

# Random Shots

## Shooting Shots Part II: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

by Robin Preston

The previous edition of Random Shots broached the subject of how to document a shot collection photographically, beginning with a discussion of factors to consider when selecting a camera and stressing the need for a tripod (see footnote at the end of this article for an update). In this issue, I'd like to consider what makes a good photograph and then return with specific guidelines in a subsequent installment.

eBay is an endlessly fascinating social phenomenon, but the sheer volume of activity also means that it can serve as a powerful educational tool. This is particularly true during winter months when 100+ pre-pro glasses are offered for sale each week. Every auction comes with at least one photograph, few of which were created by professional photographers. Thus, an investment of just a few minutes on the site rewards one with access to images that vary widely in terms of quality and diversity of technique and one quickly gains a sense of what works



Figure 3



Figure 1

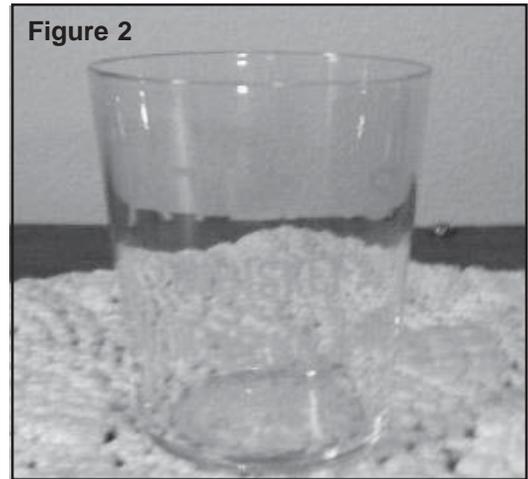


Figure 2

photographically and what does not. The following pages present a selection of these images and attempt to identify what makes and breaks a shot-glass photo.

### *Shake, Rattle and Roll.*

The first example [Figure 3] reinforces the need to use a sturdy camera support when photographing glasses. This is a rare glass from Adolph Beck & Co. of Chicago, although it's difficult to ascertain its origins from the blurry photo. The human frame is simply not capable of becoming sufficiently rigid to support a camera without movement, meaning that hand-held photos are going to be blurred. The degradation in image quality may be subtle or, as in the example shown here, severe enough to make the label indistinct.

### *The myopic and presbyopic*

The next few examples cover basic problems in technique that should have been obvious in the camera viewfinder or digital view screen.

The first [see Figure 1] suggests that the photographer was peering at the glass through bottle lenses, because the shot was jammed right under the nose of the camera. The optics were unable to focus at such close distance so the resultant image is blurred. There are additional exacerbating issues such as a hand-held glass (more blur), most likely a hand-held camera (still more blur), and use of a flash (reflected hot-spots), all of which add insult to injury of the fact that this is a detailed and highly desirable glass from Jas. Gorman of Lynchburg, Va.

Next is an image in which the subject occupies only a small fraction of the frame [Figure 4]. This kind of presentation is common in listings where a scanner has

been used to create an image of a glass, or where a collection of five or six glasses are being auctioned as a group. Sellers seem to think that they have to stand several feet distant from a group in order to fit them all within the frame, paying little attention to whether or not the frame is actually filled, let alone whether or not potential buyers can ascertain condition of the glass or even distinguish a label. Since even the most basic image manipulation programs have cropping tools, it's easy to clean up such photos, although cropping does nothing to aid resolution (photo editors come pre-installed on new computers but if yours did not, free downloads are readily available via the internet).

The lesson to be learned from the previous examples is that the glass needs to be sufficiently close to the camera that the label and general condition can be readily established, but not so close that it exceeds the minimum focusing distance of the lens.

### *Too light, too dark*

Included in the "obvious in the viewfinder" category are lighting extremes. The first example is an image so dark that it's difficult to discern that the subject is actually a shot glass, let alone that it's a valuable Peoria picture



Figure 4

glass [Figure 5]. Digital cameras automatically adjust exposure time to compensate for ambient light levels but, as a general rule, if you can't read the label when looking at the glass through the viewfinder or view screen, then you're unlikely to be able to create a successful image.

At the opposite extreme is the example shown in Figure 6. Again, digital cameras are adept at responding to light extremes, but the label on this Valley City glass is so bleached by light and background glare that it's difficult to make out the city of origin.

