

# DISTINCTIONS

An Associate Distinction explores light in sacred places, while our new column, 'I made this', highlights an underwater image from a successful submission

## WHAT ARE RPS DISTINCTIONS?

Distinctions are prestigious qualifications assessed on three levels that encourage you to refine your skills, experiment with styles and techniques and push your creative boundaries

## LICENTIATE (LRPS)

Applicants must show photographic competence in approach and techniques

## ASSOCIATE (ARPS)

Requires a body of work of a high standard, and a written statement of intent

## FELLOWSHIP (FRPS)

Requires a body of work of distinctive ability and excellence, plus a written statement of intent



**Left**  
'Cherub in stained glass light, Edinburgh Cathedral' by Elaine Cook ARPS

**Above**  
'The quiet word, Manchester Cathedral' by Elaine Cook ARPS



## DIVINE ILLUMINATION

Chasing the light in sacred places helped Elaine Cook ARPS achieve her Visual Art Associate, writes Jonathan McIntosh

### From Plato and St

Augustine to Dionysius the Areopagite, philosophers have contemplated the spiritual significance of light for centuries.

For many religions – and the builders and patrons of their sacred spaces – luminescence signifies clarity and transparency, and is a physical sign of a higher power's presence.

For example, the 12th-century French clergyman Abbot Suger – instrumental to Gothic architecture's origins – argued that a place of worship's use of light can take a person from the physical world to a spiritual one. Suger's influence saw light become central to the architectural language of cathedrals worldwide.

Elaine Cook ARPS, explores this holy artistic design choice in her series *Where Light Meets Shadow*, with which she achieved her Visual Art Associate Distinction in November 2025.

Here, the Newcastle-upon-Tyne-born, Blackpool-based retired management accountant reflects on her first foray into photography, finding affirmation in a Distinction project event, and what she learned through lensing this series.

“My love of photography began 30 years ago when I would accompany my daughter on her GCSE Photography field trips,” says Cook. “After she passed her course, curiosity made me pick up her camera. From that first click of the shutter – and seeing my photographs in print – I was hooked. Over the years I’ve learned through practice what a camera can capture.”

With Valda Bailey, Joe Cornish, David duChemin and Roxanne Bouché Overton among her inspirations, Cook enjoys exploring the chiaroscuro relationship, and spotlighting through photography moments of stillness and small details

that might be missed at first glance. The 67-year-old also credits her career as a management accountant for instilling her with qualities – such as working to a brief and shaping a long-term project – that guided her through her Associate Distinction.

“*Where Light Meets Shadow* is built around using soft light as my guide inside sacred spaces,” she says. “The inspiration came from being in those interiors and noticing how light shifts across stone, wood and fabric, briefly revealing small moments that are easy to overlook. I decided to focus on intimate scenes shaped by light instead of the sweeping, wide views that cathedrals offer.”

She adds, “The work was created over four months in spring and summer 2025 using a Nikon Zf. I used a 28-400mm zoom for flexibility – to frame details and layer scenes and to isolate moments of light as they appeared. I also used a 50mm f/1.4 at times for extra help in lower light, which enabled a natural perspective for more intimate images.”

**Below**  
‘A pause for contemplation, Chester Cathedral’ by Elaine Cook ARPS

**“From that first click of the shutter – and seeing my photographs in print – I was hooked”**



**Above**  
‘Fragments of light, Liverpool Cathedral’ by Elaine Cook ARPS

## Why this submission works

### Chris Palmer FRPS Chair of the Visual Art panel (Associate and Fellowship)

Elaine’s effective and almost poetic Statement of Intent provides a gentle introduction to her submission, evoking a rhythm and atmosphere that we subsequently experienced in her images. Hence there was a strong connection between both the statement and content of her panel.

Elaine’s consistent use of the same landscape format assisted panel cohesion. The central

image of the flickering candles aided the layout’s presentation.

The assessment criteria require a high level of technical ability. The difficulties of photographing in dark places, with small bright highlight areas, is a technical challenge. The subsequent processing needs to be handled sensitively to retain a believable reality too. Elaine’s control and restraint captured each scene with commendable quality.

This ecclesiastical essay rises to the challenge of offering

variety, coupled with a consistent approach to image-making. It seemed to possess a respectful reverence, showing how light can create visual accents, thereby drawing the viewer into these quietly observed and captured scenes.

There’s no attempt here to be clever, or to rely upon post-processing techniques. The purity of the images is wholly appropriate to the content of this successful panel.



**Above**  
‘Blue reflections,  
Ripon Cathedral’ by  
Elaine Cook ARPS

**Opposite**  
‘Smoke and stillness,  
York Minster’ by  
Elaine Cook ARPS

Cook’s Statement of Intent gave discipline and helped her make consistent choices so that the images in her submission held together cohesively. A member of the Visual Art, Landscape and Digital Imaging special interest groups, she also found a Distinctions project event led by Simon Leach FRPS in June 2025 to be highly illuminating.

“This event affirmed that my idea had relevance and was a suitable subject for an Associate Distinction,” says Cook. “Simon encouraged me to work to a simple guiding phrase – for me, ‘soft light’ – and advised me to refer to it regularly to stay focused on shoots. I recommend it to anyone planning a Distinctions project. Having been a member of the Society since March 2025, I’ve enjoyed the sense of belonging and support being part of this community brings.”

For these images, Cook spent hours in the contemplative atmospheres of 12 UK cathedrals. “Sensitivity was important to me, so out of respect

I avoided photographing people and during services,” she says. “Rather than describing them, I wanted the images to suggest what it felt like to be in those spaces – calm, reflective places where you can pause from the outside world.

“I was drawn to small moments briefly revealed as the light changes, inviting the viewer to slow down and linger. What I enjoyed most about exploring the relationship between light and shadow is how it suggests mood and meaning. Light reveals, shadow softens or conceals. I loved letting light guide me.”

Photographing inside the cathedrals had its challenges, but Cook viewed such difficulties as opportunities to adopt different photographic approaches and editing techniques.

“Handholding in low light meant I had to be careful to get the exposure right while keeping noise to a minimum,” she says. “Sequencing the



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### Statement of Intent

I’m drawn to quiet light held within darkness, and to soft shadows. These images reflect the peaceful, contemplative atmosphere I find in sacred spaces. I search for fleeting moments – glances of light or shadow play that may be missed by others before they disappear, or wisps of candle smoke rising into stillness. Rather than the wide, sweeping grandeur of cathedrals, I focus on small, intimate scenes where light becomes a voice. Through light, shadow, and tone, I aim to express what I felt – a sense of calm, serenity and inner stillness. These sacred spaces offer a reprieve from the external world, inviting a slower gaze and gentle reflection.

submission and ensuring tonality translated when the images were projected required a lot of attention too. A One2One session with Chris Palmer FRPS, the Chair of the Society’s Visual Art (Associate and Fellowship) panel, was invaluable to achieving this.”

The assessors were impressed with Cook’s submission. They highlighted the high technical standard of each image, which effectively conveyed how she felt inside these sacred spaces, and noted how her brave decision to let the shadows retain their depth rather than lifting them too far had paid off.

Now that she has her Associate under her belt, Cook is looking ahead to her next project.

“I have a much stronger sense of what I’m drawn to and want my photography to say now,” she says. “Achieving my Associate is a real milestone. This experience has left me feeling much clearer about the type of photographer I am. It’s a springboard for an exciting next stage of my photography.”