

Take Good Photos of Your Pets

by Ann Ranlett

Our beloved pets will always hold places in our hearts, but sometimes memories aren't enough. We love to take photos of them, too – romping in the yard, chewing on a favorite toy, napping in the sun. But how many of you have really good photos of your pets, not “snapshots” but good, clear photos? High quality, detailed photos of your pet will be lasting images to cherish. If you've thought about commissioning a portrait of your pet someday, they'll come in handy. And if the unthinkable were to happen and your pet gets lost, you'll have a clear image to distribute on flyers.

The silly, spur of the moment, grab the camera shots are fun, to be sure, but consider taking a bit of time to get some quality photos of your pet – you'll be glad you did!

As a pet portrait artist, I cannot overemphasize the value of good photos. Although many of my clients will tell me they already have photos of their pets, I still prefer to take my own photos for reference whenever possible. Many pet portrait artists work from photos and we can't create a quality likeness from a snapshot where the pet is a blurry speck in the middle of the photo. If you're even contemplating commissioning a portrait, please take some good photos now – any artist you contact will be grateful! Below is an example of my process that shows why the photos are so important.



The photo

I took many photos of “Scooter” and chose this one for her portrait. I converted the original color digital photo to greyscale.

This photo is clear with excellent detail. There are no shadows hiding critical areas and the photo was taken so the dog dominates the picture.

Having a good photo, allows me to capture the pet's likeness much more accurately.



The finished portrait

I work in pen & ink/ink wash on scratchboard to capture the texture, tone & detail.

Accuracy & correct anatomical detail are very important to me; if the photos I have to use are indistinct, I won't be as satisfied with the resulting portrait and neither will my client.

Whether you're using a digital or film camera, a "point & shoot" or professional camera, you CAN get a good photo if use the following guidelines.

- Find a spot without a lot of background clutter – you don't want to see a fence post or flower pot sticking out from behind your pet's head.
- Get down at the pet's level. Taking a photo from above the pet results in too much distortion and an unnatural pose.
- Have a helper if possible – someone who can hold a treat or toy to get the pet's attention. The helper should stand behind or to the side of you and make sure their shadow isn't falling on the pet.
- Get detail of the pet's face – this means get close! The pet should be as large as possible in the photo. Be careful not to get too close, however, or the perspective will be distorted (i.e. big nose, tiny ears). I like to use a zoom lens, so I can be a bit farther away from the pet.
- A 3/4 angle usually works best, although cats and short-muzzled dogs (i.e. pugs) can be photographed straight-on. Include the pet's neck down to the chest and shoulders also.
- Take the photo in bright light, with a minimum of shadows falling on the pet. Overcast days are actually good days to take photos - harsh shadows are minimized. Indoor photos can work, but often it's too dark and the flash will be required – causing red eye.
- Choose a pose that is characteristic of the pet and take several photos from different angles. I usually take at least 20 photos so I'll have many to choose from and others for reference.
- For a photo that includes the pet's body too, follow the same guidelines, being sure to get good detail for the body as well. Have the pet sit or stand in a natural pose and also take some head shots.
- If you're taking photos for a portrait, provide the artist with the original digital files; for film cameras, have the photos developed as 5"x7" prints.

Unfortunately, our pets don't live as long as we'd like and we certainly don't want to think about the day they will no longer be with us. But don't wait – take some good photos of your pets now, so you'll have lasting images of your pet to cherish forever.

Ann Ranlett is an award-winning artist & illustrator living in Newcastle, CA. Visit her website at www.petportraitsbyann.com to see more samples of her work.