Figure 7 shows a glass photographed in direct sunlight, but now the lens is pointing straight down into the mouth of a glass that's standing on a white background. The light is so intense and directional that it creates a shadow of the label that is sufficiently crisp that it appears to be etched in the base! The photographer gets full marks for creativity and composition, but what are we to conclude about the condition of the glass or label? It's difficult to deduce anything other than the fact that it comes from Kansas City.

A final example of light excess is shown in Figure 8. Although the photographer was working indoors, the glass was proffered before a brightly-light window and the lens aimed directly up at the glass and into the sun. The camera optics are overwhelmed by light and the resultant image is marred by stupefying glare.

So far we've dealt with basic errors in photographic technique that literally scream at the viewer from the page. In the next sections we'll look at changes in lighting and camera position that are relatively subtle yet have a substantial and detrimental effect on the resultant image.

#### *Contrast, contrast, contrast.*

A photographer faces two major challenges when trying to create memorable and compelling images of their shots. The first is the tendency of glass to concentrate and reflect back strong images of anything in close proximity. The other is the issue of how to make an etched inscription stand out clearly against the background. Given that the inscriptions on pre-pro glasses fade with handling, many have been thinned significantly in the century or so since they were minted. Trying to capture them



Figure 5

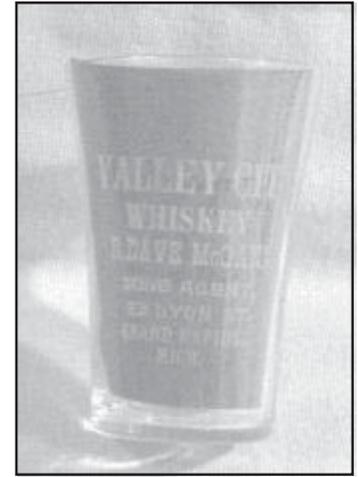


Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

on film can thus be as challenging as stalking a ghost.

Most pre-pro glasses were branded with a white label so it follows that if we wish to make the etching stand out clearly we choose a dark, contrasting background. Yet "white-on-white" syndrome is one of the commonest photographic ailments encountered on eBay. Two prime examples are shown in

Figures 9 and 10. On the left we have a Cuckoo Whiskey from Boston, on the right a Hayner Lockbox 290. Both glasses feature prominently in many collections where they're prized for the intricacy of their etching. But would you want to bid on either of the glasses shown here without being able to determine the content and condition of the label? Probably not.

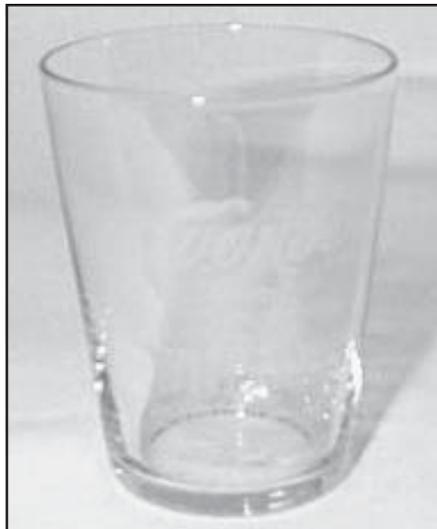


Figure 9

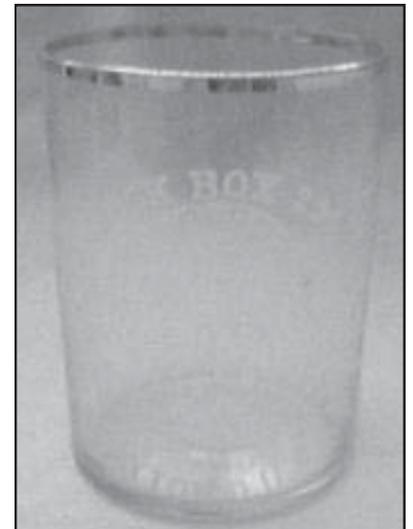


Figure 10



**Figure 11**

**Figure 2** (on the first page of this article) was taken from a recent auction in which the seller decided to cover the rich, contrasty table upon which the glass is sitting with a white crocheted fabric. Any idea where this glass comes from? **Figure 11** shows an Old Fox River glass nestled on a kitchen countertop. The photographer realized that white-on-white was a problem and hence inserted a piece of paper to provide contrast. Unfortunately it's also white and the label melts into the background.



