

When Trees Are Not Trees Anymore

“The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing which stands in the way. Some see nature as all ridicule and deformity...and some scarce see nature at all.”

Throughout history and civilization, trees have been and are still a vital element in mankind’s survival as they provide our air, our homes, our books, etc. From objects of worship to food providers, nobody could imagine life without trees as they are major players in the ecosystem and are often parts of global warming debates. Ironically, English poet and artist William Blake (1757-1827) quoted here says that, “trees are often overlooked.” Being one of the most abundant living things on earth, many consider trees simply as a “green thing that stands in the way” and some see them as all “ridicule.”

Listen now to the following in Blake’s statement: “But by the eyes of a man of imagination, nature is imagination itself.” Few elements in nature have generated as much inspiration as trees. They have induced strong feelings and renewed energy to poets, artists, writers, and even political figures and to many more, covering all the spheres of human experience.

The following citations show their strong influence and are a testimony to the human spirit; “Solitary trees, if they grow at all, grow strong”

(Winston Churchill), “In the woods, we return to reason and faith” (Ralph Waldo Emerson), “The tree is a slow, enduring force straining to win the sky” (Antoine de Saint-Éxupéry). “You will find something more in woods than in books. Trees and stones will teach you that which you can never learn from masters” (Saint-Bernard 1090-1153).

In visual arts (including photographic art), trees can become powerful symbols to express one’s feelings: from despair to deep peace or exhilaration. They can also be used to communicate some moments of life encountered as human beings. Such events, as we know, can become like the four seasons of a tree. We can come across some rough moments like trees losing their leaves to be afterwards exposed to winter’s fury or come upon revitalizing moments like trees

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budding in spring, becoming lush or healthy trees in the summer months.

It is not only the trees themselves that allow expression in this manner but also the environment in which trees evolve, often enhancing the emotions we want to convey. What is present in trees that can help in self-expression? Or, to say it in another way, when is a tree not a tree anymore? Look at the visual elements in and around the tree. For example, how come weeping willows create a level of sadness more pronounced than other trees? Because of the willow's drooping leaves, which evoke sadness.

Such characteristics are what had been referred to as an "expressions embedded in a structure" (Rudolph Arnheim, from **Art and Visual Perception**). Trees have different "structures," in which case we will react or feel differently. The shapes and lines are more pronounced when trees are leafless because of the variety of lines and curves they create, giving different responses.

Let's take some examples of how trees are effective subjects when it comes to conveying a certain event or state of mind. Remember Churchill's earlier statement "Solitary trees, if they grow at all, grow strong." Trees, known for deep roots are seen as standing proud on solid ground. A lush tree on a hilltop can be used to express a need to be alone in order to rejuvenate, or to escape a hectic lifestyle, which can mentally be energy-consuming. Such an illustration can also be appropriate to convey a feeling of having been on top of difficult events encountered over the last days, months or years. This communicates a feeling of inner strength, just like a lush tree that has stood the test of time and changing seasons. It can be amplified by using a wide-angle lens to increase perspective. Presence of cirrus clouds in the sky will add strong lines to the design and using a polarizing filter will deepen the blue sky, allowing the clouds to stand out.

An orchard of fully blooming apple trees can convey a feeling of internal blossoming. It may also indicate such a need to blossom in this way due to a timid personality or maybe related to periods of depression, present or past. Next, what would a stack of maple trees with vivid colored leaves covering the whole color spectre on a deep blue sky suggest? Perhaps, great joy, exhilaration, a celebration of life, and such emotions probably felt by someone who feels just great or happy about life.

Maybe the more profound person is someone whose thoughts seem to be like water drawn from a deep well. How would it be best expressed? Leafless trees can be used during an early fall morning fog along the river to point out the mystique in such a person, yet strong within. The lines generated by the tree branches, as well as the



fog effects, will enhance such emotion. As a last illustration, what would be the overall perception if a tree is directly in the path between the rising sun and the photographer, causing the sunrays to hit the tree and shine through its branches? A sense of illumination! Quite appropriate in relating to events encountered which become clearer with time as to their significance or outcome. It may also suggest a new beginning; such as someone having a new lease on life after a major surgery; improving greatly the quality of living.

As seen in the previous illustrations, trees can symbolize a wide array of short or long term states of mind, relating to some past and present events or simply reveal more about ourselves. Also bear in mind the importance of simplicity, which will deliver a clearer message of emotions or events to the viewers.

All photographs were taken with a Nikon FM10 film camera and a 28-200mm (18-125mm for digital) zoom film lens giving the best and widest array in selecting near or far away subjects. If a polarizing filter is to be used during tree sessions in daylight, remember that any subject matter must be taken at 90 degrees to the solar beam to maximize polarization of the blue sky.

Using a 400 ASA film (or setting the digital camera's ISO to 400) will allow shutter adjustment to 1/250 sec. for shots taken without a tripod; the lens can be set at 200mm and the shot taken early at sunrise or late before sunset. This can be





American comedian and singer (1892-1964) gives a good reason to slow down: “It is not only the scenery you miss by going too fast; you will also miss the sense of where you are going and why.” Disengaging from every day stress and preoccupations will allow better seeing over the label of what we call a tree and the possibility to discover new things that could have been overlooked otherwise.

Yes, trees have a place in photographic art and are powerful objects used to channel feelings. Trees are treasures of inspiration and are energy-restoring subjects for the human spirit. **So the next time, when pointing a camera towards trees, think of what they can become when looked at through the viewfinder.** ■



useful to know because in some cases, short notice or placement of the camera to take that magical shot won't allow use of a conventional tripod, as this has happened more than once in my personal case among my best photographs. Tree trunks, car bumpers or country fence pickets can be used as “tripods” in capturing such beauties. In one of the last photographs, taken on a late summer day, fast oncoming fair-weather clouds needed a quick response to capture a single tree, which was under the light, while clouds covered most of the surroundings. But with a 200 ASA film at 135mm, insufficient shutter speed required needed support from a car hood to take what has been considered one of my best photographs of the year.

Admit that it may be a difficult exercise in expression and challenging it is! A photographer may not feel comfortable to open up in this way because such an approach will expose one emotionally to others. But it is worth the risk, as such an undertaking has the ability to transform us; if it is possible to build such an intimate relationship between our subject, the trees and ourselves, photographic art will start to become a tool to help photographers grow as human beings.

To start with, it may be a good time to reduce pace and engage in the extraordinary journey inside the world of trees. Eddie Cantor,



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