



because creating a record of the scene in front of the camera is the furthest thing from the artist's mind.

A photograph transcends mere record to become art when the artist creates from the raw capture, a new illusion of a reality that never was.

If you see in a photograph that it is more than just a record. If you see that it no longer matters *where* the photograph was taken or *what* the subject matter might have been, that it speaks to you on a higher level, then it has indeed risen to the status of *art*.

If on the other hand you see that a photograph is nothing more than a literal — *picture of* — a national park, a sunset, ballet slippers, etc., then it is not art, only *décor*. A photograph cannot rise to the level of art if the photographer's own understanding does not extend beyond — *pictures of* — objects or scenes.

Painters often *work from photographs*. The result is something new. Not a painting *of* a photograph and certainly not something literal. The painting transcends the photograph and becomes *new* art that began as an idea contained partially in the photograph, but mostly in the painter's mind...

It can be said that fine art photographers do exactly the same thing. They also *work from photographs*, but instead of a painting, they create *from a photograph*, a new photographic reality envisioned first in the mind's eye, an image that transcends a simple record.

A fine art photograph is an illusion, deftly crafted and abstracted from the real world; one that is so close to perfection that it fools very nearly all of the people, all of the time. It is a half-truth that becomes a lie that evolves into a new truth. It is creation.

Whenever you are uncertain as to whether or not a photographer is really an artist, simply ask that person to explain the difference between an ordinary photograph and a fine art photograph as you now understand it.

"The photograph isn't what was photographed. It's something else. It's a new fact."

*Gary Winogrand*

"...I have looked at far more photographs than I have paintings, because their reality is stronger than reality itself."

*Francis Bacon*

"Like the pen, it is as good as the man who uses it. It can be the extension of mind and heart..."

*John Steinbeck*

"The use of the term art medium is, to say the least, misleading, for it is the artist that creates a work of art not the medium. It is the artist in photography that gives form to content by a distillation of ideas, thought, experience, insight and understanding."

*Edward Steichen*

"The purpose of art is to raise people to a higher level of awareness than they would otherwise attain on their own."

*Brassai*

"...I've been wanting to say this for years. Is cooking an art? Is talking an art? Is even painting an art? It is artfulness that makes art, not the medium itself. Of course photography is an art — when it is in the hands of artists."

*Aaron Scharf*

"...Why do photographers bother with the deception, especially since it so often requires the hardest work of all? The answer is, I think, that the deception is necessary if the goal of art is to be reached..."

*Robert Adams*

Photography can never grow up if it imitates some other medium. It has to walk alone; it has to be itself.

*Berenice Abbott*

"You don't take a photograph, you make it. Photography is more than a medium for factual communication of ideas. It is a creative art."

*Ansel Adams*

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THE

# PHOTOGRAPH

## AS A WORK OF ART



☞ WHEN IS A PHOTOGRAPH ART? ☞

The question of whether or not a photograph can be art was settled over a hundred years ago. Yes, a photograph can *absolutely* be art. The problem for most people lies not in accepting the premise that a photograph can be art, but rather, in learning to distinguish which photographs are art and which are not.

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The greatest asset of the photograph as art, for both artist and viewer, is its illusion of reality. This illusion is also the main obstacle to understanding photography as art... even for most photographers.

The camera compresses a three dimensional scene into two dimensions, miniaturizes it, falsifies colors, distorts shapes and perspectives and freezes time, yet somehow produces an image that appears inescapably real and absolutely truthful. So convincing is this preposterous illusion, that a photograph is believed by most everyone to be simply a mechanical record of reality; a hard fact, a stand-in.

The democratic nature of photography combined with its superficial, technical simplicity make it appear that anyone who can produce a photograph



(i.e. everyone) can therefore also produce a fine art photograph, especially in light of the outward appearance that technical superiority is the only advantage a fine art photograph has over ordinary photographs: stand-ins of a higher quality.

