

Redefining the 12 Elements of a Merit Image

The world of photographic competitions can seem like a tricky place to navigate. How can pieces of artwork be judged? Isn't it all up to aesthetics and personal preference? On the surface it would seem so, but overall there are 12 elements that have stood the test of time to make an art piece or image successful - regardless of personal taste. We're here to give you the road map (of sorts) to create the most successful images so that you can merit at your next competition!

1. **Impact:**

Definition: the sense one gets upon viewing an image for the first time.

Compelling images evoke laughter, sadness, anger, pride, wonder or another intense emotion. There can be impact in any of these 12 elements.

What it really means: This is the eye candy, the wow factor, the reason we love it. We enjoy art because it moves us. It makes us feel something- -whether it brings us joy, sadness or anger (or any other emotion aside from blasé for that matter). What emotions does your piece make people feel? This can also be described as the "wow-factor," it draws a person in and captivates their attention.

2. **Technical excellence:**

Definition: the print quality of the image itself as it is presented for viewing.

Retouching, manipulation, sharpness/softness, exposure, printing, mounting and correct color are some items that speak to the qualities of the image.

What it really means: This is the nuts and bolts of photography.

Exposure, focus, lighting, Photoshop skills, and so much more! It's what makes you a pro. But you can take it too far--be wary of going too far with corrections.

3. **Creativity:**

Definition: the original, fresh, and external expression of the imagination of the maker by using the medium to convey an idea, message or thought.

What it really means: In photographic competitions, you get bonus points for creativity and originality. Stand out! Look at an ordinary subject and find an extraordinary way to portray it.

Redefining the 12 Elements of a Merit Image

4. **Style:**

Definition: 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.

What it really means: Your work can be anything from traditional to surreal, candid to abstract. What style does your work fall into? Is it a great representation of that style?

5. **Composition:**

Definition: is important to the design of an image, bringing 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.

What it really means: Do you follow the standard rules of composition? When you break them, does it enhance the image? Don't break the rules just to be cool--only go rogue if it enhances the image. And don't be afraid to break the rules.

6. **Presentation:**

Definition: affects an image by giving it a finished look. The mats and borders used should support and enhance the image, not distract from it.

What it really means: Even in a digital age, applying borders to your work can either make or break your image. Try a few different treatments and see what they enhance, but do not take away from the image. As you can see from the examples throughout this post, it's best to keep it simple, but customized for each image.

7. **Color Harmony:**

Definition: 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.

What it really means: Are your colors and corrections pleasing to the eye? Do they look like they belong together? It doesn't mean you have to

Redefining the 12 Elements of a Merit Image

go monochromatic, but don't go crazy with tones and shades that distract from the image.

8. Center of Interest:

Definition: 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.

What it really means: Center of interest can be very subtle or very strong, regardless; they draw your focus into the image and allow the eyes to pause in certain, preconceived areas.

9. Lighting:

Definition: 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 man made or natural, proper use should enhance an image.

What it really means: This is the stuff that separates the professionals from the amateurs. The strength of your subjects should be portrayed because of the strong lighting choices you utilize.

10. Subject Matter:

Definition: should always be appropriate to the story being told in an image.

What it really means: The subject matter keeps it interesting and appropriate. Just because it's pretty, doesn't mean it's right.

11. Technique:

Definition: the approach used to create the image. Printing, lighting, posing, capture, presentation media and more are part of the technique applied to an image.

What it really means: Techniques are not only after capture manipulation but they can be camera angle, lens choice, a certain style such as forced perspective.

12. Story Telling:

Definition: 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.

Redefining the 12 Elements of a Merit Image

What it really means: It's always great to take a step back to see what kind of stories your images can create. Imagine it is the first time you're seeing your work--what would the stories behind the image look like?

Although many of these image elements are important on their own, it's also necessary to remember in more than one case, they overlap. Your subject matter directly relates to your story, your technique and color balance are also equally intertwined. It goes to show that in order to have a merit-worthy image, your work has to be strong on all 12 elements.