

Notes from the Seminar on Camera Club Judging

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A camera club competition should
be a lecture on photography with
the images as notes.

Seminar Overview

This seminar is **NOT** intended to be a criticism of judges.
Camera clubs are, or should be, deeply indebted to judges.
If it were not for judges, camera club competitions would not be possible.

This seminar is also **NOT** intended to be a forum for a philosophical discussion of rules or procedures for camera club competitions.
Camera clubs make the rules and establish their own procedures; judges only carry them out.

This seminar **IS** intended to provide an overview of camera club judging and will provide some judging opportunities to encourage participants to become judges.
There is **not** an excess of good judges begging to judge at camera clubs.

I would like to stress again that a camera club competition should be a learning experience, not only for the competitors but for the entire audience as well

Again, a camera club competition should be a lecture on photography using the images as notes.

Some of you may have an interest in becoming a judge.
Why would you want to judge?
Judging is not a high paying job

A judge will disappoint most competitors and many in the audience.
The only happy folks will be those to whom the judge gives a ribbon.
So, why would anyone want to be a judge?

Camera Club Judges: An Appreciation

Camera clubs rate competitions among their most popular activities.

Competitions attract club members who never compete at all but attend to learn and to enjoy the event.

This is possible because someone is willing to be a judge who knows in advance that he/she will disappoint most of the competitors (and please only a few).

Competitions may last over two hours

There may be 100 or more images to judge.

A judge likely will spend considerable time traveling to and from a camera club competition.

Judging is not greatly remunerated.

The most a judge can expect for “payment” is:

a mug,
a modest gift certificate,
a small honorarium,
a basket of goodies
a dinner
and the usual round of applause,
hand shake and thank you.

Although the thank you may be genuine,
judging can be a thankless task.

Some camera clubs provide the judge with information in advance about their competitions.

Other clubs “wing it” leaving the judge to adapt and adjust as the competition begins.

Camera clubs should set the rules
and establish the procedures;

judges only carry them out.

Unfortunately, there are **no** established “credentials” to becoming a judge.

There are no tests, no formal training. no certification - one merely declares oneself a judge.

Being a good photographer does not mean a good judge.

In 1997 NVACC published the first
“Directory of Speakers and Judges”

NVACC used recommendations from member clubs when listing a judge in its ***“Directory of Speakers and Judges.”***

Has the individual judged at your camera club in the past two years and would you invite him / her back and / or recommend him / her to another club?

The Directory has been the only vehicle for years that listed recommended judges.

Unfortunately, not all camera clubs keep careful records of previous judges or use any system to evaluate a judge's performance.

Again, the purpose of this seminar is not to be critical of either present or past judges but to praise them for their vital service to camera clubs.

Were it not for judges, camera club competitions would not exist. It is hoped that this seminar to identify some competent candidates who will become camera club judges.

Judge

Some Dictionary Definitions

A person appointed to decide in any competition or contest; an authorized arbiter.

To decide or decree judicially or authoritatively.

To infer, think, or hold as an opinion.

To act as a judge; pass judgment.

One who is entrusted with decisions affecting others.

One qualified to pass a critical judgment.

Judge, in its legal and other uses, implies particularly that one has qualifications and authority for giving decisions in matters at issue.

Camera Club Competitions - Three Types

Monthly Competitions

End of Year Competitions

Exhibitions - Jurying/Judging

Each of the above requires a different judging skill.
Some judges are comfortable doing all three,
other judges will do only one or two.

Camera Club Competitions - Three Types

Monthly Competitions are the most difficult and have the most pressure since time is a factor, the competitors and the audience expect a comment on every image.
The sheer number of entries often preclude careful analyses.

Judges are often asked to consider too many images, resulting in poor choices due to mental fatigue and the limitations of time.

Judges often select images having immediate impact.

Judges do not have the luxury to see how images “age.”

Thus, bright, saturated images may be chosen over more muted, pastel ones which, given more leisurely viewing, would be more appealing and acceptable.

For larger clubs fewer entries per competitor may be necessary in order to make judging more thoughtful and manageable.

It should be stated that the effectiveness of a judge, particularly at the monthly competition, depends on the efficiency and organization of the Competition VP, and in the case of projected images on the competence of the projectionist.

End of Year Competitions are usually more leisurely.

Sometimes two or three judges are used.

The judge(s) is/are allowed to review the images without anyone being present (other than the Vice President(s) for Competitions) and comments are not expected on every image.

The judge(s) usually can choose when and where to judge the competition.

Exhibitions - Jurying/Judging often take place in the venue where the prints are displayed.

Sometimes two or three judges are used.

The judge(s) is/are not expected to comment on every image

Usually a judge(s) statement is requested.

The mat and frame must be considered in addition to the print itself.

