

Elements of a Merit Image by Bob Hawkins, CPP, M.Photog.MEI.Cr.

One hundred and fifty years ago, the science of photography was only available to those folks hearty enough to pursue the craft in horse-drawn darkrooms. The film of the era was emulsion slathered on glass plates, and the cameras weighed as much as many of the photographers. At that moment in history, esthetics was probably not uppermost in the minds of the practitioners.

By studying the works of early photographers, it becomes obvious just how rapidly that changed. Those photographers weren't content just recording a scene from eye level or letting the background be whatever was there. The men and women practicing photography in those early days showed an interest in arranging the elements of their photographs; showing ingenuity and creativity improved the impact of those images. Proper composition and print presentation evoked a style recognizable in many of the earliest photographers' work. The choice of subjects, use of lighting, a defined center of interest, plane of focus and the balance of physical elements and tones in the scene often made the viewer see exactly what the photographer wanted to be noticed first – telling a story without a sound uttered or a word written. Since every photograph of this time was made by hand, photographers of the era had to be craftsmen. They were concerned with the final quality and technical excellence of their photographs, not to mention finding new ways to produce good work in varying situations.

Today those large film cameras have been replaced by much smaller digital cameras that can be carried everywhere photographers go. Horse-drawn darkrooms exist only in museums, and except for those purists who love the process and qualities of film, the days of making each photograph by hand are gone forever. The modern darkroom lives in the virtual realm inside a computer the size of a small suitcase. Visual artists produce their images with high-end inkjet printers or send their digital files over the Internet to a retail processor for finishing. However, the earlier photographer's desires to improve the photographs they made by attending to the details of their work still lives on in the modern image makers of today.

Twelve elements have been defined as necessary for the success of an art piece or image. Any image, art piece or photograph will reveal some measure of all twelve elements, while a visually superior example will reveal obvious consideration of each one. They are:

- Impact is the sense one gets upon viewing an image for the first time. Compelling images evoke laughter, sadness, anger, pride, wonder or another intense emotion. There can be impact in any of these twelve elements.
- Creativity is the original, fresh, and external expression of the imagination of the maker by using the medium to convey an idea, message or thought.
- Technical Excellence is the print quality of the image itself as it is presented for viewing. Retouching, manipulation, sharpness, exposure, printing, mounting, and correct color are some items that speak to the qualities of the physical print.
- Composition is important to the design of an image, bringing all of the visual elements together in concert to express the purpose of the image. Proper composition holds the viewer in the image and prompts the viewer to look where the creator intends. Effective composition can be pleasing or disturbing, depending on the intent of the image maker.
- Lighting—the use and control of light—refers to how dimension, shape and roundness are defined in an image. Whether the light applied to an image is manmade or natural, proper use of it should enhance an image.
- Style is defined in a number of ways as it applies to a creative image. It might be defined by a specific genre or simply be recognizable as the characteristics of how a specific artist applies light to a subject. It can impact an image in a positive manner when the subject matter and the style are appropriate for each other, or it can have a negative effect when they are at odds.
- Print Presentation affects an image by giving it a finished look. The mats and borders used should support and enhance the image, not distract from it.
- Center of Interest is the point or points on the image where the maker wants the viewer to stop as they view the image. There can be primary and secondary centers of interest. Occasionally there will be no specific center of interest, when the entire scene collectively serves as the center of interest.
- Subject Matter should always be appropriate to the story being told in an image.
- Color Balance supplies harmony to an image. An image in which the tones work together, effectively supporting the image, can enhance its emotional appeal. Color balance is not always harmonious and can be used to evoke diverse feelings for effect.
- Technique is the approach used to create the image. Printing, lighting, posing, capture, presentation media, and more are part of the technique applied to an image.
- Story Telling refers to the image's ability to evoke imagination. One beautiful thing about art is that each viewer might collect his own message or read her own story in an image.

The Photographic Exhibitions Committee (PEC) of PPA uses the 12 elements above as the “gold standard” to define a merit image. PEC trains judges to be mindful of these elements when judging images to the PPA merit level and to be placed in the International Print Exhibit at the annual convention. The use of these 12 elements connects the modern practice of photography and its photographers to the historical practice of photography begun nearly two centuries ago.