

RPS PHOTOGRAPHIC DISTINCTIONS

Much has been published about the distinctions of the Royal Photographic Society, both by the Society itself and successful applicants. However, very few currently active panel members have spoken out about anything other than the official line, whereas I feel that there is rather more to be said particularly about the preparation needed to be successful.

As many of you will know, some 15 years ago, I was invited to be a member of the RPS Licentiate Panel and, in addition, around 5 years ago, the Visual Art Panel (now named the Pictorial Panel) for both Associateship and Fellowship of the Society and the direction of my involvement in the world of photography completely changed. The work I do for the RPS entails not only assessing applicants work, but also taking part in Distinction Advisory Days and, where I feel it appropriate, mentoring individuals on a 1-2-1 basis. The latter entails guiding potential applicants to the point where I deem them ready to submit their application. Whichever distinction you are applying for, taking a degree of advice is certainly a sound idea particularly where picture selection is concerned. After all, most of us are the worst judge of our own work. Assessors must fulfil certain criteria in order to be appointed to the various panels, first and foremost of which is their proven photographic ability and success in either general photography, as with the 'L' Panel, or in a more specialist area where 'A' and 'F' are concerned. Many are on the PAGB Judges List. All have vast photographic experience and proven expertise. As an assessor, moving from the 'L' to 'A' and 'F' is not by any means automatic and depends purely expertise in a specific, and often specialist area of photography. To work on the 'L' Panel, assessors must hold an ARPS at the very least and holding an FRPS is required for the 'A' and 'F' panels

Dealing with the Licentiate first, the primary requirement is to be able show that one is competent in a variety of disciplines and/or techniques, and have mastered the basic functions of your camera equipment to the same degree. The beginnings of a personal style is often evident, but by no means essential at this stage. Images, of which you require 10, must be pictorially competent with close attention to detail and technically of a very high standard, the latter of which is the main reason for failure. Being more specific, even slight lack of appropriate sharpness and often seen over processing is not acceptable under any circumstances. Over sharpening and fringing is often seen and likewise unacceptable. Lack of understanding of tonal relationships in monochrome is also quite common leading to poor conversions. An additional requirement is that the set of images must, when presented for assessment, be arranged as a cohesive set which when viewed as a whole, form what I like to think of as the 11th. image which, like the other 10, needs to be apparent. With the previous statement, I'm assuming a print application. With PDIs, the assessors look for a set forming a pleasing sequence of images. At this stage, it is worth mentioning that presenting a print application can give you a distinct advantage, because what you see at home is exactly the same as the assessors see, whereas with PDIs that is not the case for

reasons of variation in quality of equipment and its calibration. Choosing a PDI application rather than prints is on occasion viewed as the cheap option, but the failure rate mostly due to technical issues is much higher than with prints. So submit quality prints, which can be trade processed, if you can.

The right attitude of mind can also be a factor. Success in your local club's competition is rarely relevant when putting an LRPS panel together. The standard of photography between clubs varies enormously and winning the awards in one club is certainly no guarantee that you won't be an also ran in another and, of course, club circuit judging standards vary hugely. The answer is to physically see what is required via the successful panels of others which are often displayed online or, ideally, by attending an actual assessment or Advisory Day.

The 'I don't need any help' attitude can so easily lead to failure. There is no shame in seeking help, which is there for the asking online and also from most panel members at their discretion and depending on their personal circumstances. All help is given free and voluntarily and is there for the asking. That's what we do.

As I said previously, judging our own work is a dangerous game that few of us are any good at. Likewise, taking advice from the club 'expert' is almost always a bad idea. The only folk who are able to give you advice based on experience and an intimate knowledge of the standard expected are *current* panel members, many of whom are only too willing to help. I emphasise 'current' because from a panel members point of view, keeping up to date with technology and current trends and styles is very difficult unless you're an active assessor. When I failed my first attempt at the ARPS in 1994, I sought the help of the then Panel Chairman, Bill Wisden Hon. FRPS who guided me to a successful submission a year later and eventually to Fellowship in 2001. Bill has been my mentor ever since and remains my biggest critic. I haven't always heeded his advice over the years, but when I haven't, I've usually lived to regret it! A mentor with proven experience is a valuable asset, but bear in mind that not every assessor is willing to take it on as it can be both time consuming and on occasion quite stressful.