Other Camera Club Competitions

Inter-Club Exhibitions - Annual Natures Vision Photography Expo.

600 - 750 prints are entered by
camera clubs from the NVACC.

For the first three years one judge was used;
in the following years three judges were used.

Inter-Club Competitions - unfortunately, these are rare.

The now defunct GWCCC used to hold semi annual competitions .

They were very popular among the participating clubs.

Organization and logistic requirements were considerable.

Usually, three judges were used for these competitions.

Demolition Derby Syndrome

Judges Don't Pick Winners; Judges Pick Losers!

Judges must eliminate some 75% of slides or prints before they can consider the Honorable Mentions. Then they must eliminate the Honorable Mentions. Next they must eliminate 3rd place, and then 2nd place.

Finally, through the process of elimination, at long last 1st place is chosen.

Thus, a camera club competition, like a demolition derby, bestows awards upon the last images still around at the end of the competition.

Some Reasons given by Judges to Eliminate Images

No subject, no center of interest. (It's a background looking for a subject).

Subject not moving/looking into picture.

It needs a person.

Horizon in the center or not level.

Violates rule of thirds. That is not one of the ten commandments. Honest!

Leading line(s) lead to nowhere.

Building(s) falling over.

"I have seen better sunrises, sunsets" etc.

There is a better flower/portrait/sunset, etc. in the competition.

Light not good.

Not enough color, too much color, color not accurate.

No catch light in the eye(s).

Too busy/too dull.

Not sharp/foreground not in focus.

Distracting background.

Picture is over/under exposed.

There is/are hot spot(s).

It is just a snapshot.

It is a post card image.

Tonal range exceeded capability of film/sensor.

Even number of objects.

I don't know what it is.

Not as good as the competition.

Wrong time of day.

I don't like pink, cats, etc. - (personal prejudice is not a legitimate reason).

That's art, not photography. - (personal bias is not a legitimate reason).

I don't know what it is -- OUT!

A judge does not need to know what he/she is looking at.

A good judge should be able to analyze an image based solely on its visual qualities such as color, tone, harmony, balance, rhythm, texture, etc.

Abstracts -- found and/or created -- are examples of images that are not immediately recognizable.

It is essential that a judge be totally open-minded, willing to appreciate all images including portraits, landscapes, architecture, still life wildlife, sports, multi-exposures, sandwiches, abstracts, etc.

A competent judge should be able to appreciate **ALL** images without the need to know what the image is or how it was created.

Judges are only human.

All judges have preferences,
perhaps biases and prejudices.

That will never change,

a good judge should **not** allow his/her preferences,
biases, or prejudices to determine choices.

A good Camera Club Judge is or should be:

An educator

Articulate.

Open minded, objective and tolerant.

Quick, always mindful of time.

Decisive.

Thoughtful.

Fair.

Assertive - willing to be critical and honest when necessary.

Respectful - not disparaging or nasty

The C's of Criteria Concerning Choices in Camera Club Competitions

The following are the criteria I use when judging images:

Craftsmanship - technical aspects of the image.

Composition - design aspects of the image.

Creativity - different, imaginative, unusual aspects of the image.

Communication - how the image communicates with the judge? This can involve mood, feeling, and emotion.

Craftsmanship + Composition + Creativity = Communication

Is it possible to assign values to the first three C's?

Can we weight them?

Are they of equal value?

Are some more (or less) important than the others?

Craftsmanship Considerations

Is the image sharp (if it should be sharp)?

Does it have the proper depth of field?

Is it correctly exposed?

Are the colors acceptable, i.e., natural to the human eye?

Is the contrast range acceptable?

Can we see grain in an analog image?

(That raises a question: what is the proper viewing distance?)

Can we see pixels or noise in a digital image?

(That raises a question: what is the proper viewing distance?)

How is the total presentation?

For slides or projected images:

Are they clean and free from dust specks?

For prints:

Is the print matted correctly?

Is the mat color, border and size proper?

Is the print on the type of paper appropriate to the image?

If the image is black and white, is the tonal range correct?

Are the blacks black and the whites white without blue or purple cast?

Craftsmanship Considerations

For images intended for exhibition:

In addition to the previous:

Is the print worthy of being in an exhibition?

Are the mat and frame appropriate?

Composition Considerations

Composition Considerations

Lines.

Shapes.

Texture.

Perspective.

Color.

Tone.

Harmony.

Rhythm.

Balance/imbalance.

Proportion.

Composition Considerations

Is the essay clearly understood? Does it need to be understood?

Does it gain from having some mystery?

Where does it succeed?

Where is more effort needed?

Remember - Composition is Visual Communication

Thus, photographers are visual writers.

Every entry in a competition is a visual essay written by the competitor.

