

Booklet #11: The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs

## **SURVIVING PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPETITIONS**

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.

If you would like to know more about NVACC or have questions or suggestions concerning our booklets or services, please feel free to contact us at [JoeMiller@NVACC.org](mailto:JoeMiller@NVACC.org).



# Surviving Photographic Competitions

## **A Photographic Competition is:**

- a stimulus for creating meaningful images
- a benchmark of your progress (sometimes)
- a way to learn new techniques
- a way to hone your skills
- a way to get "attaboys" or "attagirls" when you do well
- a way to get depressed about your perceived abilities when you don't do well
- a way to spend lots of time and money
- a stimulus for homicidal thoughts toward the judge
- a roll of the dice, depending on the mood of the judge that day, and his pre-set prejudices for or against your subject matter or style

## **A Photographic Competition is not:**

- a foolproof way to determine whether your creativity or photographic skills are acceptable
- an indicator of your relative worth as a photographer among your peers
- an absolute indicator of good v. bad images
- a reason to quit your day job and become a photographic "arteest" (if you do well)
- a reason to smash your cameras on the rocks and launch yourself off a tall building (if you don't do well)

## **"Here Come De Judge"**

The first definition we usually think of when we hear the words "to judge" is "to pass sentence upon" as in a court of law. But we are not dealing with law here, nor are there any sentences, no life and death decisions. Our lives and freedom are not at stake, only our egos.

If we read further in the dictionary we come to this definition: "to determine or decide authoritatively after deliberation." Now we are getting closer. Camera Club judges do, indeed, decide authoritatively. Most, however, do not have the luxury of enough time to deliberate more than a few minutes. And, unless there is more than one judge, and all

confer on each print, there may be no deliberation at all.

To judge also means to "appraise discriminatingly as an expert." The key words here are "discriminatingly" and "expert." Presumably the people a camera club chooses to judge a competition are considered experts in some facet of photography and/or art. Some are comfortable and do a good job, trying to give the creator of the photograph the benefit of the doubt. But others are untrained or too narrow in their viewpoints to be able to judge everything equitably. Many people cannot be discriminating: some do not have well-formed views, which gives them the appearance of being "wishy-washy". Others are so narrow that they will not accept anything that falls out of their limited category of likes and dislikes.

A judge must "arrive at a conclusion." In the case of competition, there will eventually be award winners. The judge will conclude the competition with a pronouncement based on his conclusions.

To judge also means to "form an opinion or evaluation." We need to remember that what any judge thinks is just his own opinion. It is possible for the judge to be wrong. It is acceptable for the photographer to disagree with any opinion. The opinion, even though it is arbitrary in the sense of giving awards, does not have the weight of law. Any other judge could and often does give a different opinion. This is one reason it is important to resubmit photographs that "almost made it" or those about which you feel strongly. The next judge might choose it for an award. The judge is entitled to his opinion, but should be able to give reasons for or against any given photograph. A judge who denigrates the photographer with comments such as: "if you've seen one sunset you've seen them all," or "I can't understand why anyone would submit such a bad print," or "I don't understand it; out!" is one who shouldn't be invited back because he is being neither helpful nor informative.

## **What Judges Look For In a Photograph**

Although there is no absolute right or wrong, good or bad, when it comes to viewing any art form, there are a few basics that most judges seem to look for.

- *Impact* — The photograph which has qualities that seem to reach out and grab the viewer from the very first glimpse will often fare better in a competition where the judge or judges must make quick decisions. Even though another photograph might be one that you could hang on your wall and enjoy for years, if it requires some study to appreciate its nuances, it probably will not fare as well in a competition when seen against those "grabbers."
- *Composition* — We hear a lot of judges who have learned a few so-called rules of composition and then use them to make all of their decisions. Falling into this pit may be one of the most unfortunate habits of many judges. Center of interest and rule of

thirds come to mind when this topic comes up in conversation. Not every photograph needs to have a center of interest or have it placed in one of four predetermined areas in the frame. An accomplished photographer will learn about good composition from several sources and apply the parts that are appropriate to each individual photographic situation.

