

Course sample

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Photography two

Landscape



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Introduction

'One might say that landscape pictures are those that express an apprehension of the difference between our special human concerns and the earth's own compulsions.'

John Szarkowski, 1981

'... a tree momentarily shimmering in a brilliant sun or the same tree drenched, half hidden by a passing storm; painted, etched or photographed under such conditions - the transitory instead of the eternal.'

Edward Weston, 1930

A universal theme

This is a Level 2 subject-oriented course in our photography portfolio and, like its companion *Photography 2: Documentary*, is designed to be taken after you have successfully completed the Level 1 courses. You will, in other words, by now have a good grounding in the basics of photography. Although we will from time to time recapitulate points that you learned in the first course, other things will be left unsaid on the assumption that you have acquired the basic skills. If you are in doubt about anything, refer back to the first-level course materials.

If you are able to, you should study this course and *Photography 2: Documentary* in close succession, as they have been selected for covering a particular range and are designed to be complementary.

Social documentary photography generally demands an outgoing approach - you must usually interact with the people you are photographing - and calls for some flexibility and speed of response towards subject matter that is constantly changing and is normally outside your control.

Landscape photography, on the other hand, tends to be more introspective and calmer in approach; the landscape is always there, and while the light and some other variables change, you can exercise considerable choice over when and how you photograph it. As you will discover during this course, landscapes offer a great deal of room for interpretation. In the sense of your personal development as a photographer, they are very convenient subjects.

I'd like to explore this idea of interpreting a subject a little further. An important goal for many photographers, once they have achieved a level of proficiency, is to find their own way of working, a method of photography that reflects their personal interests; in other words, their own style. This is hardly ever a fixed state of affairs - even successful individualists do not usually arrive at a particular photographic style and stay there. Personal style changes as interests change; or rather, I should say that style develops. Some areas of photography make it easier than do others to develop your own style. If the subject does not impose its own conditions on how you shoot it, you have more time and opportunity to explore different ways of treating it, and this is very much the case with landscape. If you have already completed the Photography 2: Documentary course, you may well have found that you spent much of your time following the subjects - people - and reacting to their vagaries. This makes it more difficult, though by no means impossible, to develop your own distinctive way of working.

Landscape, by contrast, is in this sense a more tractable subject. Landscapes are physically large and, except in rare instances, offer as many viewpoints as you care to find by moving around. You can choose when to photograph them, in season, time of day, light and weather. You can experiment with different lenses, compositions and films. You can work quickly or slowly, conventionally or otherwise. In short, you can interpret any landscape according to your taste. Over the last century and a half, this is what countless photographers have been doing, and throughout the history of art, so have painters.

The landscape tradition

Of all the subjects for artistic expression, one of the most enduring and popular has been the landscape. It is, after all, a very important part of our visual experience, and one that we at times invest with a certain amount of emotion and philosophising. Because this is a tradition that predates photography, and because so much of landscape imagery is a matter of interpretation, I strongly urge you to study and familiarise yourself with the work of landscape painters of all schools and periods.

Now, of course, the techniques used by painters differ from those of a photographer, and because painters are not restricted to an optical reality as you are when you look through the camera viewfinder they have more freedom of interpretation. Some painterly techniques in landscape art are interesting to know about but of little relevance to a photographer. The Impressionist painter Claude Monet, for example, placed great emphasis on analysing the minute assembly of colours and tones in nature, even to the extent of working on several canvasses at the same time, moving from one to the other as the light changed. This is not something that you will have to consider; the lens and film (or digital sensor) will record all of this automatically. However, what the work of landscape painters will show you is the intention to interpret views in various ways. Also, the very fact that paintings are technically quite different from photographs gives a useful kind of abstraction; there is no risk that you might feel like 'copying' a particular image.

