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Pictorial Effect in Photography. Hints on Composition and Chiaroscuro for Photographers
(Preface & Chapter I)
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PREFACE.

ONE of the greatest difficulties in writing a book for beginners in any art is to make it simple enough. Nine out of ten photographers are, unfortunately, quite ignorant of art; some think manipulation all-sufficient, others are too much absorbed in the scientific principles involved to think of making pictures; while comparatively a few only have regarded the science as a means of giving pictorial embodiment to their ideas. It is for the first-mentioned that I have dwelt so long, in Chapters III., IV., and V., on what may be termed the initial idea of composition – Balance and Contrast. It is denied by some that art and photography can be combined, and these ridicule the idea that a knowledge of the principles of art can be of use to the photographer. It is to counteract these erroneous notions that I have insisted so strongly on the legitimacy and necessity of understanding those guiding laws in composition and chiaroscuro, which must, in all forms of art, be the basis of pictorial effect.

In the choice of illustrations, I have selected, chiefly from copies of familiar pictures, those by which I could best elucidate a principle or assist in the description of a process, rather than those which may be regarded as simply pretty pictures. In the photographic illustrations by various processes, I have endeavoured to show that the principles laid down could be embodied by means of photography.

For the rest, I have aimed to make a useful, rather than a pretentious, book. I believe it will be an aid to photographers, in which case I am satisfied it must aid in elevating an art in which I have a profound faith.

H. P. ROBINSON.

TUNBRIDGE WELLS, AUGUST, 1869.

PICTORIAL EFFECT

IN

PHOTOGRAPHY

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

“All arts having the same general end, which is to please; and addressing themselves to the same faculties through the medium of the sense; it follows that their rules and principles must have as great affinity as the different materials and the different organs or vehicles by which they pass to the mind will permit them to retain.”

“Every opportunity should be taken to discountenance that false and vulgar opinion that rules are the fetters of genius; they are fetters only to men of no genius; as that armour which, upon the strong, is an armament and a defence, upon the weak and mis-shapen [sic!] becomes a load, and cripples the body which it was made to protect.”—*Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds*.

“In a word, every art, from reasoning to riding and rowing, is learned by assiduous practice; and if principles do any good, it is proportioned to the readiness with which they can be converted into rules, and the patient constancy with which they are applied in all our attempts at excellence.”—*Dr. Thompson’s Outlines of the Laws of Thought*.

THERE has been so much written on art in its relation to photography, which, when attempted to be applied, has been found to be of very little use – so much talking, as Carlyle says, “from the teeth outwards,” upon this matter – that it was with the greatest diffidence and reluctance I consented, some time ago, to write a series of papers on the subject for the *Photographic News*, a journal which, without neglecting the strictly scientific detail upon which mechanical photography depends, has always urged upon photographers the study of art as of vital importance to success in their profession, and has constantly advocated its claims to rank as a near relation to sculpture and painting. My aim was to set forth the laws which govern – as far as laws can be applied to a subject which depends in

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some measure on taste and feeling – the arrangement of a picture, so that it shall have the greatest amount of pictorial effect, and to illustrate by examples those broad principles without regard to

which imitation, however minute or however faithful, is not picturesque, and does not rise to the dignity of art. Upon these papers this work is based.

Two principal objects should be kept in view by those who endeavour to impart knowledge in any art: the soundness of the instruction given, and the simplicity of the language in which that teaching is propounded. In promising, at the outset, to be as practical as possible, I know I am sacrificing some advantages to myself, and much ease of writing, besides the *éclat* that often follows and rewards the inventor of grandly-sounding sentences, easy to write, but difficult to read, and still more difficult to understand. Those who represent art as a kind mystery, an inspiration, a gift of the gods to special favourites, often receive the credence of the ignorant, as, in assuming the language of the oracle, they are supposed by the uninstructed to possess the inspiration, and hence, until the imposture is discovered, they receive more attention than he who endeavours to show that there is a pathway open in the direction of the temple of art which all may tread, even if all do not reach the inner sanctuary. Notwithstanding this, my object will be to write as clearly and definitely as possible, that I may be understood by, and be of use to, all those who (whether using photography either as a profession or an amusement) honour me with their attention.

It has often been asserted that the artist, like the poet, is born, not made; and, within certain limits, the assertion is doubtless true: without a natural capacity for pictorial perception no study and no amount of industry would produce an artist. "Patience and sand-paper," Ruskin remarks, "will not make a picture." But, no matter how great the natural capacity, or how undoubted the genius, certainty in excellence, and permanent success, cannot be attained without a knowledge of the rules, and a study of the principles, upon which pictorial effect depends. No mistake is more fatal than a reliance upon genius instead of effort, upon "inborn taste" instead of culture and the application of recognized and certain laws.

I shall have not a word to say on the poetry of art; that is a question on which it is difficult to write so as to be really understood, except by those who have had a long education in art. I shall confine myself to what may be called the construction of a picture: in fact, I propose to deal with the body, or perhaps the skeleton, and not the soul; with the tangible, not the intangible; with that which can be taught, not that which must be felt. Neither shall I attempt to go into the extreme subtleties of the science of composition, which only could be of use to painters, who have command over every line that appears in their works. Photographers, although a wide scope for artistic effect is open to them, have not the facilities which other artists possess, of making material alterations in landscapes and views embracing wide expanses, neither have they so much power of improvement in figure subjects, although much may be done by skill and judgment; but they have open to them the possibility of modifying, and, being free agents, they have the power

of refusing to delineate, subjects which, by no efforts of theirs, will ever make effective pictures. It is a too common occurrence with photographers to overlook the inadaptability of a scene to artistic treatment, merely because they think it lends itself to the facility, which their art possesses, of rendering, with wondrous truth, minutiae [sic!] and unimportant detail. To many this rendering of detail, and the obtaining of sharp pictures, is all that is considered necessary to constitute perfection; and the reason for this is, that they have no knowledge of, and therefore can take no interest in, the representation of nature as she presents herself to the eye of a well-trained painter, or of one who has studied her with reverence and love.

