



Ohio Valley Camera Club of West Virginia

President's Message
What Makes a Great Image?
April 26, 2010

What makes a great image? This is what every photographer strives for and may be the hardest thing to define. It is what we keep spending insane amounts of our hard earned cash on...equipment. Striving for that perfect image is what gets us up at 5:00 a.m. only to go stand in the rain waiting for the perfect time for that perfect shot. It is also why we travel hundreds of miles on a photographic pilgrimage to listen to a photographic master pass little tidbits of secrets upon us as though we were disciples of our faith finding out the secrets of life.

First let me say I am not an expert on this subject. Much of what I say in this message came from others far more knowledgeable and far better photographers than I will ever be. But what I do want to do is weed in some of my own opinions and in some way help you find out what does make a great image.

First I think that most consider a great image as something that becomes memorable, that has moved us in such a way the image stands out in our memory and stands the test of time. Great images though photographic history were images of famous people or famous news worthy events. There are far too many to begin to list them all in this message but I will name a couple that I am sure you will remember. The famous shot of Marilyn Monroe standing on the air vent. Another one is the image frozen in time of the bullet passing through an apple.

Most photographers find images that create emotion have a lot of impact or stops the viewer in their tracks. Some use shock value while others find that perfect time and location to make that great image. Images that tell a story are used by many photographers who are considered at the top of their game. Professional photographers are always looking for that next great shot. You have to keep in mind that no photographer makes a great image every time he or she pushes the shutter release. A lot of photography is about numbers. The more pictures you take the better

chances you will get a great image. Also, the more you learn about photography the more great images you will end up taking. The worst feeling a photographer can have is to know the great image was right in front of him or her just after he or she put the camera in the bag.

Since photography is a form of art it is subjective. When you start sharing your images with others you quickly learn that the viewer's reactions are as varied as there are different types of people. But if you can pass your message through your photograph and the viewer understands that message you are on your way to creating that great image. The stronger the subject is the easier it is to have the viewer understand the image.

So by now you should start understanding what a great image is. It is an image which portrays your message well. It is an image that stirs emotion or a reaction from the viewer.

Now you may ask, how do I create a great image? Well as I said before, that is the real challenge of every photographer. But you start by keeping your mind and eyes open, always scanning for the next location. Find photographers who you think create great images and dissect their images. Ask yourself what makes that a great image. Critique the image. Ask yourself what elements made the image work. Was it the lighting, the subject, the location, the post processing? Then ask yourself could you create the same image. What would you need? What equipment, what location, and what knowledge do you need? Do you know someone who would work as a subject? Then ask yourself the big question. How could you improve on the image, the idea, or the subject? Now go out and create it. Copying other photographers ideas is the greatest complement you can offer that photographer and the best way to learn how to create and develop your own style.

Now that we have some idea about what makes a great photograph let's look at some of the technical aspects that you need to know to make your image a great image. Let's look at the twelve elements of judging a photograph used by the Professional Photographers Association of America.

Impact. This may be the most important of any of the twelve elements. As I said before you want to stop the viewer from moving on to the next image. Impact is the first impression someone has of your image. Did the story jump out at the viewer? Strong images are ones that grab the viewer. These images make the viewer think, laugh, cry, or sigh.

Creativity. Is your idea fresh and does it show imagination. Something that you may want to do is create an idea book. As you start thinking of creating great images ideas will start bouncing around in your head from all directions. Write them down. Then set aside time to develop them into a finished product.

Technical Excellence. Your image needs to be technically correct. Is the lighting correct to convey the message? Is the exposure correct? Was it post processed correctly? The best way to meet this element is to get training. The more you learn the technical aspects of photography the easier it will be to create that perfect image.

Composition. This is important to the design of an image. Bring 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. Understand the rules of composition. Use the rules of thirds or have a good reason to break the rule. Do not cut off parts of the image that are needed to support the subject. Understand negative space and the use of flow. Know that the viewer's eye comes in from the top left of the image and exits at the bottom right.

