

Traps for young players – conventions in photo judging

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If there are no “rules” in photography as some famous photographers claim, then club members might well ask why judges refer to them so often. Even if we agree that “guidelines” is a better word, this doesn’t quite fit the bill. There are “conventions” by which I mean a set of commonly expressed beliefs or sets of values employed by judges in commenting on images in competition.

Quite often club photographers just starting out will be unaware of these, and will have images marked down without being aware these conventions exist. These are not always to be found in set subject guidelines, there is an assumption either that the entrant knows these rules or will find out from the judging experience. Conventions are not facts, but opinions. However, fore-knowledge of prevailing opinions is being fore-armed when first entering photo competitions.

The purpose of this article is to create greater awareness of the traps that commencing entrants in competition can fall into without knowing it.

The opinions expressed below are mine as are any errors.

1. Impact – there is a strongly held convention that images should have visual impact. This is usually achieved by simplicity, which in turn is influenced by subject choice. Cropping often achieves visual impact. An example of this might be a set subject on shapes such as triangles. Concentrating on a few triangles and cutting out unnecessary or distracting material helps achieve this aim. However, if you were photographing a parade and one marcher was out of step, then you need to show the out of step feet in relation to a set of other feet that are in step, or the image is meaningless.

One factor which has led to over-concentration on cropping by judges has been impact judging. This is judging where a panel sees an image for a few seconds and then gives a score. The method is often employed in competitions where there are thousands of images being judged. Apart for exposing club members to the process, it has no educational value or place in club judging.

One outcome of this is that contemplative or detailed photographs need to be exceptional to score well in photo judging. A subtle work may not be appreciated by a judge, especially those to whom cropping seems to be the only tool in their kit, and would probably want to crop a painting like “The Garden of Earthly Delights” (see references). There is no optimal cropping as judges vary in opinion as does the artistic nature of the photograph itself.

2. The “story” of an image – this is a concept that many judges refer to in comments. It is related to 1. above, and refers to the narrative or point being made in your image. This is assisted by your image title or caption, but the image should be judged on the strength of the image with little or no weight given to the cleverness or otherwise of the caption. This does not always occur in practice, so make sure your title is easily understood and relates to the image.
3. Composition – this includes such things as rule of thirds, rule of odd numbers, leading lines and many others. For some people, design seems instinctive, for many others it is something to be learned. In photography courses, there are often accompanying units on design to help build these skills.

In my view, judges often use technical considerations as a winnowing process, and it will be mastery over technical matters that can inhibit an image from receiving a higher score, unless it has an over-riding visual quality or other factor. Hence I recommend strongly listening carefully to judges to discover these design elements and use them, until you know when to deliberately ignore them. Generally speaking, judges like the subject of your image to be off centre. They will sometimes comment that it fits the rule of thirds. However, there can often be subjects that are so powerful, perhaps because of symmetry or some other factor, that central placement is the only placement for your composition.

Another is the “rule of odds”. This obviously does not apply to a St George and the Dragon type of image, but it does explain why the ducks on the wall in Granny’s living room were in sets of three. Odd numbers are believed to create tension and interest in an image, hence three ducks in your pond photo, not two or four.

Judges will also often remark on how lines lead the viewer into or through a photo. Once you appreciate what these are you will see them everywhere – a road, stream, row of trees, and so on. A winding path is more appealing in a rural scene than a straight road, for example, except when it isn’t.

4. Originality/copyright – the simplest way to explain this convention, is that when photographing an object or artwork that has been created by other human hands, bring something to the party. By this I mean, your own interpretation. If there is a statue in the park, you need something other than a close up of it. This might be people interacting with the statue, or by placing it in context in a landscape, or trying your hand at forced perspective (the statue of a mayor holding up the local council chambers for example).

The convention often falls down or is unevenly applied. A set subject implying an object might be shot as a still life, but fall foul of this convention, but be perfectly acceptable if it were entered in a still life competition (unless the judge has few tools in his kit, as alluded to earlier).

Similarly copyright is a complicated matter and best avoided by judges who are unlikely to be experts in this area. Plagiarism is another matter, where a photographer claims someone else's image as their own. However, there are many grey areas regarding this whole issue. In photography there seems little concern that images taken during a workshop with a recognised tutor probably ought not to enter images in competition as their own work – this would not occur in a painting or sculpture workshop for example. However, there is no denying the influence of artists and musicians (see References) on each other, and notions of copyright are nonsense in such situations. In other fields, such as writing or textile art where a commercial machine sewing service is used, artists can enter works as collaborative efforts.

I have provided references for further reading in this area. Entrants should be aware there is a convention by many judges regarding the upholding copyright that may not be based on fact. Generally speaking, avoid subjects or situations where these conventions might be adversely applied to your image.

5. On the level/being upright – nearly judges will notice immediately if the water in your image is running uphill. This is an easy thing to fix, and should be the second thing you do (say in Lightroom) after lens calibration. Similarly, fix buildings that have walls that look as though they are falling down. This is called “keystoning” and happens because the camera sees what is actually there, perspective, whereas our brains automatically compensate for what our eyes see. This is unless you as the artist deliberately distort perspective for your creative purpose. When you break a rule like keystoning, break it deliberately.
6. Eyes sharp – this is something a judge notices quickly. If the subject is living the eyes should be sharp, or at least the eye closest to the camera should be. This one really is a rule; it is harder to imagine someone having the tip of the nose of their subject only in focus, but it has probably been done.
7. Post-processing – if you are in a beginning grade in your club, judges should make allowances for level of post-processing skill. Many judges will suggest post-processing alterations. These will include removing signs of modernity (powerlines, etc) from old buildings, placement of clouds into empty skies (cropping is the alternative), selective lightening or darkening of areas in an image and so on.

The trap for young players here is that judges often don't add the caveat that this is only acceptable under certain circumstances, such as open categories, and some set subjects.

Travel, nature and wildlife, photo-journalism and social documentary are excluded. Always read the rules for entry carefully, and if you have a travel image, save this separately to the one you manipulate for another category. An example of this is the use of models at an historic site, or a cultural performance put on for tourists – these images are ineligible for travel competitions, as is digital manipulation.

Don't insert another kangaroo in your nature shot – this is just not permitted, even though technically, and possibly aesthetically desirable. Similarly, social documentary is meant to be the plain truth of what the photographer saw, not something concocted.

The Australian Photographic Society has some definitions on its website, and the Judges Manual from the Photographic Society of Queensland is another source (see references).

The history of the controversy of image manipulation is more than a century old in Australia. A famous example is the dispute between Frank Hurley, war photographer, and Charles Bean, official historian, during the First World War. Hurley, already famous from his role as photographer on the early Antarctic expeditions, made composite negatives of several scenes he shot during the war to "see what a modern battle looks like". Bean described them as "fakes" which he "would not have at any price". Recently we witnessed the controversy over the numbers present at Trump's inauguration in 2016 compared to Obama – photographs were relied on to settle the matter.

In my opinion, if the clouds weren't present in your landscape, come back another time. If you can't do that, but you want to enhance your image, then the correct designation for your final image is "Inspired by...", because it is not what was actually there. Many won't agree with that view. Some state processing skills are of equal importance to camera skills. This is incorrect, what matters is the image, the means of getting it is irrelevant providing you haven't cheated.

This issue matters because it increasingly difficult to tell what is real from what is not, and as serious photographers we have a duty to tell the truth. This separates us from the deceptions regularly posted on social media by propagandists.

The obvious exception to the above is creative or conceptual photography. Provided all the elements you use have been created by your hand, anything goes, and should in producing such images.

References

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