



LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY - ADVANCED

By A. John V. Hart

Whether or not you consider yourself a beginner or advanced worker, do take time to study Matheson Beaumont's help sheet introducing Landscape Photography. Many of the points he makes are relevant to all levels and subjects of photographic endeavour and provide a valuable checklist for assessing the success of one's efforts.

It is unreasonable to make a clear delineation between the junior and senior worker because the latter does not suddenly "arrive". Rather, it is an ongoing journey building up the skills of conceptualisation, and acquiring the technical understanding demanded by both your subject and equipment. During this time develop your versatility and open-mindedness so that you can respond to subject matter both intellectually and emotionally in a whole variety of ways.

A genuinely advanced photographer will always be willing to make the extra effort to capture those special images, welcome new challenges and profit from experience.

Developing the Seeing Eye

The able photographer out in the field will quickly establish a number of image options in his mind's eye relevant to prevailing conditions. If time is the essence, it is important to have the technical confidence, as each possible image might need to be executed in a different way. In addition, changing light and weather and a tight traveling schedule can put extra pressure on the photographer. The grab shot may be the only chance you get and you have to be ready for it. Otherwise you will still have to prioritise about which approaches will be most useful.

Much of this confidence can be built up over a period of time as you become really familiar with your favourite landscape territories during each season and all times of the day. Not just through your viewfinder but also with your naked eye observe the textures of the Fiordland mosses, the searing heat of Central Otago's midday sun, the sunset afterglow at Mt Cook, the backlit spray of the wild West Coast beaches, and the wet volcanic colours of Tongariro National Park. For future reference try and record notes of different camera settings, lighting conditions and angles of view.

Build up your understanding of when to be in the right place at the right time.

Forward Planning and Preparation

The above approaches will assist your sense of direction and improve your chances of capturing good images. However, always be prepared for the unexpected and avoid being rigid in your expectations.

Make sure your basic equipment will widen rather than restrict your options. Perhaps include a tripod and cable release to facilitate a small aperture allowing maximum depth of field and also to retain movement in water by using a slow shutter speed. A graduated grey filter to tone down a bright sky and show more detail in darker foreground areas; a plastic sheet on which to lie for that low or close up shot, and a pair of gumboots for when the composition demands that you stand in a foot of water!

Subtleties, Additions, Subtractions and Enhancements

If you get books out of the library or go to exhibitions to see the work of top landscape photographers you are likely to observe certain special qualities. The main components may have been reduced to a bare minimum. Yet, added value to this simplicity may have been gained through very subtle use of light and sensitive rendering of texture, thus conveying in an emotional sense what the photographic artist was feeling and intending during the making of the image. On the other hand, another image may at first appear complicated and demanding but upon careful study will show an inspired combination of compositional signposts, and various tonal and colour contrast mechanisms all leading to the calming influences of balance, recession, and a place to rest a while.

Always try to eliminate the unnecessary and then build up the image with subtle enhancements sympathetic to the main idea.

Gaining experience in still life, natural history, and portraiture will improve your understanding of how directional light models form, creates texture, and affects the tonal range. Learn how even a slight movement of camera position can make a huge difference to how a subject is rendered.

Image Media

There are many advantages in being competent in both the print and slide media, and being comfortable in working with both colour and monochrome. It does not mean that you should be involved in all of these at one time when out in the field as that can be distracting.

However, slide positives, which usually enjoy a good standard of commercial processing, in general more accurately reflect your handling of exposure and colour compared with negatives, which are more vulnerable to the lab technician's decision-making and available printing technology. Consequently your image expectations may not be met.

Monochrome provides helpful experience for the colour worker in understanding tonal values and the need to be able to control them at both ends of the range. In landscape, monochrome can have the same unifying and simplifying effect as it does in architecture and portraiture.

The print medium allows for an image to be critically studied within a longer time frame than for slides. Try to understand why some initially high impact images may suffer diminishing marginal utility in subsequent viewings whilst others have a greater degree of longevity.

New Challenges

Think beyond the square! Do not just see the landscape in broad, literal terms. See it in its close up intimacy and many abstractions using either traditional or derivative methods.

Remember that Landscape offers much to a whole range of photographers holding a variety of agendas and interests.

The documentary worker will continue to play an important role recording the there and now landscape for posterity before places such as the Queenstown district changes any further under Man's influence. In a photojournalism sense he may even choose to organise the material so that a political point is made.

The pictorial photographer will continue to identify what is pleasing to the eye, capturing the moods of the early morning mists and the late light on the hills. Traditional approaches will remain valid and rewarding.

However, avoid being a dispassionate bystander. Interact robustly!

Then there is the manipulator who instead of weaving chemical darkroom magic or employing transparency montage techniques now sits in the electronic workplace using Photoshop or other digital imaging software. For such workers the real landscape out there is simply the starting point, with the new technologies providing new freedoms to express the unique conceptualisation of the mind's eye.

Good luck with your imaging!

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