

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.

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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

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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. ♦

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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.

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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.