

# The Hamster Wheel of Progress

*A Cautionary Tale for the Digital Revolutionary*



"Disney Hall #3, Los Angeles, CA, 2004"

©2004 Huntington Witherill

article by **Huntington Witherill**

## ***The Hamster Wheel of Progress***

by **Huntington Witherill**

---

In outright theft of a line from the great comedian, Dennis Miller...*“I don’t want to get off on a rant here, but...”*

While digital technology continues to work its magic on increasing legions of photographers, many of whom are now getting sore ankles from jumping for joy at the almost overwhelming array of creative possibilities inherent to the digital approach, now might be a good time to step back and survey the possible long-term rewards (or dare I say consequences) of climbing aboard the digital hamster wheel of progress.

As a fine art photographer who was trained nearly thirty-five years ago in what could fairly be described as a “classical” approach to the medium (black and white, view camera, the Zone System... the “West Coast School”) I have over the past ten to twelve years admittedly fallen hook, line, and sinker for the promises of digital photography. And to be honest many of those promises have been fulfilled, in spades. I too, am getting sore ankles. Although in my own case the affliction is more likely the result of dragging my heels in a hopeless attempt to constrain the hamster wheel itself, and less so the act of jumping for joy.

Using digital technology to produce photographs— as a means of achieving personal and artistic self-expression— is not all that different from using the more conventional tools provided one



*“Disney Hall #4, Los Angeles, CA, 2004”*

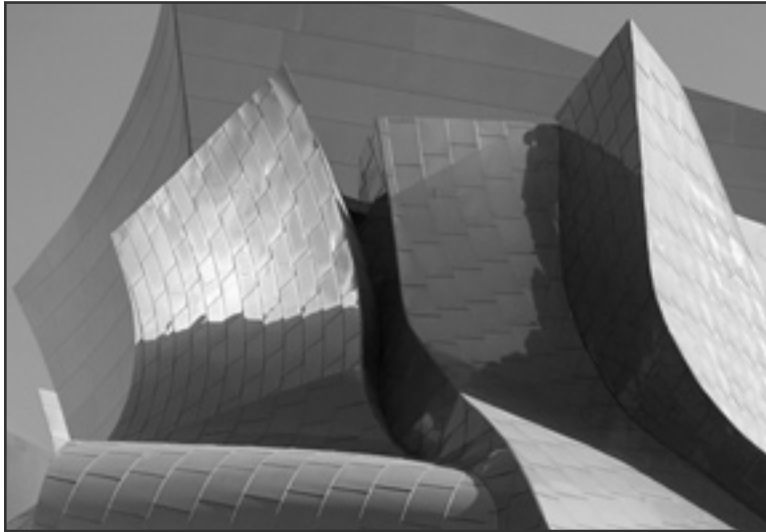
©2004 Huntington Witherill

---

focuses on the goal itself rather than focusing on the specific tools and materials used to achieve that goal. Of course, the goal I’m referring to here is that of producing successful photographs on an ongoing and consistent basis. On that basis, successful photographs can only be accomplished by applying creativity and imagination to the complete mastery of one’s chosen tools and materials. Simply put, if you don’t intimately know the technical and expressive capabilities of your tools, and know precisely how to get those tools to perform to your will, you’ll likely never achieve successful photographs on

## The Hamster Wheel of Progress

### page two



"Disney Hall #1, Los Angeles, CA, 2004"

©2004 Huntington Witherill

a regular basis. And, this will be the case regardless of the specific *kinds* of tools you choose to use.

In my view, photographs can best be defined as follows: *Photographs are two-dimensional, stylized interpretations of a given reality, which are a direct result of the photographer's decision making process— that process having been filtered through the particular set of tools and materials the photographer chooses to use.* In practice, successful photographs are a direct

result of the photographer's decision-making process and have little to do with the actual tools and materials employed in their production. Thus, whether one uses digital, or conventional approaches makes little difference in the relative success or failure of a given photographic expression.

In this discussion, a successful photographic expression means having something of consequence to say to one's audience through the use of a visual medium. That goal is achieved by applying creativity, imagination and experience, together with sound and focused decision making, to achieve effective communication. Let's face it; photography *is* a form of communication. By applying the aforementioned attributes, the photographer is able to manipulate (in a calculated, intentional and practiced manner) one's tools and materials so as to reliably achieve a predictable outcome that communicates the photographer's intent. And again, doing so on a regular basis requires the complete mastery of both the technical and expressive capabilities— the *practiced implementation*— of one's chosen tools and materials. After all, you can't concentrate your effort on applying imagination and creativity to your photography while you're trying to figure out how to tweak the knobs on your camera in order to achieve proper exposure. And, therein lies the rub.

Conventional approaches to photography have remained virtually unchanged over the past 100 years. A view camera, film, and an enlarger work essentially the same as they always have.

