

# HORIZON NEWS #65

IMAGES, THOUGHTS AND NEWS FROM HORIZON PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOPS

***“One reason collectors are clamoring for [these photographic prints] is that the period since the late 1980s is coming to be viewed as a Golden Age in photography.”***

Weston Naef, photography curator, J. Paul Getty Museum, cited in Bloomberg Business Week

## The “Golden Age” of Photography: Is It NOW?

Steve Gottlieb

When someone refers to a period as the “Golden Age” of one thing or another, it’s usually a good time to don your skeptical spectacles. “Golden Age” declarations are, likely as not, infused with nostalgia, limited perspective, self-validation or just plain ignorance.

In some cases, “Golden Age” designations are surely justified. Who would dispute that the “Golden Age of Movie Musicals” was the 1940s and 50s. Or that the “Golden Age” of the illustrated magazine was also the 1940s and 50s, when *Life*, *Look* and others were at their pinnacle. My father argued that the decade from 1938 and 1948 was “The Golden Age of Jazz,” which is the title he gave to his book of photos and essays. These judgments carry extra weight because they have the benefit of hindsight.

Was the late 1980s the start of the Golden Age of Photography, as Weston Naef (quoted above) suggests? Golden Age declarations about the recent past inevitably lack objectivity and perspective. That’s all the more true when talking about the present. Even so, I feel certain that we are living in the midst of still photography’s “Golden Age” RIGHT NOW.

During every period of photography’s 175+ year history, you’ll find great photographers and great images. Great photographic styles have been developed. Great visual stories have been told. There’s no time since photography was first invented that it hasn’t had a major impact on the culture and consciousness of people around the world. So why do I feel sure that *now* is photography’s Golden Age?

For one thing, infinitely more people are taking more pictures than ever before. For the first time in history, nearly everyone carries a camera (in one form or another) all the time...and most are putting it to use. The astonishing output of pictures captures every aspect of our world, from nature’s magnificence, to war’s brutality, to animals’ cuteness, to endlessly fascinating human faces and conditions...not to mention the daily billions of ordinary snapshots of ourselves and everything we see and do. But it’s not just a matter of *quantity*—the number of *quality* images has never been greater. Hardly a day goes by that I’m not dazzled and touched by what I see: images of great beauty...power...drama....heartache...surprise.

My Golden Age designation is based on more than quantity and quality. New imaging tools have enabled photography to expand its stylistic range. Straight imagery now shares the stage with all manner of digitally manipulated images. Photographers routinely encroach into territory once occupied solely by painters



**Bill McDonnell's** strong shot, taken at the Korean War Memorial during our fall DC workshop, shows the kind of professional sensibility in composition that more amateur photographers are demonstrating these days.

or photo darkroom masters. Photographers now mimic impressionist painters and abstract expressionists, photo-realists and photo surrealists...or you name it. And photographers are using these (relatively) new tools to make their own distinctive creative statements that may have no category.

Still another reason to say this is the Golden Age: photo equipment, from digital capture to digital manipulation to the latest tools for lighting and such, have given amateurs power to equal the quality—if not the consistency—of even top professionals (and without breaking the bank). In a recent *Popular Photography* magazine photo contest *not a single winner was a professional*. Can you imagine amateurs taking home all the honors in an open sports competition...or one in music, or dance, or architecture, or law...or you name it? I've been judging photo contests for decades; each year, the quality and range of work are more impressive. Today is more than just the Golden Age of Photography generally, it's also the Golden Age of the Amateur.

It's also a "Golden Age" in terms of image dissemination. We get our work in front of more eyeballs than ever before. A glance at Facebook and other photo sharing sites has to make one wonder how many hours folks spend taking—and looking at—pictures. Clearly, the explosion of imagery combined with social media has tapped into a primal desire to share moments of our lives with family, friends, and even the world at large.

