

Composition

Photography is about seeing. The camera's mechanical processes: aperture, image sensor, light meter, and white balancing all aim to replicate what the human eye perceives. It is to the benefit of the photographer to understand his or her equipment so that the machine may be manipulated to produce the specific vision of the photographer. That said, cameras these days can generally make very decent exposures with out any input from the operator (photographer). One thing cameras will never truly be able to achieve, however, is an understanding of subject matter, or the ability to comprehend the emotional significance human beings associate with imagery.

Each photograph holds meaning - some more than others - but all inform the viewer in some way. Photography has often been associated with documentation. It records a moment in time and this has lead to a notion of truth telling. With the emergence of digital technologies the "camera doesn't lie" notion no longer has any relevance. However photography is still unique in its ability to capture, in incredible detail, imagery similar to what our eyes perceive.

Unlike the human experience, which is one long drama played out over time,; each photograph is a small theatrical experience unto itself. Though a photograph originated from a specific moment in time it is not bound to that moment. Divorced from its context, the photograph tells its own story using only the objects, expressions and actions frozen inside the frame. The ordering of content within the frame is composition. Effective composition catches the eye, and holds its interest. It directs the viewer's gaze through out the frame, and discourages the eye from wandering from the unfolding visual story.

The Frame

Every Photographic image is bound by a frame. In the case of digital cameras the frame is defined by the dimensions of the image sensor that captured the image. The frame is a stage. The imagery that it contains can be thought of as a theatrical performance. The story to be told is up to the photographer.

Though it shares many of the same general aesthetic considerations as painting or any other visual medium, composition is approached differently in photography. In painting or drawing the artist starts with a blank "canvas" and he or she must construct a composition – elements must consciously be added. In photography the process is reversed. The photographer is faced with an overwhelming amount of material and must consciously remove from the frame anything he or she feels distracts from the subject (visual point of interest) and the story to be told (the composition).

Orientation

The frame is set with a specific width and height. This is fixed. At the most basic level of composition the photographer must decide the orientation of the frame: *Vertical*, or *Horizontal*.

Angle of View

Furthermore the photographer is in control of the angle (point) of view for the image. Don't underestimate the impact of point of view! The same subject shot at different angles assumes very different meanings to the viewer. Not only do many objects look very different from various angles, but there are hierarchical implications to the position of the viewer expressed by the angle of view.

Check Your Edges

As mentioned before effective composition catches the viewer's gaze and directs its movement within the bounds of the frame. It is important therefore to be conscious of how elements within the composition interact with the edges of the frame. There is a sense of anxiety produced by important visual components within an image being to near to the edge of a composition. They draw attention to the edge of the frame - distracting from the composition within. Furthermore compositional elements, namely lines, guide the viewer's eye. Carelessly composed, they can lead the eye the edge of the frame and out of the composition. The viewer's gaze is similarly led in the direction of the subject's gaze. This is true for any subject with eyes, whether it be a dog or a human being. The same is true for action within the frame. If a subject is moving, it is important to position that subject with space to move inside the frame. The viewer instinctively looks to see where the subject is going and if it immediately leads out of the frame their eye will follow.

Foreground/Background and Positive/Negative Space

Depth within the frame is broken into foreground (close to the camera) and background (receding from the camera infinitely). These terms are generally reference points in relation to the subject(s) or point(s) of interest within the composition. Interplay between foreground and background can lead to dynamic images. At times however it is desirable to isolate a subject, such as in portraiture. In such an instance you do not want the background to compete for the viewer's attention. One frequent compositional error known as a "Merger" refers to the inadvertent merging of a subject with a background object, such as a person's head and a telephone pole behind it. In three dimensions these two objects have no association with one another, but compressed into a two dimensional plane they become undeniably distracting as a single shape.

Additionally, the balance of the subject(s) within the frame is very important. The notion of balance is a complicated one, with many considerations. All rules are made to be broken, but a very basic rule of compositional balance, and a good starting point for beginners and photographic experts alike, is referred to as the **Rule of Thirds**. The frame is divided into three equal segments, both vertically and horizontally, creating a grid of nine rectangular sections. These 1/3rd lines become guides for positioning the subject or key points of interest within the frame. The notions of balance and symmetry are not synonymous. Though the "Rule of Thirds" dictates that the subject be placed off center, it produces, visually speaking, a "balanced" and visually stimulating composition.

Everyone has their own story to tell, and a unique way of seeing the world. But we do share visual similarities with one another and as social beings we need to communicate. Like language, images exist to aid communication between the photographer and the audience. Whether adhered to absolutely or ignored intentionally, it behooves the photographer to become familiar with the visual language. What follows is a break down of the visual elements that describe all imagery, and the principles used to apply these elements.

