

# **From Good to Great**

*Using the 12 Elements to Create  
Award-Winning Images*

**Mark Fitzgerald**

PPA Master Craftsman Photographer

Adobe Certified Expert

503 977-2400 ~ [mark@ddroom.com](mailto:mark@ddroom.com) ~ [www.ddroom.com](http://www.ddroom.com)

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# What's the Difference?

- ✓ **Does quality matter?**
- ✓ What's the difference between good and great images? How do you discern one from the other?
- ✓ What is it that makes an image great? What makes an image mediocre?
- ✓ Does greatness happen by accident?

# When Does Greatness Happen?

- ✓ Greatness can be created **in-camera** the instant you press the shutter.
- ✓ It can also be created during **postproduction** when editing a photo.
- ✓ A **combination** is often the best solution because it's hard to create greatness in post if you don't begin with a good image.
- ✓ Learn to see and pre-visualize the final image before it's been made.

# Learning to See

- ✓ When you **start recognizing greatness**, you begin to see the world differently.
- ✓ Your experience with the camera becomes more holistic as you explore possibilities.
- ✓ After you've seen a subject in a certain way, **challenge yourself** to see it in other ways.
- ✓ Shooting with other photographers is a great way to explore different ways of seeing.

# Does Reality Matter?

- ✓ Is it important for an image to represent reality in order to be great? That depends.
- ✓ Some people prefer that their images represent reality. Not everyone needs to play by those rules.
- ✓ Exceptions are some nature and wildlife photography, photojournalism, law enforcement evidence, etc.
- ✓ For most of us, though, we are **free to create images that please ourselves** and the people we share with.
- ✓ *But, when you enter competitions, you need to think about pleasing judges.*

# Your Job as an Image-Maker

- ✓ **Why do we create images in the first place?** For me, one of the main reasons is to share my vision.
- ✓ As an image-maker my job is to understand what is important about a specific image and then translate that visually to the viewer.
- ✓ Amplify the great parts of an image and suppress the not-so-great parts to create a visual experience.
- ✓ **Create a visual experience** that guides the viewer through the image in your predetermined way.

# PPA Image Competitions

- ✓ The **Professional Photographers of America** (PPA) developed a ranking system for competition images.
- ✓ Images are scored numerically with the goal of achieving a score of at least 80 – a merit image.

*Exceptional 100-95*

*Superior 94-90*

*Excellent 89-85*

*Deserving of a Merit 84-80*

*Above Average 79-75*

*Average 74-70*

*Below Exhibition Standards 69-65*

# 12 Elements of a Merit Image

- ✓ The 12 Elements of a Merit Image was **developed by PPA** to define the qualities of a merit image.
- ✓ Competition jurors use these criteria when evaluating and scoring images.
- ✓ One could use these elements to evaluate almost any type of artwork, not just photography.
- ✓ **12 Elements are:** Impact, Story Telling, Center of Interest, Subject Matter, Style, Composition, Creativity, Technical Excellence, Lighting, Color Balance, Technique, Presentation

# ***Understanding the 12 Elements***

## 12 Elements ~ Impact

- ✓ *“Impact is the sense one gets upon viewing an image for the first time. Compelling images evoke laughter, sadness, anger, pride, wonder or another intense emotion. There can be impact in any of these twelve elements.”*
- ✓ Impact is the main thing a viewer experiences when first encountering an image. A powerful story can have major impact, just as an image with strong color harmony can have strong impact.

## 12 Elements ~ Story Telling

- ✓ *“Story Telling refers to the image’s ability to evoke imagination. One beautiful thing about art is that each viewer might collect their own message or read his or her own story in an image.”*
- ✓ Sometimes the story is obvious, other times the viewer has to search for it. A more obvious story can have greater impact because it’s instantly understood by the viewer. A subtle story can also have strong impact when the viewer is engaged long enough to find it.