## *The Hamster Wheel of Progress*

### page three

The skill with which one can apply imagination and creativity through the use of these tools remains relatively predictable and reasonably controlled once the initial learning curve has been negotiated. And, these tools will remain comparatively consistent in terms of their design, implementation, and compatibility from year to year, so that when they finally do break down they can be replaced with essentially the same exact tool. However, digital tools and materials continue to change and reinvent themselves with the frequency of high fashion hemlines! Acquiring and subsequently maintaining control and familiarity with digital tools and materials remains a particularly elusive, redundant, and time consuming task. An interesting and informative task to be sure, but not one that is necessarily conducive to the actual production of art.

Charlie Parker was arguably one of the greatest jazz saxophonists of all time. Yet, I wonder if he would have been as accomplished a musician were he to have been compelled to re-learn a “new and improved” fingering scheme on his saxophone every eighteen months. Parker knew his instrument cold. He didn’t have to think about how to get that unique sound from his horn because he instinctively knew how to get it. He had repeated the exercise so many times with the same instrument that it simply became second nature to him. He wasn’t compelled to repeatedly upgrade, re-learn, and re-master his basic tools. In short, he didn’t have to expend interminable energy attending to the mechanics of his tools. Once Parker initially mastered the mechanical nuances of his instrument he had only to deal with

his own creativity, experience, and decision making in order to accomplish an enduring legacy of musical expression.

In my view, the use of digital technology- while having the ability to exponentially expand the possibilities for new and refreshing photographic visualization and manifestation- will nevertheless continue to impede and frustrate its practitioners. Once you’ve climbed aboard the digital hamster wheel, you either commit to spending significant amounts of time re-learning the basic nuances of your tools as they incessantly change, or you do as I have and attempt (with predictably diminishing success) to



*"Neiman Marcus, Las Vegas, NV, 2004"*

©2004 Huntington Witherill

## The Hamster Wheel of Progress

### page four

ignore all the upgrade paths and stick with the tools you know. I currently use a Macintosh G4, with system 9.2.2, and Photoshop, version 6.0.1. These tools are now up to five years old, which in digital terms renders them as virtual dinosaurs. I figure my current tools and materials to be serviceable for another 2-3 years before they are completely unusable as having become virtually incompatible with any then current standard. The writing is on the wall. Manufacturers simply do not support, or encourage this kind of “dig in the heels” approach. Obviously, planned obsolescence will not be so easily deterred.



"Dinosaur #1, Vernal, UT, 2004"

©2004 Huntington Witherill

So, when my current computer system goes belly up (and it *will* just like the last three have) I'll have to upgrade and it'll be back to square one. New computer, new operating system (there's at least a month's worth of re-education, right there!) new software, new peripherals, new storage devices, and maybe even a new “super gigapixel” camera, by then. All of it will be thoroughly “new and improved” and every bit of it, absolutely unfamiliar. And, let's not even mention the monetary costs associated with this boatload of gear. Once again, I'll be faced with re-learning the mechanical implementation and expressive nuances of most all of my tools. As a photographer who will soon become eligible to join the AARP, this seems a decidedly redundant and wasteful use of precious time. Time that none of us have in great abundance.

Will digital photographic technologies ever come to a place of design standardization like a trusted view camera, or enlarger? I seriously doubt it. In my view digital photography is a lot like youth. Illusions of eternity are all too quickly overwhelmed by the reality of lost opportunity. To me, the rewards of digital photography are not unlike that \$100 bill tacked to the top of a greased flagpole. The prize remains an enticing one. Yet, the odds that I'll get within arm's reach of the top, only to slide back down empty-handed, seem nearly overwhelming.

Digital based photography has a lot going for it, and the superior aesthetic potential inherent to the medium will likely continue to trump these pesky “new and improved” issues.

## ***The Hamster Wheel of Progress***

### **page five**

Personally, I plan to continue my relentless drive to scamper up that flag pole, regardless the costs. Yet, in my opinion the digital path will also continue to offer a reasonably frustrating and difficult approach to fine art photography. Achieving any sort of enduring mastery over such a relentlessly evolving set of ultimately incompatible tools and materials is likely to remain a decidedly mercurial pursuit.

*“Of course, that’s just my opinion... I could be wrong.*



Huntington Witherill is a fine art photographer who lives in Monterey, CA  
He can be contacted through his web site at: [www.HuntingtonWitherill.com](http://www.HuntingtonWitherill.com)

This article is reproduced with permission, and was originally published in the August, 2004 issue of PSA Journal, the official magazine of the Photographic Society of America, Inc. For information on PSA membership, please write to PSA Headquarters, 3000 United Founders Blvd., Oklahoma City, OK 73112

For more information please visit

***Huntington Witherill’s***  
***comprehensive web site at:***



***www.HuntingtonWitherill.com***