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Albrecht Rissler

Photographic Composition

Principles of Image Design

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The Playing Field Composition means bringing together individual elements into a cohesive whole. Music emerges from the assembly of notes, rhythm, and the interplay of instruments. Individual graphic elements interact in a similar way in the visual arts. Sculptors work with three-dimensional components, as do architects and city planners.

When it comes to painting, drawing, graphic design, and photography, composition pertains to the organization of two-dimensional elements within a predefined image area. In most cases, the image area is a rectangle. It is in this area that all of the visual subject matter is conveyed.

When a viewer observes an image, his or her eye immediately responds to the overall effect of the image, even if it is difficult to initially grasp the elements at play. The fundamental effectiveness of an image is its composition, its formal organization. Even a well-selected subject that has been immaculately reproduced in a technical sense will usually fail to impress viewers when not supported by a compelling visual design: a picture's content and composition should merge into one cohesive image.

An image's composition consists of various individual elements that exhibit unique qualities. Individual elements may strike dramatic contrasts with one another or they may play harmoniously off one another. Anything appearing within an image is always seen in relation to its outer boundaries. How a subject is positioned within the image area determines its effect. Keep in mind that different results will be produced depending on the size and shape of the image area you use. The dimensions of the image area and the relative positioning of the objects that appear within it should always be considered when composing an image.

The photos here show scenes from the town of Aspra on the island of Sicily.

Value Added A familiar experience: the view from a hotel room. There isn't much to see here—just trees and a white chunk of a building blocking the view. Tough luck! This view doesn't make for a worthwhile vacation photo. Time to give up? No!
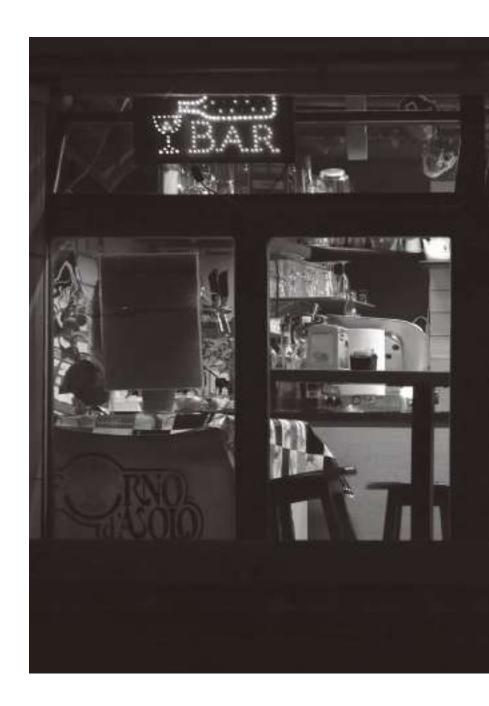
Turning the camera to find the same view at a different angle causes a few interesting things to happen. By zooming in a little, a picture starts to emerge within the bordered camera display that reveals something more interesting than a hurried memento snapshot. Examining the viewfinder image or the image within the borders of the camera's display screen is really helpful to discover that the subtle curved contour of the mountains creates an interesting contrast with the angular building in the foreground. Gradually the appeal of the subject starts to increase.

Zooming in even more causes the pole and the electrical lines to gain prominence. The large, monochromatic area of the building contrasts with the delicate lines of the wires. Furthermore, the wires' dark silhouettes produce a sharp contrast between darkness and light. Now all that's left is to avoid central positioning of the horizontal top edge of the house's wall. A slight adjustment to the perspective results in the inclusion of the edge of the roof, which slants into the picture's spatial depth.

This example demonstrates that a successful photo requires both a photographic vision and an effective visual design. The more you are aware of the compositional possibilities for a photo, the better you will be able to satisfy both requirements. Having a fundamental knowledge about visual design in conjunction with a proficiency in the technical operation of a camera greatly improves the number of your photos that will be successful. This series also illustrates that a patient, deliberate engagement with your subject matter is often necessary to produce memorable results.
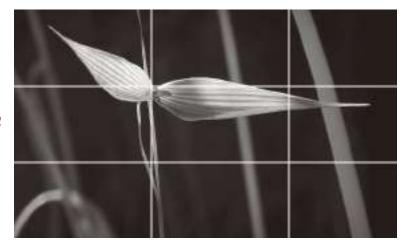
Serene, Neutral, Charged, Proud There are many variables that determine whether a photograph enchants or underwhelms a viewer. Key among them in determining the quality of a photo is the ratio of an image's proportions. Every format, or aspect ratio, produces a unique effect. Visual formats have the potential to accentuate or undercut the subject of an image.

