

maintaining a portfolio

The best way to find work is to show people what you've built. For that, you will need a portfolio. You can have a paper portfolio that you carry around in person, or an electronic one that can be viewed either online or downloaded to a computer. Ideally, you would have both.

A paper portfolio is great, because you may be showing your work while standing, or in a props shop where there are no computers, no accessible outlets, and no Internet access. You can certainly carry your portfolio around on a computer, but keep in mind that batteries can die, computers can crash, shops can be filled with dust and sparks, and traveling around to interviews increases the chance that you leave something behind; forgetting your paper portfolio in a cab means you just have to reprint the pages.

An electronic portfolio is easier to update, and is free to copy and leave with as many people as you need. An online one has the additional benefit that it can be accessed wherever you have Internet, which is great if you do not have your portfolio with you but someone wants to see your work. It can also be seen by someone in another city without having to mail anything.

## What to Include in a Portfolio

When I was just starting out, I took photographs of everything I built, or even things I simply modified. These days, I still take photographs of any project I devote time to. It is far preferable to take pictures and never use them than it is to realize later that you should have taken pictures. Besides showing employees what you have built, it is also a good personal record to remind you what you have done in the past.

Never assume that you will be able to take a photograph of your prop once it leaves your hands. The prop may be destroyed, or your schedule may keep you from visiting the theatre or set, or you simply may not be allowed backstage or behind the scenes. This does not mean you should not try to

get a photograph later on; a picture of a finished prop in action, or in front of a neutral background looks great in your portfolio. Keep in mind that many actor's unions control how their images are presented, so any photographs of your prop being used by an actor on set cannot be posted publicly without permission.

When you first begin your career, you will most likely be putting everything you have ever built into your portfolio. It is only after you have been working or in school awhile that you can begin to edit. Your portfolio should be a representation of the work you excel at and what you are capable of doing in the future. If you consider yourself a props carpenter, then your portfolio should reflect that by showing a lot of carpentry projects. If you are really good at molding and casting, your portfolio should feature some good molding and casting projects.

Pay attention to what job postings or employers are looking for. If an advertisement lists upholstery skills as a prerequisite for the job, make sure to have some upholstery projects in your portfolio.

Many props involve some form of collaboration. Should these go in your portfolio? The short answer is "yes," but it comes with some caveats. First, you should be clear about what your contribution was. For instance, you may build a prop, but someone else may paint it. Try to include photographs of the prop both before and after it was painted. That way, you can indicate that the "before" picture is what you personally achieved. When in doubt, remember that a portfolio should reflect what you are capable of doing in the future. If a photograph of a prop makes it appear that you can use a certain material or technique that in reality you can't, your future employer will be less than thrilled. Do not try to pass off a photograph of a complicated and beautiful prop as your own work if you simply sanded it. Always indicate, in text if necessary, what your exact contribution to a collaborative project was.

Should you include work done outside of film, theatre, or television? If it is created in similar circumstances, such as display or exhibition work, then sure. Work done in classes can also be included. Outside projects can be a great way to flesh

out certain areas of your portfolio. For instance, if you have taught yourself upholstery but have not had a chance to use it on a prop project, you can take photographs of your own personal projects to showcase your skills. Personal projects are a great way to learn or practice a craft skill without the pressure of show budgets or deadlines. What you want to avoid is having a portfolio that is overwhelmingly personal projects or artwork done outside of any sorts of constraints. I heard of a woodworker who had a portfolio filled with beautiful examples of fine furniture. When the interviewer asked him how long it took to construct a particularly interesting desk, the woodworker replied, “18 months.” This is not terribly useful for work in show business! Employers are not only interested in the quality of your work, but how well you work within budget and time constraints, as well as how well you react to design changes on the fly.



Figure 1-1: This process shot shows roughly how this African sword was made and what materials were used; the blade was cut from a piece of steel, and the handle was carved from a single chunk of wood.

