

How to Win Photo Competitions !

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I belong to the RPS Travel Group and recently the Group's co-ordinator of its annual photo competition retired. In his farewell article he offered some insights into what he thought made a winning image. Apart from the obvious technical advice (no flaws) he said winning images need to have *impact*. But what exactly is impact? My idea of impact is simplicity, often (with travel images) involving getting in close. But looking at the awarded travel images over the years, impact evidently means very different things to different judges. For me, composition and lighting are important; I also hate chopped-off feet. For others, it's other aspects.

What does all this mean? It means that we can follow all the advice about impact and still not get a look in because (as I say about some camera club judges) 'I don't know what tree they're up, but it's not the same tree as me.' Were I to win an award, it wouldn't mean my image is better than other high-impact worthies. It would simply mean the judge and I see the world similarly; our subjective interpretations, likes and biases have aligned.

Over the years I've found I am more likely to agree with camera club judgings when they are done by a panel, rather than by one person (and I say this as someone who judges at camera clubs – as one person). The absurdity of one-person judging was illustrated last year at my (then) local camera club. They have an annual interclub competition with a club in the UK. Last year a Melbourne judge and a UK judge each independently judged all the images. Via Zoom the UK judge gave us his results and comments early one morning and in the evening the Melbourne judge did the same. They each had to give a first place overall and select five other 'Honour' images. Each image was scored out of twenty, and these were added up to decide the winning club.

Before I continue, have a guess at the overlap of winning results between the two judges. Do you think it was 100% (hardly!), 80%, 60% or maybe as low as 20% agreement? The answer is Zero! It wasn't that one judge's favourite image was lower down the other judge's list – not a single image honoured by one judge was on the honour list of the other. All six images honoured by the Australian judge were taken by UK club members and five or the six images honoured by the UK judge were taken by Australian club members. That just tells me the visual merits of an image weighed less for these judges than its novelty value. Even the winning club – on aggregate scores – was different for each judge.

Might training for judges overcome this? In Victoria we do have a judges' association, one purpose of which is to 'continually improve the quality of the practice of photographic judging' and this is done through training. But to be honest (or simply uncharitable), my experience is that the ones who used to be (in my single-person view) just woeful are now, since training, woeful with letters after their name. So I'm led to conclude that there are two essential ingredients in a winning image: one is impact and the other is having it judged by a *panel* of judges. Or am I dreaming?