The 16:9 aspect ratio better approximates the natural human perspective. When employed horizontally, this format is well grounded and often ideal for revealing broad-angled views of sweeping landscapes. When employed vertically, such as this image of the Statue of Liberty, this format can exude proud or even toplofty undertones.

In painting and graphic arts, the image area or canvas dimensions can be even longer and narrower than the 16:9 format, resulting in thin strips of artistic space. The precursors for such works of art can be traced to nineteenth-century woodcuts from Japan. Kitagawa Utamaro and other artists inspired many Western artists to experiment with such extreme visual formats. *Japanese Lilies* by Impressionist Claude Monet and *Judith II* by the Viennese painter Gustav Klimt are famous examples of images with particularly slender aspect ratios.

In contrast to the 16:9 format, images in a square format are highly relaxed. Their proportions do not pull the viewer's gaze toward any particular side or area of the image. The photograph on the right-hand page of the rocking chair on the porch and the nearly square snippet of the background landscape achieves the placidity intended by the photographer. The photograph is far from dull, however, because the right-leaning perspective of the image and the resulting contrast of visual areas subtly work against the otherwise sedate qualities of the square aspect ratio.

Tip *Many cameras allow you to superimpose gridlines in the viewfinder or on the camera's display screen to help with your composition efforts when previewing a photograph. The intersection points of the horizontal and vertical lines, which create a grid with nine fields, roughly correspond to the golden ratio. Photographers can use this rule of thirds to quickly arrange the image's key elements and achieve a harmonious visual balance.*

Harmony A physicist named Theodor Fechner (1801–1887), from Leipzig, Germany, conducted an experiment in which he offered study participants 10 rectangles with different aspect ratios and asked them to select the rectangle that was the most pleasing to them. The data showed a clear preference (approximately a 35 percent approval) for the proportion of 21:34, often referred to as the golden ratio. The least popular ratio—nearly a square—had a ratio of 5:6. It received only 0.27 percent approval. The study was conducted to demonstrate that the golden ratio satisfied a human proclivity for harmonious proportions.

A striking number of examples of the golden ratio can be found in the natural world—especially in the growth patterns of plants and animals. The nautilus—related to a squid—and the daisy are often cited as examples of this phenomenon. The nautilus's hard shell and the daisy's inflorescence grow in logarithmic spirals that correspond to the proportions of the golden ratio. It's no wonder that visual artists, including photographers, as inveterate observers of nature, orient their work with these proportions.

The aspect ratio of 2:3, which is offered as a shooting option by many modern cameras, comes close to matching the golden ratio. This format offers a rich array of possibilities for creating particularly harmonious compositions. When using the golden ratio, the composition of the outside dimensions of the image area, the positioning of the subject within the image area, and the relative proportion of the subject within the image area create a natural harmony.

The photo of the oat glumes nearly achieves this standard. With a format of 2:3, the axis of the object is approximately positioned at an intersection point of the golden ratio. The difference in length between the two glumes also roughly corresponds to the golden ratio.

Up or Down? Horizon lines and other horizontal visual elements divide photographs into two halves. In deciding where to position such lines, photographers can establish a distinct area of contrast. The composition of the photographs featuring the mosque at the Schwetzingen Palace offers an example of how to determine which position is the most effective. Centrally located horizon lines often result in boring photographs, but the picture below illustrates that the middle is not always easy to identify. In cases like this, it is better to consider the visual balance of the image rather than the literal, measurable location of the photo's center.

Photographs should make clear that one area of the image is the dominant section. The sky and the trees on the left make this distinction obvious in the narrow portrait-format shot of this scene (right).

If the top portion of the image is too short, the mosque will be pushed up against the upper boundary of the image area. If you want to avoid central divisions, you should opt for the version on the right-hand page. The mosque, the sky, the lake, and the opposing groups of trees bring an effective balance to the photograph.

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Diagonals

Squared Away Photographers can use diagonal lines when composing photographs to establish a sharp contrast with the right-angled outside border of the image area. This photo (top) showing a diagonal dividing line between the sand and the water at La Calete de Famara on the island of Lanzarote illustrates this effect. The predominant diagonal line is broken up by many smaller slanted lines running in opposing directions.

