The Appeal of Black and White Photography
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› Our natural tendency is to shoot in color as we see the world in color.

› An image or scene is made up of multiple visual elements—color is but one of those visual elements. Others include:
  • Texture
  • Shape and Form
  • Tonal Contrast (difference between light and dark areas)

› The removal of color forces the viewer to pay closer attention to the other visual elements
  • B&W lets the subject stand on its own, without the ‘distraction’ of color
Color vs B&W Example, a Red Rose
Color vs B&W Example, a Red Rose

- Color provides immediate feedback, evokes emotion.
- Color tends to dominate the photo so much that it’s difficult to see the other compositional elements that add impact to an image.
Color vs B&W Example, a Red Rose
Color vs B&W Example, a Red Rose

- When color is removed from the image, any importance it had leaves with it.
- Without color, the emphasis then falls on other compositional elements (light/shadow, texture, contrast, shape & form).
- B&W lets the subject stand on its own, without the distraction of color.
The Appeal of Black and White Photography (Cont’d)

› From an artistic viewpoint, color depicts reality, black and white is an interpretation of reality.
  • Many fine art photographers prefer b&w for their tendency to distance the subject matter from reality.
  • The object of art is not to reproduce reality, but create a reality of the same intensity.

› Black and white images have a timeless/classic quality which will never go out of style.
  • Classic photography was born and grew in black & white.
  • The Masters of photography (Ansel, Steglitz, Cartier-Bresson) started in b&w.

› It has an aesthetic appeal…it simply looks good!
Learning to See in Black and White (Pre-Visualization)

One must learn to ‘pre-visualize’ what works well in b&w. It is a learned ability to form an image in your mind’s eye of what the scene will look like before clicking the shutter, allowing the photographer to hone in on subjects and compositional elements that translate well in black and white.

Attempt see the scene as a black and white image by observing **Tonal Contrast:**

Look at the brighter parts of the scene to see how they interact with the darker parts of the scene.
Learning to See in Black and White (In-Camera)

Preview the scene, In-Camera, in black and white:

1. Set your camera to Monochrome.
2. Shoot in RAW.
3. The preview (LCD display) will be stripped of color. However, the color information is retained in the RAW file.
4. Experiment with in-camera color filters (yellow, orange, red, green) for different effects.

Then, identify the other compositional elements that don’t depend on color that can add impact to your image.
Compositional Elements that add Impact

Look for Contrast

- One element that can give interest to a black and white image is contrast.
- You can use contrast to show what’s important and what’s not.
- Seek out scenes that naturally show signs of high contrast and your b&w images will have impact.
Compositional Elements that add Impact

Look for Texture

- Texture can be a form of contrast.
- Texture adds another dimension to an image, making a black-and-white image come to life and giving it an almost three-dimensional feeling.
- Texture is affected by lighting conditions. Side-lighting helps reveal the texture of a subject.
- B&W photography really lends itself well to texture as it adds impact to an image.
Compositional Elements that add Impact

Lines and Curves

- Lines and curves help to direct the viewers’ eye into the frame, toward the subject.

- Adding the human element can add interest to an image.
Compositional Elements that add Impact

Look for Patterns and Repetition

- **Patterns**: while patterns can get lost in a color image due to color taking the attention, patterns can add impact in a black and white image.

- **Repetition**: Bold shapes and repetition become almost abstract in black and white photography and can add interest, impact to an image.
Compositional Elements that add Impact

Shape and Form

- Shape and Form are two important visual elements.

- Shape is a 2-dimensional (flat) representation of a subject in a 2-dimensional plane.

- Form is a 3-dimensional representation of the subject in 2-dimensional plane.

- The challenge for photographers, like painters, is to present the subject, giving depth or 3d in a 2d form (the photo or canvas).
Compositional Elements that add Impact

Shadows and Silhouettes

- High tonal contrast images tend to pop out at the viewer.

- Shadows: deep, black shadows add mystery and impact to black and white images

- Silhouettes: striking black outlines of backlit subjects can add impact, drama to a black and white image
Subjects that lend itself well to Black and White

Portraiture

- Portraiture in black and white can be a bit tricky primarily due to skin tone. One should learn to evaluate skin tone properly. It shouldn’t be too light, nor too dark.

- Without color, attention is focused on the eyes and face. Elderly people with wrinkled and time-worn skin make for great black and white subjects.

- Sepia-toned (monochrome) portraits also work well as it adds a timeless value to the image.
Subjects that lend itself well to Black and White

Landscape

- Black and white is a very effective medium for landscape photography
- With color, a landscape can evoke a certain moodiness
- Without color, black and white draws attention to the shapes and forms of the components within the landscape including the quality of light
- Look for ‘active skies.’ Long exposures with active skies adds drama, impact to a black and white image.
Subjects that lend itself well to Black and White

Architecture

- Towns and cities are full of modern architecture made from metal and glass.
- There is also beauty in older buildings have personality and should be captured as well.
- Castles and cathedrals also make great subjects. Be sure to look for opportunities in the details.
- Look for uniqueness in architecture that helps add impact.
Subjects that lend itself well to Black and White

Street Photography

- Street photography is often seen as a documentation of real life and storytelling.
- Black and white is still dominant in this genre.
- Removing color helps to bring attention to the human element, helping your subject stand out.
- Study some of the great street photographers like Vivian Maier, Robert Frank.
- The Decisive Moment (Henri Cartier-Bresson)
Conclusion

• B&W is all about concentrating on shape, pattern, form, texture, and line. It's about reducing a subject down to its barest form and tonal range.

• It's about light and how it interacts with the subject, with no color distraction.

• Seeing in black & white is a learned skill. The photographer must learn to pre-visualize their subject in black and white before clicking the shutter.

• Of course the black and white vs color debate is a personal one. For every person I ask who loves shooting in b&w, there are others who much prefer the vibrancy of color photography.

Which do you prefer – Black and White or Color? The decision is yours!
Meet the Masters...

As in any discipline, one must spend some time studying the masters who have had a decisive influence on black and white photography. Below are but a few of the ‘masters of black and white’ for reference:

- **Ansel Adams**, landscape photography, developed the zone system
- **Alfred Stieglitz**, the spiritual father of fine art photography.
- **Henri Cartier-Bresson**, street photographer
- **Edward Weston**, mastered still life photography (Red Pepper)
- **Joel Tjintjelaar**, teaches b&w fine art architectural and long exposure photography
- **Julia Anna Gospodarou**, partner with Joel Tjintjelaar, b&w fine art photography
- **Michael Kenna**, Long exposure black and white minimalist photography
- **Vivian Maier**, street photographer
Black & White vs Grayscale vs Monochrome

While it might be clear to some, the difference between b&w, grayscale, and monochrome might not be so clear to others.

- A **true black and white image** consists of only black and white colors.

- **Grayscale:** The technical definition of “grayscale” is an image that is composed exclusively of shades of gray, varying from black to white.

- A **Monochrome** image is one with varying tones of one color only (yellow, red, green, blue) as in a sepia toned image.
In photographic terms, black & white and grayscale are used interchangeably. However, grayscale is the more accurate term to use for the type of photography we call black & white.

All grayscale or b&w images are monochrome as they are made of varying shades of only one color—gray. However, not all monochrome images are grayscale as monochrome images can be made using varying shades of any color.