

An Analysis of Judging

by

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Introduction

The importance of judging, or what some would call selecting, or evaluating, cannot be denied. Where would club photography be without competitions, exhibitions and the granting of Distinctions? And yet, judges are almost invariably the object of criticism and denigration and rarely of praise. The subject never fails to arouse great passion and controversy. Knocking of judges by lecturers and writers has become endemic, but few have tried to study the subject and improve it.

Talks and articles on judging usually amount to individuals stating how they judge, and then seeking to justify their method as the best, without making any effort to compare their own techniques with those of others, and without trying to evolve from observations credible principles of judging.

When I took up photography seriously some 17 years ago, the subject of judging fascinated me, as it bore great resemblance to some aspects of my professional work as a psychiatrist, in which I dealt with abstract subjects which are difficult to measure or quantify. You cannot, for example, measure the severity of depression by means of an instrument as you can with blood pressure. In psychiatry we have developed sophisticated ways of dealing with such abstract subjects by the use of 'scales' and statistics, and I wondered whether I could apply my training to the study of judging in photography.

I knew from the outset that as so little established literature existed on the subject that anything other than systematic observations on judging would be inappropriate. I therefore set about making my own observations on judging at all levels from club competitions to international exhibitions and salons. I did this intensively over a period of between two and three years and have continued making these observations rather less rigorously ever since. Being trained in observing people and how they function and analysing the underlying reasons and motives for their behaviour, it proved to be an interesting and rewarding exercise.

I did not publicize my project, so the judging sessions I attended were in no way affected by my presence. Whenever I had the opportunity I talked to the judges without giving them any indication of my study. I can categorically say that we have some excellent judges and I am greatly indebted to them for providing me with the opportunity to analyse their methods and thus helping me to conceptualize better methods of judging.

I have tried to categorize my observations into those which might be described as negative aspects and those which are positive; and these are considered in turn.

The Negative Aspects

I have observed many negative approaches adopted within the judging process, but will restrict my comments to four of the most significant ones, which are:

- 1. 'Overvalued Ideas'**
- 2. Failure to see the picture as a whole**
- 3. Critical rather than constructive approach**
- 4. Consideration given to effort in getting or making of the picture**

1. 'Overvalued Ideas'

This term, borrowed from psychiatry, describes well a common failing which arises as a consequence of a judge having an idea which he currently wishes to promote as being very important in picture making. Invariably the idea is valid but when held with great fervour, the judge becomes so preoccupied with it that he neglects all other aspects of the picture.

The best way to illustrate this failing is to state actual examples observed during the study.

1.1: A judge was of the opinion that obliques (i.e. diagonals) are preferable to verticals and horizontals. He spent most of his time looking for obliques to make his point instead of getting on with the task of judging. This conclusion was justified by the fact that he used the term 'oblique' over 70 times in the session.

1.2: Importance of background was stressed by another judge who then set about spending most of the time judging the background rather than the subject matter.

1.3: Importance of a full range of tones from pure black to white in monochrome was stressed by a judge. However good, some prints which conveyed a great deal of mood, or which reflected a misty atmosphere, were rejected for not displaying a full tonal range, even though their feeling would have been destroyed if they fulfilled these criteria.

1.4: It was the belief of another judge that most pictures should be light at the top and dark at the bottom as that is what normally occurs in natural lighting. Any picture bright at the base was marked down, including a stunning picture of a street scene where contra-jour lighting was reflected by the footpath.

1.5: More than one judge expressed the view that monochrome is more creative than colour as the world is in colour and it would require some creativity to translate it into black and white. This implied that colour pictures only depicted reality and lacked creativity. This is obviously not true as colours can be, and have been, manipulated for creativity. The judges who have held this view were in fact those who favoured monochrome to colour prints and that showed in their marking and giving of awards.

1.6: Several judges held the view that unless a picture was 'creative' it was not worth entering. In consequence only a small proportion of the total entry was fully assessed and commented upon. One of those judges gave the top award to a very gimmicky picture to the surprise of the club members. When the judge was asked for his reasons, he remarked: "I am sorry if you cannot understand such a picture."

