

HOW JUDGES ASSESS PHOTO COMPETITIONS

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Deeply appreciated is the competition judge with the knowledge, tact and patience to provide constructive criticism of each and every photo. Unfortunately such beneficence is the exception. Of course, all judges add to our learning, and we can only be grateful for their efforts on our behalf. As an assist to the perplexed photographer whose masterpiece may have been turned aside in competition by an “Out,” “Next,” or “Not my cigar,” this article discusses the artistic objective of photo competitions, and elaborates common critiques offered by contest judges.

The Main Criterion: Photography as Art

A photograph has to be seen as art in order to place in photo competitions. When is photography art? The most uniformly accepted criterion over the past century and a half defines art in photography as an image that evokes emotion, be it beauty, contrast, pathos, intrigue, pity—any one of innumerable human feelings.

To be considered art, a photograph has to be virtually free of technical flaws that would distract from the image. Since the absence of technical flaws is normally a prerequisite for qualification of a photograph as art, most judges begin a critique of an entry by noting any significant technical flaws.

Common Technical Flaws in Photo Entries

In normal vision, our mental image is of a naturally composed scene, perfectly focused, with appropriate contrast and unimportant effects diminished. For example, glare on a polished floor is nearly as bright as the lights above it, but when we view and unconsciously process the scene, the effect appears quashed and the impact of the glare muted.

When a photographer captures the same glare on paper or transparency, the image becomes a step removed from our unconscious mental processing. Apprentice architectural photographers are surprised at how glare on a shiny floor appears much brighter in a photograph than directly to the eye. The glare has to be reduced or removed from the photograph, or it will become an object of attention and effectively ruin the artistic potential of the image.

Similarly, it is incumbent on the photographer to avoid distractions that would occur absent correct focus, proper exposure, adequate contrast and sensible composition. Most technical flaws cited by competition judges can be summarized as follows:

- ❑ Out of focus: The main subject or a part of it may be out of focus, or there may appear two focal points that confuse the image. Another potential distraction occurs when background intended to be out of focus, as in a vague, colorful blur, instead shows up partly in focus (a “tweener”) which can divert attention from the main subject.
- ❑ Image not full: A sizable part of the photograph is empty or has no meaningful content, to the extent the view appears wanting.
- ❑ Objects cut off: Significant elements of the image are cut off by the borders of the photograph (although some photographers intentionally produce such an effect in landscape photography).
- ❑ Excessive contrast: One or more areas or colors appear too bright or dark. Backlit scenes are especially vulnerable. Potential remedies include a more median exposure, flash (or, withholding flash), a graduated neutral density filter, shooting under less contrasty lighting conditions, and using better film for contrast.
- ❑ Hot spots: When lighting is not uniform, a photograph may have a few areas of particularly bright illumination that detracts from the image.
- ❑ Weak coloration: Faded color, or a gaping absence of tone where strong color saturation would normally be expected, is considered a technical fault by many judges (for example, a white (or “bald”) sky, which for color images can often be remedied by a polarizer). Skies in black-and-white images can be darkened by a yellow or red filter.
- ❑ Over- or Under-Exposure.
- ❑ Glare and the like: Offputting reflections, blurs of motion and other unintended consequences of capturing an image under challenging conditions may also dilute artistic effect.
- ❑ Image not level: Photographs taken with wide-angle lenses are particularly susceptible. A tripod and/or spirit level are musts with ultra-wide lenses.
- ❑ Presentational faults: Not infrequently, judges reject entries because dust or a crack appears on a transparency. Prints are sometimes rejected because the size is considered too small to effectively illustrate the content, or because of flaws in development such as streaking.

Of course, serious photographers are not unaware of these issues. Some flaws can be avoided with adequate preparation, but many shooting situations are so impromptu or otherwise difficult to perfect that technical issues remain a challenge for the most expert photographers.

Anticipating Correction of Technical Problems by Overcompensating

When an image is initially conceived, it is sometimes possible to increase the feasibility of making any needed technical improvements in the darkroom or digitally. As a general rule, provide for more of what may be needed later.

