

Photographing Icons



Photographing icons can sometimes be rewarding and also sometimes be a trap. The trap is that we do what everyone else has done and so make a great looking scene get absolutely no attention, because it has been seen so many times before and “this is just **another** shot of what we know”.

The rewarding side of this, and usually the approach I try to take, is to approach the icon from a different perspective and endeavor to make an image that I haven’t seen before. Sometimes you think you have accomplished this until someone points out that they have seen something similar not that long ago. But also sometimes you do get lucky and really do create something unique that hasn’t been thought of before. This is of course the aim with every photograph, but with icons it is a little more difficult.

As photographers we need to take our own vision to a scene and not that of someone else. Several years ago whilst I was teaching a workshop and during one of our field sessions, I wandered over to one of the people on the course to enquire how they were going. The conversation that ensued I found very interesting. Basically they told me that I wasn’t telling them what to photograph. My job as a workshop leader was to tell people what to point their cameras at and just about set up the shot for them and calculate the exposure. The only thing I wasn’t allowed to do was press the shutter.

I pointed out to this person that I couldn’t **see** for them and that what they were asking basically was non visionary. I could tell by their evasive response that they didn’t agree. Later that evening more was revealed when we were doing a portfolio revue of peoples work. This person showed their images and pretty much they were all photographs of iconic images done by other well known photographers. Mostly panoramic and I suspect taken whilst holding the book open at the appropriate page.

In my quarterly newsletter about 18 months ago I remember writing that the copy machine has to be one of the best machines of our time. You can get what you want instantly and you don't have to do any hard work to get it. It seems that the type of photography I have just mentioned is no different. In fact in other areas in life it manifests itself as well. The supermarket/petrol idea. One starts the idea, it works and then everyone's doing it. TV stations copy each other's programs all the time. If you frequent those big shopping malls you see duplication constantly. My home town has evidence of it happening and even I have been copied with my workshop program almost to the letter. In photography, copying is something that most do when they start out. Not that it is a bad thing initially for ideas, but to continually keep at it without finding your own direction is perhaps a little sad.

When I started approaching photography more from the art perspective, it is no secret that I found great inspiration from the work of Ansel Adams, Galen Rowell and perhaps the early work of John Sexton. No doubt in my early years I subconsciously looked for similar images as I went about exploring the landscape. As I became more entrenched in this type of work my view of their images changed and I found that only a certain number were appealing. I discovered other photographers who probably influenced me as well albeit I was probably not aware of it at the time. People like Bill Brandt, Arnold Newman and probably my all time favourite photographer, Brett Weston.

Copying initially is fine, but sooner or later one has to come up with their own ideas, whatever field they are in. To duplicate continually what someone else does makes you no more than that machine I mentioned before. Be influenced, but for goodness sake switch off from the outside world for awhile and start looking from within. You may even discover what you are made of.

So when it comes to photographing icons, most of us would have seen images before of what we are about to take a picture of. The goal for me is to make something different or as different as possible.

The two images I have presented here come into the "different" and "as different as possible" category. The image "Arch and Opera House" is for me new. I have never seen the Opera House photographed from this perspective. This of course makes me feel that I achieved something and that I have gotten away with photographing an icon, differently.

My feeling of the second image is some what different. From the viewing platform of the 12 Apostles it is hard to be **very** different. Years ago before all the platforms went up (obviously to protect the environment) and the walkways, the rails, gates and fences, in the days when we didn't need protecting from ourselves, you could get some different kind of shots. But now that we are much more reckless and don't have a feeling for self preservation, we need to be controlled, so making an image of this icon has become somewhat difficult.

During a workshop I was teaching at the Great Ocean Road last November, I decided to make an image of this scene. My reason for doing so was because I thought the quality of light to be rather beautiful. The tendency is to pull back and use a semi wide or wide angle lens and include everything as I have done before, but this day I thought I would crop in slightly so as not to make the stack. (bottom left corner) that collapsed a few years ago, too obvious. But really it

was the light that sold me. Apart from filtration the only difference between the two images here is that a cloud blocked some light falling on the foreground, but not on the background from about half way into the picture. The reason I have shown both pictures is for you to see by using two filters on the lens what difference they can make. I know if you use the new technology you can apply filtration afterwards, but once again you will learn nothing and it will not look the same, but then again different is maybe what you're after.

In picture A no filter has been used and so the sky is much lighter and some detail is lost in the stacks but not so much in the cliff edge. Picture B has had an orange filter applied overall and also a .4 ND grad applied to the sky area. This will bring the sky down by 2 stops, lessen the overall contrast of the image and make it much easier to print. Also as you can see it has darkened some of the shadow area of the shore, but actually lightened others areas that were in partial shadow. Although the ND Grad just kissed the top of a couple of the stacks it had little effect on them as far as balance of the print went. I may have been a tad lucky here.

If you've had a block when it comes to photographing icons maybe take the approach that I have always adopted and try to make a shot that you have never seen before. It's another challenge that as a photographer you can set yourself and you'll find what it will do is not only make you look a little harder, but also differently at all other images you decide to tackle.

Till next time.

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