

## Background check

Go classic, trendy or both, but always keep it fresh

They may not be the subject of your portraits, but the background and props you use can not only enhance your photographs, but also improve your customers' image of you.

If your client feels special upon entering your camera room, it only can help the end product.

Working with a variety of affordable backdrops and props, photographers can experiment with different designs and textures and be ready for anything. New sets can get the photographer's creative juices flowing. Look for backgrounds and props that will attract customers, but that also challenge you to think creatively about making images. Your studio's budget and the kind of photography you do will influence your choice of sets, but variety is an important factor as well. The more variety you offer, the more likely you are to sell more and bigger prints.

Your background should complement the subjects without competing with them. No doubt every photographer has that one dependable standby, such as the Classic Designs of Backgrounds by Maheu ([www.backgroundsbymaheu.com](http://www.backgroundsbymaheu.com)). It's usually a neutral-toned backdrop that works with a gamut of skin tones and clothing colors, one that can be backlit with gels to create several colors and moods. Ideally, it works well with men, women, and children.

In addition to the cost and durability of the background, consider intangibles as well, such as timely delivery and versatility. Scenic muslin by Cole & Company come with a painted floor at no additional cost ([www.coleandcompany.com](http://www.coleandcompany.com)).

Trends will come and go, but the classic



Image courtesy of American Photographic Resources

**Above:** Sports fans will love APR's Old Time Ball Glove prop. Made of Fiberglas and resin, it's the perfect size for a baby or toddler. Props make the shot, especially for seniors. **Left:** APR's Retro Chair is made of hard propylene. It makes an excellent posing tool as well.

handpainted Old Master-style backdrop still has a place in your repertoire. In fact, the portrait industry seems to be moving toward a fine art painting look, whether it's a Renaissance-style tapestry or impressionist scenics, or props that emulate an Old World courtyard. Garden themes are also hot right now, such as Summer Roses by Backgrounds By Bonnie Boatwright ([www.bonnieboatwright.com](http://www.bonnieboatwright.com)). Adding props such as Denny Manufacturing's Garden Way walls and columns completes the set and adds versatility ([www.dennymfg.com](http://www.dennymfg.com)).

Inexpensive accents like flowers, drapes, baskets and vases can create different moods with the same background. High-key white props are less popular now than vintage colors such as ivory, walnut, and neutral green. Wicker by Design sells ivory-colored props that complement high-, mid- and low-key backgrounds. For more versatility, they offer slipcovers that transform wicker furniture into upholstered pieces ([www.wickerbydesign.com](http://www.wickerbydesign.com)).

The latest trend in high school senior portraits is a graphic design for backgrounds and props, available from many sources, including DR Backdrops ([www.drbackdrops.com](http://www.drbackdrops.com)). Of course, where young people are concerned, when a theme reaches trend status, it's already out. With seniors, you need to be ahead of the curve, not following it.

That's why some digital photographers are using Chromakey screens, like those available from Photoflex, and using them in combination with digital backgrounds that come on CD-ROMs ([www.photoflex.com](http://www.photoflex.com)). This combination gives you a large selection of backgrounds that would otherwise be cost-prohibitive. With a little practice and the right software, you can use just one Chromakey background to come up with a host of different looks, saving you time and money. The Virtual Backgrounds front projection system is a productive alternative that provides an infinite variety of backgrounds and saves time in postproduction because you capture the background simultaneously with the subject, as if he or she were actually standing in the projected space ([www.virtualbackgrounds.net](http://www.virtualbackgrounds.net)).

Regular additions to your stock of props



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**Left and above:** Bonnie Boatwright's small company focuses on hand-painted and custom muslin backgrounds that combine classic and contemporary elements. The photographer can accessorize the set with various props to different moods.

**Below:** Just because the prop is formal in design, like the Fainting Couch by Wicker by Design, you don't have to dress up the subject. Go casual for a dramatic effect!



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Image courtesy of Wicker by Design

Image courtesy of Backgrounds by Maheu.



Backgrounds by Maheu introduced a new signature series, The Floral Symphony. These backgrounds are painted in the impressionistic style with several layers of color that add depth to the portrait to make them look like fine art.



If you've got a big enough vehicle, backgrounds are portable too. Here, Toni Laine was captured in a pensive moment at an ice equipment manufacturing plant that could have been anywhere in the world.

Image courtesy of DR Backdrops



The cool and warm color mix in this Blue Bronze muslin from DR Backdrops makes a versatile background to build on.



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Don't be locked into reality when Henry Oles Virtual backgrounds can recreate a special time, place and mood.

and backgrounds gives customers the variety they're looking for and keeps them coming back. I've heard photographers say, "I can't buy anything new because I don't have any more room." I have one word for them: *ebay* ([www.ebay.com](http://www.ebay.com)).

Without regular updates to the look of their photographs, those photographers won't have any business, either. Successful photographers understand that backgrounds and props pay

for themselves in a couple of seasons and they buy *new* props and backgrounds. You get more creativity for your dollar by investing in versatile, durable props and backgrounds that enhance all of the aspects of the finished photograph. □

*Thanks to Bonnie Boatwright, Dennis Cole, Travis Gadsby, David Mabeu, Ann Martinez, Susan Day Moore, Henry Oles, Natalie Osborne, and Dan Rosebaugh for their advice, insight, and help with this story.*