

Reflecting Reality

Some members are asking, “Why don’t all of the divisions allow us to change or alter the images we submit? Why not encourage us to improve our work to the greatest extent possible?”

Although all seven divisions of the Photographic Society of America (PSA) now embrace digital capture and electronic submission of images and/or computer printing, this does not mean that the existing divisional restrictions on manipulation or modification of content have been lifted. While some divisions have always encouraged artistic efforts and rewarded creative results, such variations are inappropriate in the three reality based divisions.

Imaginative creations are honored in four divisions: Electronic Imaging; Color Projected Images; Pictorial Prints and Stereo. **But the Nature, Photojournalism and Photo Travel Divisions were established to show aspects of our world as they exist and they emphasize that any attempt to tamper with a photograph undermines the integrity of the message.** In keeping with existing rules in these divisions, no subject matter may be moved, cloned, added or deleted; there can be no manipulation beyond resizing, cropping or restoration of the correct color and density, and no over-sharpening or digital filters can be applied. To do otherwise would cause the Society to lose all credibility with other organizations and individuals dedicated to similar depictions of reality.

Many people may remember what happened when the National Geographic Society (NGS) changed the composition of existing objects in a photograph in order to fit a photograph on the cover. Readers who noticed that a pyramid had been moved complained that if NGS were willing to do that, everything else they published could be called into question. Remembering the notorious publicity it caused, they will likely never do that again. Their photographers illustrate the reality of the places they cover, not by arranging pictorial situations or changing existing scenes, but by capturing spontaneous moments in that culture. PSA’s exhibition standards agree that a Photo Travel image will, *express the feeling of a time and place, portray a land, its people, or a culture in its natural state* and that *photographic manipulations which misrepresent the true situation or alter the content of the image are unacceptable.*

Press associations also have strict ethical guidelines preventing the modification of images and, although professional photojournalists

were among the first to embrace digital technology, adding, deleting or moving any content electronically, even what might appear to be relatively insignificant items, can swiftly end a career. Furthermore, subjects are not to be posed or changed in any way. Whenever a news photographer needs to do that, such as for an environmental portrait that condition must be obvious to the viewer, and anyone found to represent a pre-arranged moment as a spontaneous one is in serious trouble. In line with the ethical standards of professional photojournalists, PSA’s exhibition standards proclaim that, *in the interest of credibility, photographs which misrepresent the truth, such as manipulation to alter the subject matter, or situations which are set up for the purpose of photography, are unacceptable.*

Naturalists are also very sensitive to the trustworthiness of an image, as was evidenced a few years ago by a chorus of protests against a respected nature photographer who attempted to improve a nice shot by adding a third cub to his image of a big cat and her two little ones. PSA’s nature standards speak to an honest presentation of the subject material and disallow, *any form of manipulation that alters the truth of the photographic statement.* They explain that *makers may perform any enhancements and modifications that improve the presentation of the image that could have been done at the time the image was taken but that does not change the truth of the original nature story. Cropping and horizontal flipping (equivalent to reversing a slide) are acceptable modifications. Addition of elements, removal of elements other than by cropping, combining elements from separate images, rearranging elements or cloning elements are not acceptable, nor are over-sharpening or digital filters.*

So it should be evident that encouraging digital submission does not condone changing an image in any way. With photography rapidly becoming increasingly electronic, it has become so easy to do this that the temptation can be overwhelming. But honest representation is at the heart of what nature, photojournalism and photo travel photographers do, and the place for creativity is in PSA’s four other divisions. For the Society to ignore these commonly accepted standards would show a total lack of integrity and could seriously damage PSA’s reputation among other photographers and organizations that are concerned with the truthful depiction of our world. ■



Lynn Troy Maniscalco,
FPSA, EPSA