To the average person the scene in front of the camera is something that is *captured*, like a baseball in a glove, whole and complete. A final photograph is stored within the camera to be transferred to paper at a later date by any competent technician.

To the artist-photographer, the original scene is only crude, raw material. What is recorded at the shutter's release is not any semblance of a finished product. It cannot be simply — *sent to the lab* —

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# Materials, Methods & Other Clues

Today, the phrase *fine art photograph* has been greatly diluted. Every portrait, wedding and greeting card photographer *borrow*s it to hawk his wares. In the final analysis, you must rely on your own judgement to purchase what you have determined to be genuine art. However, there are ways to significantly improve your odds...

Easily noted practices specific to serious fine art photographers are universally disdained by others.

Genuine artists, regardless of medium, consider the use of inferior materials to be fraud. Fortunately, photographic materials have only two extremes: the best, and terrible. There is no middle.

Prints must always be made *only* on archival quality papers, free from the acids that cause inferior materials to quickly yellow and crumble. For pre-digital prints these papers are called *fiber based* and must be painstakingly washed by the photographer for permanence, a *very* tedious procedure. Never buy prints made on the only alternative to fiber, *RC*, aka resin-coated paper. Some traditional photographers still coat their own papers. These are invariably of the highest quality.

Good papers for digital printing are made entirely from cotton rag (matte surfaces) or specially made, de-acidified and buffered wood pulp papers (all other surfaces). For the latter, the word *baryta* is always used in the name. There are also specialty Japanese papers, often hand-made. The secret to all of these papers is the claim "100% acid free". No manufacturer *forgets* to make this important claim.

Matte board is simpler still. The only materials serious photographers will accept are *Museum Board* (100% acid-free cotton rag) or *Conservation Board* (de-acidified and buffered wood pulp). Both types of board have these unique qualities...

- a single, solid, uniform color throughout
- they look exactly the same on both sides
- four (usually) identical, nearly invisible plies (layers)
- colors are variations of white or tan/brown, or black
- never strong colors; green, red, blue, yellow, purple, etc.

Also check the manner in which a photograph is mounted to the board. A print must *never* be glued,

taped, dry-mounted, or in any way permanently attached to *anything*. If a print cannot be removed from the board by simply lifting it out, don't buy it. The only exception is *Japanese hinges*: thin, strong, acid-free tissue paper attached via a special paste to both the matte and non-image parts of the print.

Photographers who print digitally choose very specific inkjet printers manufactured for the sole purpose of printing photographs. These printers use only *pigment (or carbon)* inks, never the unstable dye inks used in most other printers. Inks made for printing photographs are very stable and constantly improved. No serious photographer will ever be uncertain when asked about the inks he employs.

Fine art photographers *never* imitate painters in any way and absolutely *will not*...

- make prints on painter's canvas
- sign the surface of the image itself
- use ornate or distracting frames or mattes
- apply paints or other materials anywhere
- alter the image to make it look in any way painterly

Also, be sure to reject...

- images printed out to or near the edge of the paper
- signatures not in pencil (acid-free black ink can be OK)
- prints in direct contact with frame glass
- images that rely on gimmicks of any kind
- photographers who can't decide between color and *Be3W*

Lastly, subject matter says it all. Serious photographers always work in specific, named projects, always show prints in cohesive groups and *never* list generic subject categories like *landscapes, sunsets, flowers, pets, etc.*

Fine art photography has a long rich history, of which pretenders are ignorant. Ask which historically significant photographers an artist admires: *Edward Weston, Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, Dorothea Lange, Minor White, Imogen Cunningham, Harry Callaban, Carl Chiarenza* (Ansel Adams is too easy), etc. Lack of familiarity with the greats of photography is a strong indicator. Adulation of popular wildlife and wilderness photographers should send you immediately running for the exit.

NOTE: while there are always exceptions to art-related *rules*, disregarding what you have read here will almost invariably result in a regretted purchase.