

An Analysis of Judging

Part Two

by Dr. E.R. Sethna

The following analysis by Dr. E.R. Sethna, as well as Part One published last month, was first published in the Royal Photographic Society Journal. It is reprinted here with permission.

B - The Positive Aspects of Judging

Having dealt with the four main ways in which negative attitudes manifest themselves in judging, I will now turn my attention to the positive aspects.

In good judging, I found that three attributes of the pictures were taken into consideration. These—in order of importance—were as follows:

- A) What the picture communicates—the “message” with a weighting of 50-60 percent.
- B) The content of the picture and how it is dealt with, with a weighting of 30-35 percent.
- C) The technical aspects of the picture—the “medium” with a weighting of 10-15 percent.

A) What the Picture Communicates—The “Message”

Appreciation of all art, including a photograph, is not primarily an intellectual exercise but an emotional one, which may be pleasurable, depressing, moving or frightening. The mood that a picture conveys is the core of the “message” and should form the basis of evaluation of a picture. Good judging is done more by the heart than the head, and the ability to feel a picture and not just visualize it. It is the buzz and tingle which one experiences on seeing a good picture which is at the heart of judging.

More often than not it is difficult to verbalize feelings and emotions that a picture conveys, a fact which assumes greater proportions in the case of judges

not blessed with a verbal facility. A judge who finds it difficult to express feelings and emotions of a picture should not feel he is alone but rather should realize that almost all people find difficulty in this area. Like all abilities this one increases with practice, and once acquired, adds so much value to a judge’s comments that all should strive to achieve it.

It is neither essential nor important for a judge to find out what the author of the picture was trying to communicate. What matters is what feelings and thoughts it engenders in the viewer—the judge. More often than not a good picture conveys different things to different people and credit should be given to a picture that manages to do that. Ambiguity of a picture could be its greatest charm by providing an image on which viewers can project their own thoughts, feelings and imaginations.

Besides the feelings, emotions and mood, there are three other things that a picture may convey and they are:

- i) A statement or a story
- ii) An idea or inventiveness
- iii) Interpretation of the beauty or any other quality of the subject.

i) A Picture May Convey a Statement or a Story as in photojournalism or documentary photography, but again the best pictures in this field are also laden with emotion. Pictures of refugees such as the Vietnamese boat people would fail if they did not convey their plight and suffering. This would be true of all forms of documentary photography such as that of social upheaval, war, famine or celebration.

ii) A Picture Could Convey an Idea or Inventiveness. This would be true of

much of what one would call “creative” photography where the photographer’s creative input, whether achieved at the taking stage or by subsequent manipulation, is far more important than the recorded image. This does not imply that photographs must be manipulated to be creative, but rather that they must reflect the personal input of the photographer by providing an image onto which the viewer can project his own thoughts, fantasies and imaginations aroused by the image.

iii) The Photographer Can Add Meaning to a Picture by His Ability to “Interpret”

the beauty or otherwise of the subject he chooses to photograph. The results are often referred to as “pictorial” or even “record” photography. There is a tendency at present that anything that is not considered as

“creative” or “contemporary” has no place in photography. It would be a mistake to take this extreme view. How often judges say that what is good in a photograph existed in the subject matter and that the photographer only recorded it. That is a very narrow view. Different photographers interpret the same subject differently and some better than others and good judging requires taking that into consideration.

To give an analogy; if a musician plays a classical masterpiece one could not say that he only played what was composed by someone else. We give

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full credit to how he has interpreted the composer's work. Similarly, a good photographer interprets in his own inimical way the favorable attributes in the subject he photographs.

However, one has to admit that what could be described as a "record" photograph and what I would call an "interpretive" photograph would have to be of a very high standard to evoke as much response as the "creative" work in which there is a greater input of the photographer's creativity.

B) Content of the Picture and How It Is Dealt With

This is where the ability of the photographer to see what subject would lend itself to a good photograph is judged. What appears good to the eye does not necessarily make a good photograph. Different subjects have different degrees of being photogenic. How often one sees a really good photograph of a subject many of us would not have dreamt of taking. Even when the subject matter is quite commonly selected for photography, like a portrait or a landscape, it is the choice of the person or the scene that the photographer makes which will determine success or failure of a picture. Often it is the uniqueness or rarity of the subject which will make it interesting and worthy of high marking.

Equally important to the choice of the subject is how it is dealt with and that includes:

- a) The choice and control of lighting; one of the most important aspects in picture making.
- b) What is included and what is not in the picture.
- c) The choice of background, setting or environment for the chosen subject.
- d) Sharpness or lack of it in the picture as a whole or in different parts of the picture.
- e) The interpretation of movement.
- f) The juxtaposition of tones and colors.
- g) Exploitation of perspective.
- h) The critical timing of taking the picture.
- i) The arrangement of the different components of the picture—the composition.
- j) Exploitation of pattern and texture.
- k) The choice of format—horizontal or vertical and the shape and dimension of the picture.

C) The Technical Aspect of the Picture—The "Medium"

The following should be considered in assessing the technical merits of the picture:

- 1) Handling of tonal range and color rendition.
- 2) Correct exposure.
- 3) Sharpness of the picture—depending upon its appropriateness to the subject.
- 4) Quality of processing.
- 5) Retouching.
- 6) Appropriateness of choice of black and white or color.
- 7) Presentation of the picture—mounts in prints and cropping in slides.

