



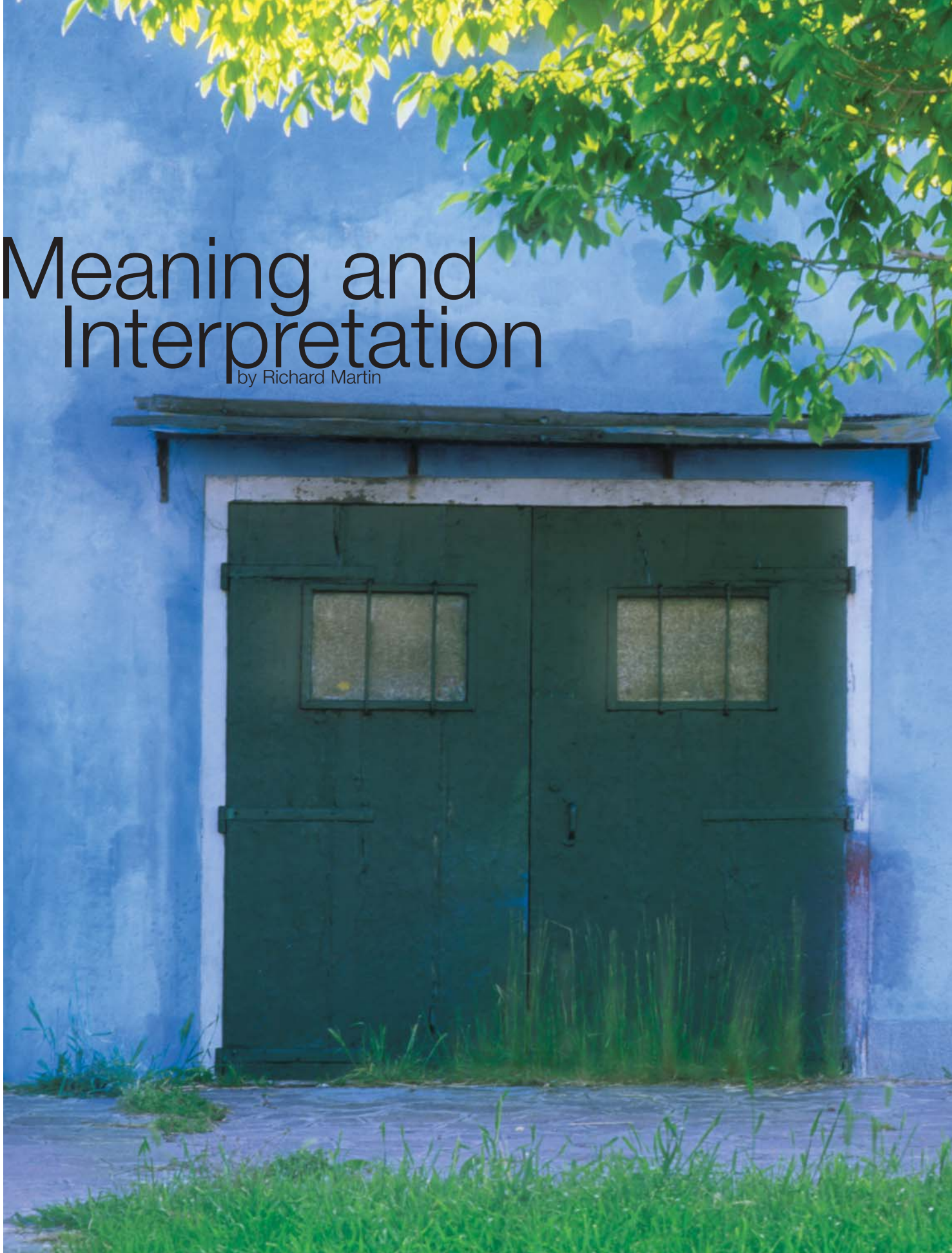
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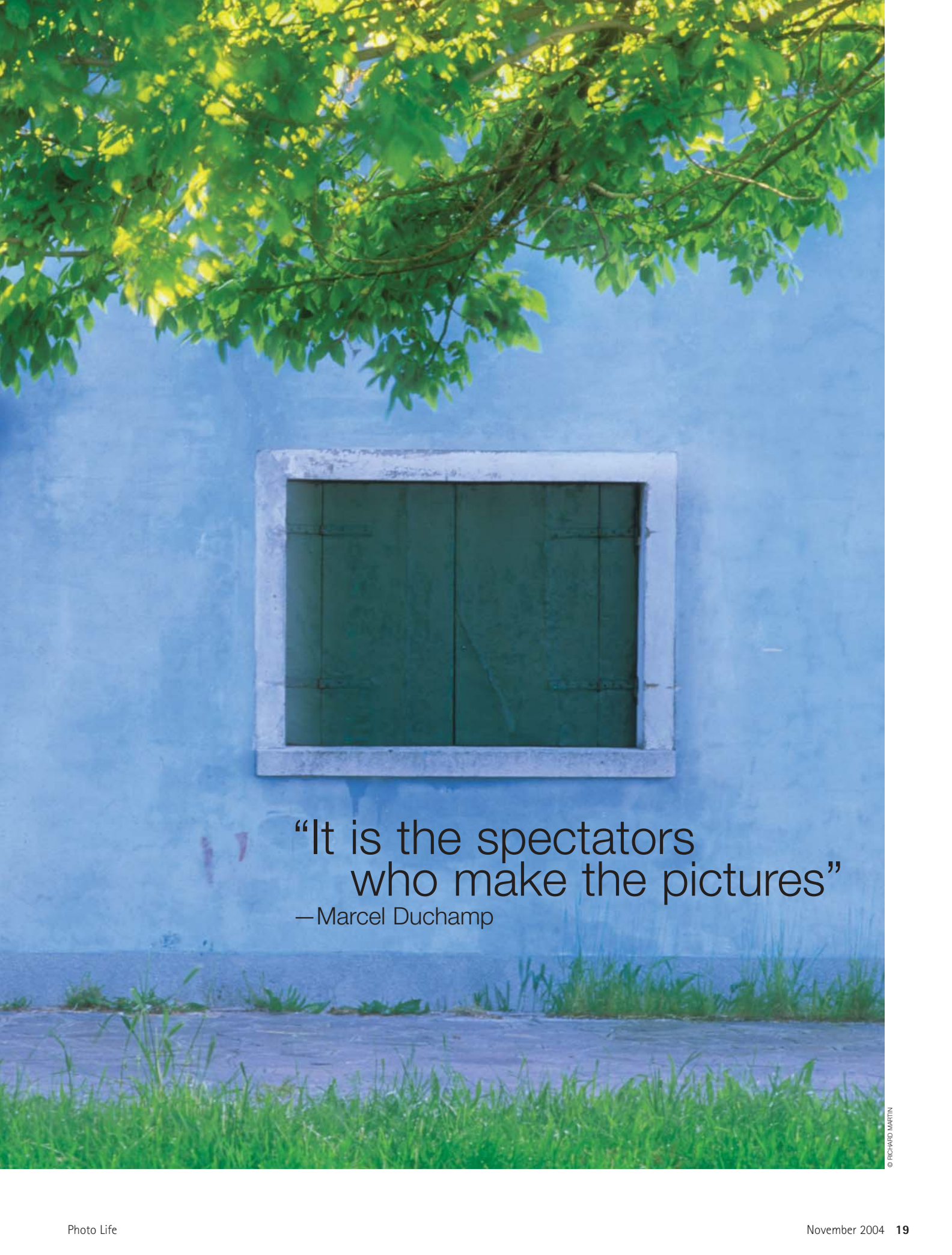
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# Meaning and Interpretation