1.7: A couple of judges felt that pictures portraying movement by the use of slow shutter speed, should have something sharp within them. However good such pictures were, they were marked down if they did not contain this element. It would be true to say that no such rule is followed by most judges and some famous and well-known pictures of this kind do not satisfy these criteria.

1.8: Some judges were sticklers for 'print quality' by their own individual criteria. In such cases it meant that they gave little attention to the content of the picture or what it communicates, but only judged the picture on the quality of the printing.

1.9: Some judges emphasised the importance of presentation, particularly the mounts used for prints. At times it appeared that assessment of presentation superseded that of the picture.

1.10: In a natural history competition a judge expressed his view that unless a picture is taken in the wild, it is not a natural history picture although no such rule was stipulated by the club. The judge spent an inordinate amount of time guessing which pictures were taken in the wild and which were not (often reaching the wrong conclusion). This concentration prevented him from properly evaluating the pictures for their merit.

1.11: In another natural history competition the judge stated the view that mammals are neglected by natural history photographers. It was obvious from the outset that photographs of mammals would be treated favourably even though some of the pictures of birds, insects and flowers were better, and that is what happened.

1.12: Early in a session of judging a judge said that he did not like studio portraits, and he proceeded to pass over several pictures of this kind of subject without judging them at all. Many other judges expressed dislike of a particular subject and openly admitted that it was no use putting such pictures in front of them.

As a psychiatrist I often dislike patients referred to me. It would be inconceivable for me not to deal with them or treat them as fairly as any other patient. Should not the photographic judge be professional enough to assess categories of pictures of which he/she is not fond, and at least compare such pictures with each other?

The above examples demonstrate that however valid an idea may be, if it is 'overvalued' by a judge, then inevitably the judging will be restricted to a single issue and the rest will be neglected. It can also lead to judges making their own rules which are exclusive to them and applied indiscriminately.

2. Failure to see the Whole Image

A fundamental principle established by Gestalt theory is that "The whole is not the sum of its parts". This is best explained by a couple of examples. When one appreciates the beauty of a building, the architectural qualities it possesses are not there in the individual bricks it is made of. It is only when they are put together as a structure that the whole acquires aesthetic qualities of its own. Similarly, a tune is not just a sequence of notes. When played together they produce a tune, the quality of which is not present in the individual notes. It is invariably the case that the qualities of the whole transcend the attributes of its components.

The same principle should apply to a photograph. When seen as a whole, as an entity in itself, it has qualities which far transcend the parts of which it is made. Regrettably, in photographic judging realisation of this fact is sadly lacking. It appears that some judges look upon pictures as if they are just a collection of areas of different tones or colours. From their comments they seem to dissect the picture and closely scrutinise the different areas rather than respond to the picture as a whole.

So common and widespread is this practice that we have learned to accept it as an established way of judging. How often does one not hear judges comment at great length on 'a bright area on the edge of a picture', or 'the placement of hands in a portrait'? These comments would be quite acceptable and valid, and useful to the audience for improving their work, but they must not be the main criteria of judging! They can only be secondary comments after the judge has evaluated the picture as a whole. If a picture is an object of art, it is the creation of an artist through which he or she endeavours to communicate; and that is the main and primary thing the judge should look for. That can only be done if the judge sees the picture as a whole, as an entity in itself, and not as a collection of areas of different tones and colours.

There is another way of looking at the same issue which gives it a different slant. In all art forms, certain media are used for the production of a piece of art. In painting it is the canvas, paints and brushes; in music it is either the voice or a musical instrument; and in dance it is the use of the body and dress. But these are just the media which the artist uses to express himself. What the artist conveys could be described as 'the message'. It is obvious that the true value of an artistic work is the message and the medium is no more than the vehicle employed to convey the message.

