



Shot for Eric N Smith Designer & Goldsmiths, Glasgow. Taken on a Horseman Digiflex II with Nikon 85mm PC and Phase One P45 digital back.

PROFILE Paul Hartley



Jewellery is well known to be one of the hardest subjects in the world to photograph, but one man has made this type of work his speciality WORDS Bip Mistry PICTURES Paul Hartley

Biography

WITH ALMOST 30 YEARS experience, Paul Hartley is England's leading jewellery and watch photographer. His exquisite images result from a fine eye for detail coupled with complete control over equipment and technique. Having worked with large-format film cameras Hartley stepped into the world of the high-end digital back with Phase One in 2001 and now operates a state-of-the-art digital workflow system, producing beautiful images for clients like Beaverbrooks, F. Hinds, H. Samuel, Hirsh and Swag.

- 1953 – Born in Manchester, grows up near Stockport
- 1973-76 – Studies at the Polytechnic of Central London, gaining a BA degree in Photographic Arts
- 1977-80 – Works in the fledgling audio-visual industry
- 1981 – Begins freelance working from a small basement studio in the West End
- 1983 – Sets up Hartley Studios in Camden
- 1990 – Takes his first jewellery shots
- 1993 – Discovers Photoshop and Macs. Works on the first DeBeers Shadows campaign
- 2000 – Offered his first digital-only commission, and never looks back
- 2004 – Moves to small studio in Fulham



Montblanc gents watch for Eric N Smith Designer & Goldsmiths, Glasgow. Taken with a Horseman Digiflex II, with Nikon 85mm PC and Phase One H10 digital back.

■ BIP MISTRY: When did you last shoot on transparency film?

PAUL HARTLEY: Blimey, I haven't shot film for eight years. I used to have a 2000-plus square feet studio in Camden where I did big product shoots. I rented car coves for my forklift truck shoots and once I even had half a railway carriage in there. I shot transparency film on a Sinar 5x4, sometimes with a roll-film back and occasionally on 10x8. An E6 dip and dunk lab was conveniently disguised in one corner of the studio and run by a mate of mine. Looking back, it was definitely a slow working process, even though we had a

70-minute turnaround. I took the old film fridge to the dump when I downsized to the Fulham studio.

■ What was your first digital kit comprised of?

My move from film to digital kit came in 2001, although I'd been working with Photoshop since 1993 and scanning transnians for many years. The first serious pure digital job was for the jewellery chain F. Hinds. I was offered the job only if I could shoot it digitally.

On the basis of that commission I shelled out over £20k on the first Phase One/Rollei Xact II kit. The Rollei Xact is a miniature bellows view camera on a rail complete with tilts, shifts and swings. The kit consisted of a Lightphase six-megapixel back and Schneider Digitar lenses in Rollei electronic shutters. The whole point of digital is it's small, precise and compact. Later, I bought a Horseman Digiflex II with a Nikon 85mm Macro PC, which improved workflow no end.

■ How was your first experience working with digital?

For years I had struggled with 5x4 because of its size. The main problem being the Sinar's large front-lens plate, which gets in the way during close-up work. I really wanted the advantages of digital: the immediacy and the quality. I used all of my view camera skills to

exploit depth-of-field and the focus plane, but the first shots were very disappointing. I was stopping down the lens to f/32-45 to get everything sharp the way I did with film, but the problem was with the optics: aperture diffraction just kills the image. With film the grain and mush hid the problem, but with digital, there's no hiding place. You have to use a wider aperture to get high-quality results from the expensive digital optics. Now I never stop down more than f/16.5, and like to keep it at f/11. With macro this is something of a problem and camera technique is vital.

■ What were the main pros and cons of the digital switch?

You can do camera movements using micrometer adjustments and you can make multi-exposures with the Rollei electronic shutter, with no need to touch the camera, and control of 1/10th stop increments. Best of all, is the control I have over what I produce. To a control freak like me it's the best thing that's happened to photography in decades. It allowed me to take complete control of my career.

On the first job I did all the retouching myself. The first thing that struck me was just how much more work I could achieve compared to film. As the work piled in, it went from full-time assistant to full-time retoucher within a year.

In the beginning, it was a big educational exercise to try and get clients to accept digital. But when the first jobs appeared in print, they could really see what the fuss was all about! It's easy to forget just how far we've come in eight years and how much resistance there was from sections of the print trade at the beginning.

■ How do you visualise a watch prior to photographing it?

When I look at a watch, I sort of deconstruct it. I look at it in terms of a whole series of pictures, facets, planes and areas, which are then essentially assembled in Photoshop. By shooting on a very rigid stand, and by multi-exposing and processing the 16-bit Raw files in Capture One, I get the best possible quality files, which can be adjusted for balance, saturation and contrast in real time. Whilst the item is still under the lights, I process the images as 8-bit files, drag them into

Paul Spurgeon Marquise diamond set ring in platinum. Taken on a Horseman Digiflex II with Nikon 85mm PC and Phase One P45 digital back.