**Figure 12**

Finally, here's yet another Boston glass but this time photographed against a natural landscape [**Figure 12**]. Sadly, the snow lay deep and crisp and even on the day of the photograph and we end up with another example of white on white. There actually IS a reason that Russian troops are kitted out with white smocks for winter combat: white-on-white makes for perfect camouflage!

The lesson here is that if we wish to make the label on a pre-pro glass stand out clearly, we need to choose as background that is as dark as possible.

### *This Old Landscape*

Would-be sellers on eBay are frequently driven outdoors in search of adequate lighting, typically balancing the shot precariously on a convenient fencepost or railing. Since little thought is given to the background, we're treated to a dizzying array of texture, color and highlights. As a keen gardener, this can be an endless source of fascination, but it can also be a major distraction if the focus of hunt is pre-prohibition glass rather than a rare perennial Geranium. An example is shown in **Figure 13**. In the color version it's difficult to be sure if the intended subject is a bed of daffodils or the bloom etched on the Cassel Eye-Opener. The season changes for the example in **Figure 14**, but again, General Wayne is having difficulty distinguishing himself from the backdrop of trees, lawn and siding. We move indoors for **Figure 15** and now the main focus is the neighbor's house, while in **Figure 16**, the seller's hand dominates the image. While hand-holding requires minimal set-up, flesh tones provide a decidedly sub-optimal background plus there is the issue of movement-induced blur consider. On occasion the distraction of fingernails deeply impacted with what might well be recent privy night soil is so disturbing that clicking on to the next listing is a welcome escape!

While most of the images shown on the right could have benefited greatly from tight cropping to remove peripheral distracting elements, the take-home is that if we wish to focus a viewer's attention on the glass, we need to provide a clean background.

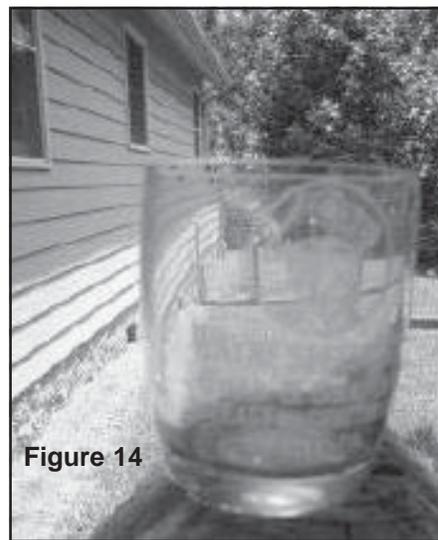
### *Time for reflection*

The other main barrier to capturing clean images of subjects made of glass is the issue of reflections. Curved vessels such as shots are particularly difficult in that they concentrate and focus light into vertical bands and they usually end up positioned so as to obliterate a crucial part of the label. The stronger and more directional the source, the more obvious the problem becomes, as seen when one tries to use a flash [**Figure 17**].

Reflections can originate from the back, the front, or both walls of the glass, depending on camera position. The photographer who created the image in **Figure 18** was doing everything right in terms of a clean backdrop that nicely contrasts the label, but he was standing



**Figure 13**



**Figure 14**



**Figure 15**



**Figure 16**

in full sun and so we see a pair of hands holding a camera reflected hotly from the front of the glass above the word “Shamrock”. The take-home here is that one has to examine everything in immediate vicinity of the glass and evaluate it for its ability to show up as reflected hot spot in the final photograph.



Figure 17



Figure 18

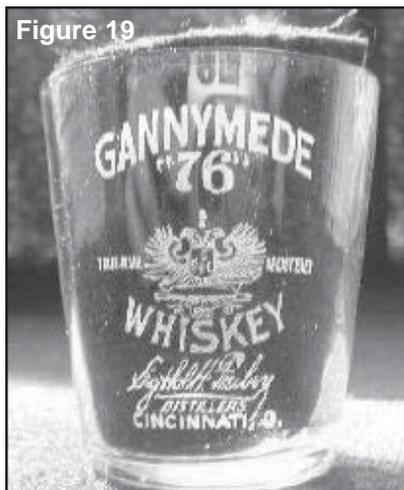


Figure 19

### Stuff it!

One common way of dealing with reflections off the back wall of a glass is block them with paper or fabric. The insert can also provide strong contrast for the label, although one still has to be wary of reflections bouncing off the front wall. The Gannymede “76” glass in **Figure 19** is a good example: this image was created by the same seller who snapped the Shamrock above. Again, the source of the reflection is the camera and hands that hold it, accentuated by the contrasting material within. **Figure 20** shows a “stuff it” technique that never works: filling the glass with a dark liquid. Despite all expectations to the contrary, liquids just seem to make the pre-pro labels fade away.

