

# EXHIBITION PHOTOGRAPHY

*An Abridged Version*

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*A Meeting of the Pictorial Group on 18 November 1953, with Mr. J. Dudley Johnston (Hon. Fellow) in the Chair. The speaker began by sketching the history of art from prehistoric times to the present day. He then went on to a more detailed history of exhibition photography, including the R.P.S. and the London Salon. Dr. Jouhar drew attention to the great increase in the number of amateur photographers since the Second World War and (despite noisy propaganda to the contrary from photojournalists) in the numbers of salons and exhibitors. The speaker then continued:—*

Two pertinent questions may now be asked: (a)—Why do we try to make pictures? (b)—Why do we exhibit?

(a)—In common with the exercise of other forms of art, we resort to making pictures, firstly, because it is one of the functions of human nature to express itself by indulging in some form of art or craft; and secondly, the practice of any art, including photography, serves as a form of "escape" from the hard and often humdrum existence of everyday life. Civilization and artistic activity are inseparable. There is no doubt that an outstanding pictorial photographer of today is a highly developed artist who employs a camera as a means of expression rather than a brush, and who is ever trying to imprint his personal pictorial outlook on sensitized paper instead of canvas. Psychologically, to indulge in any art is to "escape". Admittedly, there are other forms of escape, like going to the dogs, visiting "the local", the kinema, television, and the theatre. There is no denying that these occupations do fulfil an important role in everyday life, but here is the difference: they are kinds of shilling-in-the-slot pleasures providing escape into phantasy for those too tired, too ignorant, or too lazy to provide any other escape for themselves. The practice of artistic photography differs in that it is creative and by its exercise we not only perpetuate our own pleasurable experiences and attempt to give pleasure to others but we make and create our own enjoyment.

(b)—And now to the second question "Why do we exhibit?". The answer is that we are all born with an inherent urge to "show off", display, and thereby "attract". This is the genesis of exhibitions. The primary reason is not mercenary, since very few such photographs are ever sold. Neither is it "pot hunting" as some misinformed people like to think. The biggest and the most important shows usually have no "pots" to offer. The coveted reward is the very acceptance of the submitted picture for "showing", and perhaps a label at the back which implies a sort of symbol of approval, capable of giving extreme satisfaction.

When some people criticize exhibitions, they forget that in essence, most photographic exhibitions are virtually competitions, which, like all games,

are held between individuals who are ever trying to assert their prowess or superiority of some kind over others. All competitions must, of necessity, have a suitable organization and arbitrary rules. The participant in a particular game must be expected to observe certain practical limitations and to possess a certain sense of humour! In fact, he must voluntarily submit to such regulations if he wishes to play and enjoy the game. If it be argued that the majority of the exhibitions are supposed to be run for the benefit of the exhibitors who usually foot the bill in the form of an entry fee, the exhibitors should not forget that the organizers of an exhibition are, in most cases, doing it altruistically without any thought of personal monetary gain.

## THE CONDUCT OF EXHIBITIONS

Some ten years ago, as the President of the Twickenham Photographic Society and Organizer for several years of its international exhibition, on many occasions, I often received requests for information on how to run exhibitions. So several lengthy but fruitful discussions took place in which the most prominent part was played by Mr. Leighton Herdson (Fellow); others who made valuable contributions included: Messrs. Percy W. Harris (Hon. Fellow), Bertram Sinkinson (Fellow), G. L. Hawkins (Fellow), R. H. Mason (Fellow), F. A. Whippey (Member), and Anthony Peacock (Fellow). Every possible angle concerning exhibitions that occurred to any one of us was fully discussed. As a consequence, very constructive suggestions emerged. At first it was thought that the findings of that conference should be made available to anyone interested through the T.P.S., but finally it was decided that the ultimate object of those deliberations should be to dedicate them to the R.P.S. or the Alliance, provided, of course, that these authorities would accept them. The whole plan of organizing and staging an international exhibition was divided into ten parts which form the "meat" of the document available free to any affiliated society on application to the Secretary of the R.P.S.

