
Your Bottom Line

By Dr. Henry J. Oles, Cr.Photog.

Here today, back tomorrow

Most ambitious image-makers strive to discover original photography styles that will earn them public acclaim and attractive profits. They often fail to recognize that most "new" trends are merely recurring past styles, modified to fit present needs.

Reemerging patterns are most apparent in the fashion industry. Skirt hem lines rise and fall, then rise again. Hats become popular and are soon outmoded, only to grab the spotlight once again years later. Young people who haven't lived through several fashion cycles view "new" clothing as exciting and fresh.

Resurrection of classic styles is also found in photography, although cycles in our profession aren't as frequent or obvious as those in the fashion industry.

To predict future trends in our field, simply study previous photography types. For example, I anticipate black-and-white film will reappear as a stylish image-making medium.

I've recognized numerous signs that black-and-white photography is starting to make what will be a dramatic comeback. While flipping through recently published magazines, I've noticed a myriad of black-and-white ads produced by companies that could easily afford production costs for four-color ads. All you have to do is turn on the television to see that black-and-white is becoming a popular advertising medium on TV.

Another sign heralding the medium's return is the scramble by one-hour lab equipment manufacturers to market black-and-white paper processors. In fact, several such products were introduced at the 1988 Photo Marketing Association Trade Show. Manufacturers wouldn't produce black-and-white processing equipment if research hadn't indicated a new booming market for the items.

Among the numerous advantages of black-and-white photographs are that they have a longer life than color, which fades and loses brilliance after a certain number of years.

In addition, the film generally is cheaper to purchase and process than color—

an advantage for large and prosperous businesses, as well as smaller companies. Black-and-white pictures also boast a tremendous amount of impact.

I don't foresee photographers working exclusively with black-and-white film, nor do I believe the medium will be used exactly as it once was. Returning styles are seldom identical to their previous states. Instead, "new" trends nearly always have unique twists that recapture the public's attention.

For example, commercial photographers have added an exciting touch to black-and-white advertising images by highlighting key products in color. This type of print can be created with background projection or a special scanner to make color separations, and a host of other methods. Portrait photographers may want to experiment with this novel technique that utilizes the strengths of black-and-white and color in one photograph.

I also predict tinted and oil-painted black-and-white photography again will capture consumers' attention. These unique techniques add a personal, hand-made touch to photos. Rare in today's automated, mass market culture, hand-made products can prove unique and very profitable. Presently we are hard-pressed to locate labs that offer tinting and oil painting services, but that will soon change.

One factor could limit the production of hand-tinted and oil-painted photos in the professional portrait industry—the reduced numbers of skilled colorists. Although coloring class enrollments have risen considerably recently, this specialized service won't be readily available for years.

However, a shortage of colorists may be an asset because limited supply nearly always means greater value. This translates into higher prices and profit. Forward-thinking pro lab and studio owners may want to consider producing black-and-white and colorized photos.

I believe tinted and oil-painted black-and-white photos will become novelty

products and demand higher prices than color. These specialized items may become the exclusive domain of independent studios. Volume operators may not find it cost efficient unless black-and-white film use becomes extremely widespread.

Although it may be painful to admit, amateur shutterbugs often take advantage of "new" photo styles far more quickly than do professional photographers. Amateurs were among the first image-makers to opt for color film, and thus far have been more eager than pros to experiment with black-and-white photography.

A number of additional photography trends deserve to be recognized. For example, traditional, formal studio portraiture is gaining a foothold in the market, whereas the casual outdoor style has lost some popularity. Sharp focus photographs may return to the limelight, as evidenced by the work of several eminent fashion photographers. Nonetheless, don't toss out your parabolic reflectors, soft boxes, soft focus lenses, and umbrellas. The soft look of Bill Stockwell's misties and fantasy styles most likely will return.

Success and profit are almost always dependent upon innovation and imagination. Instead of following trends after they've achieved a measure of success, recreate "new" photo styles. Although being at the forefront of the profession may carry a few extra risks, the potential to reap huge rewards more than justifies the gamble.

All you have to do is study history to discover past trends, develop a new twist on an old theme, and watch your bottom line soar.