- *Another Point on Composition*— Make certain your image contains only the information you want the judge to see. If an image of a pastoral scene has a power pole showing along an outside edge, use a special mount to re-crop, or use opaque tape to cover it up. Most viewfinders do not allow you to see 100% of the area you are actually recording on film (only 90% to 95% is typically visible). So don't feel bad about not seeing that distraction at the edge of your image - it probably didn't show in your viewfinder. Just crop it out.
- *Color Harmony*— A cacophony of color can sometimes be visually confusing, while similar or complementary colors can refine your image and give it a cohesive feeling. You want the judge to appreciate the image, even if it is a disturbing subject, and color harmony is a way to help make that happen.
- *Sharpness* — Whether your subject is better portrayed with either shallow or great depth-of-field, your main subject should be relatively sharp. If you're photographing a fall scene with trees turning autumn colors against a backdrop of rolling hills, most of the trees should be relatively sharp. Imagine that scene with sharp rolling hills, and fuzzy orange blobs on blurry dark columns — your message of the beauty of autumn will probably not be accurately received.
- *Non-distracting Background*— Always, *ALWAYS*, *ALWAYS* pay attention to the background. The background is the thing against which your main subject lives or dies, at least as far as the judge is concerned. A beautiful flower, with distractions in the background, will not allow the judge to appreciate your main subject. If you're stuck with a less-than-perfect background, try to control it as much as possible by changing your camera angle or height, and using very shallow depth of field. Remember, however, that backgrounds with blotchy areas of light or dark, or strong colors, even though out-of-focus, will still be very obvious. So be aware of those problem areas before you decide to click the shutter.
- *Exposure* — Most judges look for images that indicate you have control over your equipment, and exposure is one of those controls. Grossly underexposed or overexposed images often are not visually pleasing. However, if your aim is to present, for example, a soft image with a pastel feel, don't be afraid to experiment with overexposure of 1 or 2 or more stops. On the other hand, if you want to convey a brooding or moody image, or one with very deep rich colors, underexposing a stop or two will enhance that feeling. Just remember, that most judges want to see some detail in both the light and the dark tones of an image, with the possible exception of a plain

background.

- *Lighting*— Since photography by its very nature requires light, lighting is one of the most important factors in the production of a winning photograph. The direction of light adds to the impact and mood of an image. It helps to determine technical aspects of the photograph such as aperture and shutter speed. It is key in accenting points of interest. It can be deadly if it is in the wrong place, is too strong, or too weak. Winning photographs can be made in any kind of light, but that light must be controlled by the photographer.
- *Print and Slide Quality*— Most judges who are themselves photographers recognize a well executed image when they see it. For a slide to score well it must be properly exposed for the subject and mood, with some control over contrast. For a print to score well, it should have the appropriate amount of contrast, be printed for the correct amount of time (neither over-printed nor under-printed), and should have believable colors. Many judges look for a full range of tones in black and white prints. Blacks should be black, whites should be white, with a wide range of gray tones in between. While the amount of grain and diffusion, color choices, paper choice, toning, and other darkroom manipulations are all the prerogative of the photographer, any of these should be done with the utmost care and attention to detail.
- *Presentation* — While the way a print or slide is presented may not have anything to do with the quality of the image itself, it does have meaning in a competition where your photograph is being compared to others. The entries that are presented well will score higher because they make a better impression; they have more impact. To start with, prints should be spotted, and slides should be clean, straightened in the mount, and free of dust. Mats should be carefully cut and of strong enough material so that they will not buckle or flop on the judging stand. It is a matter of taste and convention whether it is appropriate to use colored mats, as opposed to white mats, on color prints. Most judges today will accept colored mats as long as the color is compatible with the colors in the print, and is not so bright or garish that it detracts and draws the eye away from the photograph. If prints are mounted, they should be adhered firmly to the backing. With handling during the competition, it is possible for a print to slip, and receive damage, or to look crooked to the viewer.
- *Posing and Story Telling* — These two categories seem to have much more importance in professional judging than they do for club competitions. Mostly they have to do with the presentation of portraits. Probably the best advice we can give about portraits in club competition is that you must judge each of your photographs for its photographic qualities. Be careful about becoming emotionally attached to a "snapshot" of your grandchild because of who is in the picture. Look for the same things in a portrait that you look for in any photograph: good composition, non-distracting backgrounds, color harmony, and all the technical factors that make a good print or slide. The viewer should be able to tell what is going on in the photograph if it

is a candid. Body parts should not be cut off in awkward places, expressions should be appropriate for the mood of the photograph, and pose and clothing should be appropriate for the age of the subject.