Photographic judging seems to be too preoccupied with the medium as if a photograph is just a technical exercise rather than an artistic expression. One accepts that possibly the medium in photography is more technical than say in painting and warrants some consideration, but if the medium is wholly or largely what is judged with little attention to the artistic expression then the whole point of judging is missed.

The realisation of this fact first came to me when I saw a lady judge a club competition by placing a strong emphasis on artistic expression in the picture as a whole rather than technical details, precisely as advocated above. When I complimented her on her method she was rather surprised as she had not realised that her method was different from that of the other judges.

Repeatedly I found that many good judges work intuitively and they never analysed their method or developed a system of judging. Unfortunately, intuitive behaviour is not transferable or capable of further growth by rational thought.

3. Constructive or Over-critical?

The modern view of testing in education is to find out what a candidate knows rather than what he does not. If a similar approach is taken in photographic judging, it should be to find out what is good in the picture and not what is wrong. **Many judges work on the premise that judging means finding out what is wrong and the best picture is the one with the least faults.** Comments from such judges can hardly be constructive.

The most important belief in psychology is that people learn, or change their behaviour, only when rewarded; and if that be the case, emphasis must be on identifying good features and on constructive advice on how to overcome shortcomings.

I have been reliably informed that judges in flower arranging all have training before they start judging and are instructed to evaluate the good that they find in the flower arrangements and not what is wrong or make harsh or nasty comments. If a constructive approach is followed there is certainly never any room for nastiness, sarcasm or rudeness.

Even on rare occasions when criticism is warranted, it could be done very politely and in a constructive manner. I am sure that many potentially good photographers have been lost to club photography because of ill-advised comments of judges. Judging should be looked upon as an agreeable exercise where the judge's sole function is appreciation of the work he is asked to evaluate.

At one club I was invited to the work was not only poor but the total entry was so small that I could have finished the session in less than half an hour. I was given permission by the club to show some of my work strictly for the purpose of illustrating the points I was going to make on their pictures and not to make a talk on my work. It proved to be a most enjoyable evening, not only for the club, but for me. The only trouble was that they asked me to do the same thing again the following year.

4. Effort put into the Picture

Many judges feel that in their marking they should include the effort on the part of the photographer either in getting the picture or in the making of it. It is hard to justify this approach. If effort put in by the photographer is included in judging, then why not a host of other considerations that would affect the picture-making, such as the equipment a photographer can afford; the amount of travel he can manage; or even his height which might be an advantage to him in taking pictures. It would be best if judging were restricted to what is put in front of the judge and had nothing to do with how it was made, what effort went into it or what advantages/disadvantages the photographer had.

The more important positive aspect of judging will be dealt with in the second part of this analysis.

The Positive Aspects

In good judging I found that three attributes of the pictures were taken into account:

- 1. What the picture communicates – the 'message' – with a weighting of 50-60%.**
- 2. The content of the picture – the 'medium' – with a weighting of 30-35%.**
- 3. The technical aspects of the picture – with a weighting of 10-15%.**

1. The 'Message' of the Picture

Appreciation of all art, including a photograph, is not primarily an intellectual exercise but an emotional one, which may be pleasurable, depressing, moving or frightening. It is the feelings, emotions and mood that a picture conveys which is the core of the 'message' and should form the basis of evaluation of a picture.

Good judging is done more by the heart than the head, with the ability to feel a picture and not just visualise it. It is the buzz and tingle which one experiences on seeing a good picture which is at the heart of judging.

More often than not it is difficult to verbalise feelings and emotions that a picture conveys, and not all judges are blessed with verbal facility. A judge who finds it difficult to express feelings and emotions about a picture should not feel he is alone but rather should realise that almost all people find difficulty in this area. Like all abilities, this one increases with practice and, once acquired, adds so much value to a judge's comments that all should strive to achieve it.

It is neither essential nor important for a judge to find out what the author of the picture was trying to communicate. What matters is what feelings and thoughts it engenders in the viewer – the judge. More often than not a good picture conveys different things to different people and credit should be given to a picture that manages to do that. Ambiguity of a picture could be its greatest charm by providing an image on which viewers can project their own thoughts, feelings and imagination.

