

Perspectives in Evaluating Photographic Images

We recognize that judging is subjective, therefore we are providing member/judge perspectives on 3 key criteria of creating and post processing of an image.

Perspectives on Photographic Elements

by Dennis Chamberlain

I have listed Impact first as I believe it is the most important element

Impact. Impact is often described as the “wow” factor. This is the most subjective of the three elements of the ELCC judging because everyone has his or her own feelings about whether a photo has impact or not. It can come from dramatic lighting, a face with character, breathtaking scenery, or perhaps your subject is something unusual or you have used a very original, creative, and thought-provoking technique. Or perhaps your photo conveys an intense, remarkable mood. Most people think of impact as an “immediate reaction,” but sometimes a “slow burn” works even better. One example of impact that I like to offer is a rule that is almost universal – don’t enter photos of your children. They have great impact for you, but they probably don’t impact impartial observers the same way.

Composition. An essential element of a good photograph, composition is often simplified into a definition of “the intersection of the thirds” or “lines that lead you into the main subject,” or the effective framing of “interesting patterns.” Fortunately, there is much more to composition than that, and once you understand the basics it is fun to “break the rules”. Good composition comes from observing artwork, from practice, and from study. Michael Freeman’s book “The Photographer’s Eye” is an enjoyable introduction to composition.

Technical. Is the photograph sharp? Is the exposure well done? Is there too much or too little contrast? Are there bright parts of the photograph that are “blown out”, and are there dark portions of the photograph that are total black with no detail? Is the color accurate? Judging the technical qualities of a photograph would seem to be more objective than the other two elements (impact and composition) and yet some of the most creative and artistic photos are not intended to be sharp, have lots of areas with no detail, and purposely incorporate unusual color overtones. The key here is the artist’s intent – is it a landscape where sharpness and proper exposure are intended, or is it a creative piece where there were no such intentions? The artist’s intentions are important here, and good artwork normally makes those intentions clear.

Perspectives on Photographic Elements

by Keith Bauer

Composition: At its basic level, composition is the arrangement of the elements in the scene.

There are principles of basic composition that should be understood, but not viewed as rigid rules. Composition should express your vision and intention for the image. Composition consists of light, foreground/background relationships, subject, contrast, space between elements, simplicity and inspiration. Composition should not be about redoing someone else's work, rather it should be about creating your personal interpretation of a scene. Creating order out of chaos is an element of composition that is extremely important. As Ansel Adams said "There is nothing worse than a sharp image of a fuzzy concept."

Impact: Impact is the visual reaction to an image. An image with strong impact makes the viewer engage with the image, study the image, scan the image, understand the image, enjoy the image. It is an emotional reaction to the image. Images with strong impact cause the viewer to stop and enjoy it. Images with low, or negative impact cause the viewer to turn away and want to look at something else. Impact must be made instantly. Images that are overly complex generally have low impact. Clearly impact is a very personal, subjective concept. In general, images of common scenes have less impact. For example, balloon shots in Albuquerque must be really spectacular, or the impact will be low. Images of iconic scenes tend to have less impact because viewers have seen them countless times. Images of unique subjects presented well generally have more impact.

Technical: The technical side of photography consists of elements from image capture in the field, to final image display. Common technical elements involved in the capture include exposure, focus, depth of field, and proper lens choice to create the perspective you want to convey, and composition. Yes composition is a technical element. The "correct" exposure may be different than the one the camera meter suggests. The exposure needs to match your intent for the image. Once the image has been captured, the technical journey continues with post processing. The goal of post processing should be enhance the intent of the image captured. Over processing a poor image just produces an over-processed poor image. There seems to be a sense of "I'll fix it later." That rarely works if the image was not executed correctly. There is both an art, and a science to post processing. The science side includes understanding all of the tools available, what they do, and how to effectively use them. What it does not include is when or where to use them. The "when" and "where" parts are much harder to learn and are incredibly important to the final product. Images that should be critically sharp, need to be. A common technical critique is that an image is soft. That is most likely because the image should have been sharp and it wasn't because the photographer didn't do the work to make it sharp. The photographer didn't take the time to work through the proper techniques to create a sharp image such as using a tripod, or critically focusing, or using mirror lockup, or... Not suggesting every image must be critically sharp, but if the image needs to be, and it isn't the technical merit of the image will suffer. The technical component is easier to master than composition and artistic vision.