Judging Photographs - Most Important Elements

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Judging photography is a subjective act, with personal preferences supported by a Judge's knowledge. Attempting to discern a particular judge's personal preferences is futile. It is possible, however, to codify the standards judges use to formulate their opinions. The Photographic Exhibit Committee established the 12 critical elements of a merit-quality photograph. These elements are endorsed by the committee for use by International Print Competition Judges. In order of importance these elements, with brief definitions, are:

1. Impact: Invokes a first-impression opinion from a judge. It is the aspect of the photograph that holds a judge's attention and commands him to look further. Impact stands at the top of this list because of its umbrella coverage; many other elements have the opportunity to create impact.

2. Creativity: Photographer's invention and design skills at work. It is the element that transfers imagination and feeling from the creator to the viewer, lifting the photograph into the realm of art.

3. Style: Distinguishes one photo from another in a manner that is real, not contrived. It expresses a photographer's individuality.

4. Composition: Divides a photograph into a successful arrangement of subject matter. It creates a harmonious rhythm in the photograph through symmetry and repetition.

5. Print Presentation: Addresses the choices made in cropping, matting, and mounting that enhance a photograph. It dares a photographer to be different in either a dynamic or traditional format.

6. Color Balance: Weighs the use of complementary colors (dark against light, strong against weak) and how these are incorporated into the subject matter of the photograph.

7. Center of Interest: Leads the viewer's eyes through a photograph without unnecessary distraction. It identifies a dominant component that gives strength and definition to a photograph. The center of interest should always be the focal point of, and supported by, secondary objects.

8. Lighting: Illuminates the characteristics, mood and statement of the subject matter. The correct quality of light stems from proper exposure.

9. Subject Matter: Is the appropriateness of the subject for the total interpretation of the photograph.

10. Print Quality: Comprises the levels of contrast, color, lighting, angles, and other elements that make a statement for the photo.

11. Technique: Is the foundation of photography which intermingles with a photographer's knowledge of art principles. It takes abstract ideas and makes them concrete.

12. Storytelling: Achieves the photo's narrative purpose. It builds an emotional response that challenges a viewer's imagination.