How to Select Photos for Black and White

In 1936 Kodak introduced Kodachrome for still photography, which was the first practical color process available to the average photographer.  Before that, practical photography was limited to black and white.  Even after color film was in use, many photographers, such as Ansel Adams, Dorothea Lange, Sebastiao Salgado, and Imogen Cunningham, still made black and white photography popular.

Why should we create black and white (monochrome) photos?  Good black and white photos have fine art appeal.  Black and white allows photographers to create images that are reduced to such basic elements as composition, contrast, form, and texture without the distractions of color.

Digital cameras give us several options that we did not have with film.  Shooting in RAW allows us to select multiple options for black and white conversion, especially white balance correction, and many cameras have digital filters so we can create a black and white file in the camera and compare it to the original color file for a rough idea whether will make a good black and white.



BLACK AND WHITE CREATED WITH AN IN-CAMERA DIGITAL FILTER

Some photographers develop a "black and white eye" so they can visualize what scenes will make good black and white photos after conversion in Photoshop or some other photo processing software. For example, a landscape with deep shadows may look great in color but have a more artistic dramatic look in black and white.



PHOTOSHOP CONVERSION OF A LANDSCAPE WITH DRAMATIC SHADOWS

Scenes that don't have much color to begin with but have great shapes could make good black and white conversions.  Black and white is also a way to "rescue" photos where the color is a little off.

A PHOTO WITH GOOD FORM BUT QUESTIONABLE COLOR CAN BE RESCUED WITH BLACK AND WHITE

Black and white is a way to focus the viewer's attention on the subject by eliminating distractions, for example by using strong light or backgrounds eliminated by fog.

Older subjects can be given a vintage presentation by converting a photo to black and white.
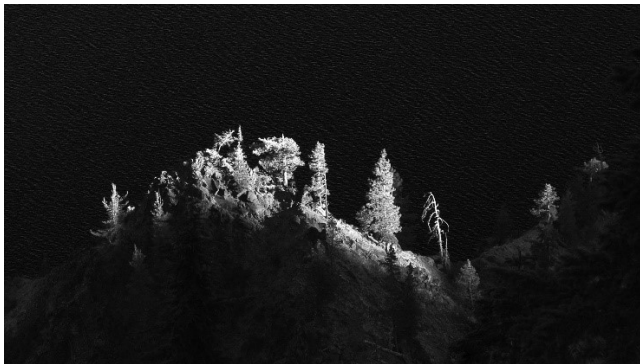



BACKGROUND ELIMINATED BY STRONG LIGHT          ABANDONED HOUSE WITH A VINTAGE LOOK

We are fortunate in this digital era that we don't need to carry a second camera loaded with black and white film if we want to cultivate a black and white eye. Even though a darkroom can be a great experience, we don't need to invest the time, space, and money to learn this skill. Instead, we can take color photos and convert them to black and white on our computers in comfort and with a relatively small software investment. Try it. You might be amazed.

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