by Richard Martin





“It is the spectators  
who make the pictures”  
—Marcel Duchamp

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**H**ow do we know what a photograph is supposed to mean, or what its real meaning is? All visual media, including photographs, generate meanings. Even though a photographer may not actually be aware of these meanings during the process of exposing an image, meaning is nevertheless present. It may seem rather obvious that the image itself contains all the meaning that the photographer hoped to convey, and it is merely up to the viewer to discover that meaning. However, it is worth noting that pictures rarely speak to everyone universally.

The reason why one photograph speaks to us more powerfully than another is somewhat of a mystery. Meanings are produced through a complex relationship that involves at least four elements coming together: the photographer's intended meaning, the image itself, how the viewer interprets or experiences the image, and the context in which an image is viewed (in a museum gallery, a book, or a magazine for instance).

### The Photographer

A photographer combines visual elements to record a particular perception of the world. The question is: does a photograph represent to the viewer what the photographer intended it to mean, and if so, how can we tell? Any photograph or image can only have meaning within a set of pre-existing socially supported ideas, symbols, ways of thinking, and values. Even the most sophisticated work will not have the same value for everyone. There is no guarantee that a photographer's personal meaning will be conveyed in the same way to every viewer

because we all have different experiences in our lives, different temperaments and interests, that we bring to the work.

### The Image

Does the meaning exist in the image? Consider the key visual characteristics of a photograph: the subject, colours, and textures as well as their physical and psychological effects on the viewer. The design of a photograph—how the expressive components of form and colour are arranged into a composition—can be an important vehicle of expression. We can think of the design as a kind of universal language through which we communicate our ideas.

