. 'That's particularly true of Hipstamatic on the iPhone. However, you should initially shoot in the basic camera mode, and then use the image in conjunction with the apps, rather

than using the apps to record the picture.'

The colours and textures offered in apps like Hipstamatic can make for interesting alternative images, such as a striking shot of Gus sitting against a wall (see below right). His wavy hair and beard leave him looking a little like a certain religious figure stuck in the depression of modern-day urban life.

Going back to her mantra of good preparation, Annabel maintains that if you've thought about lighting and composition, good phone cameras will give you great shots. 'In order to progress you must adapt – you have to move with the times,' she says.



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Below: Smartphones have their own virtues when it comes to portraiture



## Would you like to take part?

**EVERY** month we invite three to five AP readers to join one of our four experts on a free assignment over the course of a day. The experts are **Tom Mackie** (landscapes), **Cathal McNaughton** (documentary and photo essays), **Annabel Williams** (location portraiture) and **Luke Massey** (wildlife). Our next confirmed *Masterclass* will be with Luke Massey in November. If you would like to take part, visit [www.amateurphotographer.co.uk/masterclass](http://www.amateurphotographer.co.uk/masterclass) for details of how to apply. Please remember to state which *Masterclass* you would like to attend and make sure you include your name, address, email address, daytime telephone number, some words about your work and three or four of your images.

## LIGHTING

**WITH** locations popping up all the time, Annabel tells our readers that natural light can create gorgeous pictures.

'Natural light in the urban environment can be flattering to your subject, and with conditions such as these you will be left with little work to do in post-production,' she explains.

One of Annabel's favourite methods is trying out the same location from opposite angles. Not only will your actions help you to make the distinction between lighting in the area, but it will also give confidence to your subject.

'This fulfils two purposes: it gives you a better idea of what will make a good shot, and it can also fill the person with confidence if you make a point of saying that they look better from a certain position,' she says. 'Your search for the perfect lighting with added positive reinforcement will improve your subject's confidence and produce better pictures. It shouldn't be forgotten that with a lens pointed at them, people will always feel like they are being judged – so make yourself a good judge and tell them what you think of them.'



Exploring the various angles from which to shoot will reveal the best working position

SUE KENNEDY



HELEN SCHIRRE

## GET ME SECURITY

**ON MORE** than one occasion, Annabel and the group were approached by inquisitive security guards demanding to know what they were doing, and then were told in no uncertain terms to move on. This is a particular problem in urban areas, with cameras and guards lurking around every corner, ready to pounce as you set up that shot of a lifetime. Be aware that while you may see a perfect location, you may not necessarily be able to use it, particularly if you are using the shots commercially. Companies and organisations that own land may demand a fee to shoot in that area, so be careful when setting up a shoot that costs time and money as it may be brought to a swift end.