It can be argued that technical merit of the picture should be a prerequisite to assessment of artistic qualities which have been so strongly emphasized up till now. In a sense this is true, but in reality it does not present difficulties. Technical ability is acquired far more easily than aesthetic. In consequence, experience shows that those capable of great artistic expression are rarely lacking in technical ability. What is more often seen is that those lacking in technical ability are also unable to excel in artistic interpretation. It is only on exceptional occasions when a picture outstandingly good artistically has to be rejected because of very poor technique.

A weighting to the above three aspects of judging has been suggested at the beginning of the section, and in most cases, what is suggested would be appropriate. However, good judging would require some flexibility in the weighting. If a picture reveals an exceptionally high standard in one of the above three features it would be entirely appropriate to modify the weighting beyond that suggested in the given range. A photograph which by its very nature did not have a strong emotional message but which was a superb example of timing of taking the picture would deserve an extra weighting in B and lower in A.

Conclusion

Though the three aspects of pictures to be taken into consideration in good judging have been stressed, it is by no means suggested that there should be rules for what judges should like or dislike. Judging is, and will remain, a subjective exercise. This is why we have three or more judges in major exhibi-

tions and salons so that different tastes and interests are fully represented. However, what is suggested is the need for agreement on what judges should take into consideration in judging and the above three parameters could form the basis for it.

A good example of what should be taken into consideration in judging does exist in ice skating we so often see on television. Judges are asked to mark on "technical merit" and "artistic interpretation." If like in photography the judges were allowed to mark on any aspect of ice skating they considered important then it is possible that one judge who believed in the choice of music as the most important thing would mark wholly or largely on the music chosen. Another judge who considers the choice of dress by the skaters as the most important will mark on this entirely different issue. Even more absurdly, if a judge believed that the difference in height of the skating pair was the most important thing he would mark only on that issue.

This is what is happening in photographic judging where marking is done according to rules made by the individual judge and which are entirely personal and exclusive to them, or where the marking is based on the judges' current fads, prejudices and overvalued ideas.

If there was a consensus on what should be taken into consideration in marking and the weighting given to each attribute chosen, it would help entrants to competitions and exhibitions to know what was expected of them and the results of judging would be more consistent and fair. This does not imply rules on what the judges should select but agreement on what aspects of the picture they should be taking into consideration in judging. It would in fact mean less rules than at present since individual judges are currently making rules based entirely on their own way of thinking.

It is only when standards of judging are improved and based on sound principles of what constitutes a good picture that photography will attract the status and recognition of other arts.

Remaining Issues on Judging

Finally there are a few remaining issues which need to be considered They are:

1. Difficulties in Giving Awards.

This difficulty particularly arises in major exhibitions and salons where the total entry runs into thousands. If it is an open exhibition covering every kind of subject and type of photography, it would appear to be a very difficult, if not an impossible task to pick one image as the best of the lot. If the judges pick a landscape there will be a score of other landscape pictures which could be considered as equally as good and why choose a landscape when there are scores of equally good pictures on other subjects?

To overcome this dilemma, I have found that judges on some occasions have chosen a totally way out image for the top award which more often than not does not represent the total entry nor has the highest artistic merit. Again, the lame excuse by judges—that it is we who are incapable of understanding the image of their choice—would not do. It is in my opinion the most arrogant statement that one could make. If a judge cannot explain the reasons for his choice it is more than likely that it is the judge who has not fully understood what is a good photograph and how to assess its artistic and technical merit.

I believe that judges sometimes feel that they will be judged by the awards they give and on some occasions to appear “with it” they choose a “way out” or an outrageous image for an award. However, it has to be admitted that it is a formidable, if not an impossible, task to choose one image as the best from an entry of thousands.

The solution may be to give the top award to the most successful entrant rather than the so-called best picture. This can be done by giving an award to the entrant who has the highest total score from the customary four prints or slides entered by that individual. It is more than likely that the highest total score is shared by several entrants. In which case, the judges would see each of these entrants' four pictures together and decide which set of four is the best. In practice this is much easier than picking just one image.

This also keeps the top award from going to a picture which was produced by chance or fluke by not such a competent photographer, as it is most unlikely that any photographer would produce

four outstanding pictures by chance. The principles of giving awards should be based on awarding the most competent and artistic photographer rather than the picture.

2. Should Print Workers Only Be Chosen as Judges for Prints and Slide Workers for Slides?

Theoretically, it should make no difference as a good judge can appreciate and evaluate a good picture whether it be a print or a slide. But having said that, as photography is relatively more technical than other art forms, it might be preferable, though not essential, to have a judge who does the type of work he is asked to judge. Quite often judges who have never done print work make comments which show their lack of knowledge in that medium, and that greatly diminishes the credibility of the judge.

3. Should the Judges Be Practicing Photographers and Current Exhibitors?

If we wish to improve the standard of judging it would be best if such a stipulation was made. If judges who are not practicing photographers and current exhibitors continue to act as judges for years to come they might adopt outdated ideas when photography has moved on since they were exhibitors. I

would think many judges would not find this view acceptable and that has been expressed to me strongly on many occasions, but my observations certainly support this view.

4. How Can Judges Be Made to Improve Their Standards?

The only way judges will change their ways and methods would be for us to reward them for their effort and expertise. This implies some form of recognition or some other form of reward, including payment by the standard attained. If judges are to be rewarded in some way, a system of monitoring would become a necessity and the way to do that would be a subject in itself.

In conclusion, I would not like to claim that this study is the last word on judging or that it has answered all or most of the questions on this difficult subject. My only wish is that this study proves to be thought-provoking and leads to further studies, conferences, dialogue and correspondence so that in the future, preferably in the near future, we establish good and sound principles of judging.

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