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A Short Course in Digital Photography Introduction

All great images, digital or otherwise, start by capturing a great photo and capturing great photos requires an understanding of your camera. It's these aspects of digital photography that this book is all about.

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Digital cameras are only a few years old and are just now beginning to make serious inroads into photography. They have yet to be fully accepted by some photographers. However, despite some current limitations, digital cameras are the wave of the future and it's only a matter of time before most photographs are taken with these kinds of cameras rather than traditional film-based cameras.

Photographers who don't accept digital cameras generally base their arguments on the fact that the images are not as good as film-based cameras. Yet these same photographers most likely use 35 mm SLR cameras that are not as good as 8 x 10 view cameras. And if they do use 8 x 10 cameras, they don't use the even better mammoth glass plate view cameras used by Jackson and Muybridge after the Civil War. If they really wanted quality, they'd be using mules to carry their equipment. So much for their argument being based on the quality of the image.

The sad truth is that the quality of images has hardly improved at all since the first daguerreotypes of the 1840's and albumen and platinum prints of the late 1800s. What's happened is that both cameras and photographic processes have become easier and more convenient. Digital cameras are just another step along this path. Images captured with these cameras are admittedly different, but you'd be hard pressed to prove they are inferior. Many of the arguments you hear today about digital cameras are but echoes of the sentiments expressed when the 35mm Leica was introduced in 1925. Suddenly there was a camera that was easy to handle in the most difficult situations and with a long roll of motion picture film, capable of

capturing one image after another. It may have used a much smaller negative, and hence been "inferior," but photographers who held onto their big, awkward box cameras were soon bypassed by history.

Another argument against digital cameras is that they are mainly of the point and shoot variety. That means they are fully automatic and don't have the controls that photographers have traditionally used to get great photos. This implies they are used for vacation pictures or photographs are taken as documents of family events. However, there is a certain elitism and snobbishness about this point of view. In general, the photographer brings more to a great photograph than the camera does. The history of photography is replete with stories about photographers who didn't know or care much about cameras. Jaques Henri Lartigue was getting great images before he was 10 years old--and with an old box camera to boot. It's said that Dorothea Lange (or was it Margaret Borke White) used the printed instructions that came with her film to set her camera's setting--"bright sun 1/125 at f/16, cloudy bright 1/125 at f/11, and so on."

But even if objections to image quality and lack of controls were true, these will change over time as more sophisticated, yet still affordable, cameras are introduced. Image quality already rivals or exceeds 35 mm film in high-end cameras. And these cameras also have the same controls as a professional 35 mm SLR. Their only drawback is their price, but prices are falling rapidly now that image sensors are solid state and Moore's Law is at work. In the meantime, you can get good pictures with point and shoot cameras, but to get great ones you still need to understand what the camera is doing for you automatically. If you understand the basic functions of your digital camera, you'll find it easier to expand and improve your photography. It's this understanding that gives you the creative control you need to record a scene realistically, just the way you saw it, or to instead capture the feeling or mood instead of the details making up the scene. Your understanding of a few basic principles makes it possible to take a photograph that best expresses what you want to convey.



The flowers in the foreground add both depth and interest to what might otherwise be a pretty dull picture.