

The Mouth of The Kenai

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Plugged In: Bookmark the best to better your photography

By Joe Kashi, for the Redoubt Reporter

Our holiday gift suggestions in 2015 focus on truly useful books that take your photography to a higher plane, relatively inexpensive items that help you make better photos with your existing gear, and cameras and lenses that provide excellent capabilities while costing less than \$600.

This week, we'll start with serious books about serious photography.

Improving your knowledge and technique does more to enhance the quality of your photographs than buying an expensive, prograde camera or lens. No amount of top-tier equipment can compensate for poor composition or cliched subjects. So, we'll make our first shopping stop in the book department.

There's real benefit in broadening one's view by seeing representative examples of acclaimed photos by other photographers, and not just American photographers.

- For that reason, my first photo book suggestion is always "The Photo Book" by Phaidon Press, a British art book publisher. It's a very broad, good-quality selection, although I've been surprised that it occasionally chooses lesser work by several famed photographers. Peter Bunnell's "Inside the Photograph" focuses more tightly on 31 prominent American photographers and examines their work in greater depth. Somewhat dated but still good adjuncts are "The History of Photography" by Beaumont Newhall and "How You Look at It — Photographs of the Twentieth Century."
- Aperture's Master of Photography series is among the broadest and best series of monographs, each examining a single photographer. My personal preferences include the monographs about Paul Strand, Edward Weston, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans, Man Ray, Andre' Kertesz, Harry Callahan, Eugene Atget', Wynn Bullock and Dorothea Lange. This is practically an honor roll of 20th-century photography.
- Minor White, one of the most important 20th-century American photographic instructors and theorists, was the founder and editor of Aperture, America's foremost serious photography review. Consequently, he did not issue any monographs of his own work through Aperture. But there are several worthwhile books examining White's role in photography. Some of the more interesting are the published catalogues of several seminal, internationally famous shows that White organized while a professor at MIT, including "Octave of Prayer" and "Light 7."

- Ansel Adams's "Examples: The Making of 40 Photographs," is practically a master class with America's most famous photographer. In "Examples," Adams takes the reader through each step in the visualization and making of some of the most iconic photographs ever made in America. This is a must-have for serious landscape photographers. Other interesting Adams tutorials include "Classic Images" and "The Ansel Adams Guide Basic Techniques of Photography, Book 2."
- Despite the traditional, though now-fading, disdain of "serious" photographers for color images, color now plays a dominant role in American landscape and fine art photography, and several books usefully address or illustrate color's role. John Shaw's "Landscape Photography" is full of technical tips to improve your landscape images, while Joel Meyerowitz's "Cape Light," Richard Misrach's various books, and Jay Maisel's "Light — Color — Gesture" richly illustrate how color imagery can rise to the challenge. For a more general, theoretical discussion of color, Josef Albers's "Interaction of Color" has been a standard work for decades. Albers was a leading American art theorist who emphasized a common-sense approach to using color while teaching at Yale after fleeing Hitler.
- An excellent tutorial on choosing a subject and framing the image is "Why Photographs Work," by George Barr, a Canadian physician with a psychiatric practice focus. Dr. Barr choose 52 very strong photographs and engaged in a discussion with the photographer about why those particular photos worked well. In a similar vein, "The Life of a Photograph" by famous National Geographic photographer Sam Abell is excellent.
- You'll find similar discussions in "Beauty in Photography" and "Why People Photograph" by nationally prominent American photographer Robert Adams. Although I don't necessarily agree with everything these books postulate, the discussions are highly worthwhile and should stimulate readers to rethink their own approach to photography, and that's the point of these books.
- Photography is rather paradoxical in that it is both the most literal and representational of all media while inherently containing an underlying abstractness. The best examination I've seen of this tension is "The Edge of Vision — The Rise of Abstraction in Photography," by Lyle Rexer. Abstract images may not be your preference, but there's a good discussion of when and how abstract elements can make photographs more compelling.
- Minimalism is an important attribute of good abstract images, and one of the best books that I've found that broadly examines this artistic approach is (what else?) "Minimalism" by Phaidon Press. In a similar vein, Michael Freeman's "The Photographer's Eye" and Laurie Excell's "Composition: From Snapshots to Great Shots" include examples and exercises intended to propel your images beyond the mundane.
- Several more technically oriented books struck me as worthwhile, including "The Photographer's Handbook" by John Hedgecoe, "The Digital Print" by Jeff Schewe, "Mastering Black and White Digital Photography" by Michael Freeman, and the two somewhat dated but still interesting and useful "Photoshop Lightroom Adventure" books set in Iceland and Tasmania, Australia.
- I've always been rather surprised at how little most photographers seem to know of, or learn from, other art forms. Although photography has its own unique technical challenges and capabilities, the underlying need to see strong forms and fresh subjects is constant across all artistic disciplines. If you're inclined to broaden your approach and freshen your "eye," then you might enjoy the following general discussions: "The Photograph as Contemporary Art," by Charlotte Cotton, "Concepts of Modern Art," edited by Nikos Stangos, "On Becoming an Artist," by Harvard psychology professor Ellen Langer, and "Art and Fear," by David Bayles and Ted Orland, the latter being Ansel Adams' assistant for many years.

Art of Satire Contest