## 12 Elements ~ Subject Matter

- ✓ *“Subject Matter should always be appropriate to the story being told in an image.”*
- ✓ Subject matter is one of the first choices a photographer makes when creating an image.
- ✓ A subject can have more than one center of interest point.
- ✓ The treatment of subject matter has a great deal to do with the final outcome of the image. This is often where a photographer’s style emerges.

## 12 Elements ~ Center of Interest

- ✓ *“Center of Interest is the point or points on the image where the maker wants viewers to stop as they view the image. There can be primary and secondary centers of interest. Occasionally there will be no specific center of interest, when the entire scene collectively serves as the center of interest.”*
- ✓ The center of interest is often what draws the photographer to create a particular image. It can be enhanced through processing, such as burning and dodging.

## 12 Elements ~ Composition

- ✓ *“**Composition** is important to the design of an image, bringing all of the visual elements together in concert to express the purpose of the image. Proper composition holds the viewer in the image and prompts the viewer to look where the creator intends. Effective composition can be pleasing or disturbing, depending on the intent of the image-maker.”*
- ✓ Standard rules for composition, such as the Rule of Thirds is a good place to begin. But don't be afraid to experiment.
- ✓ Composition is used to guide the viewer to the center of interest.

## 12 Elements ~ Style

- ✓ *“Style is defined in a number of ways as it applies to a creative image. It might be defined by a specific genre or simply be recognizable as the characteristics of how a specific artist applies light to a subject. It can impact an image in a positive manner when the subject matter and the style are appropriate for each other, or it can have a negative effect when they are at odds.”*
- ✓ An example of style would be High Dynamic Range photography. HDR is a style many photographers are using. The thing that differentiates HDR images from one another is the technique used by the image-maker.

## 12 Elements ~ Creativity

- ✓ *“Creativity is the original, fresh, and external expression of the imagination of the maker by using the medium to convey an idea, message or thought.”*
- ✓ Creativity is usually a combination of other elements, for example using a clever title to enhance impact and storytelling.
- ✓ Creativity comes in many flavors. A new way of photographing an old subject can be creative, just as using a unique processing method to enhance the subject.

## 12 Elements ~ Technical Excellence

- ✓ *“Technical excellence is the quality of the ‘image’ itself as it is presented for viewing. Retouching, manipulation, sharpness, exposure, printing, mounting, and correct color are some items that speak to the qualities of the ‘image’.”*
- ✓ Technical excellence embodies most of the procedures in the postproduction process. This is where the image-maker demonstrates understanding and best use of editing tools and the output process and how to use them to enhance the viewer’s experience.

## 12 Elements ~ Lighting

- ✓ *“**Lighting** - The use and control of light - refers to how dimension, shape and roundness are defined in an image. Whether the light applied to an image is manmade or natural, proper use of it should enhance an image.”*
- ✓ Photographers are drawn to light. Sometimes the light is the subject of a photo. Directional light is usually preferable to flat, even lighting. The use of light should subject and style being used.

## 12 Elements ~ Color Balance

- ✓ *“Color Balance supplies harmony to an image. An image in which the tones work together, effectively supporting the image, can enhance its emotional appeal. Color balance is not always harmonious and can be used to evoke diverse feelings for effect.”*
- ✓ Color balance should be accurate for the subject unless an intentional deviation is preferred.
- ✓ **Color harmony** refers to the way color works in the image. Harmonious colors can be of the same hue, like red, yellow, and orange - or opposite hues, such as orange and blue.

## 12 Elements ~ Technique

- ✓ *“Technique is the approach used to create the image. Printing, lighting, posing, capture, presentation media, and more are part of the technique applied to an image.”*
- ✓ Technique can be thought of as the the way a particular image-maker approaches the image making process. How he or she combines the other 12 elements to find his or her individual voice.