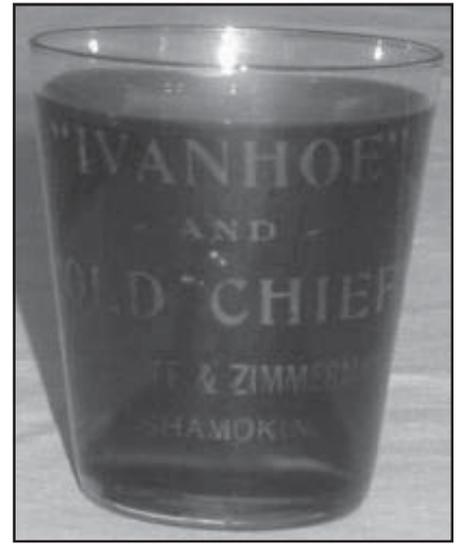


Figure 20

### A Parting Shot

So what have we learned from our eBay tutors? First, make sure that the image on the view screen is in focus and there’s sufficient light to read the label by without overwhelming it. Second, choose a background that’s uniform and contrasts well with the label. Third, be aware of any brightly-illuminated hotspots in the vicinity of the glass that may cause strong reflections. Finally, crop the image so that the glass fills the frame.

These are the basic rules, but how they’re translated into a successful image depends very much on individual tastes and the willingness of the photographer to spend a few minutes experimenting. I’ll provide some specific ideas in the next installment, but for now, I’ll leave you with one of my favorite “shot shots”. The background is black felt and the glass is illuminated by soft, natural light coming from my home office window [**Figure 21**]. It doesn’t get much easier than that!

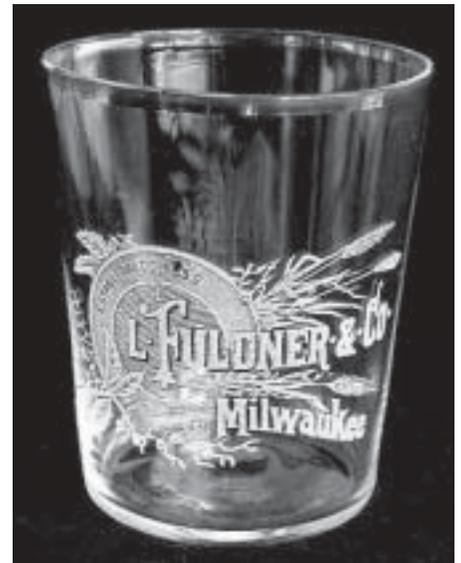


Figure 21

*Robin is an enthusiastic collector of shot glasses and maintains the collector’s website [www.pre-pro.com](http://www.pre-pro.com). He can be reached at 245 N 15th St., MS#488, Philadelphia, PA 19102, e-mail [oldwhiskey@pre-pro.com](mailto:oldwhiskey@pre-pro.com).*

Shortly after the first installment of “Shooting Shots” went to press, Consumer Reports printed a buyer’s guide to point-and-shoot cameras (November 2005, pp. 16-19). They gave high scores to the Canon Powershot A510 (\$180), the Kodak EasyShare CX7430 (\$180), and the Olympus D-580 Zoom (\$160). Two other footnotes. A collecting colleague wisely suggested that one select a camera in which the memory card is accessed from the side rather than the base. This makes it easy to remove in the middle of a shooting session. For similar reasons, you might also want to start each session with a set of fully-charged batteries so that you don’t have to disassemble the camera-tripod assembly in order to replace a drained power pack. And finally, my four-year old digital camera is beginning to show signs of age. Specifically, images shot under low light conditions are scattered with multi-colored dots, much as if I’d strung my glasses with teeny fairy lights. I believe this reflects individual light detectors going bad, so given how low prices on point-and-shoot cameras have fallen in recent months, it may make more sense to buy new rather than used.