Now some observations of my own on the conduct of exhibitions may be of general interest

to those who lack experience of such matters:—

1. An open exhibition should be run for the advancement of the art and science of photography and not for any monetary gain.
2. Choose a time for your exhibition so as not to clash with other important exhibitions. Also keep in mind when it is most likely to have most visitors. This may depend on its locality.
3. Location could be chosen as an art gallery, public library, or other suitable building. Club's or society's own premises if adequate in size and facilities.
4. Select an enthusiastic committee and secretary and organize the team work.
5. Consider, beforehand, cost of entry forms, postage, catalogues, sticker-labels, selection committee's expenses, etc.
6. For sending out entry forms, obtain names and addresses from other exhibition catalogues.
7. Begin to send notices to the photographic press at least four to six months beforehand. For an international exhibition, nine months is the minimum.
8. The entry forms should be in the hands of the prospective exhibitors in this country four to six weeks before the closing date.
9. Follow the general arrangement of forms of any of the leading salons. Changes in rules should not be made without careful consideration of the possible results that may follow.
10. The aim of the Exhibition should be clearly mentioned, e.g., the aim of the London Salon is to exhibit only that class of work in which there is distinct evidence of personal artistic feeling and execution.
11. If the aim is to show documentary, scientific, or record work, it should be clearly stated.
12. Mention limit of the number of prints. A limit of four prints is suggested.
13. The size and characteristics of the mounts should be clearly laid down, e.g., "light-weight", "light-toned", etc.
14. It is important to mention in the entry form that the contributor will be notified immediately after the selection takes place, also that the prints will be returned prepaid in their original packing by a certain date after the close of the exhibition.
15. Total rejects should be returned at the earliest possible moment, even before the opening of the Exhibition.
16. Catalogue should be sent to all entrants before the opening day.
17. Prints when received should be carefully opened, numbered, and recorded.
18. There should be an interval of a week between the closing date and the selection, since there are always some late arrivals.
19. Jury of selection to be carefully decided upon; date and time fixed, suitable arrangements made for their reception, stay, refreshments, comfort, and expenses.



Formula for getting into Exhibitions "Frame your Picture".  
All illustrations by the Author

20. A selector (please note, *not* a "judge") should be a good technician, have good general and artistic training, wide and extensive experience of making and observing photographs.
21. The qualifications of the selectors should be announced in the entry form.
22. Three or five are the correct numbers for a selection committee.
23. The aim of the selection committee should be to select from the submitted entry enough prints to make a show which represents a cross-section of the whole and which reasonably fills the possible hanging accommodation.
24. The selection committee should be given comfortable chairs and seated at a convenient viewing distance (three to five feet).
25. During selection the illumination should approximate to that falling on the exhibition walls.
26. There should be no undue haste in passing prints before the eyes of the selectors. Small or doubtful prints may be handled for closer scrutiny.
27. "Voice vote" and free discussion should be the aim.
28. The prints may be arranged in "piles" consisting of 3, 2, 1, or "No Vote".
29. The selectors may be invited to submit prints which should be hung as examples of their work. If voted upon, an experienced substitute should be invited to record the vote.
30. Every print submitted should pass the scrutiny of the selection committee. There should not be an undue cutting down of the number of prints that are hung.
31. Prints before selection should be segregated according to size, colour, "high or low key" and subject matter if possible.
32. After selection, roughly arrange the prints on the walls, interchange and rearrange so as to display them at their best, after which, number and catalogue them.

33. Illustration catalogue.
34. At the end exhibitors should
35. During selection organized to help them. The arrangements recorded immediately hand with figures. Transmit the results in 24 hours.
36. Arrange a list of the duration of the exhibition, not less than a fortnight.
37. All entries should be numbered.
38. When receiving material, check the necessary, put free of charge, damaged original prints back.
39. Labels and numbers on each packet be clearly legible.
- The above instructions should be read by the exhibitors before the exhibition opens. The exhibitors should be advised of the aspects to consider in their entry form.
- Read, mark, pack and seal the prints in their original undamaged condition before the closing date. The prints should be packed in a simple without fancy multiple in a three-ply stout paper, each print in a separate envelope, one inch larger all round than the print. Do not be in a hurry. Keep trying; you will be sure to succeed.