The judge must determine how well the writer (competitor) presented his / her essay.

Composition Considerations

Dominance.

Sharpness/lack of sharpness.

Background(s).

The use/misuse of negative space.

Exposure - determines visual reaction/mood/emotion.

Contrast - color and tone.

Placement.

Spacing.

Separation.

Lighting.

Eye movement.

Did the visual writer (the competitor) submit an ordinary or extraordinary visual essay?

Creativity Considerations

Does the image represent/demonstrate one of the following creative techniques:

Sandwiching.

Photo Montage(s).

Infrared.

Black Light.

Multiple Exposure.

Panorama.

Selective Focus.

An atypical approach to an ordinary subject.

Careful or different camera placement/position.

Unusual choice of lens or shutter speed.

Special lighting or other special effects.

Post Camera Manipulation(s) - - such as Photoshop using a computer.

My Personal Criteria for Choosing the Best Image at a Camera Club Competition

If I were commissioned by the Corcoran Gallery to select one image to hang in its Gallery, which one would I choose?

If I had to hang one image in my house, which one would I choose?

Between these two questions, would my choices be any different?

DO'S

A Good Judge should:

effectively analyze an image (i.e., be able to “diagram” an image).

Make helpful, constructive comments on every image.

Keep in mind that the competition is a learning experience for both competitors and the audience.

Offer technical observations with suggestions.

Offer compositional observations with suggestions.

Recognize, encourage and reward creativity.

Comment on emotion/feeling/mood of the image.

Give demerits for sloppy matting and/or presentation.

Comment on color accuracy/naturalness.

This is important with so many competitors using home printers that may not be color corrected.

Point out when images are merely ordinary images of an ordinary subject.

Note whether the photographer put him/her into the picture.

Comment whether the photographer found a different or unusual vantage point.

Be receptive to **ALL** images - avoid personal biases which have no place.

Be consistent, decisive and not wishy-washy.

Be positive and upbeat; humor is a definite plus.

DON'TS

A Good Judge should not:

Tell us what we are looking at.

Try to determine the locale, country, city, etc., where the image was taken.

Say the composition is good or bad without telling us why.

Throw out an image without saying why.

Say I don't know what it is -- **out**.

Say this doesn't stand up to the rest of the competition without saying why.

Excessively praise an image then throw it out. Excessively criticize an image then renege and give it a ribbon.

Be rule bound - - e.g., images need an odd number, or the "rule of thirds" should be used.

Compare images to those **not** in the competition -- e.g., I have seen better sunsets.

Feel obliged to distribute the wealth --

i.e., if flowers are the best images, then award **all** the ribbons to flowers.

Expect all images to have a subject or center of interest -- e.g., pattern and abstract images.

Recommended Procedures for Monthly Competitions

Start with a run through of all print/projected entries without comment.
This will allow an overview of the entries and will give an idea of the overall quality of the images.

Starting with the second pass, make succinct comments on **ALL** images and start eliminating entries
Suggestions and constructive remarks on how to improve the image are better than negative comments.

Keep track/make mental tab of images as they pass through,
so as not to cause any embarrassment resulting from a miscount later on.

Clearly enunciate “**IN**” or “**OUT**” (or other terminology) to eliminate any confusion.
Speak loudly enough so that print passers or projectionist(s) clearly understand.

Pick first, second, and third place winners plus requisite number
of honorable mentions as the club designates.

Competition Judge Evaluation Form

Name of Judge _____ Date of Competition _____

1. Please rate the judge's performance using the numerical scale below. Circle the appropriate number with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest:

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constructive comments and insights..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Choices consistent with comments..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Ability to communicate reasons for choices..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Choices made in timely fashion..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Appreciation of nontraditional as well as traditional images..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Awareness of photographic composition and image presentation..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| The competition as a learning experience..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

2. Would you invite this judge back? Yes No

Would you recommend this judge to another camera club? Yes No

Please use the space below if you wish to make any additional comments about the judge.

A Guideline for Judges

(A possible letter/e-mail to be sent to judges before the competition).

Procedure:

1. For every category, start with a run through of all print/slide entries without comment. This will allow an overview of the entries and will give an idea of the overall quality of the images.
2. Starting with the second pass, make succinct comments on **ALL** images and start eliminating entries. Suggestions to improve the image rather than negative comments would be appreciated.
3. Clearly say “**IN**” or “**OUT**” as each image is presented.
4. Pick first, second, and third place winners plus requisite number of honorable mentions as the club designates.
5. All images do not need a subject. Patterns, textures and abstracts are prime examples. Such images should not be summarily dismissed without giving reasons for elimination.
6. Images may be eliminated for both technical and aesthetic reasons. Both are important and should be addressed in your critique.

