

Rules and intuition – intuitive versus template judging

Dan Swart APSSA

Judges who have been nurtured in the typical camera club culture tend to judge according to a preconceived template. That template is firmly rooted in a well-established tradition of what a club photograph ought to look like. In its most dogmatic application, among other things, the picture must have a composition based on thirds, it must have a focal point and it must have strong visual impact. The emphasis is on the blind application of compositional rules rather than aesthetic qualities or expressive interpretation of subject matter.

And, not unreasonably, it must be technically competent – perfectly exposed and have sufficient sharpness.

Anything that does not fit that template, no matter what other good qualities it may have, is considered to be inferior photography.

For reasons of efficiency and practicality in a situation such as salon judging, where decisions must be made quickly and objectively, template judging has generally been chosen by those who control organised amateur photography as the preferred method. Lip service is however sometimes paid to qualities such as “story telling” or “mood” but ultimately it is the adherence to clearly defined technical and compositional criteria that really counts.

Template judging however prevents a true appreciation of the best photography mainly because it identifies “faults” rather than looking for good qualities. Moreover the “faults” it identifies are not necessarily bad in general terms but only because they break certain traditional and mostly discredited “rules of composition”. The originators of this system seem to have wanted to make photography into a competitive sport. They must have been people who liked order and certainty above something as nebulous and subjective as aesthetic value or emotional appeal.

This style of judging can blind you to other, arguably more important qualities like originality of concept, artistic interpretation, imaginative composition, subtle nuances, photographic vision, honesty and insight, to mention a few.

If that template were to be applied outside of club photography many of the best photographs in the world would fail. And also by that standard some really outstanding work by leading APSSA photographers fails.

A few judges, on the other hand, tend to use a more intuitive kind of judging. They try to understand what the photographer's intention may have been. They make an effort to establish what the photograph is about. Yes, they will also look critically at the technical aspects but will not insist on any particular division of space in terms of an over-used compositional formula but rather interpret a particular arrangement according to the demands of the subject matter. They try to see photographs with an open mind and against the background of an awareness of the larger world of photography and art beyond the limits of a club or society such as PSSA.

For too many photographs, some of them the best work, template judging is inappropriate.

The problem is that these photographs that are discriminated against because of template judging are closer to the kind of photography that has earned mainstream approval – that is, in the world of photography outside of club photography. Template judging is an essentially superficial way of assessing the value of a photograph. It glosses over many valuable attributes that an excellent photograph may have and tends to elevate cliché formula pictures of little real value outside of the camera club context.