

How to Improve your Photography to Make Great Images

by Michael A. Di Stefano, MNEC

To take your photographic talents and skills to the next level, you need to consciously assess how you photograph now, and then, think what you can do to improve your knowledge, technique, creativity and vision.

One of the easiest ways to help yourself improve your images is to become educated about the world of photography. Subscribe to photography magazines and read books about photography. Information is knowledge, and with knowledge about photography you will be able to create better images. Some of my favorite magazines are: *Outdoor Photographer*, *Peterson's Photographic* and *Photographic Techniques*. Photography books are wide-ranging in their subjects of coverage. Some of the best books I've read are: Kodak's "Workshop" Series, HP Photobooks "Learn Photography" and "Photographic Techniques" Series, *Amphoto*, and *Amherst Media* books. Many books can be found at camera shows, flea markets, and E-bay. I've found *Edward R. Hamilton Bookseller* to be a very good source for new books at deep discount prices.

Similar to increasing your knowledge of photography by reading is to visually study the images of the masters of photography, such as: Ansel Adams, Eliot Porter, Edward Weston, Philip Hyde, John Sexton, and Freeman Patterson. The reason these photographers are considered masters is that they learned the craft of photography and honed their skills to create great images. Look closely at their images. Study the way they convey the sense of place or object and the image's composition. Try to determine what lens, filters or special equipment they used. Observe the lighting of the image. What did it do for the subject and mood of the image? How did the masters make their images stand out from those of everyone else? Ask yourself these questions and more as you study the images of master photographers you admire and try to photograph like.

You must know how to work your camera to truly create and control the images you take. Sit down with your camera's instruction manual and read it. Set your camera on manual (turn off all the bells and whistles) and learn how to set the aperture and shutter to create the effects you want with a correct exposure. Use the techniques of photography to get the most out of any situation. Depth of field is how much of the image is in focus. Setting the f-stop to f22 or f32 will render the greatest depth of field where everything (or nearly everything) will be in focus. Setting the f-stop to f2.8 or f4 will leave a much shallower area in focus in your image. Pan blur is panning the camera at a high shutter speed with the motion of the subject in your image. The pan blur effect results in a fairly sharp image of the moving object against a very blurry background. This will intensify the sense of motion of the image's subject. Fill Flash is a technique to help even out exposures in uneven lighting situations. A situation such as photographing a person whose face has the sun to their back would be difficult. The person's face in shadow would most likely be under exposed. The addition of a little TTL flash with an ambient exposure will even out the lighting for a more pleasing image.

Use all the other tools of photography to get the most out of any situation. A tripod is always a must. For the sharpest images the stability of the tripod is matchless. The use of a tripod also gives the photographer time to slow down and think about how to approach a

subject. Different films should be used for different situations. Use the film that will best compliment the type of image you're taking. For example: if fall foliage is your subject, then a vivid saturated film like Kodak EBX or E100VS is a good choice. If the lush green of a forest and ferns is what you're shooting, than Fuji Velvia 50 or the soon to be announced Velvia 100 is the choice to make. Film color bias sometimes alone is not enough. Consider using filters to maximize your images in any situation. The most useful filter, in my opinion, is the polarizer. I never take it off my lens unless it will hurt the image I'm trying to get. The polarizer will remove haze from landscapes, increase the appearance of colors by eliminating glare and deepen blue skies. Who doesn't like deep blue skies?

Composition is a make or break condition of great images. What you leave out of your image is more important than what you leave in your image. An age old saying, "Less is more" stands true in almost every situation and is the best advice and first thing you should remember when setting up a shot. Choosing the best lens to portray your vision of the final image is another important aspect of your final composition. A wide angle lens will encompass more area and consequently more objects to clutter the composition. Moving in close to a foreground object will increase its dominance in the composition and minimize or hide background distractions. Telephoto lenses have a limited angle of view and the longer the telephoto lens the narrower the field of view. Thus, they will inherently isolate a smaller portion of a scene. The other benefit of telephoto lenses is that they have a shallower depth of field than lenses of short length. You should try shooting all subjects as many different ways as you can. This can be as simple as changing from horizontal to vertical format, or changing the angle of view. Get down to the level of your subject if it is a flower or a small child. Train your eye to see critically. Expand your imagination for originality and good composition will follow.

Great images are only made during peak conditions. Peak conditions are prime lighting conditions, but can also mean a frozen moment in time. For landscape images great lighting usually is early morning or late afternoon. At these times of day the most drama will be found with the strong side lighting that gives texture and dimension to scenic images. Early morning is a classic time to transmit the mood of a new day breaking. An image of a still lake with steam rising off the water will enchant all who view it. An image of receding mountain ridge lines disappearing into the early morning fog and haze will instantly relate the view to your feelings when you took the shot. Bright light is not always the right light for a scene. Many times indirect or defused light is best for a situation. Flower images often benefit from this type of lighting. If photojournalism is what you're shooting, then peak condition is the moment when the action of the subject is best captured in your image. Sports/action photography is very much like nature photography. In both cases you're trying to catch a moment of time when the story of your subject is told. Peak conditions may highlight a story telling or emotional moment. Translating the drama or suffering of life can make a very powerful image when captured, but as with nature photography, do not add stress or suffering to an already highly emotional situation such as a family losing all their possessions in a home fire, or a homeless person just trying to survive.

One key aspect to making great images is Creativity. At some point you must stop taking the "status quo" type of shots. Making your images stand out from everyone else's is what differentiates average from great. We have all heard the oohs and aahs when a truly great image shows up during a competition or show. It is this instant recognition of all the above

factors I've pointed out, coming together and expressing the photographer's intent to capture and translate his or her vision. Creativity is being able to approach scenes and see them in a different way. Creativity means making new images, even at photo icons, by putting your own personal touch to an image that has been shot by thousands of photographers before you.

A useful exercise to develop creativity is self assignments. Going out to shoot a specific subject will concentrate your vision on the subject and help you investigate the possibilities at hand. You can also force yourself to see new visions in the old by revisiting local sites you have shot before and trying new approaches. Being open to new and different view points is the spark that will ignite the creative fire in you.

The art of seeing is what needs to follow creativity or be developed at the same time. Now that you're thinking differently and creatively, you must put it together in a way that ties up all the loose ends into a nice neat package. To me this is developing your own style of photography. As I said earlier, "study the images of the masters". Dissecting their images will illustrate their styles. For myself, I love landscapes, and I try to show at least three planes or dimensions in my images. Using a wide angle lens is my means of including a foreground plane with some sort of item of interest. Then there is the middle plane where the majority of the image resides. The wide angle lens reduces the size and importance of the mid plane, but retains its importance as secondary subject matter. Then there is the background which can be the sky with nice textured clouds or a far distant mountain line. Adding more planes to an image can increase the sense of depth, but may cause the image to become cluttered. At this point you are now creating images not just taking them.

All in all, it is a delicate balance. By gaining knowledge, studying the masters, controlling the camera, using the necessary tools, adjusting the composition, shooting during peak conditions, cultivating your creativity, and developing your eye's ability to see and your mind to wonder, the possibilities then become unlimited.