
A Photographer's Guide to Makeup

Many photographers, especially those of the male persuasion, have no idea how to apply makeup or what makeup adds to an image. With so many photo processing tools available, is a makeup artist even necessary? Why not simply remove blemishes and add color in Photoshop?

As a makeup artist, I hear these questions all the time. My goal here is to talk about when you should hire a makeup artist, versus trying it yourself or fixing things in Photoshop. I also give a brief overview of the various components of makeup and how they come together to enhance (or conceal!) your subject's features. It's great information in case you can't hire a makeup artist and want a better understanding of what she would have done as you try to fix the problems in Photoshop.

The Role of a Makeup Artist

The makeup artist you work with should be your partner in crime in getting great images. It's her job to understand the final purpose of images that are being taken (wedding? senior photo? fashion magazine?) and to help you achieve that. However, her main job is to make sure the client, model, or talent looks as good as possible so you have a head start on creating memorable images.

A makeup artist is especially important if you're shooting video. There's a reason why Jon Stewart and Barack Obama never go in front of the camera without makeup on, and it's that today's HD film exposes every wrinkle, pore, pimple, and blotch. While such blemishes are easy to remove on a still image, they are much more difficult to fix in a moving picture. It is far easier to have a makeup artist even out skin tone and cover blemishes beforehand than to try any fancy tactics on the computer afterward.

A makeup artist is also crucial for controlling shine. A person quickly grows shiny under the hot camera lights, and you don't want to realize while reviewing your film that the subject has suddenly developed an oil slick around frame 5,024. While you could, in theory, watch out for shine and powder a subject yourself, in practice it's difficult. A videographer has to stay focused on the making of the film; he can't be swooping in every five minutes to remove shine or tuck away a stray hair.



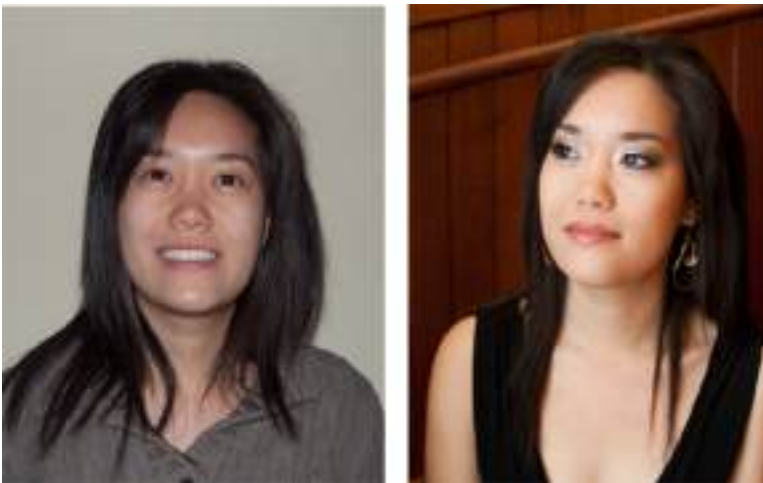
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In contrast to video, still photography is much more forgiving when it comes to makeup. If you're photographing only men (and are not shooting an Emporio Armani ad or some other fashion-heavy image), you can get away with just concealer and powder, or even nothing at all, and perfect the skin later using Photoshop and plug-ins like Digital Anarchy's Beauty Box. I do recommend using powder, since shine is harder to remove post-picture than localized imperfections like pimples and scars.

If using a makeup artist is optional for men in still shots, how about for women? Here, the heuristic is completely different. When photographing a woman, the rule is: Always hire a makeup artist.

This is not because women are worse-looking and somehow need more help than men. Rather, it's because there is so much opportunity to make women look fantastic using makeup in ways that are extremely difficult for Photoshop to mimic. For example, makeup can make a woman's eyes pop, add depth and contour to her features, and in general, make an otherwise ordinary-looking woman appear stunning.

Here is one example I am particularly proud of:



I dare you to try doing that in Photoshop.

