

The Photographer's Eye

by John Dixon, Group XIX

I like to take photographs. Over the past 65 years I have taken tens of thousands of images. The ones on the FriendsOfMalaysia.net website were all taken between 1968 and 1973 with a Pentax Spotmatic SLR camera and Kodak black and white film. People have often complimented me on my photos and have said "Oh! You must have a very good camera." I appreciate the compliment but I respond "I do have a good camera, but I think what you are commenting on are the pictures and that is all in the eye!"

I grew up in San Juan, Puerto Rico. When I was very young (14 yrs) I started drawing and doing linoleum block prints, both for enjoyment and to sell to tourists. I was entirely self-taught, and I developed a way of looking at any scene and "framing" it and seeing a completed picture. I have built upon that early work over the last 65 years. When I take a picture, I always mentally frame it so that the composition is balanced and tells a story. The real work in making an interesting photo is mental. The other main lesson I learned at that time is that "practice makes perfect" -- do LOTS of drawings and (a decade later) take LOTS of photos!

In San Juan I would go out with a 12 by 18-inch pad of white drawing paper with a German Mars pen. I would do five to 10 drawings in an hour walking around the streets of Old San Juan. Since I used black India ink on paper there was no second chance. Once you put a line down on paper it was there forever! With practice I found that I could look at a scene and put my pen to paper and, while looking ahead, move my hand to start drawing what I saw.

For both pen and ink drawings and block prints there are no shades of gray. Things are either black or white. You learn to look for the essential line or element in any drawing and eliminate the non essential parts. Of course, now with modern photoshop techniques one can easily modify, edit or adjust photographs after they've been taken, but if the core features are not there to begin with it's hard to create them after the fact.

For example, these scenes from Puerto Rico. A street in Old San Juan now and my sketch of the same building in the 1960s:



Another lesson I learned 10 years later was the benefit of taking multiple images of the same scene. I had gone back to Cambodia in 1970 (even though the war had started) because I wanted to return to Angkor Wat. It was a most unusual time -- soldiers were in the street, bridges were blown up, and there were armed checkpoints everywhere. You never quite knew who was a friend or who was a foe and it was probably a very foolish trip to make but still quite extraordinary. (Of course, as PCVs we thought that we were young and immortal!)

One evening in Phnom Penh I came upon a French professional war photographer who was taking pictures of a woman with a small kerosene lamp selling sweets on the roadside. It was very dark, she had the one small flame, her food was arranged in front of her in the flickering half halo of light. Other passersby's would stop and buy sweets for a few *rials*. I noticed the French photographer kept shooting and shooting and shooting. He would go through a roll of film and then put in another roll. (Film came in rolls of either 24 or 36 exposures. Not like today with digital cameras where electrons are free, and you can take an unlimited numbers of images!)

I asked him why he took so many photographs of the same scene and he told me that he did so because he never knew in advance which one would be the one! He would take 20 or 30 images to get the one really good photograph. And I had thought that getting the Perfect Picture was just serendipity! After that I started taking multiple shots of any image, a process that only increased with the advent of digital cameras (electrons, unlike film, were free!)

Therefore, the lessons that I learned is that a good photo has two main components- an interesting framing of the image and the "serendipity" that comes from just the right picture that actually captures what you're trying to get. Both require the "eye" as much if not more than the equipment itself. The albums here represent some of my favorite images from the thousands that I have taken documenting life in Malaysia in the late 60s and early 70s. Of times and places and people that no longer exist. It was a simpler time, the light was bright, the air was clear, traffic was less hectic. The Malaysia we lived in 1968 was not that different from what had been there 50 or 100 years before. Hopefully these images from the past will bring back some pleasant memories.