Sapphire and diamond necklace for Hirsh, Burlington Arcade. Taken on a Rollei Xact II with 80mm Schneider Apo Macro-Digitar and Phase One P45 back.

Photoshop CS3, layer, mask and blend before flattening. This file then goes off for retouching, which is mostly cleaning, pathing and re-layering. Generally, watches are quicker to retouch than shoot. The whole thing is constructed, not taken, I don't take a picture in the usual sense.

■ And what factors are you considering when you are shooting jewellery?

Jewellery is sometimes a bit quicker to shoot than retouch, because the outlines are generally more complicated, but once again I construct each shot and even the simplest shot

will have a minimum of two multiple exposures.

I'm still learning, but after all these years I like to think I have a pretty good knowledge of jewellery. I know what rubies and emeralds should look like, and know the difference between a tanzanite and a sapphire.

I try to look at the jewellery with a jeweller's eyes first of all. For example, diamonds are valued by something called the four Cs: cut, clarity, carats and colour. So, addressing these is important and realising that with state-of-the-art digital kit the tiny black dots called inclusions are resolved, or less than ideal colour is shown up. I use my



Diamond-set rings for Swag jewellery brochure 2008. Taken on a Horseman Digiflex II with Nikon 85mm PC and Phase One P45 digital back.

experience and sort it before it ever leaves the studio. Every item of jewellery is different and each one has to be judged individually. Generally speaking most jewellery is hand-crafted, there's no one rule.

■ Do you have a favourite set-up for photographing jewellery?

Most jewellery shots are within a crop of the frame and it's fair to say that the need to have them much bigger than three times life size is rare. So, most of the catalogue work is shot on a tethered Phase One H10 on a Digiflex II with a Nikon 85mm PC lens, and this is my workhorse set-up. I can get better

depth-of-field by pulling back but still get the phenomenal lack of noise and crisp definition this back is capable of.

The Phase One P45 is wheeled out when I need the extra resolution. Although I'm only using about 60 per cent of the sensor area with the Horseman, the pixel sites are smaller and the max file size is a whopping A2 at 300dpi. Big enough for an art director to do his own crops.

■ Do you follow a general procedure when photographing?

I generally start with lighting the metal and that includes lighting white and yellow gold separately, then I'll light

the stone. When shooting watches, it's important to understand the different metallic finishes from stainless steel to gold. I shoot using the histogram. I can get the perfect exposure and I always trust the numbers.

■ How do you deal with the large file sizes?

The digital workflow incorporates Quad Intel 3GHz Apple Mac Pros with 9GB of RAM and 10,000rpm Raptor drives for the tethered captures. Speed is of the essence. I have an NEC 2690 Spectraview calibrated with an X-Rite i1. FOGRA Proofing is with an Epson 4800 run by an EFI Colourproof RIP



TX Chronometer for the Timex Corporation.
Rollei Xactll, 80mm Schneider Apo Macro-Digital, Phase One P20

and an i1Pro calibrator. I store my files on a 3.5TB Sonnet Fusion Raid box.

■ What lighting kit do you use?

My Elinchrom Style 300 heads get the most use. Most importantly, they go down to as little as 8J, which is vital given the small distances I work with. I use a variety of light shapers fitted to the standard Elinchrom reflectors both with and without barn doors. I also use 44cm and 100cm square softboxes. I have a mini spot to put the occasional sparkle into pavé settings. I also have an Elinchrom fibre-optic kit to do the same. Control is the key.

I tend to work pretty much on my own these days so I collect loads of clamps and magic arms to make my life easier. The Flash Centre sells some nifty little articulating card holding arms I wouldn't be without.

■ Have you considered changing your camera kit recently?

The Phase One P20 mounted on a

Cambo X2-Pro/Mamiya AFDII combination – it's my future direction in kit. The Mamiya is the only focal plane MF camera available right now. I use this combination for a lot of my watch shots. I've got a collection of four Phase One backs, three of them still on the Hasselblad V mount so I'm keen to keep them running for as long as possible.

■ How does the retoucher see your vision, and what kind of things does he do?

I have to provide a file that my retoucher can work from and achieve what I want and I always insist on layered files back to me so that when I review I can make adjustments.

For example, if we have a stainless steel watch I may need it to be pulled from the background, or need a glow putting behind it. The retoucher will create clipping paths round it. He will go in and take out all the little flaws and marks. It may be that somebody

has drawn in the date in the little window with a biro.

Remember, 39-megapixels can make things look appalling! You're blowing something up that was never designed to be seen that big. So, we bring it back. Often, the samples we shoot are made in the Far East and can look rough. Put it this way: we repair all those things, which will be perfectly good when the final items are made in a factory.

■ What has been the most prestigious job you have done?

Although I was called in to DeBeers to shoot the Millennium Star diamond, I also shot the almost priceless collection of natural blue diamonds as well, and allegedly these are even more valuable than the 'big boy'. Impressive though these are though, the most interesting diamond I shot was the Eureka Diamond in the DeBeers vaults. ■

Contact

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