ART ELEMENTS

(The Sensory Qualities of an Artwork; Your Tools)

1. LINE

A *Line* is a mark made by a pointed tool or brush and is often defined as a dot in motion from point A to point B. It has length and width, but its width is very small compared to its length. A line is created by the mark of a tool like a pencil and often suggests *movement* in an artwork. Variety in the thickness of lines creates surface interest. Some lines are thick; some are thin; and some are both thick and thin.

2. SHAPE

A *Shape* is a two-dimensional area that is contained within an implied line, or is identified because of color or value changes. Shapes have two-dimensions, length and width, and can be *geometric* (like a triangle or a sphere) or *organic* (free-form like a flower). *Design* or *Composition* in short is the planned arrangement of shapes. Think of a snake as a *Line* and a snake with its tail in its mouth as a *Shape*.

3. TEXTURE

Texture refers to the surface quality of the artwork. Textures are all around us in our environment and in nature – a gravel path, tree bark, a brick, a cat's fur, a burlap sack or a stucco wall. Clay and other sculpting mediums are particularly useful to the artist for creating interesting textured surfaces. *Visual Texture* is the artist's creation of the illusion of how something might feel if you touched it – a fur or hair for example. *Tactile Texture* is a texture you can actually feel and touch like sandpaper included in a collage. *Pattern Texture* is a surface disruption created by the repetition of lines, shapes, colors, values, etc.

4. COLOR

Color has three properties. The first is *Hue*, which is the name of the color. The second property of color is *Value*, which refers to the lightness or darkness of the hue. The third property of color is *Intensity*, which refers to the purity of the hue. An intense hue is a color that has not mixed with any other color.

5. VALUE

Value refers to shades of dark and light. Value changes help us to feel the shape of an object by showing us how light illuminates a form. Value can be used to create a focal area or a center of interest. Value can be used to show depth or to create the illusion of space in a two-dimensional (flat) artwork like a painting. A three dimensional artwork has genuine depth, and occupies real space.

6. FORM

Form describes *volume* and *mass* (the three-dimensional aspects of objects that occupy space and have weight). Forms can and should be viewed from many angles. When you hold a baseball, a shoe, or a small sculpture, you are aware of their curves, angles, indentations, extensions, and edges – their form.

7. SPACE

Space has width, height, and depth. A room or a box is a space. Using perspective and value, an artist can create the illusion of a space on a two-dimensional piece of paper.

ART PRINCIPLES

(The Formal Qualities of an art work; How and Where to Use the Tools)

• BALANCE

Balance refers to the distribution of visual weight in a work of art. Balance can be either *symmetrical* or *asymmetrical* in a work of art. When you cut an artwork in half and both sides appear to be about equal in shape, weight, value, and color, then the design is in symmetrical balance. Asymmetrical balance involves two sides that are different, but remain visually balanced.

• MOVEMENT

Visual *movement* is used by artists to direct the viewers' eyes through their work, often to focal areas. Such movement can be directed along lines, edges, shapes, and colors within the work. The eye moves most easily on paths of equal values.

• RHYTHM

Rhythm is the repetition of the elements – colors, shapes, lines, forms, spaces and textures. Variety is essential to keep rhythms exciting and active, and to avoid monotony. Movement and rhythm work together to create the visual equivalent of a musical beat. There are regular and irregular and staccato (abruptly disconnected) rhythms.

- **CONTRAST**

Contrast refers to opposites in values, colors, textures, shapes and other elements. Contrasts create visual excitement and add interest to the work. If all the art elements are the same, color for example, the result is monotonous and unexciting.

- **EMPHASIS**

Artists use *Emphasis* to create areas of focus in their work. Artists can emphasize color, value, shapes, or other art elements to achieve an area of emphasis. Various kind of contrast (black and white, for example) can be used to emphasize a center of interest or a focal point.

- **PATTERN**

Pattern uses the art elements in planned or random repetitions to enhance surfaces. Patterns often occur in nature, and artists use similar motifs to create patterns in their work. Pattern increases visual excitement by enriching surface interest. A plaid fabric is an example of the use of pattern.

- **UNITY**

Visual *Unity* is one of the most important aspects of effectively designed artwork and it is planned or recognized by the artist. Unity provides the cohesive quality that makes an artwork feel complete and finished. When all the elements in a work look as though they belong together, the artist has achieved unity. All the principles work together to create unity.