

An Analysis of Judging

Part One

by Dr. E.R. Sethna

Introduction

The importance of judging, or what some would call selecting, cannot be denied. Where would club photography and the RPS 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 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 instance, measure the severity of depression by an instrument as you can with blood pressure. In psychiatry, we have developed sophisticated ways of dealing with such abstract subjects by use of "scales" and statistics, and I wondered whether I could apply my training in psychiatry to the study of judging in photography.

I knew from the outset that as so little established literature existed on the subject, 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 two to three years and have continued making these observations less rigorously ever since. With my training in observing people and how they function and analyzing the underlying reasons and motives for their behavior, 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 got 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 analyze their methods, thus helping me to conceptualize better methods of judging.

Those not particularly interested in the subject of judging need not be put off from continuing to read this article, as it could equally be regarded as one on photography as an art form.

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.

A - Negative Aspects of Judging

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:

- i) "Overvalued ideas"
- ii) Failure to see the picture as a whole
- iii) Critical rather than constructive approach
- iv) Consideration given to effort put into getting or making the picture. -

i) "Overvalued Idea"

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 fervor, 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. A judge was of the opinion that obliques in composition 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 seventy times in the session.

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.

3. Importance of a full range of tones from pure black to white in monochrome prints was stressed by a judge. 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 had fulfilled this criteria.

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 “contrajour” lighting was reflected by the footpath.

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

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.”

7. A couple of judges felt that pictures portraying movement by use of slow shutter speed, should have something sharp within the picture. 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 this criteria.

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 communicated, but only judged the picture on the quality of the printing.

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

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 own merit.

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 favorably even though some of the pictures of birds, insects and flowers were better, and that is what in fact happened.

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 type 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 to not deal with them or not treat them as fairly as any other patient. Shouldn't the photographic judge be professional enough to assess categories of pictures of which they are not fond, and at least compare them with other pictures in the same category?

From the above examples it can be seen that however valid an idea is, if it is “overvalued” by a judge, he restricts his judging to a single issue and neglects the rest. Overvalued ideas can also lead to judges' making their own rules which are exclusive to them and applied indiscriminately.

ii) Failure to See the Picture as a Whole

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 only when they are put together as a structure that the building acquires aesthetic qualities of its own, which do not exist in its components. 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 realization of this fact is sadly lacking. It appears that judges look upon pictures as if they are just a collection of areas of different tones or colors. From their comments they seem to dissect the picture, closely scrutinizing the different areas rather than responding to the picture as a whole.

So common and widespread is this practice that we have all learned to accept it as an established way of judging. How often one hears judges comment at great length on “a bright area at the edge of the picture,” “the position of a tree,” or “the placement of the hands in a portrait.” These comments would be quite acceptable, valid, and useful to the audience in improving their work, but they must not be the sole 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 a creation of an artist through which he or she tries to communicate, and that is the main and the 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 colors.

There is another way of looking at the same issue which gives it a different slant. In all art forms, there is a medium used for 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 they 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 probably the medium in photography is more technical than say in painting and that premise 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 realization of this fact first came to me when I saw a lady judge at 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 realized that her method was different from that of the other judges.

Repeatedly, I found that many good judges worked intuitively and they never analyzed their method or developed a system of judging. Unfortunately, intuitive behavior is not transferable or capable of further development by rational thought.

iii) Critical Rather Than Constructive Approach

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, the test 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 behavior, 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. The carrot will always remain more effective than the stick.

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, nor are they to make harsh or nasty comments. If a constructive approach is followed there is certainly never any room for nastiness, sarcasm and rudeness in judging.

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 in which the judge’s sole function is appreciation of the work he is asked to evaluate.

I can well understand that some

judges would say that at some clubs the work entered is so poor that they are hard put to find something good to say. I well know the feeling. At one club judging I attended, 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 got the permission of 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 again next year.

iv) Effort Put Into Getting and Making of the Picture

Many judges feel that in their marking they should include the effort on the part of the photographer in either getting the picture or 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 which 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 was 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 the advantages or disadvantages of the photographer. +

This is part one of a two-part treatise on photography judging, from a psychological perspective. Dr. Sethna is a psychiatrist and vice president of the Royal Photographic Society of the United Kingdom. He has been a member of PSA since February 1993.

