



'Wherever there is light, one can photograph'

Alfred Stieglitz

It's a colourful world

So why black and white?



Colour is everywhere. We don't see the world in black and white, we see it in rich, vibrant colour. It inspires and challenges us, and we all respond to its many hues differently. Colour affects much of what we do in life and our choices. Whether it's the clothes we dress in, the car we drive, the way we decorate our homes or the food we eat, colour is an important part of how we choose to express ourselves.

So why choose to photograph in black and white? The answer is simply because we don't see the world that way. From the deep blacks to the bright whites and the many shades of grey inbetween, the monochrome palette makes us look at our familiar world differently. It has an emotional effect very different to that of colour.

Regardless of its content, a photograph can succeed or fail based on its graphic characteristics alone. When working in the fine-art style, artistic harmony is paramount. This is achieved not only through correct framing and composition but through the right balance of light and shade.

Careful rendering of these elements produces the correct tension between the subject and the surroundings. Between the two extremes of the range, the pure blacks and pure whites, there is nothing that is so strong that it might interfere with everything else, upsetting the balance.

In a colour picture, a single tone out of place may detract enough to spoil the intended mood and lessen the impact of the image. Artists and designers carefully choose which colours to include in their creations. Street photographers wishing to produce an artistic impression of a scene do not have the luxury of choice; they must work with whatever is on display. However, switch to black and white mode and it becomes a whole lot simpler.

Strong, sparring colours become smoothly blending shades of grey. It's suddenly a harmonious world where everything works together and nothing looks out of place. Even the two most dominant tones of pure black and white complement each other rather than fighting for attention. Right across the range, and from smooth surfaces to rich textures, there can be harmony.

Within this world the drama is augmented by the relationship between dark and light. Soft shadows with feathered edges help to reduce contrast. Pushing darker tones to solid black can produce an image that appears flatter as the edge detail is eliminated. Shapes become stronger and lines more defined.

The monochrome palette allows the photographer to explore new graphic possibilities that can help to establish an individual artistic look and style. It can transform an otherwise mundane scene into one of real beauty and offer a whole new way of looking at the world, leading to better self-expression and exploration.

There are many examples of street photographers who have focused on black and white even after the introduction of colour film. Daido Moriyama and Mario Giacomelli, for example, have used it to give further weight to their gritty and bold compositions, while Fan Ho used it, together with clever angles and framing, to capture and enhance some of the most beautiful moments in time.



Across the range

Make full use of the monochrome palette



The balance of light and dark in photography is very important, regardless of how you choose to work and whether you shoot in colour or black and white. Light and dark are the essential building blocks of my images and working in monochrome simplifies the process and allows me to concentrate more on what I want from an image tonally.

When people ask what inspires me to take pictures, my instant reply is “the light”. If the conditions are to my liking, then I’ll feel there is a good chance of finding something positive to work with. The first thing I tend to look for in a scene is the relationship between the shadows and the highlights.

I’ll want the lightest areas to be strong but not overwhelming. Then I’ll look to see if the shadows are dark and large enough to give me a solid bottom end. If both these areas are right then I’ll look to see what there is tonally in between.

Depending on the style of the picture, I might want as much as I can get from the grey values in order to add some graphic detail. On the other hand, if I’m looking for a stark, high-contrast look, I will want to suppress the tonal values and accentuate the extremes. Hopefully a scene will lend itself to one or the other and have a specific mood to it, which will dictate the kind of picture I’m likely to get.