A steady stream of untrained photographers are entering the marketplace with little more than a digital camera and a business card, while the economy challenges every industry to slash expenses. In this environment, professional portrait photographers are being challenged to sharpen their skills and their competitive edge—or risk losing their client base.

If you already personalize your clients’ portraits with distinctive settings or backgrounds, hair and makeup styling, wardrobe selection, lighting style and selective retouching, the time is right to master the lost art of lighting your subjects in a way that enhances their distinctive facial shapes.

I first learned of this face-based technique last fall while reading Sculpting with Light: Lighting Techniques for Portrait Photographers (Amherst Media, 2008) by Colorado-based commercial and fine art portrait photographer Allison Earnest (www.allison Earnest photography.com). In a chapter called “Lighting Different Facial Shapes,” Allison presents a tutorial on sculpting with light the most popular face shapes—round, oval, rectangle, angular, square and triangle—and the most flattering lighting treatments for each.

This article attempts to distill the highlights of Allison’s studio and location lighting directions for three facial types—round, square and angular. Serious portraiture and lighting professionals will find a cover-to-cover read of Allison’s book indispensable.

Most male models have square faces. Photographing females with square facial features, however, requires lighting that prevents them from appearing too masculine.

Luciana, a professional Brazilian belly dancer with strong facial features, commissioned Allison to create images for her business. “When scheduling her session, she told me she was not going to pose,” says Allison. “She wanted me to create her portrait while she danced—and that’s what we did. Honoring clients’ requests can be challenging at times, but it’s the best way to produce images that show them in their personal comfort zones.”

Allison photographed her with a strong, soft directional main light source with a Rembrandt and loop-lighting patterns, so a portion of Luciana’s face remained in shadow (see photo 1). “The main light—a Hensel Integra 500 monolight with a 22-inch beauty dish placed at a 45-degree angle to the dancer—was on full power to ensure an f-stop that would allow me to retain my depth of field as she danced,” says Allison.

When a monolight with a 20-degree grid was placed behind Luciana and to her left, it accentuated the left side of her jaw and produced a pleasing accent on her facial features. The accent light recorded at one f-stop brighter than the main light. “Since she was constantly moving, setting the exposure value brighter than the main light ensured adequate exposure even when she moved farther from the light source,” says Allison.

To create a tropical Brazilian ambiance, Allison fitted a backlight with an amber gel for the final image. “This image was processed in Photoshop, where I blurred the background to create a shallow depth of field, which separates the subject from the background,” says Allison. Keeping the main, hair and background lights the same, an additional fill light was placed to the subject’s right side, filling it with cooler light (see photo 2).

“When Luciana saw the final images, she was overjoyed and told me she had never looked so good in a photograph,” says Allison. “That’s what it’s all about, isn’t it?”

The most common facial mask is a round face, primarily because it can evolve from any facial shape. “Subjects with extra weight on their frame typically have extra weight on their facial mask, thus making an oval, square or triangle face appear more round,” explains Allison. “The photographer’s job is to capture each subject in his or her best light. Ideal lighting setups for clients with round faces—typically Rembrandt, loop and split lighting—will help to slim their appearance.” Butterfly lighting is not recommended because it can make the subject look heavier.

Hair stylist Shanee’ has very round features, so creating a flattering portrait required creating shadows on either side of her face to add shape and depth to her cheeks. “I used a modified lighting setup with the main light placed at an angle between 45- and 90-degrees to the subject,” says Allison. “The main light was a single Hensel Integra 500 monolight with a medium softbox attached for a soft shadow-edge transfer.”

To illustrate what happens when a good lighting pattern is combined with poor subject placement, Allison photographed Shanee’ with a short-light pattern. This created a pleasant shadow on her right cheek, but made her left cheek look misshapen (see photo 3).

Her body was turned toward the light, making her slim build look wide. “In most cases, it is preferable to leave your main light source where it is and reposition your subject,” says Allison. “When I directed Shanee’ to tilt her head to the right, her right cheek received less illumination from the main light source, enhancing the sculpting effect on her face” (see photo 4). “Now, Shanee’ turned her body away from the main light source to create a more feminine effect and a thinner appearance.”

“After more depth in the portrait, I placed accent lights slightly behind Shanee’, camera right and left, which lit her hair and added depth and dimension. The accent lights were metered and adjusted to record approximately three-quarters of a stop lighter than the main light, providing separation from the background and accenting the model’s hair,” explains Allison (see photo 5).

Compare photo 1 with photo 3 to see the difference in the models’ faces and overall appearance.
Angular facial features are common for male subjects. Accentuating these features with lighting and head and body positioning, helps to produce flattering masculine portraits. “Pose your male client’s body turned toward the main light and in square, angular positions. Conversely, for females with long, angular facial features, take care to maintain a soft and feminine look. Their jaw lines should not appear masculine or angular,” says Allison.

Brian, a theater professional, needed a new headshot for his portfolio. Like most clients, he had to be positioned for the most desirable pose. “I find it easier to direct the initial pose myself instead of trying to explain the desired pose,” says Allison. “This is one of the reasons why understanding the differences between correct masculine and feminine body positions is imperative. Brian’s body is facing the main light and his shoulders appear broad and square relative to the main light source—a common masculine pose (see photo 6).” The main light was placed at a 45-degree angle to the subject at camera right.

With the main light in its original position, a strip light was added at a 90-degree angle to the subject, camera left, and an amber gel was attached to the top to add slight warmth to Brian’s face. “Set to record an exposure value of half a stop brighter than the main light, the accent light gave a warm fill to the shadows,” says Allison. “A second accent light, an Integra 500 monolight with 20-degree grid, was placed behind the model, camera right, for extra dimension (see photo 7). While producing a hard shadow-edge transfer on the subject’s face at first, making the exposure half a stop brighter than the main light gave a highlight that accented Brian’s angular jaw.” Comparing the two photos, you’ll see how careful placement of your lights will immediately turn a portrait from average to professional.
Learning to see the light, whether you’re using artificial studio lighting or shooting in daylight on location, takes practice. In the next set of images, Allison shows how using sunlight with a single California Sunbounce reflector can enhance your clients’ facial features.

Alena, a Broadway singer and dancer, was photographed with the sun as the main light (see photo 8). Adding depth by redirecting the natural sunlight with a reflector will create beautiful shadows and highlights on her face (see photo 10). Be certain to move the reflector around so you can see how the bounced light illuminates the face. Photo 9 shows the pitfalls of over-lighting the subject’s face, creating a flat-looking portrait lacking shadows, highlights, depth and dimension.

“Creating flattering portraits that are filled with depth and dimension from light sculpting and correct posing will make your photographs stand out from the competition,” says Allison. “By moving your lights off the set after a portrait session, you force yourself to create a different lighting setup for each client. With enough practice, you will learn to sculpt your clients’ portraits with light—creating images that give you a unique competitive edge.”

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