

Thoughts on Landscape Photography

In 1800 the term 'Landscape picture' would have referred to a painting or possibly a drawing or a print made from a woodcut or metal plate. By 1830 the aesthetic created by landscape painters like John Constable became the archetype for the way we see landscape images. In some ways they were idealised portraits of what a landscape should be. A painter can choose to include or exclude any part of the scene they paint.

In the 1830s photographing the landscape became possible and photographers point of reference was that of the paintings that formed their visual language. Early landscape photographs drew heavily on the imagery of paintings. It was the case that many forms of photography also looked at paintings for their reference points in terms of composition. Portraits were often very formal because the photographer worked with similar restrictions to those that portrait painter had to deal with. Painters required their sitters to pose for a portrait which might take many hours to paint. Early Portraits photographers only needed seconds to take their portrait photographs but still required their sitters to hold a pose for up to 30 seconds.

Modern photographic equipment no longer creates these restrictions.

It is interesting however that while portrait or people photography has become very varied, in landscape photography our aesthetic remains much more closely linked to painting. The 'rule of thirds' pre-dates photography, it applies most directly to landscape images and comes from painting.

The images on the gallery page are a mixture of paintings and photographs - at first glance, in some cases it is not obvious which is which.

The photographer James Ravilious said the trouble with photographing the English landscape was that it was 'too green' - so he photographed it in black and white.

Painters often reduced the amount of green in their paintings.

I have converted one of the colour photographs to black and white to possibly prove the point. The last section of 8 images in the gallery are taken by James.

'The techy bit' - maybe too techy for some!

In photography we are capturing light. The quality and the direction of light have a huge influence on the captured image, especially in landscape photography. The atmosphere and weather conditions play a part. Some of the images 'work' because of mist, others would have been ruined by it or at least would be very different on a day with different weather conditions. Haze can be a problem when photographing over long distances. Whilst it is acceptable for the background in an image to lose clarity, if the whole subject is at a distance this is a problem. Photographing with the light reduces this, taking pictures into the light exaggerates the effect. Some raw camera software can be used to reduce this to some extent. Using a UV (Ultra Violet) filter on the lens will help, in some conditions a polarising filter might be good. They work like polarising sun glasses.

Many landscape photographers prefer to work in the two hours around sunrise and sunset, at these times of day the light source is low in the sky and increases shadows and contrast across a scene. Often photographers will revisit a scene at different times of the day to capture very different images.

The generally perceived equipment used by landscape photographers would be as large format camera as possible to capture the most detail. In film days that would mean a large format 5" x 4" or 10" x 8" sheet film camera. Today that would equate to a high pixel count 'full frame' or so called medium format digital camera. The lens used would often be a wide angle to capture as much of the scene as possible.

The human eye sees things at an equivalent focal length of about 45mm on a 35mm camera. On a 35mm or 'full frame' digital camera a 50mm lens is standard, so anything with a lower focal length is wide, 35mm is wider, 28mm wider still and 24mm, 20mm and so on progressively more so.

A camera with an APS-C chip has a multiplication factor of about X1.5 times, so a 35mm lens is not wide. it is closer to standard. $35 \times 1.5 = 52.5$. so to get the effect of a 35mm lens on a full frame camera, using an APS-C camera you need a 24mm lens $24 \times 1.5 = 36$.

On cameras with smaller chips this effect increases, on a Four-Thirds camera which has a multiplication factor of X2, 24mm is 'standard' to get the equivalent of 35mm you need an 17mm or 18mm lens. To get the equivalent of 24mm you need 12mm.

On compact cameras which have even smaller chips wide angle might be 7mm.

The mathematics work in reverse for medium format cameras where a standard lens would be in the range of 80mm – 100mm, so a 50mm lens on one of those is wide.

Paintings are rarely out of focus!

To get everything in the image in focus you need a large depth of field, the aperture used would usually be small (f16 – f22 - f32). On many cameras that have a 'landscape mode' this is what the camera will set for you. You can use aperture priority mode to set this yourself.

All of these are conventions or 'rules' that are there to be broken.

There are lots of techniques used by landscape photographers working today. Many of these involve 'post processing' of images. Commonly the dreaded (my interpretation) HDR is used. High Dynamic Range is a technique for increasing details across the tonal range of an image. This will enable detail in shadows that might not be captured on a standard image to be seen and at the other end of the spectrum, highlight detail to be retained. Whilst to an degree this is useful, when carried too far it can lead to images that for me, look unreal and 'processed'. It is possible to produce an image that contains a range of tones that greater than would be visible in the scene to the human eye.

Painters can choose what to include or exclude from the scene in front of them, They can choose what to give importance to in their picture. it is now easier for photographers to do the same. Colours can be adjusted, either to saturate, mute them or give emphasis to a particular colour. Parts of a picture can be removed and replaced with something else.

Ultimately photography is about interpretation.

Deciding what to photograph, how to capture the image and how make it the image you want.

It is about creating **your** pictures.