Shutter Genius:
How to Take the Perfect Portrait

From putting your subject at ease to capturing their best side, a top photographer's tips

By: Jemima Sissons - January 30, 2014

Amy Poehler by Martin Schoeller

If you want picture perfect, you want Martin Schoeller. The German photographer has made a name for himself with close-up shots of high-profile figures, from Barack Obama to Angelina Jolie and Jack Nicholson.

His work regularly appears in magazines like National Geographic, Time and the New Yorker, as well as in projects like this year's Lavazza calendar, which brought together some of the world's top chefs, including Albert and Ferran Adrià, Massimo Bottura and Michel Bras.

We asked Mr. Schoeller for a few tips to help those of us who point and shoot get a little closer to portrait perfection. Here's his take.

Study [the subject's] face, and think about which side is better. Is it uneven? Is one eye bigger? Does the smile go up on one side? One side is often more positive or prettier than the other side, and I go about lighting them from the better side.

If they are overweight or have a double chin, put the lights a bit higher to create a shadow. If their eyes are deep set, don't raise the lights up too much or their eyes will go too dark. If they have light hair or no hair, use less back light. If they are very overweight, don't dress them in bright colors or white. Black is best.

Once the shoot starts, ease your subject into it. I always play music. It varies depending on who I am shooting—

it can be the Rolling Stones or hip-hop.

Keep on talking to your subject, never lose the dialogue. Once they are standing in front of the white background, they are helpless—they don't know where to put their hands, which way to stand—so put yourself in their situation.

For close-ups, I use a Mamiya 6x7 film camera. But it is not about the camera, it is about the idea and the way you document it; you can take the picture with your phone.

To get the best shot, you just take lots and lots of pictures. It is helpful now with computers, as you can sneak away and have a look. I flick through a couple to see how the body language might be different. The downside is the subjects often want to see themselves. It can become a dialogue about what the subject likes, doesn't like. But photography is never a democratic undertaking, it is about trying to make an idea a reality. If too many people are voicing an opinion, then it falls apart.

With studio and close-ups, I don't do anything to the pictures I couldn't have done in the dark room. If there is nose hair, etc., I will remove that but mostly it is darkening or lightening. There is no taking out of wrinkles.

People look different in real life than in photographs. You can never tell what people will look like until you photograph them. People you wouldn't notice as good-looking in normal life then surprise you when you photograph them.

The most photogenic people generally have even, symmetrical faces.

Most actors are hard to take good portraits of. You have access to the biggest actors and think, great, a chance to do an intimate portrait. Then you look at the contact sheet and you realize that they totally played you. They are aware of the camera in each single frame. They raise an eyebrow just so. They are very good at making it look natural, but then you look back and nothing is off-guard. Colin Farrell is an example.

The average person looks good in one out of 10 shots; Brad Pitt will look good in nine out of 10. But looking good doesn't mean that it's a good picture. They might be happy but I may not.

The pictures that survive over the years are ones where you see something of somebody that they normally wouldn't share so easily. Something intimate, honest. I don't believe you can capture the soul of someone, but there are pictures that are more honest and ones that are less honest.