

Photo Club Competitions and Judging

By Hank Lewis

A great deal of the activity of our camera club is centered on the competitions we hold several times each month. Sometimes it seems to be a mystery as to why an image receives a high score, or something less. To really understand the competitions, we need to look at our camera club structure.

MCCC = Motor City Camera Club. This is our club. The club is dedicated to the enjoyment and improvement of its members in the field of photography. The club provides many learning opportunities, competitions, and social events during the course of the year. Our club is also affiliated with the GDCCC.

GDCCC = Greater Detroit Camera Club Council. This is an affiliation of most of the camera clubs in the metropolitan Detroit area, including our own Motor City Camera Club. The GDCCC provides member clubs the opportunity to meet and compete with each other, and has other activities that promote the enjoyment of photography. The GDCCC is also affiliated with the PSA.

PSA = Photographic Society of America. This is the parent of the majority of the camera clubs in the United States. It was formed 70+ years ago. The PSA sanctions all of the “International Salon” competitions in the U.S., including our very fine “Detroit International Salon”. The purpose of the PSA is to promote photography and has many member activities. Individuals or clubs can be members of the PSA. Most of the clubs in our area are affiliated with PSA. There are some notable exceptions.

PSA Judging

PSA judging standards have developed over the years to provide consistency to the hundreds of competitions held under their sponsorship or influence. The MCCC and the GDCCC in general adhere to PSA standards. If MCCC used some other standard, or no standard, we would never be able to compete effectively in GDCCC events. A person not familiar with the standards is understandably confused, and it does require patience and effort and time to learn this system. In a way, the PSA judging standards are “the rules of the game”. This is not to say that there are no other games, if not in our town, not too far away. There are some clubs that abhor PSA type of judging, and in fact have no competitions, just discussion.

Since our club does use PSA standards, certain images may not do well in competitions. This is not a condemnation of any image or its author; it’s just the wrong arena to present some types of work. The suggestion would be to enter images that would be comfortable in PSA type events and other types of images in other contests or events that are not PSA, or just do them for your own enjoyment.

PSA judging standards consider three elements of an image: Impact or Subject Interest, Composition, and Technical Quality.

Technical quality is the easiest to describe. It has to do with qualities such as tonality, color balance, image sharpness, over or under exposure, blown out highlights or blocked out shadows, or anything else related to image capture and after processing and presentation, other than composition.

Composition is the tricky one. There are many rules and caveats relating to composition. Here are some:

- Have a single center of interest, something the eye wants to go to.
- Don't place the center of interest dead center. Place at a 1/3 position in the image.
- Don't place bright objects at the edges of an image, drawing attention away from the main subject.
- In landscape images, sharp throughout is better, unless there are elements such as fog or atmospheric haze. Try to have a foreground, middle ground and a background. Use atmospheric haze to give depth when appropriate. Use objects we are familiar with to show size and scale.
- In any image, the main subject must be in focus.
- In seascapes, the horizon usually should not be dead center. A 1/3 position is often preferable. Never have a water horizon going downhill.
- Buildings should not be tipping over, unless they are really tipped.
- Watch where background elements appear in the image so they do not distort or affect the main subject. Classic example is the telephone pole coming out of a person's head. Watch for wires.
- Some objects lend themselves to isolation by way of selective focus, but the main subject must be in focus.
- Have leading lines that draw your vision into the photo, coming to rest on the main subject.
- Fill the image frame with subject matter. Large voids usually don't work well. So called negative space.
- Don't try to get too much into an image. Keep it simple. Less is more. If it doesn't help the image, get rid of it.
- Give the subject a little room. Don't merge with borders of the image.
- Watch for unwanted mergers in an image that will confuse or distract.
- Give moving objects a little space to move into.
- Experiment with a subject from many angles and perspectives.
- The above list is not exhaustive, there is still more to it.