Besides photographs of your props, you may wish to include additional material. A **process shot** shows your prop in mid-construction. Because a finished prop will successfully conceal its method of construction, a process shot will show what materials were used, how it was assembled, and other details. If you make a prop out of chicken wire and papier-mâché, a good process shot would show the chicken wire structure before the paper is applied. If you are sculpting an object out of clay, a process shot may show the lump of unformed clay, any armature used, or how the two-dimensional reference image is transferred to the three-dimensional object. A useful process shot will “tell the story” of how the prop was constructed. Do this with as few photographs as possible; it is possible to describe the construction of a prop with a single photograph if it is staged correctly.

Taking pictures of your prop through its various stages of construction are a great way to show an interviewer how you work and how you think. It also gives tangible proof that you know what you are doing (and eases the mind of those suspicious that you did not do the work yourself). Interviewers love to ask how you achieved something, and having a visual road map of the process in your portfolio can be easier than attempting to describe it through words alone. Sometimes, you may even teach a new trick or technique to an interviewer, and props people love learning new tricks. Finally, your process shots can help remind yourself how you achieved something in the past.

Drawings or other reference material you were given are good to include too, as it will show how accurately you can translate a picture to a three-dimensional object. Even rough or rudimentary sketches can be useful, as they give clues to your working process.

If your prop has special properties, show photographs that highlight them. For example, if you build a table that can support a dancer, show someone dancing on it. If your prop transforms or moves, show a “before” and “after” photograph.

As for text, you should at least include the title of the production, as well as the venue and the people in charge,

such as the director and designer. Even the most obvious photographs need the context of where and when they were used. Beyond that, you may wish to include information about materials used, techniques applied, special properties the prop had, special circumstances you had to overcome, or anything else which may not be readily apparent from the photographs. In a multimedia portfolio, you can include video showing a prop that

utilizes motion or other effects, but in a static portfolio, you need to tell the whole story with photographs and text.

## Paper Portfolios

For my highlight props, I like to devote a single page to each one. For some particularly interesting props, I may spread it



Figure 1-2: A sample portfolio page showing different views and a process shot.



across two pages, but this becomes less frequent as I add more projects to my portfolio. Some props are less interesting, but display competency in a certain skill, so I sometimes put a whole group of related props on a single page. For instance, I have a page dedicated to standard carpentry projects, and another filled with examples of computer graphics and paper props.

You can print your pictures out and stick them to paper or paperboard, or you can do the layout digitally, and print your pages straight from the printer.

In graduate school, fellow scenic designers were still creating portfolios that held pages as large as 24" by 36". These have shrunk over the years, as airlines charge more and more for luggage and the use of the Internet has made face-to-face meetings optional rather than mandatory. Props people have never needed the large portfolios that scenic designers have. Pages that range between standard letter size and tabloid size are more than sufficient. You want something that can be carried around everywhere so that it is not such a chore. A standard size also makes it economical to print new pages as you add props to your portfolio, which will ensure it remains updated.

I prefer a presentation case that allows you to add and remove pages. This allows me to update and rearrange my portfolio depending on whom I am showing it to without having to spend a lot of money getting the entire thing reprinted. You can find all sorts of presentation cases that are slightly more fancy than a 3-ring binder. As a props person, you can probably construct your own as well. You don't necessarily need a binder; I've seen portfolios that were simply a nice box filled with individual pages.

## E-Portfolios

Having an electronic portfolio is the most convenient way to show off your work; you do not have to worry about losing it, you can show it to people who are physically in different places, and you can have as many copies as you need for the same price as a single copy.

An e-portfolio has several forms, and each has its own considerations. You can have a portfolio online for anyone to search for and view, you can have a portfolio you email or otherwise share with individual people, you can have an electronic version stored on a piece of physical media that you give away, such as a CD, a DVD, or a flash drive. Finally, you can have a portfolio on a laptop, tablet, or other device that you display in person.

