



# Photography as Expression

*Determination, Pingyao, China*

Phil Douglis  
Phoenix, Arizona

What is expressive imagery? It is not a technical exercise. It is not a recording process. Instead, it is photography that interprets, rather than describes, what we see to others. It tells a story,



*Duck and friends, Plitvice National Park, Croatia*

going beyond conveying information for its own sake. It often becomes metaphorical. Minor White, perhaps photography's most notable theorist, saw photographs as "*outward expressions of inward states.*" He felt that images are "*about not just what some thing is, but rather, what else it is.*" By expressing our own metaphorical point of view about what we see, we can communicate ideas to others, triggering emotional, intellectual, and imaginative responses.

Expressive photography is based upon three important principles: *Abstraction, Incongruity, and Human Values.* *Abstraction* removes literal, descriptive clutter and hones an image down to its essence, encouraging imaginative responses. *Incongruity* presents elements that seem to be at odds with their context, creating contrasts and juxtapositions that stimulate both the emotions and the imagination. *Human values* convey the emotions, beliefs, traditions and knowledge that we understand and share as humans.

These three principles work together to express ideas. Imagine them as an integrated triangle.

Human values stand at the base of this triangle of principles. Abstraction runs up one side of this triangle, incongruity the other, and human values supports both of them. Once we know the human value or values we are trying to express to our viewers, we can consider how to abstract the image to reveal its essence, as well as how to bring either perceptual incongruity or subject incongruity into play.

From that point on, expressive photography becomes a matter of making simultaneous choices in light, time and space and using aesthetic judgments to best express meaning. We can build our images around the message of color or the abstraction of black and white. We can express meaning through our selection and use of detail, our frame placement, and our vantage point. We can inject mood and atmosphere into our photographs, using light and shadow not merely as *correct exposure* but as an abstracting force and a source of meaning. We can organize our ideas with compositions that guide the eye through the frame and stress the points we are trying to express. And we can choose a moment in time that best tells our story.

These options are not based on rules. They form the visual language we use to make expressive photographs. A visual language must be flexible, not rigidly defined by rules. Rules dictating the nature of *correct* composition, framing, exposure, focus, etc. can be destructively constricting. Making pictures in ways that others expect us to make them is an abdication of creative thought and individual responsibility. In order to make



Street performer, Moscow, Russia



Florist at Chau Doc, Vietnam



Drying salmon, Siberia, Russia

Walking through history,  
Berkeley, California, USA

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**Phil Douglis**

Phil is Director of  
The Douglis Visual  
Workshops, Phoenix,  
Arizona

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Broken terracotta figures,  
Xian, China



an expressive image, we must determine what it is that we are trying to express. In expressive photography, form should follow function. The way we put together a picture should be based on our own goals and purposes, not on a set of arbitrary aesthetic or technical *rules*.

It's also important to note that there can be no single *meaning* for an expressive photograph. Each image can have a number of meanings, depending upon who is looking at it, the context they bring to it, their cultural and life experiences. Although

it is possible to agree on the general meaning of some pictures because of commonly shared context or thought patterns, it is important to keep in mind that expressive images are intended to trigger thoughts that stimulate the mind, emotion, and imagination of the viewer. Each viewer will therefore determine his or her own version of what a picture might express. In the end, all meaning is *subjective*. Expressive photography can be considered an art form, and all art exists truly in the eye of the beholder. ■

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Decisive moment, Marrakesh, Morocco