



I see something that's not there or The trend of using thumbnails in the presentation of Fine Art Photography

A short and pregnant introduction why thumbnails don't hold what they promise.
With picture examples and description texts.

I have often been asked why I don't use thumbnail images in the gallery section of my home-pages, since they are "so convenient" and "help save so much time." I intentionally avoid using them and, as a result of another recent inquiry, I would like to clarify my position, including a few picture examples, since I feel it is such an important issue, particularly in the area of fine art photography.

It is a big mistake to believe that a thumbnail-sized image can even come close to showing what is really contained in the final print. Anyone who is experienced in dealing with the perception of pictures, and that includes all fine art photographers, knows that the effect of an image depends on many different factors, one of which is its size. A true fine art photograph often reveals a completely different effect depending on the size of the reproduction. Of course, there are no exact mathematical guidelines available, but the result changes with each different motif. There are certain photographs which work better in a smaller size, and those that have more impact large. There are also those images which make an impact despite the final print size.

Certainly the impartial Internet surfer could argue that the Internet image only represents a reduced version of the original photograph anyway. Fundamentally, he or she is probably right. However, it seems senseless to me to take the already reduced photographic information and reduce it even more to the point of absurdity. This "mini-preview" photo cannot even begin to portray a sense of the true spirit of the original. While surfing I have often regretted being taken in by some promising-looking preview photograph. In fact, in my opinion, the use of thumbnail images actually has exactly the opposite effect of making the viewing of photographs easier since you waste more time clicking around, picking and choosing which images to look at than you would if you just leisurely wandered through the entire gallery. Furthermore, you can only really get a true impression of an artist's work when you take the time to go through the complete portfolio of images.

It is always surprising to me to see how little sensitivity some webmasters have in presenting pictures online. The reduction of an image file to a smaller size while minimizing the loss of overall image quality involves quite a bit more skill than just squishing the image into miniature form. Not to mention the over-exaggerated compression of the resulting Jpeg file which often renders the final blow.

In addition to the totally distorting method of changing the images proportions or presenting only a cropped version, the process of "locking" the entire picture in its full resolution into a thumbnail-sized place-marker, including the complete loading time, is also unfortunately very common. This does have one advantage in that, once the images are loaded, they can be viewed relatively quickly in the gallery section since they just have to be transferred from the computer's cache memory. On the other hand, all the images must first be sequentially loaded, which can often take quite a bit of time. Fortunately, there are more elegant methods available. For example, after the thumbnail gallery is successfully loaded, having the full-format images loading in the background, since the viewer will spend some time on the preview page anyway.



The visual impression of thumbnail images on an Internet page is not exactly the most optimal form of representation either. What gallery owner would hang post-cards on their door to entice potential customers? Furthermore, it's my opinion that the artist who really just shows his or her best work, doesn't need thumbnail preview images since the photographs are so good that you'll want to see them all anyway!

Example photos

I would like to demonstrate on two concise picture examples how photos of same size are suitable for use as thumbnails or how their effect varies, depending on their sizes. Both examples are respectively 100, 300 and 500 pixels high and were reduced up to 75% of their original height respectively for this document.

I want to emphasize that these examples can only show provisory the various effects of original prints. They are merely for representing the above mentioned principle.



The first photo ("Linie U1") is most suitable for demonstrating different print sizes. All three reproductions seem quite proper.



The effect is excellent at 500 pixels of picture height.



The picture effect is still good at 300 pixels height – A photo which is frequently found on common internet sites.



With 100 pixels picture height this photo is not a fine art print anymore however still recognizable despite the "thumbnail size". It really invites to click on. The reason lies in its clear picture composition.

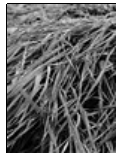
Completely different is the second example:



The second photo (“grass & dew”) looks personally best at 18 x24 cm. This is a good example for an “optimal” picture size:



300 pixels of height
The picture effect is optimal.



With 100 pixels height this picture is obviously too small.
Details can hardly be noticed due to the fine structures,
everything graying.



500 pixels of height let this photo seem obviously too large:
shades get burst up they seem like holes in the paper or
on the screen. Too many details are visible.

Conclusion

The use of thumbnails is highly questionable since they extremely fake the effect of photographs. Whoever has interest in a most realistic reproduction of his work should rather do without them for the sake of objectivity.