33. Illustrations of suitable prints are desirable in a catalogue.

34. At the end of the catalogue, full address of the exhibitors should be given.

35. During selection a team of helpers should be organized to put the prints on the easel and remove them. The accepted and rejected prints should be recorded immediately; e.g., prepare postcards beforehand with figures 1, 2, 3, 4; "Ring" accepted prints. Transmit the verdict of selectors within twenty-four hours.

36. Arrange a rota of stewards (where necessary) for the duration of the exhibition, which should be not less than a fortnight.

37. All entries should be handled carefully throughout.

38. When returning prints, twine and suitable wrapping material should be provided, and, where necessary, put fresh paper and twine over an already damaged original packing.

39. Labels and stickers may be lightly tacked on the back.

40. Two different persons should check contents of each packet before closing same for returning.

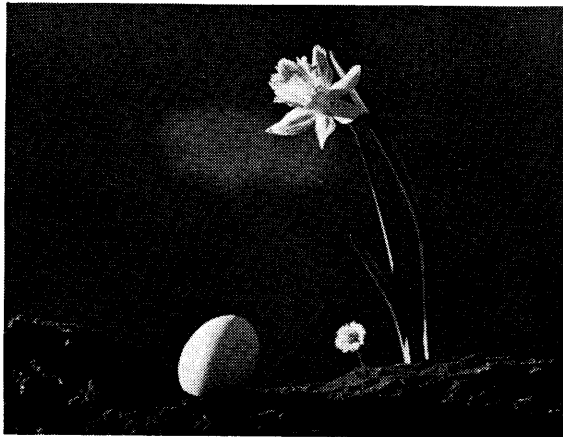
The above are some suggestions for the organizers. The exhibitor also has certain responsibilities and aspects to consider. A few may be mentioned:

Read, mark, and act upon the rules in the entry form.

Pack and send prints so that they reach the destination undamaged and in good time before the closing date. The protective packing employed should be simple without any tissue-paper. Prints sandwiched in a three-ply or similar protective board, half-an-inch larger all round than the print or mount, wrapped in stout paper and twine, travel better than in any fancy multiple packing.

Do not be disheartened if your prints are rejected. Keep trying; study exhibitions, persevere, and you are sure to succeed.

*This type of "constructed" picture is considered "New Outlook" today!*



Section A, September 1954

#### WHAT MAKES AN EXHIBITION PRINT?

First of all we must distinguish between pictorial and other types of prints. It is no use sending the purely "record", press, or personal "family album" type of print (however good in its way) to exhibitions of pictorial photography. The R.P.S. Annual Exhibition, for instance, caters for all types and one should be clear beforehand and only submit prints in the appropriate section. You may ask, what is the difference between a pictorial photograph and "record" or other types of photograph? The answer is not very easy to put into words. Broadly speaking a pictorial photograph is usually decorative, and is mainly an aesthetic, symbolic recording of a scene, personally interpreted by the photographer in his own peculiar way, and such result is capable of transmitting an emotional response (pleasant or unpleasant) in the mind of a receptive spectator. The resultant photograph is not necessarily what the original scene was, but, what it ought to be. The camera is thus made to "lie" according to the fancy of the photographer. The bigger and the more imaginative the "lie", the better the picture. Art has nothing to do with mundane truth. No photograph is ever truthful. We often delude ourselves into thinking that it is so! Furthermore, a good pictorial photograph, or for that matter, any work of art, shows originality, imagination, and unity of purpose. It is reposeful, and may have an infinite quality about it. Like a beautiful sunset, it is a unique entity made for its own sake!

A photographic "record", on the other hand, is a sort of illustrative diagram of an object or a scene, having scientifically accurate presentation in form and tone-values, but not necessarily possessing an emotional appeal. It may have technique, factual, documentary, scientific or topical interest, usually reporting "by whom", "where", "why" and "when" the illustration was made. The illustrated journals all the world over are full of such examples.

