

# Creating Portfolios for Assessment for Portfolio Distinctions

## An Important PSA Educational Program



By  
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A little over one year ago PSA offered an entirely new type of award for photographic excellence, completely different from its more standard one, the traditional star-rated system of awards. As all of us who participate in these exhibitions knows, the judges have to decide rapidly whether to award an acceptance to an individual photograph or reject it in no more than five seconds of viewing the image. Impact is obviously a major component in their decision-making.

However, there is much photography created that is also truly of the fine art caliber, but does not necessarily fit the criteria required for success in competitive exhibitions. Furthermore, we as photographers will often pursue high-quality artistic images of subject matter that appeals to us, knowing full well that it will not be successful or even used in traditional competitions. We often may well create bodies of works on various subjects that are of interest to us. The Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain has long recognized this aspect of photography, and has based its method of recognizing the merit of high quality photographers by using the system of what they call Distinctions. They are awarded at three levels—the Licentiate, the Associate and the Fellowship levels—LRPS, ARPS, FRPS.

To its great credit, PSA came to the realization that there was something fundamentally missing in recognizing and rewarding important photographic work of a genre different from the competitive international photographic exhibitions. They worked on creating their unique type of “Distinctions” program and in 2015 announced it to all PSA members. PSA has designated this award the “Portfolio Distinctions” and there are three levels of award—the Bronze, the Silver and the Gold—BPSA, SPSA, GPSA. In essence this system requires a cohesive body of work to be submitted and to be carefully evaluated. There are a number of criteria and steps in the process of applying for this award. The fundamental difference between the common competitive international exhibition awards and this award is that there are assessors who evaluate a single individual’s body of work based on its own merit, as opposed to

judges who rapidly will compare different photographers’ individual images and give acceptances to a certain percentage of the submissions. The assessors do their work in an extremely careful and measured manner spending a significant amount of time evaluating each portfolio. They follow a set methodology for evaluating each photograph in the portfolio and then the decision is based on the summation of all the photographs by all the assessors.

Based on my photographic experience, my level of accomplishment in competitive exhibitions, and many years ago having been awarded the Associate Distinction from the Royal Photographic Society, I naively and over-confidently assumed that I knew and understood the ropes well enough to apply for the Silver level of distinction. There was a high assumption on my part that I would almost certainly be successful. Well, when PSA notified participants of the results several months ago, probably less than forty percent of applicants were successful and I was one of the unsuccessful ones! Technically, and probably artistically, each individual photograph was acceptable, but as a body of work meeting a certain level of accomplishment and fulfilling the criteria, my portfolio just did not meet the required standard.

I still want to pursue this distinction but realize I have to re-evaluate this program, get to understand the requirements better, and replace my previously misplaced confidence with a more intelligent and objective way of approaching this distinction. I turned to the PSA website and particularly the membership section to gain better insight (<https://www.psa-photo.org/index.php?portfolios>). There is much information of value there to assist the applicant. In addition, PSA offers a number of educational programs online. This is under the directorship of **Jon Fishback, APSA, ARPS**. Among these programs is one that I found to be extremely helpful for this portfolio distinction. It is called “Creating Portfolios for Assessment.”

This program is an online course. Jon Fishback, the Education Services Director and Instructor, is in charge of the program. I decided to do this course. Before I explain the details, I will give my conclusion regarding its value.

## Correction • October 2016 *PSA Journal*

It is unquestionably a highly valuable tool in preparing one's application. In fact, I would say it should be, from the applicant's perspective, a mandatory first step. Having taken it, I now fully understand and appreciate why I was unsuccessful last time.

The course consists of three lessons. In each lesson the instructor sends a PDF document containing the outline of the lesson, detailed guidelines and then the actual task to be accomplished. The first and simplest lesson is to provide a brief statement of what the theme is and then to include 6 photographs that are representative of this theme. The instructor then reviews this, makes comments and suggestions, and the student follows up with a modified version if necessary. The second lesson, which I found the most difficult to successfully master, was the creation of the all-important composite image. This is a single image, prepared in a specific way that contains very small images of all the photographs to be used in the portfolio. Once again the PDF of the lesson contains detailed guidelines as to how best to prepare this composite image. Things to take into account in preparing this include the overall balance of the image, the easy flow of the eye from one image to the next and the layout of each image in the composite image. The third lesson is to create the document that will state in 75 words or less what is the actual intent of the portfolio. This is the written document that is then supported by the composite image. Again the PDF gives examples of both what would be inappropriate and what would be appropriate content in such a document to help the student prepare a good statement. Finally there are the individual photographs that make up the composite image (10, 15 or 20), which the assessors will so carefully scrutinize after evaluating the Statement of Intent and the Composite Image.