An online portfolio has many advantages. You can email the web address to potential employers; this gives them the option of perusing it on their own time. You do not have to worry about file compatibilities as long as your website is viewable on any computer. If you are cold-contacting people, you do not want to take the chance that e-mailing large files will fill up their mailbox or divert your email to their spam folder. You may also find situations where you cannot send files to a potential employer, so sending a link to a web address is your only option. Finally, you can print your web address on your business card to hand to anyone. This is especially useful at conferences or other networking events where you are meeting many people and may not have time to show a portfolio, or where the expense of handing out CDs or DVDs to dozens of people is just too much. Finally, an online portfolio is almost like "hanging out a shingle" in the physical world, and can lead to new employers and clients seeking you out rather than the other way around.

An online portfolio should be easy to navigate, intuitively laid out, and allow large enough pictures so that you can easily see your work on any screen. Your contact information should be easy to find; you may not wish to provide your personal contact information in such a public arena, which is understandable and encouraged, but you need at least a valid e-mail address and a general geographic region (I personally hate websites that only provide a "contact form" for getting in touch with the owner, as I prefer to keep a record of all e-mails I send).

An easy-to-navigate website will have your props categorized and organized. You should not have to click through multiple links to get to the pictures. It should not be difficult to get

back to the main page or to your contact information once you start working your way through the website. You do not want photographs of your best work buried deep within the website so that a potential employer never reaches them or does not realize they are there.

You can find many free options for putting your work online. Many of these are great, especially for the beginning prop maker. You should not postpone putting your work online; it is better to have a “good enough” website on a free service rather than a perfect idea for a website that is never executed. I have met many prop makers who say “I’m working on a website but it is not online yet”; six months later, they still do not have a website online. As an employer, I will be hiring other people rather than waiting for them to get their act together.

However, plenty of free portfolio sites should be avoided. They may have distracting advertisements or be difficult to navigate. They may also be downright ugly and make your work look amateurish. A portfolio site should not make it easy to navigate to someone else’s work without realizing it; you do not want a potential employer being impressed with what turns out to be another prop maker’s props.

If you do have the time, money, and talent, making your own website (or having someone else make one for you) is not too expensive. Having your own domain name is fairly cheap and shows that you are serious about your career and that you are invested in it for the long term.

Whether you go with a free service, a paid service, or make your own website, keep in mind that it should be easy to update and maintain. You do not want to put a lot of effort into starting a portfolio site only to find you do not have the time or expertise to add new pictures and projects. A website that has not been updated for a few months or years may make it seem as if you have stopped working; if your skills have improved or if you have made some spectacular props since you last updated your website, this lack of publicly available information may keep you from getting better jobs. In today’s world, one of the first things a potential employer will do is search for you on

the Internet. You want them to be able to find your website, and for it to show what you are currently capable of.

The second way to distribute an e-portfolio is by e-mailing or otherwise sharing it. It is best to restrict this to as few files as possible. Sending one or two image files is fine; sending 20 separate images is excessive. A file that can contain multiple pages, such as a PDF, is best; make sure whatever type of file you send is compatible with the computer your recipient is using and that you do not need any special programs or applications to open or view it. Simplest is best; do not add distracting animations, sounds, or other elements. A collection of images and text that the recipient can peruse at his or her own pace will give you the most success.

Because you are e-mailing this, it is vital to keep the overall size of this file relatively low. Many e-mail programs have limits on what you send or receive; your recipient may not be able to receive files as large as the ones you can send. It can be helpful to have two different files you send out depending on the situation. You can have a larger, more complete e-portfolio that you send to people who specifically request it. You can have a second one of miniscule size that you send to people just to give an example of your work; this can be just a simple collage of different projects you have done along with your name and contact information. If you have a website, include the address on this page, as well as in your e-mail. These kinds of “teaser” pages are also great to print out and bring to conferences or networking events, particularly ones where you are displaying your portfolio; they can be given out to potential employees along with your business card.

Whatever files you send out, make sure they are clearly named. “EricHart-portfolio.pdf” is a much better name than “new\_project(3).pdf.” Your recipient is likely to copy the file to his or her computer, and if the file name does not include your name and a description of the contents, the recipient may later forget what your file was named and be unable to locate it when searching.

