

On judging and evaluation

Hendrik Ferreira FPSSA

"I will try to account for the degree of my aesthetic emotion. That, I conceive, is the function of the critic."

Clive Bell: Art (1914).

Why do photographers submit their work for evaluation?

Most photographers, whether they are competitive minded or not have a desire to keep on improving their work. Critique that is offered in a constructive spirit may help to achieve this end.

Another motivation is often overlooked. Photography is a visual communication language. The photographer may thus intuitively want feedback on the effectiveness of his/her attempt to communicate a message, and especially an emotion. Few serious photographers are satisfied to only "take pictures for myself". Often photographs are submitted in the spirit of sharing and fellowship with the like minded.

The most important role of the so-called camera club judge should then be to offer constructive criticism and especially encouragement. In the longer term, this will be more important than assigning the "correct" score or selecting the "best" picture. This "judge", could more appropriately be called an "evaluator" or "critic" to indicate a contribution more important than scoring for promotion or competition purposes.

Furthermore, through his commentary, this person is also an educator whose comments on a specific picture may influence the future work of several other learning and aspiring photographers in the audience.

Most important, and often overlooked in the short term, is the influence of these judges on the culture in the club. This may be the usual culture of largely formula based pictures, "safe" for success in competitions - a culture to which many camera clubs adhere. Or perhaps there is the culture of experimentation, creativity and sometimes avant garde photography - as found in only a select few camera clubs.

Camera club photography with its emphasis on competition and the accompanying system of judging and critique is deeply entrenched, despite some deficiencies. In its favour can be said that it is a widely accessible system, serving the purpose of instruction and sometimes also education, bringing together photographers and keeping them motivated. On the other hand, perhaps the most glaring deficiency of the camera club culture is due to the competition and promotion aspects. This usually leads to the participants being unwilling to take risks, and they thus rather adhere to the safe formula-based approach. Elsewhere, breakthroughs in the arts come by challenging and shifting the boundaries, and it is inevitable to take some risks in this process.

A common deficiency of camera club judging is the fact that impact reigns supreme, due to the very short time available to evaluate each one of the large number of entries. One needs only to think of a painting such as the Mona Lisa to realize that subtlety can indeed be more powerful than impact, if the viewer has more time to appreciate it.

Judging is a subjective process. It will always be, unless it is reduced to forcing a formula based template onto formula based pictures. I thus believe that when commenting, we judges can use the qualification "for my taste" more often. Furthermore, the scoring is also subjective, and indeed a questionable system. The practice of making gold, silver and bronze awards dates from a long-gone era. I believe that a system with as many as possible judges, each one scoring only in/out will be better than the standard system with three judges scoring out of 5. "In" could mean that the photograph will be amongst the best photographs to be shown again at the end of the meeting, or that the photographer is encouraged to take up the photograph in a panel for some purpose such as promotion.

I furthermore believe that every judge should broaden his/her visual experience as much as possible, and definitely look outside the camera club world as well. Photographs from many genres can be studied in books, magazines, at exhibitions, on the Internet, etc. Even genres not practiced by the judge, should be studied, perhaps especially so. In fact, the aspiring judge can practice evaluating and commenting using these photographs.

It is also interesting to note that often the most successful photographers and judges take a keen interest in other art forms, and apply what they learn or borrow elsewhere to raise their own photography and insight to new heights.

A certain level of technical skill or craftsmanship is necessary to communicate the photographer's message or express the emotion he wants to communicate. However, it is unfortunate that in the minds of many amateur photographers, technique, "how to" and the "best" equipment become an obsession, to the extent that they sometimes do not grow beyond these and work sufficiently hard on aesthetics or to develop their own artistic potential.

In camera club judging, the handling of technique, which conforms to widely held beliefs of what is "correct", unfortunately became a dogma almost never to be challenged by the photographer submitting his work for comment. Perhaps in a large extent due to this technical dogma, club photography are sometimes experienced by outside art critics as perfect to the point of being sterile, predictable and boring.

In recent years a process of enlightenment has slowly taken foot in the amateur photographic community with regards to the so-called rules of composition. Finally, it seems that a realization has dawned that rules such as "the rule of thirds", "avoiding a too central composition", "always having a centre of interest", or "a sense of scale", etc, originated as mere guidelines for painters from a bygone century.

Much more important, are applying the principles of good visual design, which have been taught for a few decades now by eminent teachers of photography. Visual design is a wider concept, and it is universally applicable to the visual arts. It includes amongst others, principles such as using building blocks, balance, emphasis, supporting elements, and using a technique and presentation commensurate with the subject matter and photographer's intentions.

