



THE ELUSIVE FELLOWSHIP

To produce photographic quality, you first have to recognise it. Chair of the Fellowship Board, Michael Hallett FRPS, takes a long look at what that might mean

The Society's Fellowship, awarded for excellence and distinguished ability, combined with originality or freshness in approach, is its highest Distinction. It can be elusive, but it is achievable. It is demanding and rigorous, but what else would you expect of the top distinction of a Royal society? There are no other parallels or equals in photography, and for many it is seen as the Holy Grail. The Society has a membership of around 10,000, of whom some 836 are Fellows and able to use the letters FRPS after their name. This is made up of 653 Fellows in the UK, and 183 overseas.

On one level, photographic quality is what brings the various genres of photography together. It is a common goal. On another, it can be contentious, a cause of divisiveness. Part of The Society's mission is that it continually reevaluates itself and, earlier this

Above: Adam Wong FRPS: Autumn Moving in Xingjiang.

year, the Distinction Advisory Board, Chairs of the various Distinction Panels, and staff from The Society's Distinction Department, held an 'away day', where we looked at the various parts of the Distinction process, including the notion of photographic quality. Below is my attempt to summarise our discussion.

The two aspects of quality

There are two aspects when considering photographic quality: the objective and the subjective. The objective is measurable and quantifiable, while the subjective is to do with culture, emotion and style. Craft skills cement these elements together, with personal curiosity key to success.

The elements of objective quality have been established through long tradition. They entail densitometric and sensitometric values, and

characteristic curves. The notions of quantifying film speed, density and contrast have been promoted by The Society, and enshrined in the work of Hurter and Drifffield. Through his Zone System, Ansel Adams was part of this movement toward tonal interpretation. These approaches required their own forms of craft, and in more recent times the digital process has borrowed much of their photographic nomenclature, arguably without some of the earlier precision.

The subjective elements meanwhile, are a broad spectrum, encompassing all areas of photographic practice. The interpretation and cohesion this provides is what separates the merely good from the truly amazing. Much photography as we see it is based on a Western art historical foundation, and an understanding of photographic history originating from the work of Helmut Gernsheim and Beaumont Newhall.

Our emotional response to photography or, in other words, what we assume to be good photography, will depend on the range of influences we have received or accepted. We all arrive at photography from different directions and for varying reasons. Some will arrive via a professional, academic or scientific route, while for others the influence will be the

tradition of the camera club. The various photographic genres are not all mutually exclusive, and the parallels between them are much closer than many would assume.

Style and progression

Style is frequently to do with a particular point in time, while photographic progression relates to materials and processes. The Kodak Box Brownie, the Leica, and more recently the digital processes, have all brought photography to a wider audience and changed the style of the medium.

Craft skills are essential to the medium, and can be its most elusive element. Simple technical errors, such as fixer stains with conventional process, and banding with digital, need to be avoided. Finishing and retouching used to be an art, but this has been lost in the excesses of Photoshop. Simple and effective mounting shows a print off to its optimum.

If a body of work does not exude craft skills, irrespective of the genre, then it deserves not to achieve Fellowship. The addition of words, or alternative presentations such as the book or installation, should not preclude photographic quality.

The technical requirements of a digital file for an exhibition print are different to those for a PowerPoint presentation. Both relate to 'fitness for purpose'.

Achieving quality

To achieve photographic quality, the photographer must first be able to recognise it. This is the intriguing part. Photographers who really understand this will move their photography forward and continue to achieve at the appropriate level.

Photojournalists frequently mention photographic quality. My 1992 interview with Cornell Capa, documentary photographer and founder of the International Center of Photography, New York, brought quality onto the agenda. Our conversation was primarily about the commercial value of the photograph, when Capa observed that, "Photography became art when the price went up."

Capa continued, "The idea of photography as fine art became destructive and helpful at the same time. A perfect example is W Eugene Smith. We didn't quite realise at the time how he straddled the position of a journalistic photographer and an artist. He was on both sides.

"He claimed that it could take him a month to make a print. He did printing manipulations of all sorts in the laboratory. Maybe it takes longer if you make a very dark print: you make whites whiter and blacks blacker, make copy negatives, and from thereon the original negative is only a sketch with the real picture made from the copy negative.

"He heightened impact, made the print a work of art. It seems wrong, but it isn't, because he really believed in the negative being only a sketch, and the print being the final symphony. He was emphasising what he wanted to emphasise when he took the picture, and he made it into a work of art in the darkroom."

My own meeting with Gene Smith, some 40 years ago when he orchestrated a two-day masters workshop at the Rochester Institute of Technology, New York, stays vividly in my mind. Smith was passionate about his photography, the craft and quality, as part of telling the story. It was part of his

brilliance, though arguably the reason that *Life Magazine* and Magnum found him so difficult to handle commercially. Photography needs these mavericks, and he remains firmly in its pantheon.

Here is my diary note of the private view of Magnum co-founder George Rodger's exhibition at The Society's then headquarters, at Milsom Street, Bath, in June 1994: 'Henri Cartier-Bresson was there. He had come to his long-time friend's private view, to perhaps recall old times, and to quietly contemplate the pictures. It was a simple act of homage from one great photographer to another.

'Others were determined to invade his space, but this intensely private man turned on his heel and walked away. H C-B has a neat, compact frame, almost bald with remnants of white hair. He wore a beige suit, and was carrying a black walking cane with a silver handle, more as a fashion accessory than a physical necessity. He stood well back from each individual print, carefully contemplating, while rocking gently backwards and forwards on his feet.

