A Quick Guide to Flat Lay Photography

PUBLISHED - 24 AUG 2016

A flat lay is simply an image shot directly from above – a bird's eye view of an array of carefully arranged objects – and it's never been more popular, particularly in food and fashion photography. Use our tips to ensure top flat-lay shots.



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Tell a story

The best flat lays tell a visual story, so choose a theme, using a couple of 'star' items surrounded by a 'supporting cast' of additional elements. Go for harmonious, complementary

colours, and keep things simple – less is often more. The most popular format for flat lays is square, and within that square you want to be aiming for a clean, easy-to-read composition. Whether you go for a square, portrait or landscape format, use the rule of thirds to guide you – imagine a noughts and crosses grid overlaying the image, and position the most important elements roughly where the gridlines intersect.

Create the background

Choose your flat-lay's backdrop with care. Plain white is very popular and often extremely effective, but don't be afraid to experiment with different colours and textures, such as wood, corkboard, fabric, wallpaper – whatever matches the theme of your flat lay.

Get the light right

Natural daylight gives great results and will minimise shadows, which are the bane of flat lays. Set up by a north or east-facing window for a soft, diffuse light; stronger, sunny light from south and west windows is more likely to produce shadows. Another way to avoid shadows is to position matt white or grey boards around your set-up, creating a 'closed set', while a burst of bounce flash from an accessory Speedlight angled up to the ceiling will also reduce the risk of shadows. However, sometimes shadows can add to the overall effect of your flat lay, so again, experiment to find what works best.

Three legs are better than two

To position your camera above the flat lay you'll obviously need some height. You could stand on a chair or small step-ladder and hand-hold the camera directly downwards, but a tripod will make things far easier and safer – for both you and your kit! Some tripods have a tilting centre column that enables you to position the camera vertically downwards, or you can buy an accessory side (lateral) arm that attaches to where the tripod head usually fits; you then fix the tripod head and camera to the end of the arm extending over your flat lay. You might need to hook on some counterweights to the other end of the arm to prevent the whole thing from tipping.

Depth of field

To ensure everything in your flat lay is sharply in focus from front to back you want to maximise depth of field, so select aperture priority or manual mode and choose a narrow aperture e.g. f/16. This will necessitate a longer shutter speed e.g. 1 second, which is another reason for using a tripod, as it keeps the camera rock-steady during a long exposure to ensure a crisp, sharp shot. helps. To make doubly sure of minimising camera shake, shoot with a cable release or by using the camera's self-timer.

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