

# Eye candy

As more golfers carry smartphones equipped with powerful cameras and instant access to social media audiences, is aesthetic appeal an increasingly important aspect of golf course design? Toby Ingleton reports.

*Long views from the perched closing green at McLemore have golfers reaching for their smartphone cameras*

Photo: Dave Sansom

Seven-in-ten Americans now use social media, and most of those at least once a day. It's a similar picture across the globe; more than half of the world uses platforms like Facebook, Instagram and TikTok, for an average of more than two hours each day.

Hospitality providers are appealing to this audience with visual stimuli; 'Instagrammable' features like flower walls, creative installations and bespoke lighting. Hotels, bars and restaurants know that if their venue has great visual appeal, there's an increased chance of guests taking a snap and sharing it online. The result: free marketing.

But to what extent is the golf industry recognizing this opportunity?

Social media is awash with golf imagery, posted by amateurs and professionals alike. Golf course photographer Dave Sansom says he enjoys the feedback: "I'm interested in what kinds of photos appeal to folks. Thankfully, a good photograph of a gorgeous golf hole continues to capture the imaginations of those interested in golf and in golf courses. The more well-known courses receive the most clicks, but I get very positive activity from even little-known properties when a photograph, itself, is a standout."

Sansom says that his most popular photographs are of courses that offer a close connection to nature: "Long views, native areas juxtaposed with manicured fairways and greens, and water are all important elements of a good photograph, and they continue to have universal appeal."

He highlights two different courses that successfully blend these attributes: the new McLemore layout in Georgia designed by ASGCA Past President Rees Jones and Bill Bergin, ASGCA, and the Plantation course at Kapalua, in Hawaii, designed by Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore, ASGCA.

"Few courses on the planet offer vistas to match those of

the Plantation course," he says. "The eighteenth tee is one of those bucket-list sites; it draws golfers from all over the world to Maui, and it's hard to imagine not pausing to enjoy this gorgeous view. The beautiful, downhill fairway, backed by Molokai across the water in the distance is nothing short of stunning."

And of the dramatic new closing hole at McLemore, he says: "Virtually every golfer who plays the hole goes home with his own smartphone photo of this hole. Groups finishing their rounds linger after putting out to enjoy the views from the green that dangles over a cliff high above McLemore Cove."

So are golf course architects prioritizing aesthetics in their designs? Jeff Lawrence, ASGCA, says: "I've always believed golf is a visual game, 100 percent. People want to see beauty." He describes his approach to design as multi-faceted. "It needs to be playable, sustainable and maintainable. Strategy is huge, as is variety. But I also want to create something that will catch the eye, so when a golfer stands on the tee or for an approach shot, they might want to step back and take a picture."

There are many ways to achieve this, says Lawrence: "It might be the shadowing, or the contrast of

the grasses, or stronger contouring to create that palette. And you've got to maximise what Mother Nature gives you. Whatever that is – a stream, a cliff edge, a rock outcropping – utilise what Mother Nature gives you."

Explaining how the decisions taken to achieve aesthetic appeal are driven by the site, Lawrence points to the contrasting examples of Thracian Cliffs in Bulgaria and Saadiyat Beach Golf Club in Abu Dhabi, projects he completed during his time as senior designer for Gary Player.

"At Thracian Cliffs, it was not very hard to find 18 great golf holes. But at Saadiyat, besides getting to the beach edge, there was absolutely



*The clifftop site at Thracian Cliffs in Bulgaria was always likely to yield great visuals*

Photo: Thracian Cliffs Golf Club





Photo: Larry Lambrecht

*The picturesque seventeenth hole on the Old Tabby Links course by Arnold Palmer Design Company at Spring Island in South Carolina*

nothing to work with. So the bunkering and landforms needed to be of great scale to be believable. I think we pulled it off well – it’s very photogenic and the features are probably the key to that.”

Brandon Johnson, ASGCA, of Arnold Palmer Design Company, says: “Inherent in the evaluation of a property and through the design and construction process, as architects, we are striving to preserve, incorporate, accent and enhance the best attributes of any site.

