

To Crop or Not to Crop



I have always thought and said, that if you photograph you have three options when to crop an image if it is necessary. The first is when you compose the image in the camera. The second is when you are printing and you view the image on the baseboard and the third is when you mount and frame the image. After that then I guess you are open to comment or criticism.

Earlier this year I was a speaker and guest judge at a Camera Club meeting. I remember that there were several prints that in my opinion required cropping of the image which I thought made them much stronger. When I asked the question of one of the photographers the silent reply was accompanied with a shrug of the shoulders, the raising of the eyebrows and a down turned mouth. I offered the following explanation in jest. "I know you paid for a sheet of 8 x 10 and by golly that's what you're going to use!"

If by cropping an inch or 25 mm off the top of the image and it makes it more powerful then for heavens sake do it. If your image comes out, once cropped, as a 5" x 10" and your attention is drawn 100% to what the photograph is about then for goodness sake why wouldn't you do it!

I have never calculated what percentage of the prints I make are cropped, but I know I never hesitate to do it if I feel it improves the image. Too much sky which detracts from the content of the picture, then get rid of it. White rock in the bottom left corner pulling the eye away from the focus point, then crop it out. It always surprises me at how many images do not get this attention. I know, you've paid for an 8 x 10 and by golly that's what you're going to get. Maybe we should encourage a slogan "Crop till you drop", just to get some into the habit of at least considering it.

The image "**Underneath the Arches**" is a photograph I made at the Sydney Opera House. As you can see in the straight print of the entire image there is a lot of area that doesn't help. When I took the photograph I wanted the width more than anything. At first I wanted more of the top as well, but on viewing the proof sheet I decided that severe cropping was in order for the image to work. When printed, the image measures 4 1/2 x 10. But you're not interested in that, your only concern is *does* it work. Am I moved by the photograph or not? That's the important thing.

When printing this image I chose a grade 4 because I wanted the contrast in the print. I was more interested in lines and form than anything else. The straight print shows that

considerable burning is required in some of the other areas. The bottom and bottom right corner both received additional burning at grade 2 yet the entire left side received burning at grade 4. I didn't want the right side to go too dark. That's why grade 2 was used. Also the overall exposure has been increased by about 15%. And of course the image was cropped under the enlarger so the 8 x 10 sheet of paper had a white band at the top and bottom.

The next image made at **Loch Ard Gorge** demonstrates how removing a good portion of the sky and some from the bottom of the print draws our attention more to the rock formation. In this image the sky is superfluous and for me has no real bearing on the image itself. I feel by taking the sky out and some of the foreground the image becomes so much stronger.

The interest for me in the image, **Burnt Field, Two Trees & Fence** was exactly as the title says. Once again I liked the width, but knew that if it came to a print I would have to crop off quite a bit from the top and bottom. I actually took a little from the sides as well. By doing so it holds the attention within the image. All of it would be too distracting. Printing this was at grade 1 1/2 and some dodging has been done to the bottom of the print and burning to the top of the print. All at the same grade. I also had to burn out the sun hicky in the bottom left hand corner. I thought I had that covered when I took the picture.

The final image, **Snake Road**, I would like to talk about is another that I feel benefits from a general crop all around. I first printed this full frame, but then decided to do an all over crop with the least amount removed from the right hand side of the image. It is a decision that I have made, but someone else may have a different view and crop entirely differently. Such is life.

There is a little story attached to this image. In May this year at the Australian Institute of Professional Photography Awards this image was given a Gold Award. The message came back to me along with the fact that I had "gone digital" and had heavily worked the image in photoshop. How far from the truth that is which just shows how the pendulum has swung within photographic circles. Assumptions can be so dangerous. I had been judged, afterwards, on hearsay and innuendo.

The image was printed in a conventional darkroom on silver rich fibre base paper (that must have been what threw them) with the maximum number of magenta units dialed into my colour head. This was done to increase the contrast (and the confusion) and extra burning had been applied to the top and bottom and sides of the print. I then bleached the road and small areas just off the road. I did have a head start though from Natures photoshop.

The images I have presented for you here all have had cropping attached to them. Some more than others. I have shown you fairly strong crops to try and make a point, but please always consider quite tiny crops. A small crop could be as you compose the photograph and you scan the edges of your frame, you notice a branch from an unrelated tree poking into the picture. By moving a few feet to the left or right or by going forward an inch or two can fix the problem. This is just another form of cropping. It is not always related to the final print.

Sometimes you may make a picture knowing full well that you will be cropping the entire image when and if a print is made. If you recall the image Lone Tree, Omeo Valley in Issue #35 of this magazine when I made the image I used the longest lens I had, was still

short so made a note if it gets a guernsey in the darkroom then I will have to crop the whole negative. The print still ended up as an 8 x10" but only about 3/4 of the negative was used.

Cropping is a useful tool for photography and one you don't have to buy. When using it don't do as most hairdressers do and crop too short. Putting a hat on a print just doesn't work.

I hope you enjoy printing in the darkroom as much as I do, if not then enjoy your photography, it's one hell of a hobby.

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