Finally, a few other nuggets of the Golden Age. Never before has there been such an abundance of photo workshops and talented workshop instructors...plus major photo events (think "Horizon Summit") at which clusters of photo experts join together for a few days to share information and passion. And never before have there been so many camera clubs, not to mention the new phenomenon of photo meetup groups. Plus, there's online training galore. No matter your location and budget, you can access great photographic training, inspiration and comraderie.

Celebrating a "Golden Age" doesn't require viewing it through gold-colored glasses. Even the most golden "Golden Age" can have its tarnish. Several developments cause me disquiet.

- For a variety of reasons—the talents of amateurs armed with professional equipment and techniques, the surfeit of inexpensive stock images and a tough economy, among others—this is not the "Golden Age" of *professional* photography. Making a living taking pictures has never been more challenging.

- Many of us are addicted to speed (the pace, not the drug), and enamored with the power of digital tools (we'll fix it in Photoshop), so we rush through the act of shooting. From my perspective as photography teacher, I see many people engaged in a kind of photographic blitzkrieg. We're not smelling the roses we photograph.

- While there are more—far more—pictures to look at than ever before, my sense is that we devote far less time than ever looking at individual images. How many seconds do you spend looking at most pictures? (Getting through my daily FB timeline is difficult if I open all the images and links.) In years' past, many images became imprinted on our brain...and some became iconic. Now, we virtually "speed read" images, which necessarily erodes the power of images to touch us deeply. It's like having more great chefs than ever, but fewer people savoring the food as they once did. [Given shortened attention spans, do people read extended articles about photography like this one?]

- We once believed that pictures generally represented what was actually in front of the camera. No more. In the world of nature photography, for example, photographers used to work patiently to capture moments that were dramatic



My favorite "non-icon" location in DC for pictures is the passageway between East and West buildings of the National Gallery. During our DC workshop, **Al Dobryden** waited for all the lights to "go live" in the passageway before clicking the shutter. He appears to have deftly done a bit of zooming during the exposure to "stretch" the lights and intensify the sense of motion. This is an example of an amateur employing a technique once the domain of pros. This scene, with its rapidly fluctuating lighting, presents what was, years ago, a very tricky exposure situation. Nowadays, quick-responding auto exposure plus the ability to see results on an LCD, make shots like this within the capabilities of more amateurs.



During our fall visit to the abandoned factory in Delaware, **Pete Harvison** used a laser light to do some light painting—with some help from the author's legs. During the four second exposure, the legs remained relatively motionless while the laser meandered. This shot is an example of creating an image of something that is not visible to the eye but is to the camera— something we see far more of during our Golden Age. Pictures like this takes imagination and patience, but are great fun.

or beautiful...and real. Nowadays, nature photos increasingly levitate beyond the real world. We're creating a natural world that exists at some exaggerated level of intensity. Eye-popping, yes. I like it, yes (at least much of the time). Still, it is with some regret that I watch photography drift away from its reality moorings. For the photographer, nature is becoming what it's always been for the painter. A starting point. An inspiration. A subject to be interpreted and (usually) glorified, not simply recorded. This is not just true of nature images; the same is happening everywhere across the photographic spectrum.

Despite these concerns, I am thrilled to live in this era. Thrilled to be taking pictures. Thrilled to be digitally editing pictures. Thrilled to view other photographers' pictures. And thrilled to share what I know with those interested in improving their pictures. It's definitely a Golden Age...at least for me.

Correction:  
Our last newsletter  
improperly credited  
the photographer of this  
lovely detail from our  
Ireland workshop. It was  
taken by Helen French.



## **2015 One-Week Workshops with Steve Gottlieb**

**Utah: Great Landscapes and More: April 26 - May 3**

**Eastern Sierras & Yosemite: June 8 - 15**

**Portugal: Europe's Overlooked Jewel: Aug 9 - 16\***

\*Phyllis Berger, workshop co-leader

Cont'd >>>



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