

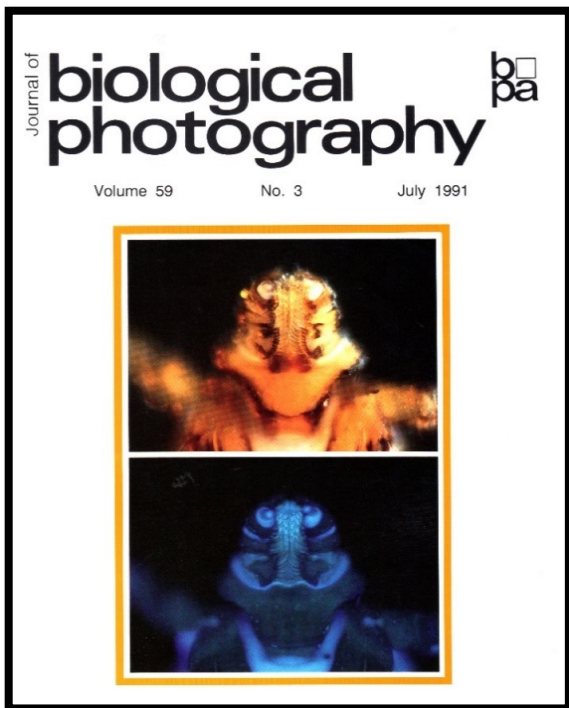
25 Years Ago in the JBPA/JBP

Thomas St. John Merrill, FBPA

In this column, we look back at the content and imagery found in the Journal of the Biological Photographic Association (JBPA), later renamed the Journal of Biological Photography (JBP). This column examines important articles from 25 years ago. In doing so, we gain some insight into those legacy photography techniques of that time.

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The first “Twenty-Five Years Ago” was published in *JBP* #59 (3), making this the Silver Anniversary of this column. This brings to mind how our use of silver has radically changed in those 25 years. The up and coming photographers of today have little to no knowledge of the silver-based images that were our livelihood for so long. In fact, I recently showed my ten-year-old granddaughter a plastic sheet of slides and asked her if she knew what they were. Her answer was, “Sure, they are old time photographs.” Were 2 x 2 photographic slides really that long ago? Were lantern slides used to record and document the dinosaurs?



Cover of *JBP* Vol. 59, No. 3, July 1991

There were two papers in issue *JBP* #59 (3) that deal with up and coming procedures from 1991, which are commonly used today. “Graphic design for desktop publishing, Part 1: Typography,” by James C. Ver Hague of the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, NY. From its beginning in 1985, desktop publishing has changed how we all see the printed word. Consider that 25 years ago, only a few different fonts were available. Now, in 2017, we have a vast number from which to choose. This raises the important question of which font to use, and when to use it. There are serif and sans serif type styles, script fonts, and symbol fonts. The choices grow even further, as many modifiers can be applied to each i.e. bold, italic, underline, superscript, subscript, shadow, etc. Certainly do not forget all the possible adjustments that can be made to font size, alignment, and color. Then there is the dreaded ALL CAPS. This causes one’s eyes not to flow through the text, but to stop at every letter (Figure 1).

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When reading, words tend to be perceived by the shape of their outline. Because of the ascenders and descenders, lowercase words have a more varied outline than words in caps. This makes reading more comfortable and faster.

Figure 1. ALL CAPS vs Upper and Lower Case (Ver Hague article)

All these alternatives and combinations result in a nearly infinite number of choices, although most of them bad. A font should be carefully selected by keeping its intended use in mind. San serif fonts work well to draw attention to the word, while a serif font allows an easier read, as the serifs (the little lines on the letters) help to guide the reader’s eye across the line of text. A reader will often see the shape of the word and recognize the word. This leads to better comprehension of the word and faster reading (Figure 2).

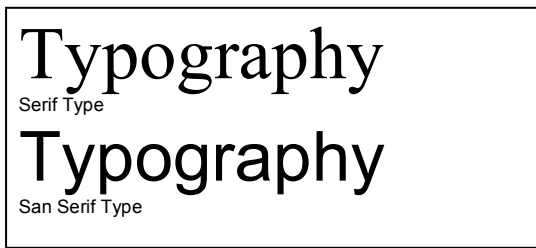


Figure 2. Serif type and Sans Serif type (Ver Hague article).

I highly recommend that this seven-page paper should be considered mandatory reading before anyone ever opens a computer. This is an excellent resource paper, and it includes information that needs to be revisited often. We have all seen many examples of bad text.

The digital image has become the “standard” in the past 25 years. In the paper “A Primer on Digital Imaging – Post Production for Still Photography,” Scott Kilbourne, RBP and Russell Dodd describe the hardware and software available for post-production of images. This paper is of interest mostly for its historical information, in contrast to Ver Hague’s paper, which has information that is still currently relevant. Kilbourne refers to his PC computer, running Windows 3.0, and a Mac IIfx computer with a 40 MHz processor and 4 MB of memory. Several boards and software packages are mentioned in the article. However, the only software mentioned that is widely known today is Adobe Photoshop®.

It is interesting to see how the post processing of images has progressed. The hardware has become faster, the memory capacity has skyrocketed, and storage capacity has increased to terabytes and beyond. Interestingly, as the technology has so vastly improved, the cost of equipment has drastically dropped. Recently I saw a 4 TB external drive the size of a book, selling for approximately \$125.00 (USD). The first terabyte storage device I saw, and it was the size of a telephone booth, which is another item that is quickly disappearing from the landscape.

My phone has its own built-in digital camera and a version of Photoshop®, but it still needs an operator to see the image both before and after processing.

As I have said in past columns, things change, but the visual perception of the image remains the same. Desktop publishing has made the printed word easier to distribute and publicize, but still the visual impact must be seen.

We have all been presented with printed material in ALL CAPS, or a font that looks cute, but is not legible on a printed page, leaving the intended message lost. Have you looked at a printed page and thought, “What a great job they’ve done selecting fonts, etc.?” The current practice of digital post-processing of images is the darkroom of 25 years ago. It can be used to optimize an image to its best, but can also make a good image bad by over-processing. The skill is to know what to do, how much to do, and, maybe most importantly, when to stop. But this can also be said for many things in life.

Author

Thomas St. John Merrill, an Army Medic and Viet Nam veteran, has been a biological photographer since 1968. Among his many professional honors are both a Fellowship in the BPA and an Emeritus Membership. Thomas lives in Southern California with Marie, his wife of 50 years. Thomas and Marie have two daughters, a grandson, and two granddaughters.

Yes, the 10-year-old granddaughter lived through her “old time photographs” remark.

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