As the student what I found to be the most educational and valuable part of this process is that the instructor, Jon Fishback, gives constant feedback and guidelines in each lesson to move one along to ultimately master each lesson. Having completed this program, I now feel that, with no guarantees of success and no level of misplaced confidence next time around, I can now put together a potentially successful application, much more so than before I undertook this educational process. ■

**PSA Portfolio Distinctions**  
**Second Assessment**  
**Deadline December 15, 2016**  
<https://psa-photo.org/index.php?portfolios>



Representative; and service as judge, workshop leader, and program presenter for camera clubs in the Southwestern Michigan area.

**Donald Vander Molen, APSA**, was inadvertently omitted from the list of members receiving APSA honors in the October 2016 *PSA Journal*. The *Journal* apologizes for the oversight and congratulates Mr. Vander Molen.

**Donald Vander Molen, APSA**, has been elected an Associate for his outstanding long-time service and dedication to local photography organizations, including service to the Southwestern Michigan Council of Camera Clubs (SWMCCC) as Vice President of Education and as Chairman of the SWMCCC Summer School of Photography; service to the Twin Cities Camera Club as President, Secretary, Newsletter Editor, and SWMCCC

## Writing for the *PSA Journal* Attention all Contributors:

For over 80 years, members have been writing articles for the *PSA Journal*. Tremendous changes have taken place in both the photographic and printing industry. While many of the key elements of preparing a manuscript for publication are the same, current technology has brought some new requirements.

The current method for submission of material for the *Journal* is via email. Simply attach your Microsoft® Word file to the email and send copies to: Donna Brennan, *PSA Journal* Editor, [editor@psa-photo.org](mailto:editor@psa-photo.org); **Sue Marrugi**, Managing Editor, [sumarru165@gmail.com](mailto:sumarru165@gmail.com); and **Sharon Prislipsky**, Assistant Managing Editor, [sharp71909@gmail.com](mailto:sharp71909@gmail.com). If you have a problem sending attachments, copy the text from your word processing program directly into the body of the email. You can submit material on DVD or CD. Mail to: Donna Brennan, 2728 Cashion Place, Oklahoma City, OK 73112. Providing a digital file for your article allows immediate review of your document because it does not have to be re-typed and is a very efficient way to ensure that your submission is exactly as you want it (with the exception of any editorial changes deemed necessary).

Don't use all capital letters. When you type your article, use regular type, not script, upper and lower case letters and do not double-space the text or leave wide margins. Please do not justify the right-hand margin.

When sending accompanying photos, digital submissions are preferred. The digital files should be prepared for offset printing: uncompressed TIFF files are preferred; in the file names, do not use punctuation or symbols, use file names that help identify the image and do not duplicate the name. Resolution should be at the offset-printing standard of 300 dpi. All files submitted for publication in the *PSA Journal* must be 300 dpi. Do not over-sharpen your image at any stage. Send more images than can be used and include both orientations—horizontal and vertical. Do not refer to specific images in the body of your article, as the Editor will select the images. A link to a Dropbox folder will be provided when you are ready to submit images. Contact Donna at [editor@psa-photo.org](mailto:editor@psa-photo.org) for more information.

Please meet our deadlines. We have a two-month lead-time for all scheduled material. All non-scheduled submissions are used when the Editor can work them into issues. If you are submitting an article for a particular issue, your finished article needs to be in to the *Journal* Editor 60 days before the first day of the issue month. We do not write articles from your notes; we use your prepared document, subject to editing.

If you have had an article on file at the *PSA Journal* office for a long time, it is possible we have just not had the space, or we needed to use other articles first to meet *PSA* guidelines, emphasize a theme, or balance the content. We will, however, return it upon your request. Occasionally some material never works into the *Journal* and has to be returned.

We appreciate all of the *PSA* authors. Thank you for making your mark for the advancement of photography and helping others learn from your experience and expertise.