The Elements of Digital Photography
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We all want to create compelling images, and to do so we must first recognize that digital photography is 50% in- camera and 50% post processing. We can think of the in-camera aspect as the foundation and post processing as all that's built upon that foundation. And like putting up a building, strong foundations give us our best chance for enduring structures while weak foundations result in structures that eventually fail. So, the name of the game in creating compelling and award-winning images is to first "get it right" in the camera and then bring out power of the image in post processing.

When we look at the important elements of photography, we usually see them as a linear catalog or a checklist, but perhaps it makes more sense to view them as a constellation of interconnected elements with some elements in a slightly more subordinate position while other elements are in a more prominent position.

In the graphic below, we see all the elements working together to create **Impact and Visual Interest** – which happen to be the two fundamental characteristics that most often succeed in competitions and are the hooks that grab and keep a judge's or viewer's attention.

And one way of visualizing how the various elements work together is to assemble them in logical groupings where Impact & Visual Interest in the center of the 'mind map,' with the balance of the elements leading into them.

Color balance
Presentation
Lighting
Technique
Subject Matter
Technical Exellence
Storytelling
Impact and Visual Interest
Composition
Creativity
Center of Interest
Style

~ Technical on the left – Emotional on the right ~

There are four major components or pillars:

1. **Technical Excellence**   3. **Storytelling**
2. **Composition**   4. **Creativity**

Branching off these four major components are the **Elements** that support each pillar. The left side of the 'mind map' covers the more technical aspects (Technical Excellence and Composition) while the right side of the mind map covers the emotional aspects (Storytelling and Creativity.)

Color balance/color harmony, Presentation, Lighting, and Technique are the elements that make up **Technical Excellence**. You can't have technical excellence if your white balance is off, or your colors are fighting each other. Additionally, the way you present your image at a competition (Glossy, flat, metal, etc.) is a huge part of technical excellence.

For lighting, technical excellence is achieved when you've chosen the best lighting for that subject in that setting. Meanwhile judges always look for directionality and intentionality with a lighting scheme.

As an element, technique looks at how you approached the creation of your image including how the image was captured as well as the post-processing after capture. Technique looks at things like digital noise, moiré, ghosting, chromatic aberration, and other distracting and avoidable elements in an image. Technique also applies to black-and-white conversions – asking the question, is the black-and-white conversion appropriate for the subject and the mood the maker is trying to evoke? A soft and creamy black-and-white image might be appropriate for a sweet newborn but could be out of place for vase filled with colorful flowers - there are no hard and fast rules, but the photographer needs to select the processing that fully supports the story he or she is trying to tell as well as the subject matter.

Color balance provides a sense of harmony to the image and takes many forms, i.e., working with complementary colors (colors directly opposite each other in the color spectrum) or analogous colors (groups of three colors that are next to each other on the color wheel) are two ways to ensure that your images will be balanced. However, colors need not always be harmonious, sometimes clashing color creates just the right amount of tension for the image, evoking strong feelings and reactions. Not every image needs to be pretty to be effective at conjuring emotion.

When color balance, technique, lighting, and presentation are thoughtfully and intentionally in place, we achieve technical excellence which then points the maker toward impact and a high degree of visual interest.

Meanwhile, a **Clear Center of interest** is a component of **Composition**, but a clear center of interest is just one part of the composition element. Does the image bring viewers into the image and keep them there? Do the leading lines take the viewer right to the center of interest? Is the rule of thirds evident or is the rule of thirds being broken intentionally for a specific effect? Are you using mood lines (patterns and lines that convey mood or emotion) to create visual tension? Do the overall lines of the image create a mood that matches the story you are trying to tell?

It's OK to break rules of composition, but the maker must do it intentionally and find a way to indicate to a photo judge that it was done knowingly. Sometimes a symmetrical image creates just the right feeling of stability and strength that you need for an image. Other times that same symmetrically can create an image that is too static, and the net effect is boredom for the viewer.

Storytelling is an element that has often been given short shrift because of its place near the bottom of the list. Many people see it last and believe that it's the least important element. But when it comes to competition, it's one of the four major underpinnings of impact and visual interest. **Subject matter** is an important facet of storytelling (e.g., an image of a massive African lions will have far more impact than a similar image of a common house cat) but it's not the whole thing. There are aspects of storytelling throughout the image—the setting, the props, the expression, the pose, and even the title, which is sometimes called the 13th element, are all part of storytelling.

Storytelling can be enhanced by the choice of post-processing and possibly presentation. A vintage-style image might lose some of its impact if it's printed on glossy paper, while a retro piece might work better on art paper or if the maker uses a 'rag edge' border for the image.

While not technically an element, **Titles** are a very important component to your competition image. It's the maker's only chance to talk to the judge or viewer, so think carefully about what you choose to say. Do you really want to throw away that chance to talk by saying something that a hundred other people have already said? Old and tired titles do little to advance your cause. And some titles have absolutely nothing to do with telling the story of the image and can end up being a stumbling block for judges who are trying to reconcile the two. Use your titles to draw out the story. Point your viewers in the direction you want them to look.

The final pillar of impact and visual interest is **Creativity,** supported by **Style**, although style can support other areas (composition or storytelling, for example), it's probably best considered as a component of creativity. It's hard to define creativity, but it can be defined as the ability to transcend traditional ideas to create meaningful new ideas, i.e., when see a fresh approach to something that's been done over and over and over, i.e., a photo of the world-famous Hollywood sign but taken from behind with the lights of Los Angeles in the background. Images that show a new way to look at something scores high on the creativity and style scale.

The last elements to discuss are **Impact** and **Visual Interest**—and it should be obvious by now that these elements don't just happen. They are the amalgamation of the rest of the elements combined. Great Impact & a high degree of visual interest have been described as the feeling one gets upon viewing "wow image" for the first time, aka, "the wow factor." A wow factor image explodes off the monitor and a wow factor causing the viewer's mind to go blank for a moment and just absorb the image.

Then, after absorbing the wow factor the judge or viewer can begin looking at the image from the standpoints of the other elements. And to reiterate, such images don't just happen—they are thoughtfully created through the judicious attention to the other supporting elements. And sometimes one element or another will prevail and take precedence (such as when a strongly emotive image allows storytelling to compensate for slight deficiencies in technical excellence).

To summarize try imagining **Impact & Visual interest** as sitting on a tabletop with four supporting pillars

- **Technical excellence**, i.e., color balance, presentation, lighting, technique
- **Composition** including a clear center of interest
- **Subject matter** that includes storytelling and
- **Creativity**

all of which when combined keep those pillars strong and ensuring the table doesn't tip over.