## 12 Elements ~ Presentation

- ✓ *“Presentation affects an image by giving it a finished look. The mats and borders used, either physical or digital, should support and enhance the image, not distract from it.”*
- ✓ Presentation is an element of every image. As an image-maker you determine how your images are first encountered. Presentation can be complicated or simple, but should never be ignored.

***Editing for  
Greatness***

# Editing with Intent

- ✓ Greatness rarely happens by accident.
- ✓ **Conscious decisions** must be made in-camera and during postproduction.
- ✓ Conscious decisions are based on an **informed knowledge** of editing tools and how they are used.
- ✓ The goal should be to **complete a vision** rather than hoping to “get lucky” by stumbling across something that might work.
- ✓ Sometimes you need to discover or uncover **the image within the image**.

# Tonal Adjustments

- ✓ Nearly every image should have a **pure black** in it somewhere. This black anchors the rest of the tones in the image.
- ✓ A pure white can be useful sometimes, but a pure white has no details. It's usually best to **hold detail** in the highlights to avoid “blowing out” highlights.
- ✓ The range from the darkest shadow to the lightest highlight is the **overall contrast** of the image.
- ✓ **Midtone contrast** affects subtle tones in the midranges, away from the ends of the histogram.

# Color Balance

- ✓ Accurate **color is important**, especially when the subject matter contains things we are familiar with, such as skin tone.
- ✓ But – Don't be afraid to **experiment** with color using Color Balance, HSL, Split Toning, etc.
- ✓ When choosing **black & white** be sure to map individual colors to grey using Black & White panel/command to get the best B&W.
- ✓ Adjust hues and saturation to enhance specific colors and color harmonies.

# Burning & Dodging

- ✓ Burning & dodging refers to **localized** darkening and lightening to control tone. The objective is to darken bright areas that are distracting, or to lighten dark areas to reveal hidden details.
- ✓ Our **eyes are drawn to bright** areas and we don't notice the dark areas as much. Burning & dodging is a powerful tool that enables you to guide the viewer through the image in the way you think is best.
- ✓ B&D is a great way to add 3-dimensionality to a 2-dimensional image.
- ✓ **Chi·a·ro·scu·ro**: Technique developed during the Renaissance that uses strong tonal contrasts between light and dark to model 3-dimensional forms.

# Retouching

- ✓ Retouching is about **managing and minimizing** large and small distractions.
- ✓ **Spotting** is important so be sure to remove small distractions and “eye-draws”.
- ✓ When cloning out **larger objects**, be sure that you don’t leave “cloning tracks” behind.
- ✓ In some cases with wildlife and journalistic images retouching must be limited to dust removal only.

# Cropping

- ✓ Cropping is one of the most important decisions you make as an image-creator. In some cases there are many pleasing solutions. In other cases there may be only one right choice.
- ✓ Think of the **Rule-of-Thirds** and strive to place important elements in one of the four power points. Avoid placing the main subject in the middle.
- ✓ Pay particular **attention to the edges** of the frame to eliminate distractions that draw the viewer's gaze away from the central image.
- ✓ **We read left to right** in the west so consider flipping an image if it helps it read better.

***Final  
Presentation***

# Making a Print

- ✓ If you are **making your own prints**, you have a lot of control over the final product. Use quality inks and papers and try to get the paper to match the image.
- ✓ When getting **prints from a lab**, look for high quality and a knowledgeable staff. They can help you get the best print from your image.
- ✓ **Consider alternative printing** mediums, such as canvas and metal when applicable.
- ✓ Don't skimp on framing when the image really matters.

# Digital Presentation

- ✓ **Create extra canvas** around the image to create a digital mat and add presentation value.
- ✓ Use **color coordinated keylines** (strokes) to help the image stand out from its digital mat.
- ✓ In **Lightroom** use the Print module for digital layout and then select *Print to File* from the Print Job panel.
- ✓ In **Photoshop** add additional canvas on a separate layer beneath the image layer.
- ✓ *When using Photoshop you can add more than one keyline (stroke).*

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