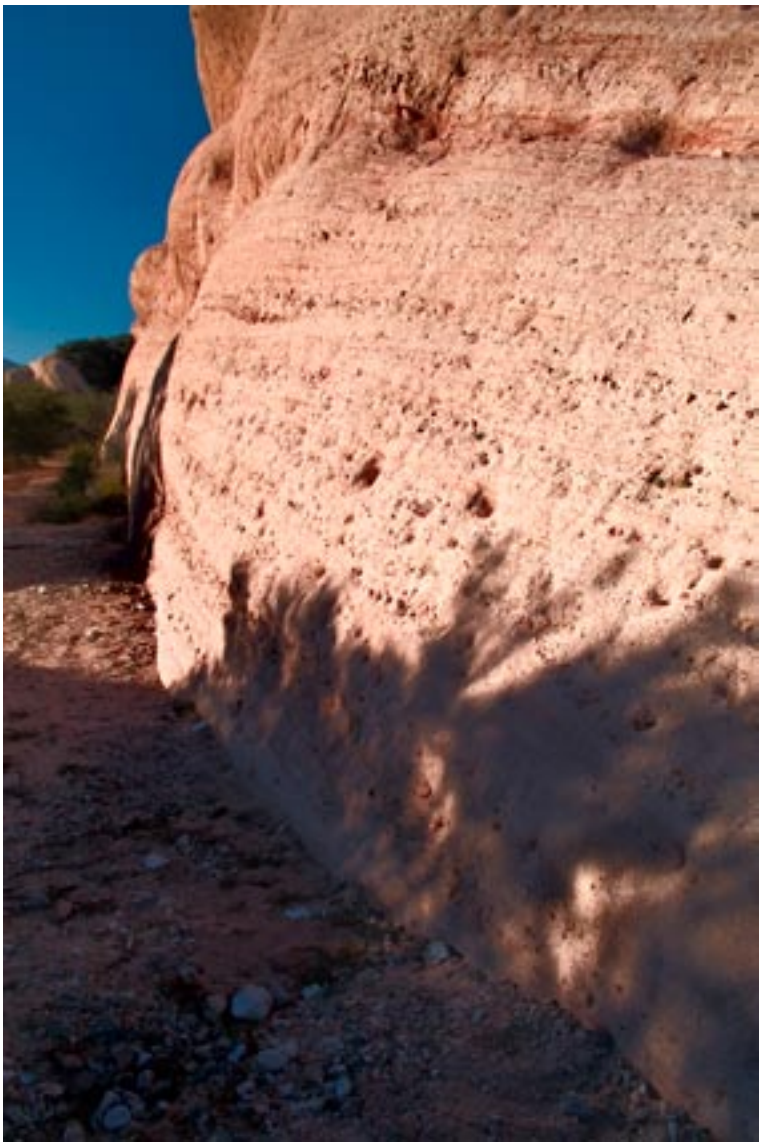
Understanding Light and Lighting for Photography

Introduction

It took me several years to understand light and lighting for the photographic process. Once I found a way to make lighting simple I could then understand light. My life as a photographer was much easier and more rewarding with this basic understanding. I'd spend long hours thinking and experimenting with lighting. It was only after time that I became at ease with most lighting salutations. A number of years ago, I gave a few seminars and lectures on lighting to professionals and beginners that helped develop my thoughts and prove the worth of my simplification. This is the first installment of several articles on light and lighting for photography.