Photography two

Part one

The Design Element



'The photograph is an abstraction of nature - a fragment isolated from a greater implied whole, missed but imagined, a connection which assists in holding the viewer's attention.'
Eliot Porter, 1987

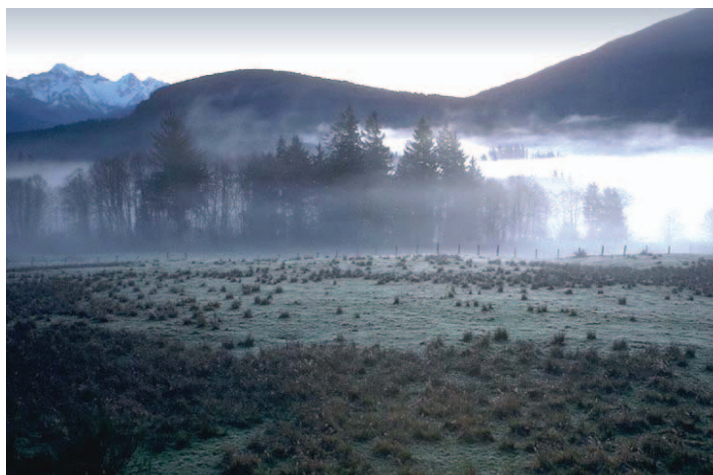
The design of the image is of particular importance in landscape photography compared with, say, reportage photography. The basic reason for this is the very universality of the subject that I have already mentioned in the introduction. Landscapes exist for everyone to see and appreciate, and are such a common part of our experience that a quick snap - a 'record' picture - is unlikely to impress anyone. In order to make someone stop and look twice at a landscape photograph, you will have to invest it with some special qualities. Lighting is one possibility, and this is the subject of *2: Light and its measurement* and *3: Using available light*. A well-chosen or unexpected viewpoint is another, and we will have a look at this in *4: Viewpoint and lens*. Above all, however, the composition is crucial. There is hardly ever any need for a 'grab shot', and you should always take full advantage of the time that you have to think about and adjust the design elements in the viewfinder frame.

The shape of the frame

One of the lessons you will have learned in the first course is that you can make most views fit into the viewfinder frame more or less satisfactorily, but that some subjects do best in particular shapes of frame.

First, however, what constitutes a landscape? Normally, most of us would not bother with a definition; if pressed we might express it in terms such as 'a view over countryside', perhaps adding that it implies a natural rather than an urban setting. This is fine as far as it goes, but we should also consider the scale of the view. If you close in on a detail of a landscape, either through changing your viewpoint or by using a telephoto lens, the more variety of shapes and forms you are likely to come across. Stand at any clearly defined landscape viewpoint - the kind that is marked on tourist maps in scenic areas - and look carefully at the entire scene. With the exception of really steep mountainous places, the general layout will almost certainly be horizontal.

Look first at the shape of the horizon - most views in Britain are either flat or mildly undulating. If anything breaks the line of this, it is likely to be in the foreground or middle ground - a tree, for instance. Then look at the lines within the landscape. Even a fairly well-elevated viewpoint, from a few hundred feet, will give you a view that skims the surface of the land. The perspective of this view inevitably means that lines in a landscape - a river, hedgerows, roads - are flattened, they appear more horizontal. The pictures below are typical. The same thing happens to banks of cloud in the sky. Wide, distant landscape views contain more horizontal elements than any other kind. This is an obvious point, but basic to an understanding of the relationship between frame shape and landscape.



Now look more closely at details within the view, as if you were using a telephoto lens to pick them out. In fact, you could use a telephoto lens here as a viewer. By closing in, you will lose some of the horizontal effect of the wider view, although the perspective will remain. Now look at details around you, in the foreground. If there is an isolated tree, for example, and you move so that it comes into view in front of the rest of the landscape, you will have introduced a dominant vertical element. If you were to construct a frame in your mind's eye that included the tree and the view beyond, it could well be vertical.

How you delimit the landscape, therefore, affects the ideal shape of frame. Also, of course, there is the viewfinder frame in your particular camera. You do not have to adhere to it if you plan to make prints later (they can be cropped to different shapes), but it is a very strong influence at the time of shooting. Composing to a different frame shape while looking through the viewfinder takes considerable imagination and concentration. Most cameras are 35mm, offering a frame in the proportions 2:3. Used with the camera held normally, this is quite strongly horizontal and well-suited to most landscapes. Turning the camera on its side for a vertical view is more difficult in landscape photography than in most other types.

Project Horizontal line

Now look more closely at details within the view, as if you were using a telephoto lens to pick them out. In fact, you could use a telephoto lens here as a viewer. By closing in, you will lose some of the horizontal effect of the wider view, although the perspective will remain. Now look at details around you, in the foreground. If there is an isolated tree, for example, and you move so that it comes into view in front of the rest of the landscape, you will have introduced a dominant vertical element. If you were to construct a frame in your mind's eye that included the tree and the view beyond, it could well be vertical.

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