“An Analysis of Judging” (in two parts) was first published in the *Royal Photographic Society Journal*.

Please hold your responses to part one until after reading part two next month. Many issues raised in part one are dealt with further in part two.

P-Essay

An Analysis of Judging

Part Two

by Dr. E.R. Sethna

The following analysis by Dr. E.R. Sethna, as well as Part One published last month, was first published in the Royal Photographic Society Journal. It is reprinted here with permission.

B - The Positive Aspects of Judging

Having dealt with the four main ways in which negative attitudes manifest themselves in judging, I will now turn my attention to the positive aspects.

In good judging, I found that three attributes of the pictures were taken into consideration. These—in order of importance—were as follows:

- A) What the picture communicates—the “message” with a weighting of 50-60 percent.
- B) The content of the picture and how it is dealt with, with a weighting of 30-35 percent.
- C) The technical aspects of the picture—the “medium” with a weighting of 10-15 percent.

A) What the Picture Communicates—The “Message”

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. The mood that a picture conveys 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, and the ability to feel a picture and not just visualize 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 verbalize feelings and emotions that a picture conveys, a fact which assumes

greater proportions in the case of judges not blessed with a verbal facility. A judge who finds it difficult to express feelings and emotions of a picture should not feel he is alone but rather should realize 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 imaginations.

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

- i) A statement or a story
- ii) An idea or inventiveness
- iii) Interpretation of the beauty or any other quality of the subject.

i) 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. This would be true of all forms of documentary photography such as that of social

upheaval, war, famine or celebration.

ii) 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 onto which the viewer can project his own thoughts, fantasies and imaginations aroused by the image.

iii) 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 as “creative” or “contemporary” has no place in photography. It would be a mistake to take this extreme view. How often judges say that what is good in a photograph existed in the subject matter and that the photographer only recorded it. That is a very narrow view. Different photographers interpret the same subject differently and some better than others and good judging requires taking that into consideration.

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 inimical way the favorable attributes in the subject he photographs.

However, one has to admit that what could be described as a "record" photograph and what I would call an "interpretive" photograph would have to be of a very high standard to evoke as much response as the "creative" work in which there is a greater input of the photographer's creativity.

B) Content of the Picture and How It Is Dealt With

This is where the ability of the photographer to see what subject would lend itself to a good photograph is judged. What appears good to the eye does not necessarily make a good photograph. Different subjects have different degrees of being photogenic. How often one sees a really good photograph of a subject many of us would not have dreamt of taking. Even when the subject matter is quite commonly selected for photography, like a portrait or a landscape, it is the choice of the person or the scene that the photographer makes which will determine 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 the subject is how it is dealt with and that includes:

- a) The choice and control of lighting; one of the most important aspects in picture making.
- b) What is included and what is not in the picture.
- c) The choice of background, setting or environment for the chosen subject.
- d) Sharpness or lack of it in the picture as a whole or in different parts of the picture.
- e) The interpretation of movement.
- f) The juxtaposition of tones and colors.
- g) Exploitation of perspective.
- h) The critical timing of taking the picture.
- i) The arrangement of the different components of the picture—the composition.
- j) Exploitation of pattern and texture.
- k) The choice of format—horizontal or vertical and the shape and dimension of the picture.

C) The Technical Aspect of the Picture—The "Medium"

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

- 1) Handling of tonal range and color rendition.
- 2) Correct exposure.
- 3) Sharpness of the picture—depending upon its appropriateness to the subject.
- 4) Quality of processing.
- 5) Retouching.
- 6) Appropriateness of choice of black and white or color.
- 7) Presentation of the picture—mounts in prints and cropping in slides.