It must be confessed, and distinctly understood, that photography has its limits. Whilst it will be necessary to explain the fundamental laws of composition in their entirety, the applicability of these laws in photography is limited by the comparatively scant plasticity of the photographer's tools – light as it can be employed by lenses and chemicals. Therefore, as I proceed with the rules of composition as far as they have been reduced to a system, or rather a *quasi* system, it will be my aim to endeavour to indicate what can be done by photography, and how; assuming throughout, however, that the student is familiar with photography and the capability

of the appliances, at his disposal, asking him to remember that great technical knowledge is only a means by which artistic power can be exhibited, and not the end and perfection of the photographer's art. In doing this, I shall bear in mind the Italian proverb, "He is a fool who does not profit by the experience of others," and shall not hesitate to avail myself of hints from any author who contains ideas worth placing before my reader, illustrating my remarks with engravings from the works of well-known painters, with occasional sketches of photographs in which the principles defined by the art of composition have aided the photographer in his choice of subject, in the arrangement of his sitter, or in his management of light and shade.

It has been often alleged that, except in its lowest phases and in its most limited degree, art can have nothing in common with photography, inasmuch as the latter must deal with nature, either in landscape or portraiture, only in its most literal forms; whilst the essential province of art is to deal with nature in the ideal, rendering that which it suggests as well as that which it presents, refining that which is vulgar, avoiding that which is common-place, or transfiguring and glorifying it by poetic treatment. Photography, it has been said, can but produce the aspects of nature as they are; and "nature does not compose : her beautiful arrangements are but accidental combinations." But it may be answered, that it is only the educated eye of one familiar with the laws upon which pictorial effect depends who can discover in nature these accidental beauties, and ascertain in what they consist. Burnet observes, "Nature unveils herself only to him who can

penetrate her scared haunts. The enquiry, 'What is beautiful, and why?' can only be answered by him who has often asked the question." The same writer, speaking of Turner's early efforts, describes them as something like very common-place photographs; they were water-colour landscapes, "aspiring only to topographical correctness, the unadorned representations of individual scenes." It was only subsequent study, and a higher knowledge of the resources of art, which "gave him a hint that selection of a situation, and clothing it with effective light and shade, ennobled the picture, and placed it more in the rank of a composition than a plain transcript." The same is equally true of

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portraiture. Although likeness is the quality of first importance, artistic arrangement is scarcely second to it. In some cases, indeed, art excellence possesses a wider and a more permanent value than mere verisimilitude. The portraits by Titian, or Velasquez, or Reynolds, live rather as pictures than as likenesses, and the Gervartius of Vandyke excites the admiration of thousands who scarcely bestow a thought on the identity of the original. Art-culture, however, materially aids in securing likeness, by teaching the eye, rapidly to seize the salient features, to determine the most suitable view, and to arrange the light so as to bring out the effect of character; at the same time giving force and prominence to natural advantages, and concealing or subduing natural defects.

To admit that photographers had no control over their subjects would be to deny that the works of one photographer were better than another, which would be untrue. It must be admitted, by the most determined opponent of photography as a fine art, that the same object represented by different photographers will produce different pictorial results, and this invariably, not only because the one man uses different lenses and chemicals to the other, but because there is something different in each man's mind, which, somehow, gets communicated to his fingers' ends, and thence to his pictures. This admitted, it easily follows that original interpretation of nature is possible to photographers-limited, I admit, but sufficient to stamp the impress of the author on certain works, so that they can be as easily selected and named by those familiar with photographs, as paintings are ascribed to their various authors by those who have an intimate knowledge of pictures.

It is of importance, at the outset, to prove that superior results are produced by superior knowledge, not only of the use of the materials employed in photography, but by an acquaintance with art, or the whole purpose of the present treatise falls to the ground.

Given a certain object – for example, a ruined castle – to be photographed by several different operators: no exact point of sight shall be indicated, but the stand-point shall be limited to a certain area. What will be the result? Say there are ten prints: one will be so much superior to the others that you would fancy the producer had everything – wind,

light, &c.-in his favour; while the others will appear to have suffered under many disadvantages. This picture will be found to have been taken by the one in the ten who has been a student of art. By his choice of the point of view, by the placing of a figure, by the selection of the time of day, or by over-exposure or under-development, or by the reverse, producing soft, delicate, atmospheric effects, or brilliant contrasts, as may be required, the photographer can so render his interpretation of the scene either as a dry matter-of-fact map of the view, or a translation of the landscape so admirably suited to the subject, as seen under its best aspects, as to give evident indications of what is called feeling in art, and which almost rises into poetry; the result often differing marvellously from the horrors perpetrated by means of our beautiful art in the hands of those whose knowledge of photography extends to this, and this only, that if a piece of glass is prepared and treated in a certain manner, it will result in the production of an image of the object which has been projected on the screen of the camera by the lens.

It is not only the cultivated and critical eye that demands good composition in works of art, but the ignorant and uneducated feel a pleasure – of which they do not know the cause – in a sense of fitness and symmetry, balance and support.