No image can incorporate all of the above suggestions, but a few wouldn't hurt. The next thing we need to know is that rules were made to be broken, sometimes it works well. You need to experiment. It is unlikely that all of the rules can be broken at the same time with the expectation of a good result.

Now we come to “Impact” or “Subject Interest”. This one has to be a little subjective, because it involves an emotional response to an image. Scott Kelby, the Photoshop guru, has described it as the “WOW” factor. It is one of those things that is hard to describe but you know it when you see it. The problem is that we all don’t see it the same way. Some images make some people uncomfortable, e.g. nudes. Portraits and family groups may be hard to relate to since we don’t know the people. Some images may stir up a strong response in the maker, but leave others unaffected. It has been suggested that portraits often don’t do as well in club competitions as perhaps landscapes or nature subjects, and that no doubt is true. Again, this likely has to do with how we relate to an image. Images of animals frequently do well, maybe we relate to them easier.

It should be noted that the conditions under which an image was captured, which at times are unfavorable, does not enter into the equation of Composition, Impact or Technical Quality. Most of us have been at the right place at the wrong time while we are out photographing. Advance planning can sometimes mitigate this problem.

The Judges

What about the judges? Well, it would seem that the judges should be familiar with the criteria by which they are expected to judge the images. This does not mean that judges must be superior photographers, although they often are quite good. We all have a built in bias as to the type of images we relate to, or don’t relate to. It is necessary that the judges suppress this type of bias as much as possible.

At our club we use a system whereby we have three judges. Each judge can award an image up to 9 points. 3 each for Impact, Composition, and Technical Quality. My personal view is that each image should be allotted the 9 points, and then make deductions in each of the three judging criteria for shortcomings in the image. If there are no shortcomings, then that judge would award 9 points. If an image had 0 Impact, which is unlikely, it could still get up to 6 points from that judge. There is an alternative viewpoint that states that an image of average quality would get say 6 points from a judge, and then that judge would adjust that up or down based on the image being above or below average. I believe that that circumvents the mandate to award points based on the above mentioned criteria, namely, 3 possible points each for Impact, Composition, and Technical Quality. There is another problem with average, what is average?

Being called upon to be a judge is an honor, and we should all aspire to be effective judges. Judging, however, is not always an easy task. Judges will not always get it right, but they usually come pretty close. The judge’s main task is to provide a score, but not necessarily comment. Some judges have an easier time with comment than others, but that doesn’t mean that one judge is less qualified than another based on comment. In commenting a judge will often have to walk a tightrope in order to critique without being critical. The competition meetings are friendly affairs, and we are all trying to learn and

move our hobby or profession to a higher level, have a few laughs, share some conversation or information.

This PSA system is not the end all of photography, and there are many expressions of the photographic image that will not do well in our competitions. Please don't let that stop you from exploring these other avenues if they interest you. But don't sell the PSA short either. There is much to be learned and many beautiful images to be made by watching and learning from other club members.

What to do

Newer members of the club are encouraged to compete at our meetings. They will make entries into the "Beginners Class", as opposed to "Advanced". My own experience 28 years ago is still fresh in memory. Being a long time and decent photographer, I was more than amazed by the quality of the images displayed at the club. My work did not measure up in the least. I had spent all those prior years trying my best without much to show for it, except for a lot of very nice family vacation and birthday party photos...and that isn't a bad thing either.

So...I started to enter the competitions and would try to incorporate one or two new things, such as single center of interest, or better exposure. At times the comments seemed almost cruel, but they really were not intended to be cruel. It took awhile, but my photography did improve, watching for problems during the capture process, better composition, better processing and better presentation. It has been 28 years and I still don't hit a home run every time, and that's OK with me. Ansel Adams once said that if he could come up with 3 or 4 really good images a year, he would be delighted with that.

So... get on with it. Enter the competitions. Learn from seeing the work of others, and talk it over with them. Go on club outings and trips and ask for assistance if you would like some, you will probably say "enough already" after awhile. We are all still learners.