A judge should:

Make helpful, instructive comments on every image.

Keep in mind that the competition is a learning experience for the audience as well as the competitors.

Comment on artistic and technical aspects and offer suggestions.

Comment on the total presentation including matting.

Comment on color accuracy.

Speak to creativity.

Identify images that are merely ordinary and not competition quality.

Comment whether the photographer found a different or unusual vantage point.

Be receptive to **ALL** images.

Be consistent.

Be positive and decisive.

A Guideline for Judges

A judge should not

- Tell the audience what it's looking at.
- Guess as to where/when it was taken.
- Say the composition is good or bad without saying why.
- Throw out an image without explaining why.
- Say "I don't know what it is -- OUT."
- Say that an image doesn't stand up to the competition without telling why.
- Excessively praise an image then throw it out.
- Excessively criticize an image then give it a ribbon.
- Be rule bound -- (e.g., rule of thirds, odd numbers, etc.).
- Compare images against those not in the competition -- (e.g., I have seen better sunsets).
- Feel obliged to distribute the wealth -- (e.g., if flowers are the best images, then award all ribbons to flowers).
- Make fewer comments when judging the advanced categories.

A Judge should insist on clear guidance from the club before the competition

- Objective of competition
- Expected starting time
- Desired ending time
- Expected number of images
- Number of categories
- Open or Themed
- Clear definition of theme
- Other helpful comments

Questions about Camera Club Competitions

In my view, the reasons for most camera club concerns are competitions. If it weren't for competitions who would care what is done in someone else's darkroom, wet or dry? During the long reign of Eastman the Elder there were complaints about competitions and now Adobe the Magician has unleashed a sophisticated array of WMD's (Weapons of Mass Design) into camera club competitions. Which of these new design techniques are acceptable and which are not? Although I have spoken and judged at virtually every camera club in the area, I have no answers, only questions. Here are a few questions for camera clubs to consider regarding competitions in the digital world of the 21st Century:

What is the purpose /objective of a camera club competition? It is important that this be clearly delineated since the reasons vary from club to club. Are competitions primarily a learning experience for the competitors and the audience? Are competitions primarily an activity where ribbons are given and received? Are competitions primarily entertainment?

The following three questions are very important given modern technology: What is photography today? What is imaging today? Where does photography end and imaging begin?

Have we moved away from the camera as the principal image creator and accepted the computer as the principal image creator? If so, is that good or bad?

In today's image-making world, what is a "camera"? The answer to that question may not be as obvious as it seems. If a camera is an image capturing device, is not a copier an image capturing device? Is not a scanner an image capturing device? Is not a computer screen an image capturing device? Is not a particular model cell phone an image capturing device? Which of these imaging capturing devices are acceptable in camera club competitions, and which are not?

How much of the image should be the exclusive creation of the "maker"?

Who is the "maker" and what does "maker" mean today?

Can the synthesizer of an image be considered the “maker”?

Is “counterfeiting” more easily achieved in the digital world? If so, can that be a problem in camera club competitions?

Should there be any limits or restrictions to the concept “an image is an image” which is held by many camera clubs?

Would a “critique evening” where there were no winners and no losers (and therefore no stress or distress) be preferable to competitions?

Could, for example, a “show and tell” evening where all participants would show two prints and/or project two images and explain how each one was created be a better alternative for club members?

Given its rapid decline in number of entries, is it time to pull the plug on slide film photography in camera club competitions?

I have only touched upon a few questions that could and perhaps should be asked about that love-hate activity called camera club competitions -- an activity whose rules and regulations are constantly and perpetually being altered, modified, revised and changed. It seems we can't live happily with them, and we can't live happily without them.

The Effect of Digital Projection on Judging

In NVPS in camera club year 2011-2012, the following were entered in the various competition categories:

total prints -379 entries
total digital projections - 735 entries
Average per competition - 148

Given the cost of ink, paper, and matting, and the time involved, will prints continue to be a popular category in camera club competitions?

Many clubs have “an image is an image” philosophy and have no special category for enhanced or extremely manipulated images. For those clubs that do have a special category for enhanced (extremely manipulated) prints, should there also be a special category for enhanced (extremely manipulated) digital projections?

Unlike slide film projection which remained virtually unchanged for decades where there was primarily one kind of projector (Kodak) and one developer (E-6), today there are many different digital projectors, computers and laptops, and ever changing software programs that influence the look of images projected onto screens at camera club competitions. What effect will rapidly changing digital projection technology (both hardware and software) have on camera club judging?

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Assignments

Now, an assignment

Please write for yourself:

- (1) The purpose of camera club competitions.
- (2) Your view of the Role of a Judge.
- (3) Your criteria if you were asked to judge.

For additional information about camera clubs visit:
www.NVACC.org