Henri Matisse, one of the most important painters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so eloquently articulates his viewpoint regarding picture design, stating: "Expression to my way of thinking does not consist of the passion mirrored upon a human face or betrayed by a violent gesture. The whole arrangement of my picture is expressive. The place occupied by the figures or objects, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, everything plays a part."

### The Viewer

The viewer's response to an image, their reception to the visual design or composition, also creates meaning. The fact that viewers create meaning is an unavoidable reality. Meaning exists only insofar as it means something to someone. How the viewer interprets or experiences an image depends on how they happen to be tuned in to certain aspects



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of the picture. For example, it may be the style of a particular photograph, or its content. The viewer may also bring a particular set of cultural associations with him or her. As a result, affecting their individual interpretation of an image. It is important to note that interpreting a photograph in a way that is different from the photographer's intended meaning does not suggest that the viewer is wrong or that the image was unsuccessful.

Meaning is social. In other words, language and conventions work only as shared meaning, and our way of viewing the world can exist only as shared or sharable. When we view images, we are participating in a social, or cultural, meaning. Response is not simply an individual thing, but is part of culture and history.

## Interpretation

Interpretation is defined as "a communication process that creates emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the viewer and the inherent meanings found in the work." In other words, to interpret what a picture is about, the viewer should allow his or her own perspectives, associations, and experiences to meet or connect with the visual evidence found in the work.

All visual images are about something. Some photographs are about social or cultural issues, as we often find in the style of photojournalism, and many abstract images are about colour or form, or simply about feelings. Some photographs are very

straightforward and offer relative ease for the viewer in understanding what the photographer is trying to say. Other works are highly intellectual, and might not be as easy for us to figure out, or understand what the artist is thinking. Realistic photographs, such as landscapes for example, may be entirely about their subject matter, or the landscape itself may be used as a symbol for something else.

After studying the photographs contained in this article, consider the following questions as you develop your own personal interpretation of the work. Consider what draws you to a particular image. Combine the visual facts discovered in the image with your own personal associations and experiences. When it comes to interpretation, remember that there are no wrong answers. Experiment, using music or poetry to link these interpretations with personal associations of the visual image. Search for music or poetry that evokes sensations and moods similar to those that the image conveys.

## Questions

- What is the theme or subject of the work (if there is one) and which visual details immediately catch your eye? What are the predominant colours, tones, and shapes?
- How are these expressive components arranged into a composition?
- What is the work about?
- Why do you think the photographer created this work?
- What does the work mean?
- What do you think the photographer's view of the world is?





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## Aesthetics and Taste

All images are subject to judgment about their qualities and visual impact. As we begin to interpret pictures, we naturally assign a range of values to them such as breathtaking or unpleasant, shocking or clichéd, interesting or monotonous, and so on. It is important to realize that these qualities are based completely on the concept of aesthetics and taste, and do not exclusively exist in the image itself. In fact, the values placed on pictures actually depend a great deal on the viewer's individual idea of aesthetics—the perception of beauty and ugliness. The question of whether such qualities as beauty or ugliness exist within a picture, or solely within the mind of the viewer, is up for debate. Some will argue that pure beauty can be found in nature and art, and is something completely separate from judgment or subjectivity.

The current concept of aesthetics—what is beautiful and what is not so beautiful, is based on the perception of taste. The common myth about taste being natural is simply not true. Taste is not an



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inherent skill that we are born with, but is rather something that can be learned through exposure to particular social and cultural ideas of what is deemed quality or tasteful. Taste can be looked upon as a natural expression of a culture's values and interests.

Whenever I experience visual art in galleries or museums, view exceptional films, or simply travel away from my everyday routine, I gain a renewed sensitivity to the visual world around me. In order to appreciate fine work, we need to first experience it. ■

## Bio

A long-time contributor to *Photo Life*, Richard pursues photography as a medium of visual expression. Well-known for sharing his enthusiasm, creative vision, and passion for the medium, Richard has been leading annual workshops on photography and visual design in his native Kingston, Ont., for twelve years, and with Stephen Patterson in the Thousand Islands each spring. He also conducts workshops and seminars across the continent, including in Seattle, San Francisco, Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal. Richard will be the featured presenter this October at the Abbotsford 26<sup>th</sup> annual photographic seminar, in B.C. His fine art prints can be found at the Silver Light Gallery in Carmel, California, and the Carlen Gallery in Ottawa. E-mail: [info@richardmartinphoto.com](mailto:info@richardmartinphoto.com). Web site: [www.richardmartinphoto.com](http://www.richardmartinphoto.com).