It can be argued that technical merit of the picture should be a prerequisite to assessment of artistic qualities which have been so strongly emphasized up till now. 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, experience 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 on exceptional occasions when a picture outstandingly good artistically has to be rejected because of very poor technique.

A weighting to the above three aspects of judging has been suggested at the beginning of the section, and in most cases, what is suggested would be appropriate. However, good judging would require some flexibility in the weighting. If a picture reveals an exceptionally high standard in one of the above three features it would be entirely appropriate to modify the weighting beyond that suggested in the given range. A photograph which by its very nature did not have a strong emotional message but which was a superb example of timing of taking the picture would deserve an extra weighting in B and lower in A.

Conclusion

Though the three aspects of pictures to be taken into consideration in good judging have been stressed, it is by no means suggested that there should be rules for what judges should like or dislike. Judging is, and 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 in judging and the above three parameters could form the basis for it.

A good example of what should be taken into consideration in judging does exist in ice skating we so often see on television. Judges are asked to mark on "technical merit" and "artistic interpretation." If like in photography the judges were allowed to mark on any aspect of ice skating they considered important then it is 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. Another judge who considers the choice of dress by the skaters as the most important will mark on this entirely different issue. Even more absurdly, if a judge believed that the difference in height of the skating pair was the most important thing he would mark only on that issue.

This is what is happening in photographic judging where marking is done according to rules made by the individual judge and which are entirely personal and exclusive to them, or where the marking is based on the judges' current fads, prejudices and overvalued ideas.

If there was a consensus on what should be taken into consideration in marking and the weighting given to each attribute chosen, it would help entrants to competitions and exhibitions to know what was expected of them and the results of judging would be more consistent and fair. This does not imply rules on what the judges should select but agreement on what aspects of the picture they should be taking into consideration in judging. It would in fact mean less rules than at present since individual judges are currently making rules based entirely on their own way of thinking.

It is only when standards of judging are improved and based on sound principles of what constitutes a good picture that photography will attract the status and recognition of other arts.

Remaining Issues on Judging

Finally there are a few remaining issues which need to be considered They are:

I. Difficulties in Giving Awards.

This difficulty particularly arises in major exhibitions and salons where the total entry runs into thousands. If it is an open exhibition covering every kind of subject and type of photography, it would appear to be a very difficult, if not an impossible task 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 as good and why choose a landscape when there are scores of equally good pictures on other subjects?

To overcome this dilemma, I have found that judges on some occasions have chosen a totally way out image for the top award which more often than not does not represent the total entry nor has the highest artistic merit. Again, the lame excuse by judges—that it is we who are incapable of understanding the image of their choice—would not do. It is in my opinion the most arrogant statement that one could make. If a judge cannot explain the reasons for his choice it is more than likely that it is the judge who has not fully understood what is a good photograph and how to assess its artistic and technical merit.

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 has to be admitted that it is a formidable, if not an impossible, task to choose one image as the best from an entry of thousands.

The solution may 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 individual. It is more than likely that the highest total score is shared by several entrants. In which case, the judges would see each of these entrants’ four pictures together and decide which set of four is the best. In practice this is much easier than picking just one image.

This also keeps the top award from going to a picture which was produced by chance or fluke by not such a competent photographer, as it is most unlikely that any photographer would produce our outstanding pictures by chance. The principles of giving awards should be based on awarding 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, as photography is relatively more technical than other art forms, 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 credibility of the judge.

3. Should the Judges Be Practicing Photographers and Current Exhibitors?

If we wish to improve the standard of judging it would be best if such a stipulation was made. If judges who are not practicing 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 many judges would not find this view

acceptable and that has been expressed to me strongly on many occasions, but my observations certainly support this view.

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 payment by the standard attained. If judges are to be rewarded in some way, a system of monitoring would become a necessity and the way to do that would be a subject in itself.

In conclusion, I would not like to claim that this study is the last word on judging or that it has answered all or most of the questions on this difficult subject. My only wish is that this study proves to be thought-provoking and leads to further studies, conferences, dialogue and correspondence so that in the future, preferably in the near future, we establish good and sound principles of judging.

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