A piece of physical media with your e-portfolio stored on it is another option for distribution. As with emailing files, be

sure whatever media you use and whatever file type you choose is compatible with the widest variety of devices your recipient may be using. With a CD, DVD, or flash drive, you can even save your portfolio in a number of different formats to maximize compatibility. Make sure it is easy to navigate and that every thing is well labeled. The main file can even be called “OPEN ME” or something similar to take all guesswork out.

If you have separate image files, they should be organized and clearly labeled as well. Do not keep the default file names of “DSC0098” when you can name them something far less cryptic, such as “Hamlet Skull side view.” Including the individual image files is a good idea just in case the recipient’s computer cannot open or read the main portfolio file or document.

You also have the option of including additional files. A resume or CV is good to have, as is a link to your website if you have one. Again, label these clearly.

Having multiple options ready is a necessity for showing your portfolio in any situation. If you meet with a person and they want to look at your portfolio while standing in the middle of the shop far from any computers, you will want a paper portfolio. If they have a computer but no Internet access, a CD/DVD is helpful, as is bringing your own device to show an e-portfolio on. If they do have Internet access, you can bring them to your website. If you do not have a paper portfolio with you and no computer is available, the least you want to do is give them a business card with your website, a CD/DVD with your e-portfolio, or some other means for them to view your work on their own time.

## Sequence

The sequence of your portfolio is very important for your paper version. If your electronic portfolio is set up like a paper version (such as with a PDF or PowerPoint file), the sequence is important as well. While some electronic portfolios and websites can be explored in a more nonlinear fashion, keep in mind that an employer is more likely to start with the first picture or category listed and proceed down the line, so the guidelines for ordering your portfolio still apply to some extent.

The beginning of your portfolio should have relevant contact and professional information. If you are a specific type of props artisan, such as “sculptor” or “soft goods artisan,” you should include that as well. You should start with one of your most eye-catching and exciting props. You want to grab the attention of whoever is looking at your portfolio. It may not necessarily be the most complex or challenging prop you’ve built; it may, in fact, just be one of the best photographs of your props. You want to follow this with one of the best props you have built. Your second page should show off your best skills. Unlike the first page, the second need not be as eye-catching, but it should highlight the best that you have achieved. Where the first page is meant to draw the viewer in, the second is there to set a trend that the best is yet to come.

Order the remaining pages under the assumption that you may run out of time and not get a chance to show your whole portfolio. Imagine that you can only look at the first five pages, or the first ten, or fifteen; does that still give a good representation of the work you can do? This is why I am hesitant to divide my portfolio into strict categories. If half of my portfolio is devoted to carpentry projects, and half to craft projects, then someone who stops halfway through will only see carpentry projects. A categorical approach works well on an Internet site where the reviewer is free to explore the pages at his or her own pace and in whatever order he or she wants.

If, however, it does make sense to divide your paper portfolio into categories, have tabs on the side so you can quickly skip to whatever section you need. If your interviewer suddenly wants to see your paper props, a tab at the beginning of your paper props section will help keep you from nervously flipping through every page. The organization of your portfolio gives clues to your organizational skills, and employers pick up on that. *How* you present your portfolio can be just as revealing as what is in your portfolio.

Your last page is important too, and should be a solid example of an exciting prop, though the skills it showcases should be included earlier in your portfolio as well. I have been to many interviews where the employer finishes looking

through my portfolio, and then leaves it open on the last page as we spend another half an hour discussing the job and my resume. That last page just sits there, staring at us the whole time. You do not want your last page to be a throwaway page.

When showing your portfolio, remember that it is more of a conversation with your interviewer rather than a presentation. You cannot predict how long you will remain on each page, and in some cases, the interviewer may ask to go back to look at a previous page.

## Photography

You may not be a professional photographer, but blurry or grainy photographs really distract from good work. Both of these problems are caused by too little light. You can adjust your camera's exposure in three different ways: the shutter speed, the aperture, and the sensitivity of the film or the chip. A fast shutter speed will freeze moving objects in place. As you slow down the shutter speed, objects that are moving may appear blurry in the photograph. With a very slow shutter speed, the slight shaking of your hands will be enough to blur the whole picture.

