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The Case of the Disappearing Glass

The distant genius who first fused sand into glass has tricked the eyes and delighted the brains of every generation of humans to follow. It has perhaps also grayed the hair and wasted the time of more photographers than any other substance. However, attempting to reproduce the appearance of glass need not lead to the photographic disasters we so often see. This chapter discusses the principles, the problems, and some straightforward solutions to the basic challenges that glass offers.

THE PRINCIPLES

The appearance of glass is determined by many of the same principles we discussed in the preceding chapter on metal. Like metal, almost all reflection produced by glass is direct reflection. Unlike metal, however, this direct reflection is often polarized. We might expect the techniques used for lighting glass to be similar to those used for metal. We might find a polarizing filter useful more often, but otherwise apply the same methods.

However, this is not so. When we light metal, we are primarily interested in the surfaces facing the camera. If they look right, then minor adjustments can usually take care of the details. Lighting glass, however, requires attention to the edges. If the edges are clearly defined, we can often ignore the front surface altogether.