“If you are working on a special site many of those features will create a great photo composition but there are so many crucial decisions that must be made to any

given golf hole before you can get to that stage.

Johnson, who points out that he is an infrequent and reluctant user of social media, says that while he has never chosen the location for a hole because of its photogenic qualities, good golf architecture will mean it happens naturally: “I’ve long been a believer that when the strategy of a golf hole is so intrinsically linked to a beautiful, natural feature such as a coastline, sand dunes, dramatic ravines, ledges or unique contours, that’s when golf and golf architecture flourish, and at that moment it’s natural to want to capture the moment or scene in a photograph.”

Gil Hanse, ASGCA, has a similar view: “We have always tried to make our golf courses fit into the natural surrounds and as a result they are hopefully photogenic,” he says. But he doesn’t believe the proliferation of social media has changed his focus. “I would be lying if I said that we do not recognize that social media platforms are now how most golf architecture information gets disseminated and promoted, but it has not crept its way into any decision-making on site.”

Chris Cochran, ASGCA, of Nicklaus Design, explains his firm’s philosophy on course visuals: “We have always strived to create aesthetically pleasing golf courses

*At Saadiyat Beach in Abu Dhabi, Jeff Lawrence, ASGCA, says a grand scale of contouring and bunkering led to a very photogenic design*



Photo: Kevin Murray

but not at the risk of sacrificing quality of the golf course. For example, we wouldn’t recommend adding a bunker or a water feature just to make it look prettier. We would only do so if it had an impact on the strategy of the golf hole.”

**“We have always tried to make our golf courses fit into the natural surrounds and as a result they are hopefully photogenic”**

“Some golf courses lend themselves to be more photogenic, based on location,” he says, pointing

to the examples of mountain or oceanside layouts. “We would certainly work to open up the views the best we can, but a lot of that depends on master plan of the property and how the overall course layout best fits.”

Cochran’s colleague Chad Goetz, ASGCA, agrees. “We are always looking to take advantage of views

and preserve unique features,” he says, adding that some renovation work also sees them trying to recapture views that may have become obscured by tree growth over the years. But he emphasizes the focus on letting nature speak for itself: “Back in the 90s it was probably more about artificial waterfalls and ‘wow’ moments, for example, while today it is more about natural features.”

Johnson notes that drones and aerial photography show golf holes from vantage points that will never be experienced by the golfer. “No doubt these are stunning images of interesting land and golf holes, but they do little to truly inform the





Photo: Dave Sansom

*Golf course photographer Dave Sansom describes the Plantation course at Kapalua as ‘nothing short of stunning’*

viewer on how that hole will look or feel while playing it.”

Hanse adds: “We will sometimes reference that we think something will look good from a drone shot. The use of drones has revolutionized how we see golf courses, but we do not change anything to suit that point of view.”

For clubs trying to keep up with the latest trends, ASGCA Past President Tom Marzolf of Fazio Design, sounds a word of caution: “Recent new courses that grab the attention are easy on the eye, but at the same time it may be more costly to maintain the width required to find the ball and play the game. The media frenzy of naturalistic, rugged

