

## Photography: Art and Communication Tool

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Every art form has something in common: an idea. The idea should be the one to provoke feelings, thoughts, or actions, but it is the task of an artist to come up with an idea and turn it into something people can experience. Photography shares this with all other art forms.

Photography is also one of the main communication mediums used on a global scale. It has the same task - to provoke feelings, thoughts, or actions, but the idea behind it is very different. The idea was not crafted by an artist, but rather taken by a photographer and molded into a story by a journalist. The key difference between art and a medium is the kind of idea you are dealing with.



The difference between photography and other art forms is that photography has become accessible to millions of people in the last few decades, and as there are more people taking pictures, and don't make them, it loses its value as an art form. It is used as a communication tool. While it also shares similar traits with art and journalism - the quality of ideas is few steps degraded. While artists dwell on existential ideas, a common person might take a picture of their food, put a filter and call it art.

Where photography differs from other art forms is how an image is created. Compared with painting, sculpting, poetry, or music, everything created comes from the artist's head - brushstrokes by a painter, stone carved by sculptures, words used by a poet, or notes used by a musician. Photography is an art form of capturing light - a light that is already present - but only shaped through lenses and captured on a sensor or film. The playground for the artist is everything before the image is taken.

This is one of the main reasons why some do not consider it art - because it doesn't create anything, but rather captures what's in front of the camera. It has the power to show reality as close as it can be. Painters strived to achieve this for centuries - capturing a moment in time, and then, a tool that does exactly this was created.

Realism in painting is maybe the closest comparison. They didn't want to show divine or epic scenes, but rather to show reality as it is. They put a lot of work in painting every little detail of the scene, thinking about realistic light, but it took a lot of time to transfer it into the medium of painting. Impressionists wanted to capture the moment as well, not focusing so much on details of a scene, but focusing on the general mood and light as it was happening - with quick brushstrokes, capturing the essence before the light changes.

Let's compare photography and poetry. Poets play with words, using tools at their disposal such as rhyme, rhythm, metaphors, wordplays and using surgically precisely their words to paint images, provoke feelings, express feelings and communicate the ideas. Photography has the ability of capturing the very image a poet has written about and provoking the same feelings in the reader.



One of the first poems I read that I realized this was *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* by Robert Frost. With only sixteen lines of simple imagery, I can get the whole image in my mind. A person with his horse stopping in snowy woods. Everything is calm, only the bell of the horse and the snow falling is heard. The last four lines are the ones that got me thinking:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

For me, it is a poem of a person stopping in the woods, during a snowstorm, getting lost, but knowing that he cannot quit life, and must continue to his destination.

Could we use photography to get the same idea across? The answer is Yes, using a different tool, but the feeling and the idea can be translated into any medium.

Art needs to be something deep and profound about life, about ourselves, about the world around us. It isn't always beautiful, and it sometimes needs to be harsh, depressing, criticizing the society - but it has to show the depths of what the artist wants us to think about. Especially in the modern era where everybody is more connected, but socially distant, living in their own bubble. Art is here to give a relief of life, but also to show us that sometimes we need to stop thinking only about ourselves, and think about problems and questions larger than ourselves.



As with other art forms, photography has some constraints within the medium it uses. The main constraint is fitting 3D into a 2D plane. It disregards feel, smell, sound or taste - only operating within eyesight. Within that, we have various tools to help achieve the idea we want. We can use color, or have it in black and white, use composition, focus, patterns, different lenses, and most important, photography works with light. This is where it gets technical, yet we can disregard all technical rules and still create art - it's only here to help us achieve the idea we want to communicate.

We need to differentiate between taking and making a photograph. Taking a photo is something anybody can do. If you give a camera to a child, an adult, or a monkey capable of

pressing a button, they will take a photograph. The difference is that they didn't put the thought process in it to communicate an idea. They might as well get lucky and every technical parameter of the image might be correct. The exposure is right, the focus is sharp, the composition is good - but, there is no idea behind it. Making an image means thinking about what we want to show the world, what we want them to feel, what to think, how to act - and using photography only as a tool to create the image.

This became clear to me while talking to a Fashion/Art photographer called Serge Leblon. In many of his images, the focus was off. Technically, you would expect the focus to be on the main subject, while the background was in focus - to get the most detail of the clothes, emotion from the model, etc. He did the opposite, focused on the backgrounds and doing something a technical photographer would call a mistake - but for him, he used it as a tool to communicate a certain mood.

When it really dawned on me is when we saw a portrait he did with Wes Anderson. It was a simple portrait, but it was not perfectly sharp - it had some motion blur on it. We asked him why his favorite portrait from Wes Anderson was blurry, and his response was: it is not blurry, it's just not sharp. With this, he told us that it wasn't a mistake, it was a deliberate choice he made, not to have him perfectly still, but to get the feeling of the person in the image, and this means not making him sharp.

So, let's remove the technicality from art, and remove art from technical photography. An extreme would be having only a black image - this doesn't even satisfy the first requirement of photography - having light. Can this be regarded as art? Yes, it can. For example, the caption near the photo is, "What do we see after death?" A black image can communicate the artist's belief that there is no afterlife, nothing - like no exposure on the film/sensor.

Let's add light, but no focus, and no color - only play of black and white shapes. Can this be art? It can - imagine a caption next to the image: what does a baby see when it's born. Making people think about something they never thought about, what was the first thing they saw when they were born.



We can add the technical layers even more to create more complex images, and play with more complex ideas, but in the end - it's only a medium to communicate ideas.

Having purely technical photos without art is possible - and it's the most common.

Everything is done correctly, good exposure, focus, composition - but the idea is lacking. Even that doesn't require knowledge, modern smartphones have such advanced technology that they do everything themselves. Using advanced AI technology that has been learning from millions of taken images, to know what is being photographed and how to process it to make it the most technically correct. The one thing it cannot learn is how to communicate the idea. This is why a lot of people have access to tools that make every shot correct but don't know how to use it as Art.

In most cases, art is created somewhere between. When an artist comes up with an idea, a profound one, he wants to show it to the world, but he also has to possess the technical knowledge to make it happen. Like a painter has to know about paint, brushes, and canvases, the photographer needs to know how to light, expose, focus and composition. Everything before taking the shot is the playground of a photographer. Setting up the mood, positioning the lights, finding the location, picking the time of the day, picking the subject, and picking the right moment. The last ingredient in here is capturing the right moment.

After taking the image, the photographer has two choices: which photograph will he choose, and will the photograph be published. While in the moment of creation he took hundreds of images, only one is the best. On some occasions, the photographer doesn't have much influence on the moment that he captured, and instead he maybe just got lucky. In the one moment everything worked together perfectly and the image that he envisioned unfolded in front of his eyes. The last responsibility and right he has as the creator is whether the image will be published or not.

Photography is a tool as the brush is to a painter, so is the camera to the photographer. What the artist decides to do with the provided tool is art. Not every painting has artistic value, so doesn't every photograph. This is why we say a photograph isn't taken, it's created. Every medium has its limits and advantages, so if we want to create art - we need to choose the right tool for the job. Sometimes photography is the right medium to use, but in some cases, it isn't. The artist needs to choose which medium and the tool can best convey the idea.

In the end, what matters the most is what is the message an artist wants to convey, and how it impacts the viewer. In the modern age, the distribution is unlimited via digital canals, and the whole world is the audience. We need to be really careful of what we communicate and give thought about what we are taking a photo of and what does it say - it is our duty to express what we hold true, but only after giving a good and critical thought and we know that the idea behind it is true.