## **Pros and Cons of Camera Club Judging**

One judge means one opinion only. This could be good if the competition is in a category where that judge has expertise. It could be not so good if the judge is too narrowly focused. It could be a disaster if the judge is unsure, inexperienced, biased, unfair, unknowledgeable, rude, or inconsiderate. The one-judge method as currently used is relatively efficient and does not need a large group of people to administer it.

More than one judge allows a composite score, which reflects all the judges' opinions. However, a judge with a strong personality can, and sometimes does, influence the others to accept his opinion. Using numbers alone with no discussion among judges is a quick, but sometimes arbitrary, method that leaves little chance for give and take among the judges. Moreover, there is no educational value to the competitors or to the audience time is always a factor because most competitions are held on a weekday evening. Judges are not as alert and refreshed as they might be in the morning. Everyone wants to get it over with and get home early.

The judge usually cannot see all entries at once to compare them to each other. The judge cannot make notes and must rely on memory, especially with slides.

Theoretically, judging produces happy winners and disgruntled losers. Many losers do not re-submit entries that "almost made it," losing an opportunity for a different opinion and possible win the next time. If the same people win over and over again, those who don't could lose heart and stop competing. A critique by a knowledgeable judge could be much more educational, particularly for novice photographers, than a full-fledged judging procedure.

## **Now Or Never**

All photographic competitions seem to have the pressure of now or never: your image has to impress the judge(s) immediately, or it will very likely end up in the "out" pile. (We mentioned this earlier under "impact".) This is even a more pressing problem in monthly Camera Club competitions when there is only one judge. You've got only one chance to wow the judge; he has to understand your image immediately, has to like it, and has to believe it outshines other images in that day's competition.

## **Guilt By Elimination, Or Playing The Percentages**

One major reason why the now or never pressure on both the judge and the competitor is so strong is the requirement that only a certain percentage of images in each

category can "place." (Another major reason is that there is limited time at any competition.) Depending on how many images are in a given category in that day's competition, for example novice color slides, only a certain number of slides can be selected for top awards and honorable mentions. If only a small number of slides have been entered, then it is possible that, because of the percentage restrictions, the judge is allowed to select only 2 or 3 slides. All the others must be eliminated, even if they are very strong slides. This forces the judge to look for either very minor flaws, or to go partly by instinct and choose the ones he likes best.

We've all seen judges pick certain images as winners, and eliminate others that might have just as much merit. A photojournalist judge might choose people pictures that are more candid or spontaneous in nature, and eliminate others that appear to be more posed; a nature photographer might choose images of wild animals and eliminate those of house pets; an architectural photographer might select images of buildings rather than people or flowers. However, don't presume that just because the day's judge has a specialty, that he will most likely choose images that fit the specialty. Sometimes a judge thinks that no one can photograph a specialty as well as he does, and consequently eliminates images that he knows he can shoot better.

So the best advice is to do your best, be true to your vision and the things you like to photograph, and stop trying to outguess the judge.

## **Critiques Help Everyone**

Having a judge explain his reasons for eliminating or keeping an image benefits not only the competitors, but the judge as well. The competitors benefit because they have been told why the judge believes the image is pleasing or not. We may not all agree with what the judge says or feels, but at least we know what he thinks. The judge benefits because he is required to verbalize exactly why the image is "in" or "out". Having to explain to other people why he feels the way he does makes him examine his thoughts and feelings, and forces him to explain clearly what he means. It also helps prevent him from making a poorly thought-out decision.