The visual effect of the diagonal lines in this photo of a fisherman at the port of Cala Figuera on Mallorca is much more complex. The elaborate network of diagonals leading in varying directions is critical to the photo's composition. These lines build a palpable tension with the rectangular boundaries of the image area. The man's legs and the fishing nets surrounding him establish the primary diagonal lines, which zigzag up to the top border of the image area, creating a sense of spatial depth. The shorter diagonal lines direct the viewer's attention to the man's hands in the center of the picture.

Tip *Try to avoid aligning a subject's prominent contours in parallel with the vertical and horizontal borders of a picture. For example, the composition of a photo depicting a house from a corner perspective is much more engaging than that of a photo taken from a head-on perspective. It's often worthwhile to adjust your standpoint so that the most important contours of your subject run diagonal to the rectangular image border.*

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Heavenly Beaches It's lovely to walk along beaches that appear to be endless. Backlighting makes the waves look particularly attractive—the water almost takes on the appearance of boiling lead. The light of the early morning and late evening are ideal for shooting photos, in part because this light makes the contrast between the water, the sky, and the sand the most discernable. The diagonals created by these elements are also especially prominent during dawn and twilight.

Diagonal lines contribute to a sense of depth in this (top) photo of an Andalusian beach on the Atlantic. Significant diagonal contours are created by the waves pointing up to the horizon, the series of fishing poles, and the human figures that appear small due to their distance from the camera.

The back and forth of the diagonal lines visible in the surface of the water at a beach near the San Francisco Bay (bottom) is much more understated. Capturing a photo such as this one requires an attentive eye and the courage to work with a less-than-conspicuous subject.

The image of the beach in Andalusia (right-hand page) shows how the human figures integrated into the picture contribute to the photo's composition. The diagonal line of the shoreline is quite subtle, but the positioning of the people in relation to one another creates an additional effect. There's a certain charm arising from the contrast of the men in the background resolutely leaning forward and the tentative pose of the woman in the foreground. Her position and the horizon line are located roughly at a harmonious intersection point based on the golden ratio.
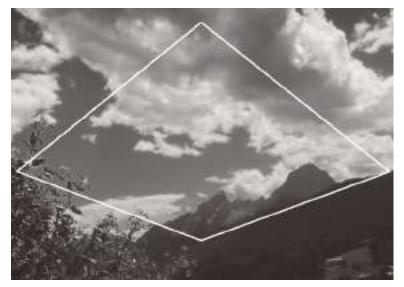
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A Touch of Drama Pure white pillow-like clouds float across a deep blue sky above the silhouette of an alpine mountain ridge. This majestic subject might be found in any number of places around the world. Both photographs here are similar, but they differ in one key way. The top photo relies on two dominant diagonal lines that run in opposite directions. They seem to want to continue beyond the edges of the photograph. The composition of the photo is easy to recognize.

Moving just a few meters away from where the top photo was taken opened up the opportunity to bring something else into the picture. A bush now appears in the left foreground of the bottom photo. Now an additional short diagonal line runs against the grain of the mountain ridge and prevents the viewer's eye from following it out of the image area. The viewer's attention is isolated within the picture. In contrast to the more dramatic photo on the top, this picture feels much more self-contained.

Tip *Always pay attention to diagonal elements in your photographs. Landscape and architecture photos as well as still lifes are often ideal candidates for dynamic compositions featuring prominent diagonal lines.*

Death of a Giant Conventional design guidelines for incorporating diagonal lines in a photo's composition dictate that lines extending from the upper left to the lower right of a picture have negative connotations while those extending from the lower left to the upper right have positive ones. Is this always clear-cut?

In the original photo (left), the Alsatian forest worker in the Vosges Mountains can be seen walking downward to the left along a fallen fir tree. The man in the photograph described the natural process of decay as "La mort d'un geant" (the death of a giant). The composition here seems to suit the subject adequately.

The mirror image of the photograph, however, reveals that the image would have been much more powerful if the camera had been positioned on the other side of the tree. The overall effect of the photo is vastly improved with the tree and the man heading downward to the right. The practice of reading from right to left is not without relevance here. Because the eye is accustomed to gathering information from right to left, images that mirror that composition create a kind of visual comfort, provided the viewer is not from a culture that reads according to a different practice. Is this mere sophistry? Don't be deceived. Our eyes subconsciously recognize these differences. Think about the photos or illustrations on book jacket designs—if the designer wants to elicit a positive response, he or she is better off using an ascending diagonal rather than a descending one.