The aperture refers to how large the iris is when the picture is taken; the more open it is, the more light is let in. So if a low shutter speed is causing blurry pictures, you can open up your aperture and raise your shutter speed to get the same exposure. There are two caveats to this. One is that apertures only get so big; indoor shots are typically so dark that even when the aperture is at its widest, the shutter speed will still need to be low for a properly exposed photograph. The second caveat is that the wider an aperture is, the less depth of field you get. A tiny aperture can keep a wide range of things in focus, from items close to the camera to objects further away. A wide aperture will have only a sliver of depth in focus. A really wide aperture may have only your nose in focus while your eyes are out of focus. This may be detrimental to photographs of your props, as you typically want the entire object to be in focus.



Figure 1-3: Blurry photographs are not only amateurish, but they will obscure the details of your prop.

The best solution is to use a tripod. This keeps your camera steady so you can use slower shutter speeds and not have to open the aperture too wide. You can also simply set your camera onto a solid surface, or clamp it in place using the tools in your shop. In some cases where a tripod is not handy, you can brace yourself against a wall and hold yourself as steady as possible while shooting pictures. If you are shooting digitally, take a lot of shots in succession; this increases your odds that at least one of them will be taken while your hand is still for a split second.



Grain is caused by a number of factors. The biggest culprit is increasing the sensitivity of your film or chip. Known as the ISO, this basically allows your camera to see more light at the expense of more grain and noise showing up. Cheaper cameras are more susceptible to this. The solution again is to use a tripod and set your camera to manual mode so you can keep the ISO down. Of course, if you are happy with the results of shooting at a high ISO on your camera, feel free to use it; camera technology is improving every year, and cameras that can shoot at ISO 6400 and higher today exhibit less grain than cameras five or ten years ago shooting at just ISO 800.

## Adding Light

Besides using a tripod, the other way to improve your photographs is by finding or adding more light. Some shops have uneven lighting; find the brightest area and position your prop so it picks up the most light. You can move it to keep shadows from falling across the important parts, or lay it down on its back, and shoot it from above for maximum brightness. You can shine additional lights from the sides to brighten it as well; most theatres have clip lights or work lights, or you can keep a set of dedicated lights in your shop just for the purposes of photographing.

Another option is to bring your prop outside to photograph if possible. On sunny days, you will have harsh shadows cast over your prop, which may actually make it look worse than if you had photographed it inside. If you can't wait for a cloudy day, then move your prop out of direct sunlight, or hang a sheet above to diffuse the lighting.

Your on-camera flash is perhaps one of the worst ways to add light. It is harsh, and its head-on position makes everything look flat and cheaply made. If you absolutely must use it, you can diffuse it by attaching a piece of tissue paper or a sheet of diffusion gel from the lighting department in front of the flash.



Figure 1-4: Photographing your props in front of a neutral background helps them stand out more.

All I have just described is the most rudimentary introduction to photography. This is not a book on making good photographs, so I will not spend more time on it, but I do want to emphasize the importance of having good pictures of your props. You can find tons of books, magazines, and websites to further your skills. Look especially for information on product photography or how to shoot still-lives.

If you excel at something, it can be hard to describe in words how you differ from someone who is merely competent at it. A photograph of a finely made table in your portfolio has a much larger, and much more immediate impact in a job

interview than simply listing the word “carpentry” on your resume.

The only way to guarantee photographs of your work is to take the pictures yourself; if someone else takes a picture of your prop, consider that a surprise bonus. Even when someone promises to photograph your prop, it may take weeks or even months to track them down and get copies of the pictures. You need to make it a habit to take pictures whenever you get to a new stage of the prop’s construction.

Often, particularly at the beginning of your career, the pictures in your portfolio are the sum total of what you have to show for your skills. Sometimes, all it takes is a single interesting and well-documented prop in your portfolio to convince the job interviewer to take a chance on you. That’s certainly happened to me; even after working at a company for an entire season, the props master will remember that one prop I had in my portfolio that impressed him.