



## How to Prepare Winning Images for *iconPHOTO*

Many competent photographers are reluctant to enter images in competitions because they feel their entries would not be good enough or because they haven't been successful in the past. Many who don't enter competitions subsequently look at the winning images and remark 'My shots are better than that!'

If you understand what the judges of *iconPHOTO* will be looking for, you will greatly improve your chances of being a finalist. This article has been prepared, by Nick Melidonis, Master Photographer AIPP, and a judge of iconPHOTO 09, to assist you in the preparation of your entry. You will also find it of value if you are entering other competitions.

- **Make Your Entry Count**

There's no point in having the best images in the world, on your hard-drive, if they don't get in front of the judges. Read the rules carefully, understand what images are eligible and prepare and label each of them, properly.

Understand how to size your images correctly, before you upload them to the *iconPHOTO* website. This competition requests JPEGs having the longest side no more than 1400 pixels, a maximum file size of 1MB per image and a sRGB colour space.

If you are unsure about re-sizing images, you will find how to do this on the iconPHOTO website; simply click this link: <http://iconicimagesinternational.com/competitions/icon-photo/preparing-images/>. You can also download the information on re-sizing as a printable PDF.

In addition to what you will find on the iconPHOTO website, you might like to download a piece of free software, called 'jpegsizer'. To do so, click this link: [www.tangotools.com/jpegsizer](http://www.tangotools.com/jpegsizer)

- **'Art is in the Eye of the Beholder'**

The independent judges of *iconPHOTO* all understand the basics of good photography and all will be able to spot an exceptional image; however, all bring with them their own tastes and prejudices. Some images score very highly in some competitions only to be totally disregarded in another. If something like this happens with some of the images you submit to *iconPHOTO*, it is best to accept that creativity is subjective and don't take it personally.

- **Increase your Chances of Winning.**

Just as in winning 'Lotto', the more images you enter, the greater your probability of winning. You can enter a maximum of ten images. The more images you enter, the better your chances at getting one in front of the judges that they all agree on. This is especially important during the 'first cull' of entries by the judges.

- **Make the First Cull.**

Aim to get your images in the first 20% of the initial cull. With very few exceptions, the judges will agree on the top 20% of the images entered in a competition, and will probably agree on the 80% that won't make it on this occasion. If you're in the top 20% of the cull, your chances of being a finalist are as good as anyone else's. After that, a majority vote from the judges will decide the finalists.

- **Put the 'WOW Factor in Your Images.**

The image has to grab the judges' attention in the first few seconds if it is going to get past the first cull. Choose images that you think have impact, with strong subject matter; after all, that's probably the reason you took them in the first place. All things being equal, a powerful image with impact will always outscore an image that is technically brilliant but lacks punch and emotion; or where the photographer has chosen a 'safe' path or approach. In your additional images, pick a couple that are really 'left field' and different; take a chance. These images may succeed with the judges or they may 'bomb out'. Don't always play safe. The eventual winner will probably have an exceptional image that has impact, and a bold design that makes it stand out.

- **Seeing it Differently.**

If you are going to enter images of a sunset, the Sydney Opera House, the new baby or the family pet; they should be absolute masterpieces. The judges have all seen images of these before; probably by the thousands. What feature will make your image stand out? Images from the best photographers, present a new way of seeing an old

theme. It's the same reason why people buy certain prints and postcards over and over again. These winning and popular images show the subject matter in a different light. Examples of that difference could be the angle that it was taken; capturing that 'decisive moment' or even showing the scene with dramatic weather and skies. Something has to be different to initially grab the judges' attention and make them take a second look.

- **Be a Competent Technician.**

Great images are often let down by poor technical skills or finish. If the image is overworked digitally, or soft where it should be sharp, or shows banding or other technical flaws, then all things being equal, the judges will choose an image from the top 20% that demonstrates the photographer has a good eye AND is technically competent.

- **Use the 'KISS' Principle.**

Look at a great photograph and there is no question as to the part in the image, to which the photographer wants the judges' eyes to be drawn. Often, they will give the judges an interesting path to lead to this part. Images that contain too much irrelevant information rarely make it to the final list. Look at your image - is some detail distracting or unnecessary? If so, get rid of it, perhaps by cropping. Another approach is to avoid having bright areas at the edge of an image as these lead the judges' eyes out of the photograph. Many photographers put a small vignette (subtle darkening of the edges) around the image, to 'contain' it, thus, keeping the judges attention focussed within the image.

- **Keep the Focus on Your Work.**

There are plenty of software companies that provide 'fancy' digital borders for your images, and on the odd occasion, they can work quite well. These sometimes tend to be frowned on by judges as they often draw attention to the border effect rather than to the image itself. Digital filters or techniques on the other hand, can be very effective in bringing a different look or 'signature' to an image and these are used by leading photographers in many professional competitions. The final result however must not 'scream' that a filter has been excessively used; good photographers use the technique sparingly. No digital technique can turn a bad image into a good one; it just makes the poor photography more obvious.

- **How does the Image Present?**

Take a critical look at every image before you upload it. Better still, ask someone you trust to look at each image for flaws and give you honest comment. Is your otherwise excellent image marred by dust or sensor spots; clumsy cloning; colours not true or the crop being too tight? As entry to *iconPHOTO* is only by uploading to the competition website, ensure you save the image for web, in sRGB colour space. This will prevent the colours shifting when your image is projected as a screen display during judging.

- **Mergers.**

Mergers occur when outlines of main objects intersect and cause confusion. A classic example is the telephone pole in the background that seems to grow out of a person's head. Keep the outlines of your main subject matter clean and avoid messy or confusing backgrounds.

- **Is the Composition Technically Sound?**

This article does not give an in-depth explanation of the 'rules' of composition. Suffice to say, the *iconPHOTO* judges know these 'rules' and would have used most of them. When judging other competitions they may have rewarded a brave but workable deviation from the classic rules. You have to know what these rules are before you can break them. There are many good articles, books and websites on photographic composition and prior to entering *iconPHOTO*; you should become acquainted with them. More often than not, images depicting bad composition tend to get eliminated early in the judging. A good rule to follow is: if you, or your trusted friend, are struggling to find the central element or message of your image because it is hidden amongst a lot of distracting and irrelevant detail, then the composition is technically unsound.

- **Come Back to the Image.**

There have been times, particularly after a marathon Photoshop session, you can believe (or convince yourself) you have created an absolute masterpiece. Avoid this form of temptation. Take a break. You will be surprised how the composition, contrast, saturation etc of the image can look very different after a day or two away from the computer screen.

- **Test the Waters.**

Often, photographers become too familiar with their images and sometimes too emotionally attached to them. To overcome this, before you upload your selected entries to *iconPHOTO*, show the images to some competent photographers you trust and let them choose and rank them. Ask for feedback about the compositional and technical flaws they spot. If you decide to do this, don't shoot the messenger'!

It's always difficult 'baring your soul' when you enter a competition, whether it's *iconPHOTO*, a Camera Club or a major national or international one. Select images that you are proud of and look at every competition as a learning process. Above all, have fun in the process. Give the judges your 'best shot', and remember you have to be in it to win it. Good luck.