There is another effect of diagonals on display here. The entire length of the 60-meter-long tree trunk is not visible in the photo, but the full magnitude of the tree is still easy to imagine. Illustrators for picture books and artists who draw comics use this technique of not revealing the entire scene. What's off screen can play out in the viewer's imagination.

Tip *Consciously resist the temptation to default to an evenly balanced composition. Asymmetry, a deliberate lack of balance, and truncating subjects intentionally can all heighten a viewer's interest, especially when these techniques complement the intention behind the photo.*

Coming or Going? The willow tree to the left is nearly falling out of the picture. This photo is not what you would call a balanced composition, but it shows that profoundly asymmetrical compositions can succeed on their own terms if the subject matter holds up well to such a treatment. The next time you are in a bookstore, take a look at the various books on display. You may find a cover with a photo or illustration that is particularly out of balance—one that has been deliberately designed in this way to suit the title or content of the book.

The composition of the photo on the right-hand page creates a completely different effect. Here, the willow is the main subject. The delicate snow-covered branches on the left side don't serve as an equal counterweight to the strong dark trunks of the willow on the right. Neither photo presents the willow in complete repose.

Many willows—especially older specimens of the white willow variety—are visual delicacies with or without foliage. They can survive long floods without suffering any damage, and if a storm should tear a willow apart, roots can even grow from the broken branches. Because the growth pattern for each tree is so different, willows make ideal candidates for composing images with prominent diagonal lines—and not only for photographers. Willows are also among my favorite subjects to draw.

Surfers and Insects The most extreme members of the human and animal worlds make for rewarding subjects when it comes to composing images with diagonal lines. Whether stretched out or doubled over, these subjects feature limbs and appendages that create interesting contrasts with respect to one another. The fact that the sections of their bodies harmoniously correspond with each other is directly related to the principles of the golden ratio. This ratio can be found not only in the proportions of the human body, but in any number of other natural objects across the planet.

There are ample opportunities to explore the use of diagonal lines while photographing such subjects. The picture of the surfer on the left was taken on a beach in Andalusia; the one on the right-hand page was taken on the Eisbach River right in the heart of Munich.

Long-legged insects are equally gratifying for creating diagonal compositions. I have never had so much time to work with such a subject as I did when I came across a voracious praying mantis in southern France: the predator spent nearly an hour feasting on this grasshopper.

Star Shapes Yet another way for artists to incorporate diagonal lines into their images is to rely on a network of lines radiating outward to the borders of the image area. The "spokes" of such a design can be either regularly or irregularly spaced—the latter of which is often more interesting. It's usually easier to position the plexus of the diagonals at the center of the photo, but moving it away from the middle often produces more exciting results because the lengths of the individual diagonal strands will vary. A network of branches dusted with freshly fallen snow is an ideal subject for this type of composition.

Forked Objects that fan out or split off are natural candidates for compositions relying on diagonal lines. Forked lines spread out and build tension with the rectangular photographic area. The photo of a splayed tree trunk on the facing page serves as an attractive example of this phenomenon.

The above photo of the split birch trunk has a similar-but-different effect. It is effective not because the trunk stands out as a positive element in front of white snow, but rather as a negative element in front of dark, similarly forked rock structure.

Breaking the Rules Avoiding situations in which prominent lines run parallel to the image border is one of the basic rules of image design, but these photographs show that a deliberate departure from the rules has its place when the subject matter calls for something a little different.

One could imagine a photo of a headboard with more tension, but this particular composition (above) retains an appropriate level of peace and calm. The placidity is disturbed only slightly by the off-center lamp and the wrought-iron flourishes.

It's early in the morning at Lac de la Maix in the High Vosges (right-hand page). Everything is still and the water of the lake is as smooth as glass. Nothing disturbs the enchantment of the scene. What is the best way to capture the mood of this moment? Perhaps a composition that features the lake's edge running diagonally across the entire image? Probably not—the style would not suit the subject in this case. In contrast, setting up the trees and lakeshore parallel to the boundaries of the image area is a much more relevant composition and one that captures the ambience that the photographer experienced on site.

We hope you enjoyed reading this excerpt.

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