

Demystifying Print Competitions

By Tina & Michael Timmons
The Portrait Gallery

How entering competitions can help you grow as a photographer

For many professional photographers, one of the highlights of their careers is being recognized as an artist by their peers. For some, this recognition comes in the form of winning an award in a print competition. Yet many photographers (both prosumers and seasoned professionals), seem to lack either the confidence or the knowledge necessary to submit their best work to a print competition.

Some busy photographers may ask: "Why get involved?" From my own experience, I believe that simply entering a print competition can truly be one of the best forms of photography education.

All phases of the process can change how you think about your work. Watching an actual judging can be particularly informative. After seeing an image, hearing its title, and then listening to the judges' comments, you'll find yourself guessing the score in your head. Getting involved behind the scenes by working on the print crew is another way to put yourself in the middle of the action. At every level of print competition volunteers are needed to help unpack print cases, work during the competition, hang images for display, and repack the print cases. Being a volunteer is very rewarding.

The entry process will also force you to evaluate your work in a more critical light.

Select the Right Images

Several factors are involved in deciding which images to submit as competition prints. Some photographers shoot images specifically with the criteria of a certain print competition in mind. Other photographers submit images they created during their everyday work. Either way is acceptable and often images will come from both types of sessions. Here are a few tips:

- **Keep the print competition in mind during your regular shooting sessions.** If things are going well and time permits, do a few poses at the end of a session for yourself. Explain to the client what your intent is, and they may even end up purchasing some of the images you shot with print competition in mind. Client work in competitions can be turned around into very positive promotion.

- **Start a separate folder for potential print competition entries.** Throughout the year continually add images that you believe have that special quality the judges might be looking for. Keep both the original file and a copy with any artistic enhancements you might have added. When the time comes, you will be well prepared to sort through your best files and convert a chosen few into competition prints.

- **Look for "an image within your image."** As you view your images, keep in mind that your competition print may actually come from just a small portion of what you originally captured. Crop out any unnecessary elements that may distract the viewer or draw attention away from your main subject. Always give the judge only those details that are necessary to tell the story.



■ **Pay close attention to composition and color harmony** because both play very important roles in award-winning prints. A great resource about composition is a book entitled *The Power of Composition in Photography* by the late Frank Kristian. The book includes detailed discussions of such elements as the rule of thirds and Fibonacci sequence. It also explains how good composition can be achieved with light, color, and direction. A strong composition can either be attained during capture or by specific cropping of the image after the fact. For a list of the other elements to consider, see the sidebar “Criteria for Judging Image Quality” on p.19.

■ **Remember that “less is more” when it comes to special effects.** Although our daily portrait work almost always requires certain editing techniques and special effects, these enhancements may not always be well regarded by competition judges. The popularity of certain techniques will often come and go very quickly. An effect that originally intrigues a judge can look old or outdated if it used too often or in excess. Also, any artistic enhancements to an image must be done extremely well. Noticeable technical mistakes tend to stand out in a judge’s mind and will keep your score lower.

■ **Use your best judgment with regards to print materials and finishing.** Prints for competition are never framed or put behind glass, enabling the judges to freely inspect all aspects of the print. A popular method of printing an image is to use a high-quality inkjet photo paper, such as LexJet’s Sunset Photo eSatin, with a very small keyline, surrounded by a digital mat. The print is then laminated to finish it off. Lamination gives the image a very high gloss finish and makes the colors in an inkjet print very vibrant. Some types of images may warrant the use of watercolor or metallic paper, and/or a traditional mat.

■ **Keep in mind that printing for an exhibition is very different from printing client work.** Very specific lighting conditions are used for print competition. Care must be taken while printing these images so they don’t look washed out under the lights. Size requirements must also be taken into consideration. A non-master in PPA must enter an image of 16 x 20 finished size, while a master can enter a non-traditional size. Before sending your print into the competition, make sure it is viewed under the exact lighting conditions that will be used in the competition.

Peace in the Valley: This image by Tina Timmons was taken in the Great Smoky Mountains. The print is included in the PPA Loan Collection.





■ Consider having your work output by a photographer/printmaker who has experience in printing exhibition-quality work. This will give you the best chance at a high score and possible awards. Any issues with regard to printing and presentation will definitely be noticed.

■ Always read the rules to verify what the print requirements are. For each competition, the rules can vary slightly. In some cases wedding and event albums can be entered in a competition on a CD instead of printing the entire album.