Not all people are good at expressing their thoughts and reasons, especially professional photographers who are often more visual than verbal. Different people have different strengths, and many who are drawn to photography as a career are often wonderful visual communicators, but not always good verbal communicators. Unfortunately, that is the nature of the beast. But within those confines, there are judges who are better verbally than others. There currently exists an excellent compilation of good judges with strong track records (published by the Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs). It is a good starting point for locating judges who will benefit club members, many of whom want to improve their skills by competing. That is not to say that names not on the list are not worthy — it may be that they were unknown at the



time the list was compiled.

In addition, another way to help determine whether a prospective judge is one you want to invite to your club is to have your judge procurer start in the summer by making preliminary phone calls to people he thinks might make good judges. Tell each prospective judge that this is just one of many initial calls to a long list of possible judges. After talking to each one, your judge procurer will have some idea of how well the prospective judge speaks, and whether he is really interested in judging. Pare down that list to the best of the best, combine it with the list from the Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs and you will probably have an excellent range of judges for the year.

## **How To Retain Your Creativity**

You have to be careful not to allow competition to beat your creativity to a pulp. Your ideas and visualizations have worth, and if you always put yourself in the position of pleasing only the judges, you will lose the spark that attracted you to photography in the first place. If you feel strongly about a particular image, even if a judge hates it, try entering it again. After all, diversity makes the world, and photography, go 'round.

## **Typical Camera Club Judging Procedures**

*One judge competitions* - Usually the judge looks at all entries one time through to get an overview. Often the judge will critique most or all of the entries the 2nd time through, eliminating some of the weaker entries that don't fit his criteria. On subsequent passes, more are eliminated as the judge aims for the number of winners needed for ribbons, and assigns those awards.

*Multi-judge competitions*- Each judge has numbered cards usually ranging from 1-5 or 1-10. As each photograph comes up, each judge assigns a number which a score-keeper adds together and announces total composite score. Ribbons are awarded based on score. Judges break ties if necessary. Sometimes judges take turns giving a critique on the first time through before scoring begins. There is very little if any discussion, except in the case of tie-breaking. In another method sometimes used, the composite scores are averaged. Ribbons are still awarded by score.

## Possible Improvements

It is worth considering a few changes to the existing procedures for camera club competitions. First, we should consider removing the restrictive percentages on ribbons and honorable mentions, and allow a judge to view each image on its own merits. That way a high quality image would have the same chance of doing well, whether it is competing against only 8 other images, or against 50 other images. Competitors would have a better perspective on the merit of their work, and would not be subjected to the restrictive percentage rules that currently exist. Each category could have a 1 st, 2nd, and 3rd place, and then as many honorable mentions as the judge felt were worthy. (In very small categories, there still could be a limit on "place" prints to just a 1 st and 2nd place, but still allow the judge unlimited latitude on the number of honorable mentions.)

Second, while it is always difficult to get good judges on a regular basis, each club could consider having at least a few monthly competitions with a panel of two or more judges. Perhaps two or three club competitions per year could use the panel approach. A scoring method would have to be worked out and approved by all the area clubs, but there are already several panel scoring procedures in place which could either be adopted without change or modified.

Finally, we should consider improving the methods for judges on a multi-person panel to discuss images wherethere is controversy among the judges. The procedure for those judges to speak their minds, or to try to influence their fellow judges, is not well-defined. A "challenge" procedure, similar to professional competitions, whereby any judge can challenge any image, either to improve or reduce its standing, might be a good starting place. Each judge would be allowed to express his opinion, after which a final decision would be made by the panel.

## Just the Beginning

This booklet is not intended as a definitive work on the merits of camera club competitions. It is just a starting point for discussion and review of methods and procedures that have been in use for many years. It is always good to take a fresh look at things that have been in place for some time, both to recognize the good elements and to improve the others. We hope it will be a beneficial guide for the future.

**Note:** Because the use of "his/her" is so awkward, we have chosen to use the words "he" and "his" for the singular, although we are well aware of the fact that females, ourselves included, both compete in and judge photographic competitions.