'After a short while, he would move onto the next print. Having been made by Salgado's printer in Paris, the quality of the prints was exceptional. Was H C-B looking at images new to him, old friends, or a 1994 interpretation? Earlier, Rodger had confided that the quality of the printing had brought out nuances in his pictures that he had not seen before.'

Sebastião Salgado's printer delivers images on another plane, something that was reflected upon in my interview with Salgado. The extremes of technical quality are an absolute requirement for his pictures on the wall, but not necessarily for pictures on a page. The difference is in the commercial value of the individual document.

More than those of his contemporaries, Salgado's photographs are instantly recognisable. Visually they are stunning, perfect, precise. His icons of deprivation are frequently elevated to fine art, perhaps in the same way as Paul Nash's paintings or Käthe Kollwitz's woodcuts respond to the futility of WWI. A cinematic parallel would see his images being painted for the wide screen, rather than using the smaller brush strokes of television, his epic choreography more reminiscent of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* than, say, CNN.

The beauty of Salgado's images is considered inappropriate by some. Are they being uncharitable, or simply missing the point? 'Each photographer has his own way of seeing and of intervening with reality', says Salgado. 'Sometimes I must apologise to people when they suggest I have perfect composition, lighting that is too dramatic, a too clean picture for so harsh a story, that I exploit the misery with my composition. It is nothing to do with this.

'When you have a fraction of a second to do a picture, you have no time to say you will make your picture in one particular way. I believe that each photographer, each writer, has a style, each person in your life has a different style, each marriage and behaviour inside the family has a different style. That is the fantastic characteristic of the human being.'

Fellowship assessment process

I am bewildered by the hype and rumour that surrounds the Fellowship assessment process. While undoubtedly propagated with The Society's best interests at heart, inaccurate and outdated information



can nonetheless cause havoc with the membership. Here, I attempt to explain the outline of the Fellowship assessment process. For details, see the Distinctions Handbook or www.rps.org

Assessment for Fellowship is a two-part process. Initial assessment is by the appropriate specialist Panel. It then makes its recommendation to the Fellowship Board, which moderates the process, and in turn makes its recommendations to Council.

Currently, the Panels which are part of this procedure are: Applied (incorporating documentary, portraiture, record, theatrical, visual journalism, wedding and the moving image), Audio Visual, Contemporary, Nature, Printing, Travel, and Visual Art.

The Panels normally meet twice a year, in the spring and autumn. Panels comprise five members plus a Chair, and are chosen from among Society Fellows, on the basis of their photographic experience, and ability in assessing and discussing the work of others.

The Fellowship assessment process is similar to that for the Associateship, but is held in camera. The 20 photographs are placed on the wall, and the candidate's statement is read out, then the Panel views the prints and has an initial vote. The Chair will invite discussion, normally starting with the minority view. When the Chair is convinced the work has been

fully considered, he will then have a second and final vote. To convince the Fellowship Board of its merit, the decision to proceed will need to be near unanimous.

The Fellowship Board meets after the Panels have met, normally in May/June and Oct/Nov. It was set up a few years ago to ensure a consistency of standards across the range of Panels. This it has achieved, confirming it as an essential part of the process.

Revised Fellowship Board procedures

From this autumn, the Fellowship Board will be working under revised procedures. The objective of the Board will continue to be one of moderation, while exceptionally portfolios may be brought forward for further consideration. It will comprise five members, chosen by the Distinctions Advisory Board and approved by Council. Its members will have extensive experience with the Distinction process, and must be able to make decisions over a broad spectrum of photography.

Panel Chairs will attend mainly as observers, and are strategically the conduit to and from the individual Panels. The appropriate Panel Chair will be expected to give a succinct presentation of why a particular body of work is worthy of Fellowship, and bring to the Board the specific expertise of that Panel.

**Above: Bob Pearson
FRPS: Flamingo.**

The Fellowship photographs shown with this feature are from the RPS Distinction Exhibition that was shown at Fenton House, demonstrating recent L, A, & F work.

It is currently showing at the Guildhall, Bath, in the space outside the Chair's office, until 30 Oct. Mon-Thurs 08.30-17.00, Fri 08.30-16.30, and occasional weekends. Ground floor disabled access. Contact Ruth Hutchings, 01225 394235, ruth_hutchings@bathnes.gov.uk

The Chair of the Board will then lead a rigorous discussion with its members, to ensure there is a thorough understanding of the work and any wider issues that relate to it, before a sound decision is made.

Something special

Some of us have something special, and that is what Fellowship recognises. We are looking for outstanding work, which may be pushing forward the boundaries of the genre concerned, or showing the very best practice in a given area. We will be looking for individual work, with a strong personal style and a maturity of vision, both in the individual image and the presentation as a whole.

Fellowship is not formulaic, and it cannot be learned by rote. For some, there may be difficult lessons to be learned.

Some years ago, an eminent Society Fellow on a Distinction Panel was asked to define Fellowship. He replied that he could not define it in words, but knew it when he saw it. That is still in many ways a truism. The visual element that gives individuality does not easily lend itself to verbal description, and tends to vary between differing Panels. It is vital that aspiring applicants seek informed and honest advice.

Michael Hallett FRPS, Fellowship Board Chair