If a scene is largely backlit or shadowy, allow for sufficient exposure to assure enough detail will be recorded in the darker areas. If such areas are too underexposed, not

enough detail will be recorded, making selective brightening (“dodging”) unfeasible. In photographing architecture, consider leaving some periphery or border around the subject in order to correct slanting vertical lines through Photoshop or other such program. Otherwise, the composition may emerge excessively cropped when the lines are digitally straightened. In the traditional darkroom, skilled technicians can also produce such realignment to a limited degree.

Photography as Art

Clear of the technical obstacle course, a photograph may illustrate beauty or other impression, powerful or subtle, but still not win an award. The bar is high and may seem unreasonably difficult because of the subjective nature of art together with the straight odds against winning a competition. Only one photo of every seven to ten or so entries can place in typical contests.

Photographer Lucian Perkins, in a talk in January 2001, advised that a winning photograph, “. . . must have something that drives me further. . . than the norm. Subtlety with complexity, and that you are compelled to study more, which grabs you.”

In my experience, a truly great photograph and sure winner evokes awe, a compelling sense of wonder and admiration that returns with anticipation when the picture is viewed again.

The Judge’s Call

Many judges stress the subjective nature of photography as art, indicating that what most impresses them would not necessarily sway others. Some admit to certain biases in assessing winning photographs. I have heard a few judges confess to not being flower buffs; others have a history of selecting only particular kinds of entries, such as abstracts. A result is encouragement of club members to diversify their portfolios. Since most photo clubs feature various theme nights, photographers keen on competition know their odds improve by diversifying.

Characteristics of Winning Photos

While there is no step-by-step recipe for producing award-winning, artful photos, certain characteristics are evident. Over and above an absence of technical flaws, finalist photos are frequently:

- ❑ Of character! The subject, whether human, flora, fauna, geographic or architectural, has a distinctive and appealing presence or intrigue. The essence may be entirely innate—an expert rendition of reality by the photographer—or the effect may have been enhanced by the photographer, using techniques to bring out the essence of the subject.
- ❑ Creative! Judges tend to prefer subjects and composition they have not seen before, rather than common subjects. While most judges would not rule out

selecting a sunset as a winning photograph, such a piece would have to be absolutely spectacular in order to make up for its commonality. Photo entries featuring popular landmarks (e.g., national monuments) and what appear to be family pictures fare even worse in competitions, because of a sense that these subjects lack the originality expected of art.

- Direct and to the point: The subject and theme of a great photo are immediately obvious. A not infrequent critique is that an image is “too busy” or multifaceted, which is an aesthetic rather than technical judgment.
- Either rich in color saturation or delicately shaded. Both approaches accentuate mood. Brilliant color is always a plus. In black-and-white images, high contrast without sacrificing detail creates a compelling tension.
- Composed to the “Rule of Thirds”: Many photographers consider that an image composed as if set out on a grid of thirds tends to appeal to the aesthetic senses of balance and order.
- Light transcendence: Highlighting the essence of the subject through a delicate interval of sunlight or other bright illumination tends to create inspiring photographs. Ansel Adams applied this technique in many of his most beautiful works.

The subjective nature of art cannot be overemphasized. In assessing photos in competition, judges frequently have to narrow the field through the reluctant, albeit straightforward admission that one photograph impresses them personally more than another. Lesson: If you believe you have a winning image, are sure it projects a strong impression and has no technical flaws to speak of, do not be discouraged. Continue to compete the image, and it will likely achieve the recognition it deserves.

Order of Presentation

Last, a word on submitting images for competition. Many photographers prefer that their multiple entries not be grouped in succession, but appear mixed with others, because of a desire that the judge not identify their body of work. In practice, judges often associate works by individual photographers regardless of the order of presentation. Moreover, such recognition often helps, rather than hurts, the chances of the contestant. Judges frequently face the quandary of deciding between two highly impressive entries by different photographers. The scale frequently tips in favor of the photographer who has obviously submitted other quality images—he or she is seen as the more deserving of recognition.