

**STEVE MCCURRY  
LESSON 10 - CHOOSING THE LIGHT**

**WORKING WITH DIFFERENT KINDS OF  
LIGHT THROUGHOUT THE DAY**

**“It’s really a personal preference what kind of light you like to photograph in.”**

Steve’s philosophy on lighting is flexible but he cites early morning and late afternoon as two particularly interesting times of day to shoot. He describes the appeal of working with the softness and the changing of the light. Sometimes, shooting in the middle of the day is the only option; Steve has ideas on how to capture beautiful, low contrast shots.

**“Right now the light’s a bit sharp. It’s a little contrasty for my taste. It’s better to wait for the light that you work best than to rush it.”**

Steve highlights the importance of patience and timing while out on a shoot in Comporta, Portugal. Waiting for the right light can make or break a photo. With years of experience working with light, Steve takes a calm and relaxed attitude, waiting for the right time to start his work.

## STEVE MCCURRY PROJECT: LESSON 10 - EXPLORE NATURAL LIGHT

**“I generally try and get out on the street early in the morning, work out through the day. Sometimes for me it’s easier to photograph at the end of the day because the light keeps getting better and better and better, so you’re able to really think it through.”**

There’s no wrong or right way to use light. Watch the master at work and reference interesting light that you see in their work.

Create a project to compare the use of natural light at different times of day.

Make sure you try the light at the end of the day an hour before sunset and 15 minutes just after sunset. Steve uses all kinds of daylight but in middle of the day he suggests you try the shady side of the using bright shadow to see the difference to hard sun.

## TRANSCRIPT

When we're talking about exterior light, there's different times of the day, different kinds of light. There's a very-- sometimes a very hard, bright light. Sometimes it's overcast, it's more soft. In the morning, early morning it's, again, soft-- late afternoon, more soft. It's really a personal preference what kind of light you like to photograph in. There's no right or wrong way. I would really encourage you to look through photography from some of the great masters and sort of see what their solution is to working in different kinds of light.

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I generally try and get out on the street early in the morning, work out through the day. Sometimes for me it's easier to photograph at the end of the day because the light keeps getting better and better and better, so you're able to really think it through, maybe come back to another place while the light's improving over the course of an hour, hour and a half or whatever.

Conversely, in the morning, the light starts very soft, wonderful shadows, and it quickly brightens up and the light becomes, for me, less interesting as the sun rises. So both are great times of the day to shoot, it's just that one you have to be poised and ready before sunrise, and the other one, the late afternoon, you have time to kind of work through the situation and maybe you have an hour or more while that light is getting better and better and softer and more kind of interesting looking.

Sometimes an approach where you photograph in deep shadow or in silhouette can also be very graphic and very interesting. If I go down the street toward the middle of the day, I try generally to stay on the shady side of the street. Again, I prefer that low contrast, muted look, as opposed to the sunny side of the street.

So I would encourage you to go out and experiment between shooting on the sunny side of the street or on the shady side of the street, and see what you think works best for you and your photography.

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This picture I made in Varanasi in India, I thought was a good example of waiting for the light to go down, the sun. Again, this is a picture after sunset when the interior light starts to really kind of shine, and you have that wonderful balance between the setting sun, the ambient light and the interior light. And it's that half an hour, 45 minutes

when you have that sort of narrow window when you make when you can make these kind of pictures. But it really makes the scene come alive.

I thought the juxtaposition between the man sitting in the doorway, this fortune teller, this astrologer, and the man in the immediate foreground, and how the man in the foreground's much darker and the man, the astrologer, is very bright because he's illuminated by the light bulb. And then you have this wonderful scene on the river showing life along the banks of the Ganges. I thought it was a nice story about this quiet moment with this fortune teller, perhaps waiting for a customer, waiting for relatives or a friend to arrive, or just sitting there contemplating the evening, the evening light.

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This picture I made in Kabul, Afghanistan is of a circus troupe, which entertains children with different acts and different performances and whatnot. So I went to this location where they were performing, and I spent pretty much the whole afternoon with them. But I discovered, as I was shooting, and they were juggling with this fire that the light became really interesting just past dark.

So I shot 'em when I was actually making the selection. The dramatic pictures were the ones where you could see the fire and the light was very dark and very mysterious and very dramatic. So again, shoot throughout the afternoon. But you might find that the best light, and the most interesting situation is after sunset when the light becomes very dramatic and that fire really comes alive. That might be the best time.

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I'm here in a Portuguese fishing village. It's amazing. I have all these boats, some of them are abandoned, some of them aren't being used. The tides out. Right now the light's a bit sharp. It's a little contrasty for my taste. It's better to wait for the light that you work best than to rush it. So for me, I'm going to wait a while, wait for the light get a little bit lower, a little bit softer, and then I'm going to walk around and do some work.

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So we have this very interesting fisherman here with a really wonderful, sort of weathered face, and I wanted to make a portrait of him. We have just a little bit of left. The sun's already set. So now we're past sunset. But still there's a lot of light left. So I'm going to take advantage of the next, sort of 10 or 15 minutes to make a portrait of this fellow.

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So when we got here the light was really strong. As you can see now, it's very soft. The scene for me comes alive more. The colors are more vibrant. Before coming to a location, it's good to plan the timing for the light. In this case, we came here with enough time to kind of look around, to scout, to do a bit of recon. And then as the light got better, was able to start shooting. So I think it's good to think about the light prior to arriving at the location to make sure that you're there when the light is best for you. And I think only you can decide what that light is.

So we've sort of lost the light now. I'm going to wrap up and we'll come back tomorrow and have another day of shooting.