An often-ignored role of makeup is the confidence boost it gives your subjects. Women who feel beautiful, look beautiful. I'm often amazed at the transformation in a woman's smile, posture, and carriage after having her makeup applied. Even though digital photography is in some ways a numbers game, a confident subject will increase your percentage of shots that are promising.

The Basics of Makeup

Now that we've covered when you should hire a makeup artist (i.e., always except when taking still shots of men, and even then consider it), let's move on to the basics of makeup. The goal here is not to teach makeup application – for that, you would need books or a personal lesson in makeup. Instead, it's to give you a grasp of the terminology and tools of makeup so that you can effectively collaborate with your makeup artist on set.

Base

A makeup artist will start by applying base (foundation, primer, concealer, and powder). The purpose of base is to smooth out the complexion, reduce redness and shine, and conceal under-eye darkness, wrinkles, and scars. A good base is especially important in video, where blemished skin is a nightmare to correct retroactively. Tools like Digital Anarchy's Beauty Box can help, but it's not a replacement for makeup done right in the first place.

When applying base, a makeup artist will often start by putting on primer, a clear gel that fills in pores and enables makeup application to go on more smoothly. Then, foundation is used to even out skin tone and create a clear canvas for makeup. I've found that on older subjects, powder foundation can settle into pores and accentuate fine lines. I prefer to mix liquid foundation with water (to make it more sheer), and then apply concealer where needed to cover spots and blemishes.

Many makeup artists will use a separate concealer for the under-eye area and a drier, more concentrated one to cover spots and blemishes. One of my favorite tricks is to use a highlighting pen on top of concealer to add radiance to the skin. This can do wonders for brightening aging skin:



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When a makeup artist is done with the base, he will set the concealer with powder. This prevents the powder blushes and shadows from grabbing onto creamy spots on the skin.

Cheeks

I like to apply a neutral bronzer along the temples on both women and men to define the bone structure and to give the illusion of more defined cheekbones. A highlighting powder can also be swept right on top of the cheekbones to create more dimension. On women, blush is blended over the bronzer to create a soft, natural flush.

Eyes

Using shadow, eyeliner, and mascara, a skilled makeup artist can really bring out the color and accentuate the shape of your subject's eyes. Unlike evening out skin tone, applying eyeshadow in when post-processing video is extremely difficult if not impossible, so hiring a makeup artist can make a big difference here. With stills, it's not too difficult to do it in Photoshop on a single image, but getting it to look consistent between different shots may be tricky. And, again, don't underestimate the confidence that can come from feeling beautiful with makeup on.

Eye makeup is often especially striking on women with light eyes and features. Here, purple shadows and liner are used to define the model's green eyes:



I often think of applying eyeshadow as a way of faceting a gem (the eye) for maximum brilliance. Here, too, shadow is used to contour the subject's eyes and reveal depth:



As a part of the overall eye look, a makeup artist will often define the brows. I like to use a pencil to lightly color in strokes, and then use a powder to soften the look.

Lips

Lips can be defined using lipstick, lip pencil, gloss, or all three. Depending on the look that you are going for, the lip color can be the center of attention or tie in a monochromatic look. Lip color is also the easiest aspect of makeup to change on set, so if you want to take several shots with different wardrobe, lighting, or set, having your makeup artist change the lip color can be a quick way to complement the new setting. You may be surprised at how changing from a neutral to a bold lip color can instantly alter the mood of the makeup.

How It Comes Together

In my work with photographers and videographers, makeup is typically not the focus of the image or film. I am rarely asked to transform the subject into a runway model or an Orc, but rather the most beautiful, confident, and classy image of themselves: the Vanity Fair cover version. What the audience doesn't see (the under-eye circles, the blemishes, the double-chin) is just as important as, if not more important than, what they do see (the striking eyes, the porcelain skin, the expressive mouth). Creating memorable images is about the overall effect, and makeup – as much as lighting, setting, subject, and retouching – is an essential part of the process.

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