Besides the feelings, emotions and mood, there are three other things that a picture may convey. These are:

- a) A statement or a story.**
- b) An idea or inventiveness.**
- c) Interpretation of the beauty or any other quality of the subject.**

A picture may convey a statement or a story as in photojournalism or documentary photography, but again the best pictures in this field are also laden with emotion. Pictures of refugees, such as the Vietnamese boat people, would fail if they did not convey their plight and suffering and this would be true of all forms of documentary photography such as that of social upheaval, war, famine or celebration.

A picture could convey an idea or inventiveness. This would be true of much of what one would call 'creative' photography where the photographer's creative input, whether achieved at the taking stage or by subsequent manipulation, is far more important than the recorded image. This does not imply that photographs must be manipulated to be creative, but rather that they must reflect the personal input of the photographer by providing an image on to which the viewer can project his own thoughts, fantasies and imaginations aroused by the image.

Lastly, the photographer can add meaning to a picture by his ability to interpret the beauty or otherwise of the subject he chooses to photograph. The results are often referred to as pictorial or even record photography. There is a tendency at present that anything that is not considered 'creative' or 'contemporary' has no place in photography. [Reminder: this article was written in 1992, well before the start of the digital era in photography] It would be a mistake to take this extreme view. How often judges say that what is good in a photograph exists in the subject matter and that the photographer only recorded it. This is a very narrow view. Different photographers interpret the same subject differently and some better than others, and good judging requires taking that into account.

To give an analogy. If a musician plays a classical masterpiece one could not say that he only played what was composed by someone else. We give full credit to how he has interpreted the composer's work. Similarly, a good photographer interprets in his own inimitable way the favourite attributes in the subject he photographs.

2. Picture Content and Treatment

Has the photographer the ability to see what subject lends itself to a good photograph? What appears good to the eye does not necessarily make a good photograph. Different subjects have different degrees of being photogenic. How often does one not see a really good photograph of a subject which many of us would not have dreamt of taking? Even when a subject is quite commonly selected for a photograph, like a portrait or a landscape, it is the choice of the person or the scene which the photographer makes that will determine the success or failure of a picture. Often it is the uniqueness or rarity of the subject which will make it interesting and worthy of high marking.

Equally important to the choice of subject is how it is dealt with and that includes:

- **The choice and control of lighting – one of the most important aspects of picture making.**
- **What is included in and excluded from the picture.**
- **The choice of background, setting or environment for the chosen subject.**
- **Sharpness or lack of it in the picture as a whole or in different parts of the picture.**
- **The interpretation of movement.**
- **The juxtaposition of tones and colours.**
- **Exploitation of perspective.**
- **The critical timing of taking the picture.**
- **The arrangements of the different components of the picture – the composition.**
- **Exploitation of pattern and texture.**
- **The choice of format – horizontal or vertical; and the shape and dimension of the picture.**

3. Judging Technical Aspects

The following should be considered in assessing the technical merits of the picture:

- **Handling of tonal range and colour rendition.**
- **Correct exposure.**
- **Sharpness of the picture - depending on its appropriateness to the subject.**
- **Quality of processing.**
- **Retouching.**
- **Appropriateness of choice of black & white or colour.**
- **Presentation of the picture: mounts for prints, cropping of slides.**

It can be argued that technical merit of the picture should be a prerequisite to assessment of artistic qualities which has been so strongly emphasised up to this point. In a sense this is true but in reality it does not present difficulties.

Technical ability is acquired far more easily than aesthetic. In consequence it shows that those capable of great artistic expression are rarely lacking in technical ability. What is more often seen is that those lacking in technical ability are also unable to excel in artistic interpretation. It is only in exceptional cases that an outstandingly good picture artistically has to be rejected because of very poor technical execution.

A weighting of the three main areas of judging has been suggested at the beginning of this discussion; and in most cases that would be appropriate. However, good judging does require some flexibility in the weighting. If a picture reveals an exceptionally high standard in one of the three paramount features, it would be entirely appropriate to modify the weighting in recognition.