Moving on to the Associateship, but before going into detail, let me state that the biggest mistake when you succeed with your LRPS is to believe you are just a stone throw away from your 'A'. The fact is that you're very, very unlikely to be. OK, so some get their 'A' very quickly, but they are very much in the minority. Most will fail through a lack of real pictorial understanding and/or because of technical ability. I would go further and suggest you don't even consider it for at least a year. Enjoy your 'L' and then make a plan. The gap between the two is genuinely vast. One of the most important factors to understand is that the panel will be looking for obvious evidence of the development of a personal style, something that needn't be apparent with the LRPS. To put this into perspective, overall, I would guess that

only one in five who approach me regarding moving forward to the 'A' are ready to even start working on it. That reduces to around 1 in 10 for those thinking of it within a year of their LRPS. So far this year, I've been approached by 11 potential applicants of which just 3 are, in my opinion, in with a better than average chance of success. It takes an awful lot of hard work, a focused approach and a lot of patience.

An ARPS is usually themed, and although this isn't essential, it is certainly easier to concentrate on one specific idea rather than flit about all over the place. A major problem is finding a suitable subject which hasn't already been done to death. A fine example, at the time of writing, is that of the horses of the Camargue, because we have seen so many applications of this subject, the pictorial standard required is such that to make the subject your own is immensely difficult. The trick is to try and find something that nobody has done before, but that by definition is never going to be easy. A new take on an established subject is probably a better idea. Always bear in mind that gimmicky or old techniques will not impress unless the pictorial content of the underlying image is of the required standard, as well as that of the 'effect' used. At assessment, we will firstly drill down beneath special effects used and consider whether the original image is sound. If it isn't, no amount of special treatment will impress. Examples that are regularly seen and poorly used examples are HDR, infra-red, cut and paste, texture overlays and backgrounds. All fall into this category and should be used only when adding something to the original image. On average, I would suspect that the average time taken to reach Associate standard is 3-5 years after achieving Licentiateship. It took me 4 years, including a failure after 3. Many never achieve it.

It is possible to skip the LRPS and go straight to the ARPS, but recommended only in exceptional cases. In my experience as an assessor, I have only worked with one potential applicant who had reached the required standard without going via the 'L'. In this case, the panel presented was quite exceptional but, to put it to perspective, only represents around 0.5% of the total number of applicants I've been involved with. As far as I'm concerned, this is an option that should be taken after much serious consideration. Better to pass the 'L' than fail the 'A' should, I believe, be the attitude. I cannot recommend this route.

Finally, Fellowship, which is the pinnacle and where 'distinguished' photography is the order of the day. It is a massive step up from Associateship, but so it should be. There really is nothing quite like it. The work it entails is immense, the quality required exquisite and the pictorial content of the very highest quality demonstrating not only a very personal vision but one that is unique. Some of the best advice I was ever given was that you can't chase a Fellowship, as you can with the LRPS and, to a degree, the ARPS. It will find you. Setting a time limit is futile. All I can add is that you will know when you're truly ready, and that gets us back to the fact that most of us are rubbish at judging our own work. Get help!

This article is not intended to be comprehensive. That would be too big a task for me to undertake. Rather, it is intended to give those who fancy starting out on the greasy pole that is the RPS Distinction process an idea of what that journey entails. For me, as for many, it was a truly rocky road that I had to negotiate to reach the ultimate goal of Fellowship, but it was, without question all worthwhile. I was so very close to giving up on so many occasions, but determination won through eventually and, with the benefit of hindsight, I regret not a minute of it.

Finally, if any of the above has inspired you to give it a go, feel free to get in touch. My details are on the KCPA website and in the PAGB Handbook, but I repeat them below for those without access to either of the above. I can also advise on the PAGB Distinction, but this is a very different animal in all respects.

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