
The Characteristics of Light

It is the characteristics of light that is essential to all photographers. We do not photograph actual people, places or things before us; we photograph light reflected from the subjects being photographed. You as the photographer must be constantly aware of the qualities of light. These characteristics create the image and make the objects before you have meaning.

The essential characteristics of light that concern us as photographers are: Intensity, Direction, Specularity, Source, Color.

Intensity

Intensity or value describes the amount or quantity of light falling on a subject. More intense areas of light are referred to as highlights; less intense areas as shadows.

Direction

Direction is essentially the way the falls on the subject relative to the camera. The old rule of always photographing with the sun over your shoulder makes for monotonous photographs with one direction of light. This old rule guaranteed frontal lighting on the subject avoiding harshness and flares. The most successful photographs explore the extremes of directional light. The most drama is achieved when the direction of the light is at an acute angle to the lens or camera.

Specularity

The specularity of light describes the quality of light. The quality can range from diffused light to point source light. Specular light is light from a single source. It makes sharp edged shadows. Specular light can come from the sun or from other sources such as electronic flash. Specular light usually implies contrasty light. Diffused light is opposite of specular light. It appears to come from many directions softening the edges of shadows and lowering contrast. Diffused light is created by atmospheric moisture or dust or by using screens or diffusers, which vary the direction of the light. Bouncing light off of a ceiling or umbrella can also create diffused light. Specularity sets the mood. It is the secularity and direction of light that give shape to an object.

Source

Light source is where the light comes from. Each source has its own qualities. The sun at noon, hot lamps, flash, street lights, fire, the sun at 6:30 p.m. all will have different qualities. The feeling you want in your pictures is greatly affected by the light source you choose.

Color

Color refers to both subjective and objective descriptions of the qualities of the light source. Objectively, different light sources emit different colors of light. This is measured in Degrees Kelvin. Subjectively we can refer to light as cool if it leans toward the blue color or warm if it leans toward the red. These differentiations have emotive effects in your images.

Conclusion

By becoming aware of these properties, you will be able to better control the final impact of your image. An interesting challenge is to take the same image and by changing one or more of these qualities, change the emotional effect on your viewer. When you are photographing you are recording light - - pay attention to this tool and learn to use it effectively.