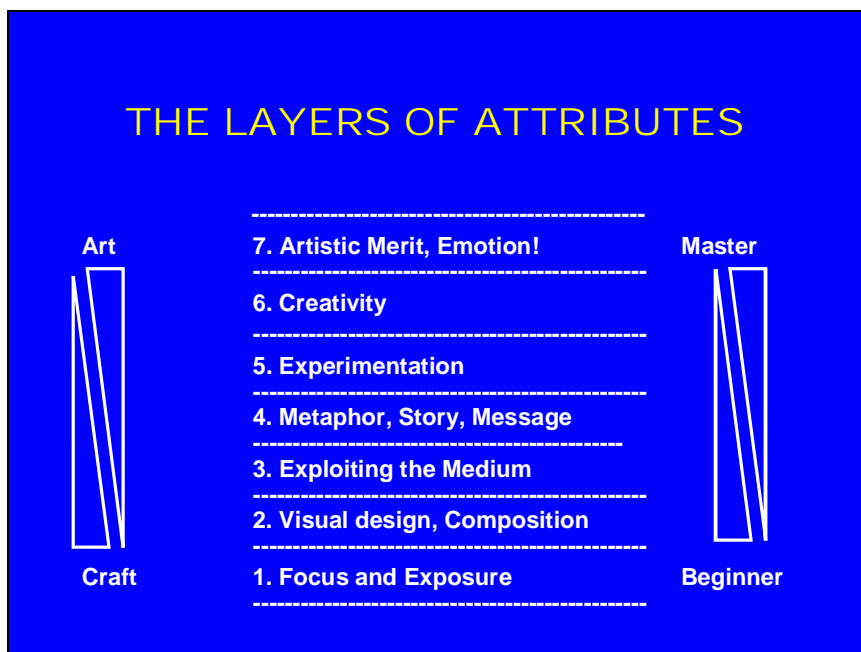
Commenting and indeed concentrating only on technique and composition unfortunately also became the crutch on which the camera club judge leans. This may

be due to an inability to comment on higher level content such as message or emotion, or simply due to a lack of sufficient time for fully evaluating and appreciating a photograph, caused by the pressures of a competition with many entries being evaluated in a limited time.

Seldom do we thus venture to comment on the higher levels of content or on the emotion that the photograph evokes. To be fair, very few judges have a formal training in the arts, or even humanities. However, we at least need an awareness of this shortcoming, if we are ever going to attain better and more meaningful critique, and eventually raise the level of club photography.

What makes some photographs stronger than others? This may be due to the fact that the more successful photograph is stronger in some attributes on a higher level. Even in club judging it is an acknowledged fact that, while in the lower star ratings the emphasis is on focus, exposure and composition, something more is sought in the higher star ratings. This is sometimes vaguely expressed as "national salon standard", or "international salon standard". These are misnomers, at least for an experimental club, since most amateur photographic salons thrive on photographs adhering to the safe formula type of approach.

Given that a photograph may have different levels of attributes, I asked myself how do I intuitively arrive at an assessment, or how do I compare photographs to indicate my preference for a winner? I arrived at the scheme in the accompanying diagram. Of course any such proposed scheme is debatable and also, quantification can never be an exact process. However, this scheme may at least be a starting point for further discussion.



At the lowest level I place the technical attributes of focus and exposure, followed on the second level by visual design or composition. In the camera club world, there appears to be consensus that these attributes should be stressed for the first few competency levels or star ratings – in fact these attributes may be all that is expected for a photograph to

be graded as successful. Since beginning photographers are mostly learning their craftsmanship, this seems fine. Also, one has usually first to learn a rule before it can be broken creatively.

On the third level, I place exploiting the medium. Photography has some excellent and sometimes unique attributes, which can perhaps be exploited best with this particular medium. Realism is the first that comes to mind. Other attributes with aesthetic potential include faithfully capturing the nuances of natural light at its best, exploiting the unique colour rendition, saturation and tonality of some films, or exploiting the ease with which perspective can be emphasized or creatively distorted with wide angle or telephoto lenses.

On the fourth level, follows story telling quality, the message communicated, or the metaphor that the picture represents. Though this attribute may be explicit and strong in photojournalism, it is often obscured in club photography. The photographer may also communicate a message subconsciously. It can be totally missed by the judge who has a different life experience or perhaps inadequate visual experience.

The placement of experimentation and creativity on the next two levels may be mostly due to my personal preferences and eccentricities.

I highly value experimentation in a hobby where so many million tools of the trade are in use, where even those practitioners with higher aesthetic and artistic aspirations often find it frustrating and even a lifelong impossibility to break with the established dogma of technique, the standard formulae of visual design and the usual subject matter. Experimentation in an attempt to break with these, may unfortunately meet with various degrees of success.

Creativity is closely connected to experimentation. I consider creativity to be the highest talent. In the context of evaluating photographs, creativity may perhaps be considered as successful experimentation, achieving some new approach.

Finally, I place evoking an emotional response in the viewer and artistic merit at the highest level. This is commensurate with other endeavours such as literature or music where the acknowledgement of artistic merit is the highest accolade. I believe most serious photographers either consciously or subconsciously strive to achieve artistic merit in their photography. Here it is necessary to briefly consider the term "art":

There are many definitions of, or views on art in the literature. The briefest one I have encountered states that "Art is about emotion – period." Another concise one when applied to photography, amounts to: "In his viewing of the photograph, the viewer will be moved to the extent that he will not be the same again."

The different attributes present in a photograph need to be weighed in order to arrive at an assessment. No photograph can be perfect – contrary to the old fashioned believe that taking "the perfect picture" is the goal of every photographer. Whatever scheme or attributes the judge believes in, attributes on a higher level should carry more weight. I believe that attributes strongly represented should be compared to attributes being weaker or even deficient. In the successful picture, the positives should outweigh the negatives. Contrary to the widely accepted dogma, I do not believe that total perfection at the lower levels is always necessary - refer to the work of some professional

photographers who are acknowledged artists. Neither do I believe in subtractive or negative judging - this amounts to fine combing and penalizing the photograph for smaller faults after the first evaluation and spontaneous emotional response.

To conclude, I would like to stress that a judge or evaluator can at most do his best, drawing from his visual experience and exposure to photography and other arts. Once a person has been explicitly asked for his opinion, it should be accepted as such.