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 light should enhance an image. Lighting can be part of the story or message to help pull the viewer to the main subject.

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. You can also develop a style that defines you as a photographer and an artist.

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. I recommend only one subject of interest in any image or you stand a chance of confusing the viewer. An example of this would be a bunch of flowers. If you want to show a bunch of flowers then the bunch becomes the subject without any single strong subject. But if you show one flower with the rest of the flowers out of focus in the background the subject is well defined and becomes the center of interest.

Subject Matter should always be appropriate to the story being told in an image. Never confuse the viewer by not being able to understand the subject.

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, captures, 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.

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. I have seen paintings where the artist signature was so big it became the subject and totally destroyed any hope of the viewer getting a message out of his or her art. I have also seen mats where the choice of color was all the viewer could see. If you walk away from the image and remember the mat then the print presentation failed. The presentation should support the image and help the viewer focus on the image and never the mat or frame. That is why most professional photographers shows have the images all matted in an egg shell white mat and black frame.

A photographer that was my first mentor and instructor told me to see the finished image before I pick up the camera. What he was trying to teach me was to use my mind's eye to be creative and to think out the elements listed above. This can be a daunting and overwhelming method if you use this process. But it does help you when you finally get to look through the viewfinder. Now you know what you are looking for. The more you practice the more the elements above become second nature. A concert pianist does not have to think about white keys, black keys, rhythm, or what parts of the piece of music to make strong or soft. This comes from lots of practice. The same applies for photography.

Here are some points to help you create a great image.

- Be where great things are happening. The famous shot of the sailor kissing the girl in the street of New York could only happen if the photographer planned to be there during the homecoming.
- Know your equipment. I can tell you from personal experience how important this is. I was asked to shoot a high profile event and I did it with a borrowed camera. Well, needless to say I become very frustrated and missed a lot of great shots. Something I will never do again.
- Understand the rules of composition and exposure. The more you shoot the more this becomes second nature. When looking through the viewfinder start thinking about composition. That is an important step to creating great images.
- Look before you click. What's in the background, the setting, is there a car speeding right toward you or your subject?
- Take lots and lots of pictures. Cannot state that any better.

- Never leave your camera at home. The single most important item in this list. You cannot take the great shot if your camera is in a closet at home.
- Always be looking around. Keep your head on a swivel and keep looking around.
- See the Light. See how the light falls on the subject.
- Develop confidence in yourself. This comes from lots of shooting and learning about your equipment and skills.
- Never stop studying photographic techniques. The old saying, no one knows it all applies here. Take workshops, classes, and read lots of books. All this will help keep you inspired and learning.
- Collect images of other photographers and study them. You should always be looking at other photographer's works. Find photographers on the Internet that you like their style or images. Follow them. Visit their site often. Use Google Reader to get notified each time they update their site.
- Stay inspired. Get involved in photography. Read books, watch videos, go to conferences and workshops and turn your house into your own personal gallery.
- Know your viewer. I think it is important to know your viewer.
- Share your work. Get others to comment on your work. It is better to have someone impartial to critique your images to learn from another set of eyes what could be done to improve the image. The old saying you cannot see the forest for the trees applies here. You may be too close to your work to see the obvious flaws.
- Join a camera club and get involved. The best way to accomplish all these elements is to be around other photographers. Photographers love to share their work, knowledge and secrets. You learn these only if you are part of their inner circle.
- Study Art. Take some art classes. This will help you understand the basic elements of art that applies to photography. Use of form, composition, leading lines, direction of light and complementary colors all come into play in creating that perfect image.

If I could say out of all of these ideas I had to pick the most important one it would be "Never Leave Your Camera At Home!" It is real hard to take pictures without it.

So now, "What makes a great image?" The answer is "A great photographer and an inspired viewer!" The answers to life may have to come in another president's message as I am taped out of more words of wisdom.

Good Shooting

Michael Adkins
President