

## What defines a proper photograph?

October 30, 2017 | Charles T. Low

This subject can keep photographers up long into the evening, discussing over a few drinks what constitutes a "proper" photograph.

In Ansel Adams autobiography, it becomes apparent that the topic was raging then; it hasn't stopped. Some thought that photographs should look like paintings. Others said no, they're photographs, and they should look like photographs, never like paintings.

Fast forward quite a few decades, and people debate topics such as:

- film vs. digital;
- monochrome vs. colour;
- "raw" digital files vs. JPEG;
- edited or not, and
- if so, how much? of what type?

The list could go on.

This topic recurred to me recently because I bumped into a life-long photographer, who said to me gruffly, "I don't edit. Never have. Don't believe in it."

He waited for my reply. "I feel more liberal about the question," I began, "but it's always an interesting topic for discussion."

"No," he said, "I don't believe in it. This photograph here," and he showed me a large print which I thought was one of the better ones he had on display, "is unretouched. All I did was darken the sky, bring out the shadows a bit, punch up the colour, and apply a touch of sharpening."

Ah. "Unedited" then, seems to be a relative term.

Which is fine. Don't think for a moment that people didn't do that back in the darkroom days, "dodging and burning" to give different areas of the photo the exact emphasis which the photographer (or printer) desired. There's a famous portrait over which took the photographer days of experimentation until he got it printed the way he wanted it. Essentially, the negative is just what it is, but then you can print it in a myriad of different ways ... like an image file from a digital camera can be processed using dramatically varying treatments.

So, what is a proper photograph? The answer to me is so obvious that I continue to be astounded that so many people think that they know an answer. **A proper photograph is one which satisfies the photographer.** It can be of something recognizable, as faithfully and literally portrayed as possible, or it can be completely abstract, which can convey something just as honest, but on a different level than the "literal". *How could there possibly be a rule or an artistic "law" about this?*

Note that so far I have not discussed the viewer. To me, the viewer matters immensely, most of the time, but there is no law about that either. How could there possibly be? Describe to me some independent authority which by some means had the wisdom to say to a photographer, "That image which you are so pleased with is not a proper photograph."

Now, it would be quite within a gallery's purview not to exhibit a certain work if it thought it unworthy. A photographer might publish a book, and you might decide not to buy it. You might inspect a photographer's portfolio and decide not to hire him or her for your wedding.

All of those things may or may not matter to the photographer, but none of them mean that we can't make photographs exactly as we wish (within the bounds of legality and morality).

Fortunately, this image of mine has been quite popular, but it clearly looks nothing like the original scene.

### Featured Posts



#### What defines a proper photograph?

October 30, 2017

### Recent Posts



#### What defines a proper photograph?

October 30, 2017

### Archive

October 2017 (1)

### Search By Tags

I'm busy working on my blog posts.  
Watch this space!

### Follow Us





To me, it is a proper photograph, as much a more "representational" one:



or a semi-abstract:



[f](#) Share on Facebook [t](#) Share on Twitter [in](#) [p](#) [G+](#) But that's not a rule! It's just my preference. [♥](#)

Even a very literal photograph never looks quite like the original subject, but the reasons for that are manifold, and may form the topic of a future rant!

