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LIGHT & SHADOW

By Brooks Leffler

Photography is a two-dimensional medium. We can make big picture and wide pictures and wrap-around pictures but none of the add the critical component of depth. Lighting tricks can sometimes help, but more important than light is its opposite: shadow. The primary way we can add depth is by carefully controlling the direction of the light striking our subject so that there is some shadow, some change of tonal quality in the surface of the image.

We probably take more pictures of people than anything else, but often we ignore the quality of light and resulting shadow on faces and bodies. Conversely, in my opinion, too much of today's photography of faces shows a determination to avoid depth. True, that's a way to minimize wrinkles, but three-dimensionality is often lost as well.

I submit that without shadow, light becomes nothing more than technical brightness, serving only to allow the recording of an image.

Examples from Google Images: Portraits

Demonstration with lights

Flat light

Directional lighting

Fill lighting and Lighting balance

Clamshell

Back Light or Rim Light

Besides people, we take lots of images of buildings and landscapes, and the same rules of light and shadow and depth apply. This is especially true of buildings and monuments. It takes a little more effort to apply the same rules of light and shadow to something the size of, say, the Campanile at UC Berkeley, but it can be done, and with good effect.

Examples from Google Images: UC Tower and Washington Monument

So you see that directional lighting has definite impact on the character of your pictures. The rules apply to all subjects. All it takes is some sensitivity on your part.