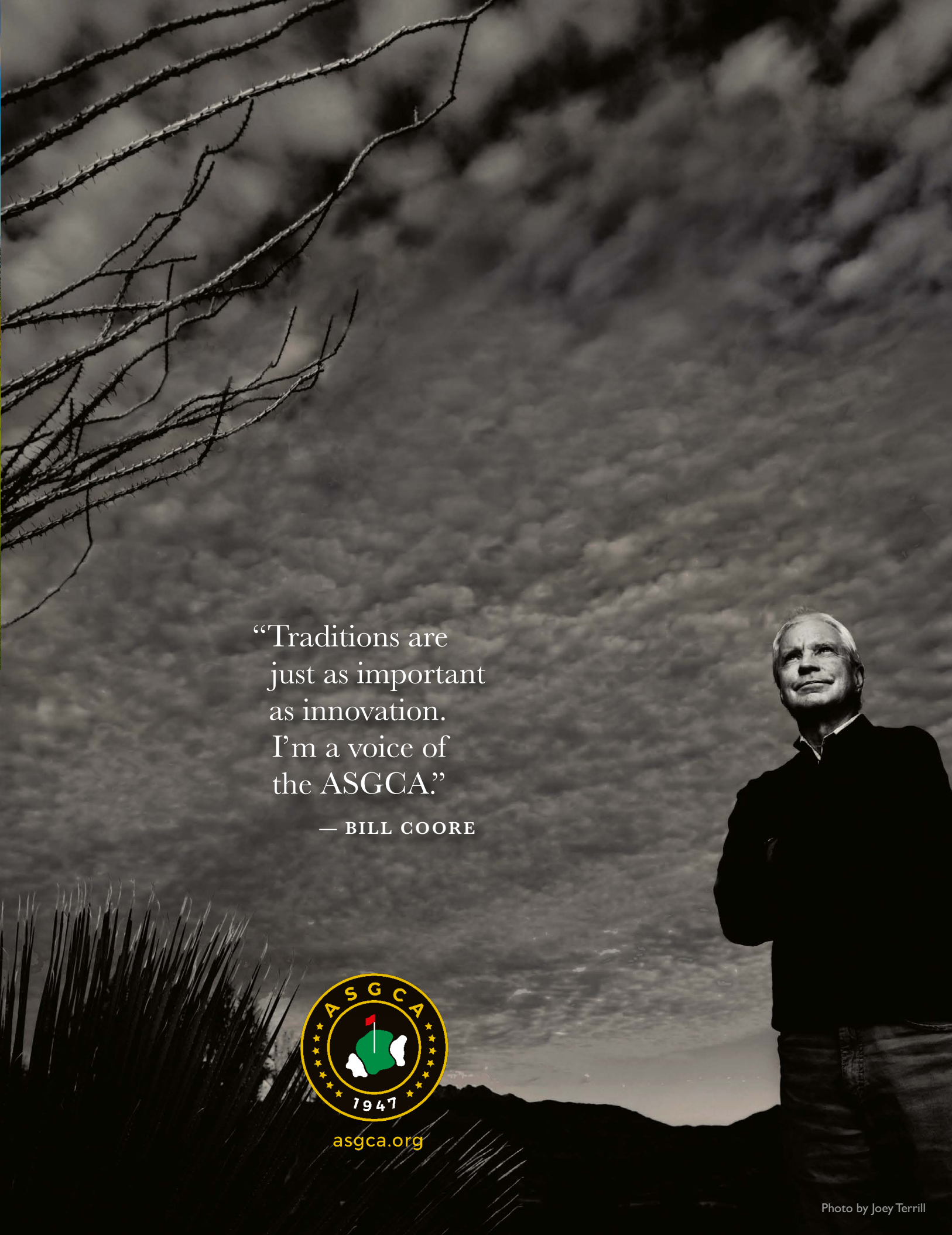
golf design is visually stunning. However, this arrives at a time when the game is struggling to grow due to ever mounting costs to build and maintain a golf course.

“What the game needs is more courses like Chicago Golf Club,” he says. “Excellent strategy, clear visuals directing the line of play. The classic courses that we all love have the clearest and most direct forms of design strategy, that is everlasting and endearing.

“If a golf hole has excellent shot options and clear strategy, then it is a beautiful golf hole as well. No need to add trendy visual extras. The secret to visuals that last are the fundamentals of great golf

architecture: a properly placed bunker, or a green shape and angle that holds your interest, wherever the flagstick is placed.”

Johnson concludes: “Golf is a game and while the most important characteristic to consider is how a course plays, its beauty and aesthetic appeal ultimately play a vital role in how a course is received by golfers. Art, sculpture and beautiful landforms to play on, over, and around are at the heart of golf course architecture. When those elements are in concert with each other, they will naturally create a composition that yearns to be captured with a photograph, sketch, painting or adoring words of praise.” ●



“Traditions are just as important as innovation. I’m a voice of the ASGCA.”

— BILL COORE



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