THE MANIPULATION OF THE DIFFUSED-FOCUS LENS

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ONE of the most valuable tools of the modern photographer who aspires to use his medium for art expression is the soft-focus or uncorrected lens. Around the use of this type of lens and the respective merits of the sharp and the diffused photograph has rolled an ocean of controversy. While the matter is not yet settled to the satisfaction of all, and never will be, the soft-focus lens as a medium of artistic expression has made tremendous advances in pictorial photography, to such an extent that almost every photographer who seriously attempts pictorial work is a user of this type of lens.

There is nothing wonderful about the construction of the soft-focus lens. It is merely a lens in which the spherical and chromatic aberrations are not totally corrected. The older workers had a lens approximating to this in the old landscape lens, but failed to realize its possibilities. I could name a professional, well-known as an artistic worker, who used one of these old single lens, supplemented by a telephoto attachment, for all of his high-class diffused-focus work. The results are fully equal to those produced by any lens on the market. Nevertheless I would prefer to purchase any one of the various lenses of this type on the market rather than waste time experimenting.

One of the first pitfalls for the novice in the use of the soft-focus lens is the choice of objects to be photographed. Diffusion never makes a picture, but it may help a scene of pictorial worth to become more suggestive. The soft-focus lens cannot be used indiscriminately on every subject with a result equal to that which might be obtained with a corrected lens. The uncorrected lens is a tool for an artist and must be used with judgment. It is hard to state in words just what type of subject is best suited to the soft-focus lens. I have had the best success when dealing with subjects which would be classified as being broad and in masses, rather than those which possessed detail. If the subject has a full range of gradation without an extreme contrast, but rather is what I would term soft and delicate, then it is in my opinion the ideal subject to show what the soft-focus lens can do.

The soft-focus lens has a tendency to emphasize contrasts, or at least to make them more decided than is best for pictorial results. Remember that beautiful tone rendering is one of the distinguishing features of photography, especially where the uncorrected lens is used. Of course it will not always be possible to obtain just the softness and delicacy that one may desire, but by studying the subject under varying light conditions and by judicious development, much may be done toward securing the desired effect. While I emphasize the fact that extremes of contrast are to be avoided and that a rather delicate lighting is desirable, do not assume that the soft-focus lens is not suited to vigorous effects. As much vigor may be had with it as with any other, in fact I believe more, but this must not be secured at the expense of either the shadows or the lights. It is quite possible to secure vigor of light by opposing a small area of light against darker tones and still not have either blank shadows or chalky highlights.

One of the most valuable features of the soft-focus lens and the one most surprising to the uninitiated is the apparent great depth of focus. Optically, of course, an uncorrected lens has the same depth of focus as at the same opening as any other, but the plane of the sharpest focus blends with the regions less sharp so gradually that the falling off is less noticeable than in a corrected lens.

This is a valuable feature to the pictorialist, as it enables him to avoid the distracting blur into which the background is often diffused when near objects are focused with a corrected lens. At the same time atmosphere is preserved in the distance, which would be lost if the corrected lens had been stopped down to sharpen both the front and back planes of the subject. This apparent depth of focus requires the exercise of great care in focusing to secure the most pleasing results. It is no easy matter to tell just when the image is in the correct focus, because it is never sharp, and each movement of the lens introduces another degree of diffusion, leaving to the artistic sense of the worker to select from these many varied effects, the one best suited to the subject and effect desired. The worker who uses his lens at the sharpest focus that he can obtain and depends upon regulating the degree of diffusion with the stops is not using the widest range of the lens. There are pleasing degrees of diffusion to be had by focusing before or behind the plane of the sharpest focus.

Never stop your lens down much, as you lose the fine qualities. All of the lenses I have ever used, if properly focused, will seldom need to be stopped down more than to f 5.6 or f 6.3, to give all of the firmness desirable. It might be mentioned that if after focusing to the sharpest possible focus with the lens open, the lens be brought in the plate about one-eighth of an inch, the exact distance depending on the lens, a greater sharpness will be obtained. By focusing in this manner the chromatic aberration is allowed for and thus a firmer image secured.

One of the most instructive experiments the beginner can make is to select some still-life subject and practice focusing on the different planes and making a few negatives for comparison. It is well to do this also under lightings of various degrees of contrast. After development, the worker can compare the results and will have an understanding of the handling of the lens.