A photograph which by its very nature did not have a strong emotional message but presents a superb example of timing in taking the picture would certainly deserve an extra weighting in areas 2 and 3.

Conclusion

Although I have stressed the three paramount criteria by which a picture ought to be properly judged, this by no means implies that there should be rules for what judges should like or dislike. Judging is, and always will remain, a subjective exercise. This is why we have three or more judges in major exhibitions and salons so that different tastes and interests are fully represented.

However, what is suggested is the need for agreement on what judges should take into consideration when judging and the three prime parameters described should form the basis for it.

A good example of what matters in judging exists in ice skating as we so often see on television. Judges are asked to mark on 'technical merit' and 'artistic interpretation'. If, as in photography, judges were allowed to mark on any aspect of ice skating they considered important, then it is quite possible that one judge who believed in the choice of music as the most important thing would mark wholly or largely on the music chosen. Any judge who considers the choice of dress by the skaters as most important will mark more on this entirely different issue.

Such absurdities abound in photographic judging. Marking is assessed according to rules made by the individual judge, entirely personal and exclusive to him/her; or marking is based on the judge's current fads, prejudices and overvalued ideas.

Given a consensus on what should count in marking and weighting it would help entrants to know what was expected of them and the results would be more consistent and fairer.

Other Issues in Judging

There are a few remaining issues that need to be considered. These are:

1. How should judges decide major awards?

A major problem can arise in major exhibitions and salons where the total entries run into thousands. If it is an open exhibition covering every kind of subject and type of photography, it would appear to be very difficult, if not impossible, to pick one image as the best of the lot.

If the judges pick a landscape, there will be a score of other landscape pictures which could be considered as equally good; and viewers might ask why choose a landscape when there are dozens of equally good pictures on other subjects.

I have found that, to overcome this dilemma, judges on occasions choose a totally 'way out' image for the top award which more often than not does not represent the total entry nor does it possess the highest artistic merit. The lame excuse made by judges tends to be that it is we, the viewers, who are incapable of understanding the image of their choice. This just will not do. In my opinion it is the most arrogant statement that one could make.

I believe that judges sometimes feel that they will be judged by the awards they give and on some occasions, to appear 'with it', they choose a 'way out' or an outrageous image for an award. However, it must be said that it is a formidable, if not impossible, task to choose one image as the best from an entry of thousands.

The solution may well be to give the top award to the most successful entrant rather than the so-called best picture. This can be done by giving an award to the entrant who has the highest total score from the customary four prints or slides entered by that person. It is more than likely that the highest total score is shared by several entrants. In that case, the judges would see each of these entrants' set of four pictures together and decide which set is the best. In practice this is much easier than picking just one image.

This will also remedy the top award going to a picture which may have been produced by chance or fluke. The principles of giving awards should be based on rewarding the most competent and artistic photographer rather than the picture.

2: Should print workers only be chosen as judges for prints and slide workers for slides?

Theoretically it should make no difference as a good judge can appreciate and evaluate a good picture whether it be a print or a slide. But, having said that, photography is relatively more technical than other art forms, and it might be preferable, though not essential, to have a judge who does the type of work he is asked to judge.

Quite often judges who have never done print work make comments which show their lack of knowledge in that medium and that greatly diminishes the judge's credibility.

3: Should judges be practising photographers and should they also be current exhibitors?

If we wish to improve the standard of judging, it would be best if such conditions were stipulated. If judges who are not practising photographers and current exhibitors continue to act as judges for years to come, they might adopt outdated ideas when photography has moved on since they were exhibitors. I would think that many judges would not agree with this view, and that has been impressed upon me on many occasions. But my observations certainly support my contentions.

4: How can judges be made to improve their standards?

The only way judges will change their ways and methods would be for us to reward them for their effort and expertise. This implies some form of recognition or some other form of reward, including possibly payment, by the standard attained. If judges are to be rewarded in some way, a system of monitoring would become a necessity. The way to do that is a subject in itself!