

Thousand Lakes Region Photography Contest Judging Guidelines

(Adapted from the National Model Railroad Association)

Judging photographs is much more subjective than judging models. A prize-winning photograph is often more a matter of art and luck than execution of technique. Certainly, the photographer is faced with more things that are beyond his control than the model builder, particularly for prototype photos.

1. **Procedure** – The following judging procedure, used for years by many in competitive camera clubs, is employed.
 - 1.1. View all the entries in a category one at a time to get an overview of the field. There should be no dialog at this point. View entries again then each judge indicates whether the entry should stay or be eliminated. During this run-through, a positive vote from any one of the judges will keep the entry in the running. Any entry receiving no votes is set aside. During the third run-through, it requires two positive responses to keep an entry; those failing are removed and set aside. If the field is still large, perform another run-through. Three judges are now required to give assent, although by this time there are usually no more than a dozen entries left. The purpose of this process is to narrow the field rather than to pick winners, thus it is advisable that little or no commentary should be made until the next step.
 - 1.2. With only ten or twelve entries left, the judges now have a reasonably small field from which to select. At this point the remaining photos are discussed and compared. Prints may be arranged on the table in order of finish and moved about as the judges seek a consensus. Entries removed earlier may always be brought back for further consideration, but it should be noted that this method will generally produce the same final ten entries or so from more than a hundred choices, no matter which team of judges is used. Different teams of judges may likely produce different winners from these finalists, however. This is not surprising, as we are dealing with a subjective medium.
 - 1.3. The PhotographyContest Manager handles the entries freeing the judges from handling a stack of prints.
 - 1.4. After all the categories have been judged, the judges select a Best of Show from among the First Place winners. This is removed from its category reordering the ranking for first, second and third.

2. Judging Factors

- 2.1. Impact – This is best explained by the "I wish I'd taken that picture" reaction. Given a choice, action is preferable to a static scene; rare or unusual equipment is more interesting than the ordinary. In model photography, the choice of the model will contribute to the impact of the picture. Other questions arise in model photography: Does the photograph reveal obvious, distracting modeling flaws, or has the photographer apparently taken pains to be sure that all of the elements shown work together to produce a pleasing result? When the environment is exceptional, or the viewpoint makes the ordinary extraordinary, full credit should be given for the contribution the photographer's sensitivity brought to the subject.
- 2.2. Composition – The arrangement of the forms within the photo should be pleasing to the eye. How well did the photographer use the available space within his format? Did he or she follow the guidelines taught in art and photography classes? If the rules are broken, did the result justify that decision?
- 2.3. Artistic Approach – This subjective area is where a strongly graphic or symbolic composition may move one judge and a "typical calendar shot" may be more moving to another. One tends to evaluate artistic and aesthetic qualities on the basis of one's own experience. What moves us and the degree we are impressed will change as we are exposed to more and better images. A judge should not start out looking for a special kind of artistry. To do so would impose our own personal values, sensibilities, or preconceptions without giving the entries a chance to speak for themselves.
- 2.4. Lighting – In photography, light is law. It is the only thing that makes it possible to expose film or activate the sensor in a digital camera. Skillfully handled, the result can be a work of art; badly handled, the result is a total failure or a snapshot at best. A picture made with on-camera flash and no other light would be a snapshot. The photographer should be given full credit for use of multiple flash, supplemental reflectors, or a well developed room lighting system, depending on the quality of the execution. Natural sunlight is superior to flash systems, but it can be handled poorly. The best execution of any lighting system in model photography is one that produces a realistic, natural appearance, without multiple shadows (there can be only one sun!), with accurate color, and without excessively harsh contrast and black holes devoid of details.
- 2.5. Exposure – If a print appears washed out, or shadow details are obliterated, it is obvious the negative was improperly exposed. However, the judges may decide that an unusual exposure was skillfully handled to achieve a desired mood or dramatic effect. This holds true for digital photography as well except that a sensor creates the image instead of film.
- 2.6. Focus – Model photographers should strive to maximize the appearance of sharpness throughout the photo to achieve realistic results. Generally, selective focus is not desirable in model or prototype photos, since it often produces fuzzy areas that are distracting; there are of course exceptions. The judges must determine whether the photographer achieved his or her goal or not.

- 2.7. Difficulty – In prototype shots, this relates to motion, lighting conditions (including weather), selection of an appropriate viewpoint, inherent danger and the knowledge of special techniques and equipment. Night photography, for instance, is considerably more difficult than shooting an idle locomotive with the sun over your left shoulder. Model photography involves a different set of technical skills for close-up work while maintaining adequate depth-of-field. Lighting models adequately can be difficult and complex as well. Since a model may be photographed many times with different settings, there is little reason to see poorly lit photos of model scenes. A prototype may be available only once.
- 2.8. Special Effects – This would apply to deliberate blurring or panning to accentuate motion, long exposures at night to create light streaks, multiple exposures, shooting through smoke or fog, using filters, print toning, or any other special effects limited only by the photographer's imagination. In model photos, special effects include smoke and steam simulation, fog, panning and wheel spinning, harsh weather conditions, and more. The final evaluation should be, as always, a response to how well the effect achieved the desired result: did it work, and is the result pleasing or evocative enough to have made the effort worthwhile? This applies whether the image was produced digitally or using film.
- 2.9. Technique – Is the color pleasing, correct, or believable? Color saturation should also be evaluated. To some extent this is influenced by the quality of processing or digital enhancement in a computer; however, whether the result is acceptable or not is a judgment for which the photographer is responsible. An unsatisfactory processing job may be redone. Black and white is more often controlled by the photographer, because more of them process their own black and white than do their own color. Good blacks and mid-tones, clean whites, and careful contrast control are essential to all contest-quality black and white prints. Digital enhancement in any form may or may not add to the quality of the basic exposure, and if done skillfully can produce a contest winner. However, no amount of digital enhancement alone can help a poorly framed, poorly focused or poorly exposed photo.
- 2.10. Finish – Consider the impact of the presentation. Prints should not be streaked or blemished and should be bonded correctly to the mount, with carefully measured borders. Mounts and mats should be clean and neatly cut; they should lie flat, and not show excess mounting tissue or adhesive around the edges. If a print is not suitable for publication reproduction, it should not be considered for an award."