



24f The Shap Pictorial Calendar

The Role and Need for Visual Imagery

By David Rose

Personal background

With hindsight I would like to thank my art teacher for inadvertently encouraging my interest in photography. My tutor did not like my paintings and shouted at me 'You do not see things like that'. She had obviously never viewed work by Chagall! Shortly after I found I needed to wear glasses! To this day I have not attempted painting - but I rarely go out without a camera!

Later I went through a series of stages involving learning about shutter speeds, apertures and the mysteries of the darkroom, all of which helped develop my sense of purpose and determination in effectively using visual imagery within an educational context – but without a brush or a pencil in my hand.

The Role of Photos in Teaching

The visual image is often more powerful than the written word in that it does not need the association of words with images to be able to create a picture in the mind. However, what is seen always needs to be sharply focused and shown to have an educational value to justify its inclusion in any educational publication.

The changing nature of photography

The advent of digital images has resulted in millions of 'snaps' that may be useful for social media, but not for extending young peoples' curiosity with a positive educational outcome. This digital development has also contributed to the demise of books as it is a far more economical and cost-effective medium in an era of diminishing budgets. Gone are the days when the photographer carried dozens of reels of film, for them to be processed a few days later when the results were seen and evaluated. (I well remember my wife carrying 64 reels of film into Tibet with instructions that they must not go through x-ray machines and be ruined by 'fogging'!) Now with readily available memory cards, thousands of images can be recorded and if not suitable, erased as you go. They can easily be sent wirelessly across the world and stored in 'The Cloud' for instant or later use.

The reason for mentioning this is to reinforce the necessity of taking photos that have an educational purpose and this is a mindset requirement for teachers with a photographic bent to consider.



The need for photos

In the classroom pupils appreciate visual stimulus but the nature of content should be appropriate for the stage of pupil development. Simple photos for the very young, possibly concentrating on one or maybe two teaching points. Older primary age pupils need images that stimulate questions that can become a point of further study. More adult students can be challenged to think about different ways in which religions may find expression.

In the past, when teachers were reliant on images from outside their own experience, this issue of appropriate stimulation was a real concern. Let me exemplify this point. Commercial publishers need to make money from their sales. What might sell a book, magazine etc. is the more exotic type of image that looks 'great', and is of a sort that no one else has published. There was a tendency in the 1980s & 1990s for the unusual or the exotic image to be included just because it was different. I will share two examples from personal experience.

Firstly, in a photo book on Christianity there was the need for an image of a Church as a place of worship. I was able to take a photo from the 18th floor of some flats in SW London. In the foreground was one of the 4 'Pepperpot' churches and the distance view went right across South London, with Crystal Palace in the background. I felt this was appropriate because there was a focal point on the church, which also enabled an exploration of the idea of community. (Sometimes a building is not required for a church to exist!)

I lost that argument for insisting on both of these valid teaching points. Instead the publisher included a pretty image of a countryside church with no evidence of people living in the vicinity!

The second example I give was a Jewish photo I was shown that appeared to be claiming to represent Jewish food. In this case all the reader needed to do was to look closely to observe it was a pizza delivery with the brand name not even obscured! False claims to suit an end may be commercially acceptable but are counter-productive within an educational context. This caused offence to many friends in the Jewish community.

One of the many weaknesses in school books is to present a Faith simply: this is often overstated by inaccurate simplification that borders on distortion. I think most of us in teaching will have come across statements such as 'Muslims believe this ...' or 'Hindus believe that ...' This can be applied to most of the Religions that are studied in educational establishments. One of my key motivations in using photos has been to challenge this stereotyping that oversimplifies the presentation of faiths when they are in fact very rich in their diversity. Teachers today have in their classrooms pupils from particular faiths who yet have many differences in their beliefs, experiences and practices. This variety should find expression within



the classroom and the school context. Having a camera in hand both gives creative opportunities but also imposes restrictions.

Sensitivity on the part of the photographer is vital when handling issues and contexts that may be someone else's 'holy ground'. Trust becomes an issue. I can remember seeking permission to photograph during a wedding recently and this was declined. I was probably the only person in the room who was not taking photographs! I well remember another incident where permission to film was declined. It was a Palm Sunday service where a donkey was led into the church following a street procession. The reason given to me was that the camera might be a distraction. (Most unlikely as there were several hundred children attending waiting to see whether the donkey did no. 1 or no. 2!) Yet it is vital, given the sensitive nature of spiritual matters that we respect this aspect of Trust and gaining permission in practice.

In addition, recent legislation relating to Data Protection is now having a major impact on educational publications. It has always been advisable to seek the necessary permissions to publish. Whereas in the past permissions were fairly-easily obtained for 'use for educational purposes', today, human (and especially child) anonymity has become almost a key requirement – a practical instance of the need for Trust in all aspects of daily life.

The Shap Pictorial Calendar

The factors mentioned above have all been influential in the selection for the Shap Pictorial Calendar of the regular twelve photos a year we publish, along with their summary titles and descriptive captions. This Calendar has now survived for sixteen years, 2003 to 2001 in colorful printed format and 2012 to 2018 via an online emailed Key.

Finding a balance between different faith traditions and then creating unusual but accurate and reflective pictures has never been simple; and taking care to produce informative and reflective titles and captions - while striving to be true to both the views of majority communities and minority viewpoints - has been essential. Showing materials, both visual and educational, to adherents of the different traditions covered – and also to members of the Shap Calendar Group has been most helpful, wherever time and opportunity have permitted. In particular my thanks go to Anne Krisman and Peter Woodward for their regular collaboration in the search for appropriate titles and captions.

Concluding Remarks

My personal experience has enabled me to explore different faiths, cultures and practices around the world and in that sense, I have been privileged. Photography for education has enabled me to find artistic expression that I hope has helped in religious education to challenge



stereotypes and encourage dialogue and discourse for teachers and pupils alike. I am aware also in terms of my own faith and beliefs that photography has helped me learn for myself about my faith and that of others. In this sense it has been for me a further privilege to be a member of the Shap Working Party for more than twenty years - for which I will always be grateful.

David Rose

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