Two of the biggest sponsors of print competitions are the PPA (Professional Photographers of America) and WPPI (Wedding and Portrait Photographers International). The PPA supports regional print competitions, as well as the International event. The WPPI print competition offers an 8 x 10 contest, in addition to the annual event. Both competitions include entries from other countries, which is nice because these images offer more of an international flair. Presentation differences are also commonly accepted within WPPI.

■ Make sure to choose the right category in which to enter your image. Making the wrong choice can harm your chances of getting the highest score. Again make sure to read all rules. For example, the category photographic open, used within PPA, is sometimes broken down on the local or state level. Portrait, Child, Family, Commercial, Wedding and other classifications may be available. Always be aware of your options, as choosing these specific categories may earn additional awards.

■ Create a title for your image that will help explain the image and tell its story. This will require some thought. Usually it's a good idea to keep the title short. But avoid common phrases, because others are

likely to come up with the same idea. (For example, the title "Field of Dreams" has been used extremely often.) Also watch for spelling and pronunciation. Sometimes the person reading the title can misinterpret what you mean. So keep it simple.

Understand How Your Prints Will Be Judged

The makeup of each judging panel varies every year. Before each competition, all judges receive thorough instructions, including a review of all procedures and examples of previous award-winning images. At PPA the panel members are mixed throughout the week, while at WPPI a group is chosen for each category and only a few judges serve within multiple panels. Every consideration is given to ensuring that the judging process is as fair as possible to the makers of the images.

For the PPA Print Competition, each judge is asked to pick a grade level and then a corresponding score within that category, as follows:

Exceptional	100 - 95
Superior	94 - 90
Excellent	89 - 85
Deserving of Merit	84 - 80
Above Average	79 - 76
Average	75 - 74
Acceptable	73 - 70
Unacceptable	69 - 0

Those images receiving 81-78 are deserving of review and those 80 or above will receive a merit and be included in the PPA General Collection. For the 117th annual PPA print competition this year, a panel of nearly 40 judges from across the US evaluated approximately 5,000 submitted entries. Of these, more than 2,000 images were selected for the General Exhibit, and only 684 of those were selected for PPA's Loan Collection.



Tiny Dancers: This image by Tina Timmons was captured at her daughter's final dance recital. The print is included in PPA's Loan Collection.

The Loan Collection images will be published in a 2009 Loan Collection book by Marathon Press and nearly 200 images will appear in the Showcase book by Marathon Press

The Benefits of Entering

In addition to helping you become a better photographer, entering print competitions can result in receiving awards on a local, state, regional and international level. Your efforts can also help you earn Photographic Degrees.

If you do receive an award, particularly with the involvement of any clients, make sure to promote the award in your local community. If you've won an award for a flower, scenic, or abstract in nature image that is beyond the scope of your portrait or wedding business, consider offering the image for sale as home interior décor.

But winning an award should never be your only objective. Once you enter your first print competition, you'll find that competing sparks a drive to increase the quality of your photography as a whole. Competition images can also provide an outlet for personal expression and creativity, giving you a break from shooting only what your clients request.

Over time, entering print competitions every chance you get will help you grow as a photographer and your everyday work will continue to improve. -U

Tina and Michael Timmons own Gallery 143 and The Portrait Gallery in Vassar, MI. They both hold the Master of Photography Degree, Photographic Craftsman, and Imaging Excellence through PPA and have won numerous awards on each level of competition. In addition, both are PPA Affiliated International Judges who teach all over the world. They are also involved in WPPI.

Michael uses the Epson 9880 Printer and Laxjet Sunset Photo eSatin Paper to print competition images for photographers from numerous states. He has printed for more than 15 Photographers of the Year. Michael offers a competition-quality artwork printing service for photographers who want high-quality enlargements of their images. The Timmons also have ten years of experience producing custom décor art for business and residential clients. (www.theportraitgallery.com and www.gallery143.com)

CRITERIA FOR JUDGING IMAGE QUALITY

PPA's Photographic Exhibitions Committee provides print-competition entrants with guidelines that explain the 12 elements typically used to judge image quality.

- Impact
- Creativity
- Style
- Composition
- Print Presentation
- Center of Interest
- Lighting
- Subject Matter
- Color Balance
- Technical Excellence
- Technique
- Storytelling

(For more details on these criteria, visit the Great Output blog.)

