

# Looking At Photographs

Photographs are made in order to convey a certain vision or idea. Graphic elements help convey this to the viewer; as the photographer, you know exactly what was intended, but when looking at someone else's image, they may not always be there to explain it. Following are some questions you can ask yourself when you look at a photograph:

1. **What type of photograph is it?** Portraits, landscapes, abstractions are examples of types. Sometimes this is clear from the context: an advertising photograph in an ad, a news photograph on the front page. A title can provide useful information, but look at the picture first so that the title does not limit your response.
2. **What can you tell (or guess) about the photographer's intention?** Is it intended to convey a specific story, or share with you a new way of seeing something old?
3. **What emphasis has the photographer created and how has that been done?** For example, if selective focus been used so that the most important part of the scene is sharp, while less important parts are not?
4. **Do technical matters help or hinder the image?** Is the central element – perhaps someone's expression – lost in extraneous detail because the photographer was not close enough?
5. **Are graphic elements important, such as tone, line, or perspective?** What part of the photograph do you look at first? How does your eye move around the photograph? Does it skip from one person's face to another, follow a curved line, keep returning to one point?
6. **What does the photograph reveal besides what is immediately evident?** If you spend some time looking at a photograph, you may find that you see things you did not notice at first. A fashion photograph may give information about styles but say even more about the social roles that men and women play – or are encouraged to play – in our culture. A scientific photograph of a distant star may have been made to itemize its stars but can also evoke the mystery of the universe.
7. **What emotional or physical impact does the photograph have?** Does it induce sorrow, amusement, peacefulness? Does it make your skin crawl, your muscles tense up, your eyes widen?
8. **How does this photograph relate to others made by the same photographer, in the same period, or of the same subject matter?** Is there any historical or social information that helps illuminate it? Is there a connection to art movements? Such knowledge can lead to a fuller appreciation of the work.