

Rembrandt Lighting

Rembrandt the master... Promoter and advocate of what we call "Old Master's" or "Rembrandt" lighting. In the example to the right we see the classic sidelighting that begins to define the style. Continuing into the present day, successful modern portrait artists are familiar with and adept at this classic lighting technique. Combined with the three-quarter view of the face, this lighting creates a very flattering effect (especially for women), slimming the face and highlighting the cheeks. In this Rembrandt original—*Portrait of a Lady With an Ostrich-Feather Fan*—note that the "narrow" portion of the face is turned toward the light, with the "broad" portion of the face falling into shadow, hence the term: "narrow lighting".



During her bridal portrait session, Suzanne stated she wanted something "different" from the demure, standard bridal look... So we adjusted the lighting to accentuate the drama and we worked with some "high-fashion", contemporary poses. She was very pleased with the results—but guess what? This is simply a variation on the "Old Masters" lighting techniques that help the artist utilize light to create interest in the shadows. Many wags in the photography business say that we don't really capture the light—we capture the shadows. In reality it's a little bit of both. The interplay of the light with the subject allows us to shape the shadows (any way we like in a studio setting) for the needed drama and impact that makes for interesting images.

Note in the images above the distinctive triangular patch of light under the eye on the shadow side of the face. This highlighting of the "broad" side of the face is a hallmark of "Rembrandt" lighting. The degree of pronouncement of this triangular patch of light can be adjusted by the intensity and angle of the primary light, as well as the positioning of the face. The First Communion portrait to the right still sports the Rembrandt triangle, but it's significantly less intense. The subject matter dictates the lighting patterns—children and pretty brides, for example, benefit from an overall softening of the lighting pattern. Adding a bit more fill, and/or using slight diffusion still maintains the directionality of the light, but softens and blends the harsh edges. While it's important to master technique, it's equally important to remember not to overpower the subject with it.