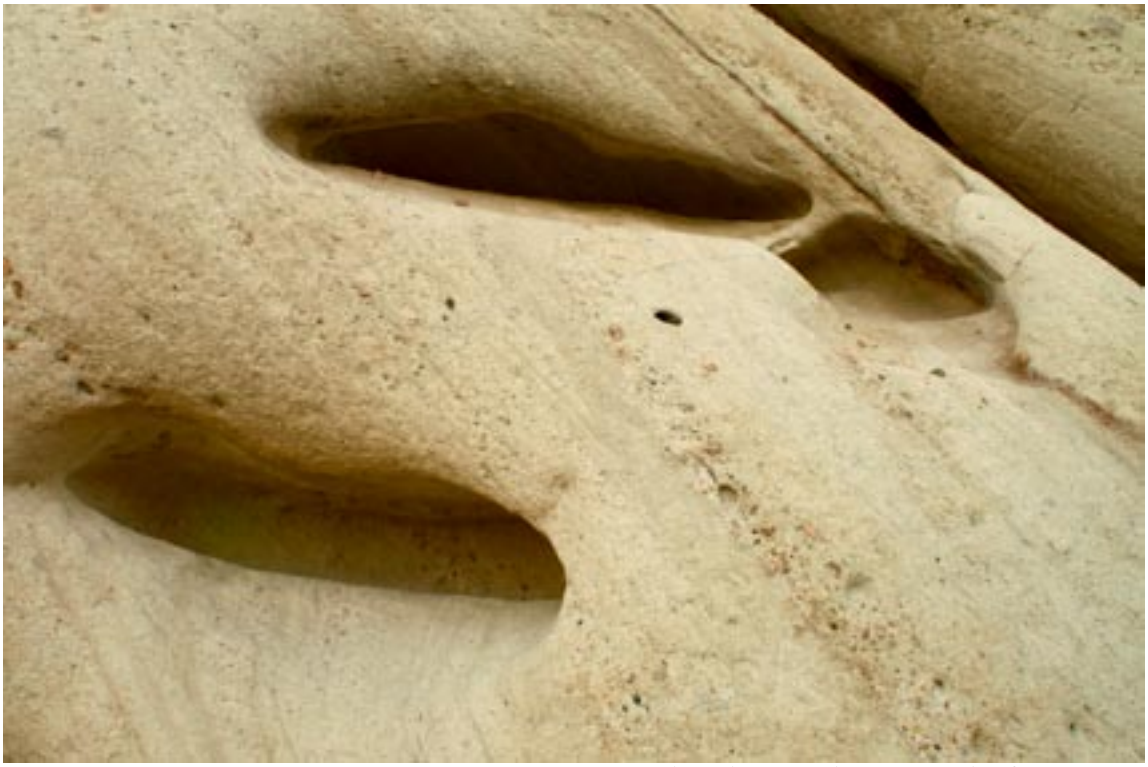
Example 1 *Compare this photo to the one on the next page in terms of the properties of light. Quantity, Color, Direction and Quality*

The best way to understand anything is to break it down into parts. I have found that I could break light down into four proprieties. These proprieties are broad and cover a huge spectrum, but if you understand each of the 4 proprieties you will understand light. Others have tried to describe light by things that span several of these proprieties, but it makes it hard to understand. I opt to keep it simple and only use four properties and then talk about how each of these properties plays a role in any lighting situation. I will write a separate article with illustrations on each of the properties, give some thought on how to describe light, and what terms to use to describe it.

The first two properties of light we have good tools to measure with. Have you guessed what they are yet? If you are thinking of your light meter you are on the right track. The first property is quantity or Amount of light. This seems simple enough and you most likely have all the tools you need to measure it. Not to fast! It is not that simple. We can measure the amount of light, but we also need to know how to control the amount of light and how it will interact with other light sources. This I will cover in depth with examples and some real life situations as well as some information as to how to use light with both

film and digital to your advantage.

The second Property of light is Color, which we also have meters to measure. Color is very important as it conveys feeling and mood. It can make or break a photo. Good news, today with digital, we have real control! Bad news, today with digital, we have real control but we need to know what to do with the control! Oh by the way if you shoot film, your in luck. You also have control. Most photographers I know do not have color temperature meters but are able to make good judgments when it comes to the color of light. I will give you the information you need to make good decisions.



Example 2 Compare this photo to the one on the first page in terms of the properties of light. Quantity, Color, Direction and Quality

The next two properties are visual by nature. This is a hard concept for some, as you cannot really see light. So for the next two properties, you need to judge them by what you see. The first is Direction, which you observe by seeing the direction of shadows. Our final property is Quality, which is a description of how hard or soft light is. You will learn in a later article how "large" light sources can be very hard and how small light sources can be made soft.

A full understanding of light will give you the greatest control of your photography. I will put together several examples and analyze the light in the terms of the four properties. I don't know how long this will take but I will try to semi regular installments with examples and I hope in doing so, I will make better photographers of us all.

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Break Down

Quantity:

Example 1 has several stops more light then example 2

Color:

Example 1 is lit by late afternoon light, very warm light, standard daylight film or color balance allows for the warmth to show. Example 2 is lit by blue sky very cold in color. Raw file adjusted for a slightly warm look

Direction:

Example 1 has a very directional side light showing lots of texture while example 2 is lit by the blue sky which shows very little hard texture as the light is coming from the camera angle.

Quality:

Example 1 is a very hard small light (sun) while

Example 2 is a soft large light (sky).

Now you can see how it all works together and even overlaps. Thinking of the 4 properties will give you a real method to improve your lighting and use of light.