It is extraordinary that this basic difference between the various types and functions of photographs is not generally realized. Some people keep sending purely "reporting" photographs to pictorial exhibitions and, when these are rejected, there is hue and cry against the exhibitions and their organizers. The fact is that some people will persist in sending pictures for exhibition to the wrong quarters or in the wrong section; the sooner they begin to discriminate the better.

In this connexion it is surprising to notice that a few editors of the photographic press, in this country and abroad, also fail to distinguish between various types of photography and keep confusing the "documentary" with the "pictorial". Moreover, this confusion is also shared by the exponents of the so-called "modern outlook". According to them, therefore, the Pictorial Section of "The Royal" merely

shows decadent, sentimental, old fashioned themes. According to them, it would appear we have no right to create pictures of the type they do not favour. They appear to be revolting against the traditional and the classical without themselves being able to produce or show something different or original. This year, "The Royal" rightly staged an exclusive exhibition by such "revolutionaries" of our day and what did we find? There were a few purely journalistic photographs, similar to those found every day, in abundance, in any illustrated daily. There were some obviously composite photographs, some with inferior technique, photomontages, semi-abstract nonsensical constructions—some good, others ordinary; but I have seen similar photographs, similar themes, similar ideas, similar compositions, year after year at the other exhibitions that they kick against! Special invitations had been issued to the known exponents of this much-boasted new pictorial outlook, but it turned out to be a case of a mountain labouring for a month to produce a mole! Such existentialists try to be anti-tradition, anti-convention, amoral, free-thinking, free-acting and to have no "compositional conscience"!

In conclusion, I should like to make a few further general remarks. A good exhibition is that which shows a representative cross-section of the best contemporary pictorial photography, well arranged and presented in good light, dealing with a variety of technique and outlook for the edification and delectation of ordinary people. My own impression is that our Annual Exhibition at 16 Princes Gate, owing to the location, neighbourhood, small size, and structural character of the premises, cannot be presented to the general public as effectively as it ought to be. The usual visitors are largely made up of Members, other photographers, their families, and friends. The public at large is still not able to appreciate a good photograph for the simple reason that it has never seen it. To stimulate interest amongst non-photographers, it might be a good idea if the organizers of the exhibition decided to award a prize for the most popular pictorial exhibit. Medals are usually awarded in the "Record", "Technical", "Nature", and "Scientific" Sections of The Royal. The motive behind my suggestion is merely to arouse greater interest and encourage the uninitiated audience or visitors in the art of appreciation of pictorial works. Let the visitors be the selectors of the most popular prints in the show. A ballot box could be placed at the entrance, into which a visitor might easily drop a signed number of the chosen print. I seriously commend this idea to the powers that be.

Some say that the pictures that used to be seen and produced in the "good old days" have not been surpassed. This is an attitude of "emotion" rather than of reason. These days we are apt to take modern miracles almost for granted. There is a tendency to



*Pictures of Fog usually get into Exhibitions.*

cling to and glorify the past, out of all proportion, and almost to deprecate the present. A few pictures are still made today that are equally as good, if not even better, than some of the much-boasted "old masters". Genius is always rare. Nowadays, the tempo of life is such that there are many who compare favourably with former standards in every walk of artistic or scientific life, going about struggling hard to earn their bread (often without butter) to keep up with crippling taxation and finding little time to indulge in the luxury of producing photographic masterpieces.

I shall end up on a personal note. I have often been charged with making pictures to please the "judges": my "be all" and "end all" is said to be an exhibition picture. This is not so. I do not deliberately go out specially to produce exhibition pictures; nor do I indulge in "still-life", "table-top", or some other constructional set-up in my studio with that object in mind. I merely try to express an idea, capture the form and mood of the moment, whether outdoors or indoors, as best as I can photographically. If it turns out to be a passable exhibition picture at times, it is simply a by-product of the compulsive urge to express myself, which, incidentally, results in a tangible form of a picture for all to see, for all to criticize and, occasionally, for a few to enjoy.

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