

Booklet #10: The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs

## **HOW TO JUDGE JUDGING**

by

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## PREFACE

The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs (NVACC) is an informal organization started in 1997 by Joseph Miller with the assistance of Dave Carter and Ed Funk. Our purpose is to promote communication and cooperation among camera clubs. We accomplish this by (a) publishing a monthly calendar of the member clubs' activities; (b) conducting training seminars for photographic judges; (c) maintaining a registry of trained judges who serve the clubs' monthly competitions and critiques; and (d) maintaining a directory of speakers who have been recommended by the various clubs. You can learn more about NVACC by going to our web site at [www.NVACC.org](http://www.NVACC.org).

This booklet is one of a series that was developed by NVACC during the period 1998-2008 to capture the considerable expertise of the many accomplished photographers in Northern Virginia and share it with others. Over recent years, we have seen significant change in the photographic art form and very rapid technical advance in both the media of photography (film and digital) and the tools (cameras, lenses, computers, and software). For that reason, the detail of some of these booklets may seem "dated", although the ideas and techniques presented transcend "progress" and the digital-film divide. Watch the NVACC web for new booklets as well as revisions that incorporate new technology and ideas into the existing ones.

Originally, our booklets were made available through member clubs for a small fee that covered the cost of reproduction. Now, however, the booklets are available on [www.NVACC.com](http://www.NVACC.com) where individuals may download one machine-readable copy and one print copy per page for personal, noncommercial use only. Written permission from NVACC is required for any other use.

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## How to Judge Judging

There seems to be two schools regarding judging. One holds that a judge should make choices with minimum commentary. The other view, which I as a photography instructor share, is that competitions should be a learning experience where judges' remarks help both competitors and the audience to improve their images. The presumption here is that if a judge is qualified to make choices, he or she should be able to justify verbally those decisions and thereby provide instructive comments to competitors and the audience. With that bias I looked at four areas: 1) what criteria should be used to judge an image; 2) what is the role of a judge; 3) what qualities should a judge have; and 4) what is wrong with judging today?

### What Criteria Should Be Used to Judge an Image

There are several criteria which can be used to judge an image. Some of them are personal opinions which vary from judge to judge. At the very least the following criteria should be considered.

- Does the image show good photographic craftsmanship? Is it exposed correctly? Is it focused correctly? Is it sharp (if it should be sharp)? Is it blurred due to hake, etc.? In competition there is no latitude for carelessness in photographic craftsmanship.
- Does the image show an appreciation of basic design elements—lines, shapes, form, balance, tone, harmony, conflict, patterns, rhythm, perspective, proportion, etc.?
- Is the image composed well? Are there "things" in the image that don't belong there—from beer cans to "busyness"? Was the picture space utilized well, etc.? While there is less rigidity in what constitutes good visual design, an image should indicate careful intent by the photographer.
- Does the image sing to the judge? Is it distinctive? Is it worthy of being in competition? The subjective areas of mood, feeling, style, impact, likes and dislikes, etc., are personal, and the responses among judges will vary widely, as well they should. The subjective appeal of an image is often vague and difficult to define. Yet it is in their subjective presentation that the better images set themselves apart from the ordinary ones.

### What Is the Role of a Judge?

Judges can take on many different roles. Here are the most important.

- The judge, of course, must rate images so that 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and honorable mentions are selected and appropriate points or awards can be given.
- The judge should provide an explanation to the competitors and the audience why each image was evaluated as it was.
- The judge should provide suggestions and guidance to help the competitors and the audience improve their images.
- The judge should make clear to the competitors and the audience that photography is both technical and personal, and that one without the other is not enough to produce a winning image.
- The judge, by example, should encourage competitors and the audience to judge their own work by showing how an image should be analyzed. After all, if competitors are not able to judge the merits or demerits of an image, how can they determine which images to enter in competition?

### What Qualities Should a Judge Have?

Every judge brings specific qualities to a competition. Listed below are the most essential.

- The judge should be knowledgeable about the craftsmanship of photography.
- The judge should understand the principles of good design and composition.
- The judge should be able to convey verbally his or her knowledge and feelings regarding an image.
- The judge should be decisive and be able to make choices and justify those choices in a minimum of time.
- The judge should be honest about his or her preferences/ prejudices such as liking/not liking pets, children, macro, abstracts, sunsets, etc., if these attitudes influence decisions.
- The judge should be able to critique without criticizing.
- The judge should be compassionate when pointing out shortcomings in an image so as not to discourage the competitors or the audience from future competitions.
- The judge should convey the fact that judging is not an exact science. Judging is merely one person's evaluation of an image based on photographic principles, influenced by knowledge and individual attitudes, which will vary

from judge to judge.

- The judge should be a teacher whose long range goal is to improve the photographic images of the competitors and audience.
- The judge should encourage individual creativity and imagination. While photographic principles must be considered, adhering to them too rigidly will lead to dull, stilted images receiving awards.

## What Is Wrong with Judging Today?

While it is easy to complain about judging, judges alone are not responsible for all the problems. Procedures used at camera club competitions may also be at fault.

- Judges are often chosen because they are known to be good photographers. However, good photographers, including professionals, are not necessarily good judges possessing the qualities mentioned above.
- Judges often do not know how to "diagram" an image verbally for the benefit of the competitors and the audience by pointing out why an image succeeded or failed.
- Judges often steer a comfortable course by selecting only images that include accepted dogma such as a clearly identified subject, located at the rule of thirds, with a catch-light in the eyes, etc. Many of these images are compositionally safe, but emotionally dull.
- Judges often discourage creativity and imagination because these qualities may not fit into the traditional notion of what supposedly constitutes good composition.
- Judges often use picayune reasons to justify why an image is rejected. This is confusing to the competitors and audience. Better to simply say "I don't like this image as well as some others."
- Judges are often asked to consider too many images, resulting in poor choices due to mental fatigue and the limitations of time. For larger clubs fewer entries per competitor may be necessary in order to make judging more thoughtful and manageable.
- 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.

- Judges are often too kind by not pointing out demerits in an image. Certainly a judge does not wish to hurt one's feelings with negative remarks, but withholding constructive comments does not help competitors, and the audience, improve their images.
- There is no evaluation system for judges. Thus an incompetent judge may have repeat opportunities to give poor information to competitors and audiences.
- The procedure used in many camera club competitions requires that judges pick losers, not winners. Judges first pick for elimination images which have flaws, sometimes minor, that can be articulated easily. Only after losers have been selected are the remaining images then awarded ribbons. The surviving images may be rather bland compared to images eliminated earlier.
- There is no area-wide roster from which to choose competent judges. An area-wide system should be established where clubs recommend judges for competitions. Inclusion in such a roster, which should list judges' experience and/or specialty, would suggest a measure of competence. (Note: This is a service the Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs provides to its member clubs.)

These comments are somewhat overlapping, and readers may disagree with many points, including the premise that competitions should be a teaching/learning experience. Comments and responses are invited and encouraged, particularly suggestions and recommendations to improve the level of judging skills and, in turn, the quality and value of competitions to both competitors and the audience.

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