

Photography Basics: Introduction to Composition

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Composition

- Composition is the selection, arrangement and relationship of elements within the image.
- Over the years, artists have developed techniques to appeal to human perception (sometimes looked at as “rules”). Augmented by modern research.
- These “rules” can provide a starting place to strengthen the structure of an image.
- Don’t become a slave to them.
- The best composition is the one that works.

Our Focus on Composition

- Balance
- Framing and cropping
- Some of the guidelines
- Leading the eye

Visual Balance

- Striving for visual balance where elements feel comfortable within frame.
- Center of interest balanced with other elements.
- Or achieve desired tension.

Visual Balance



Visual Balance



Visual Balance



Framing

**First decision you make
Based on subject and image format**

- Horizontal – tranquility, depth
- Vertical – strength, action, height
- Square – uniform, symmetry, hard to use
- Panorama – relaxed and peaceful

Framing

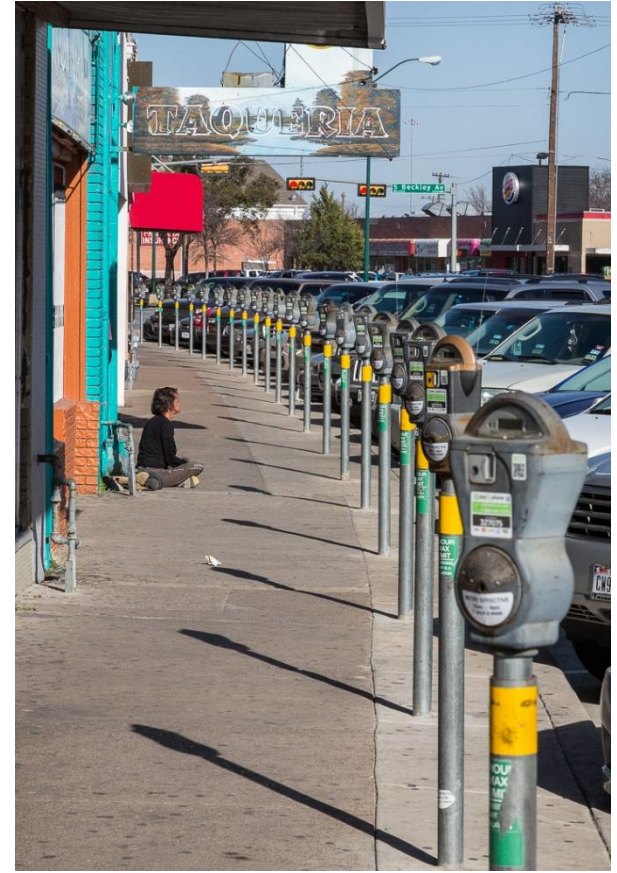
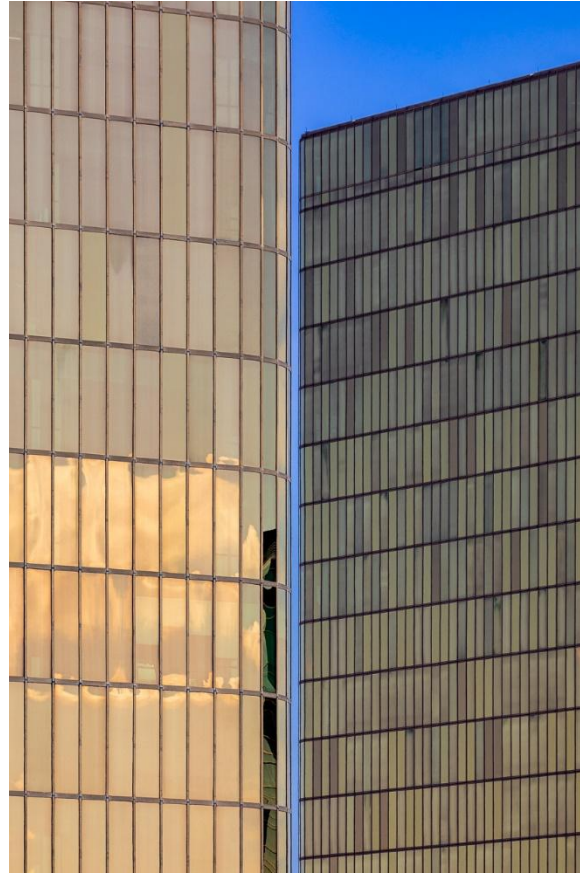
Horizontal or Vertical



Framing - Horizontal



Framing - Vertical



Cropping

- Refine framing with the crop
- Crop to accentuate image

Okay to work to standardized mat or paper

- Focus attention on the subject
- Correct alignment and distortion
- Remove competing elements and distractions

Cropping To Improve Framing

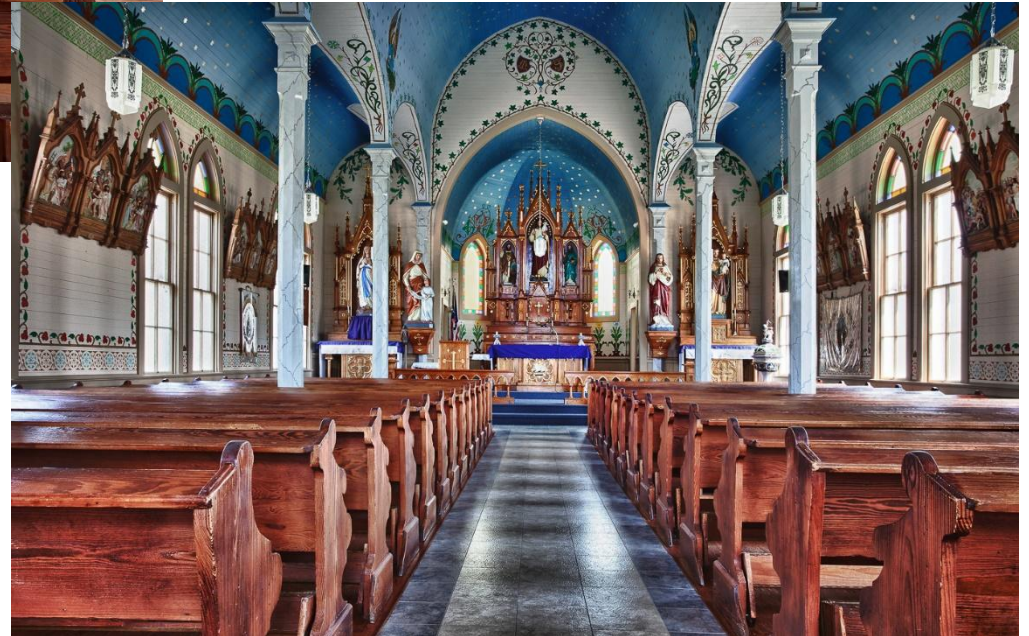


Cropping To Remove Distractions



Cropping

Straighten Image Within Frame



Some Time Tested Guidelines ("Rules")

- Fill the frame
- Keep it simple
- Rule of thirds, golden mean, sweet spot, power point...
- Foreground, middle-ground, background
- Lines- horizon, leading, direction, straight, curved, implied
- Perspective – vanishing point
- Remove distractions and competing elements
- Blur the foreground or background to separate
- Watch the edges
- Odd numbers
- Repetition
- Textures and patterns
- Frame within a frame
- Space to move or look into
- Camera angle or vantage point
- Control perspective and distortion
- Negative space
- Burning background and edges

Fill the Frame

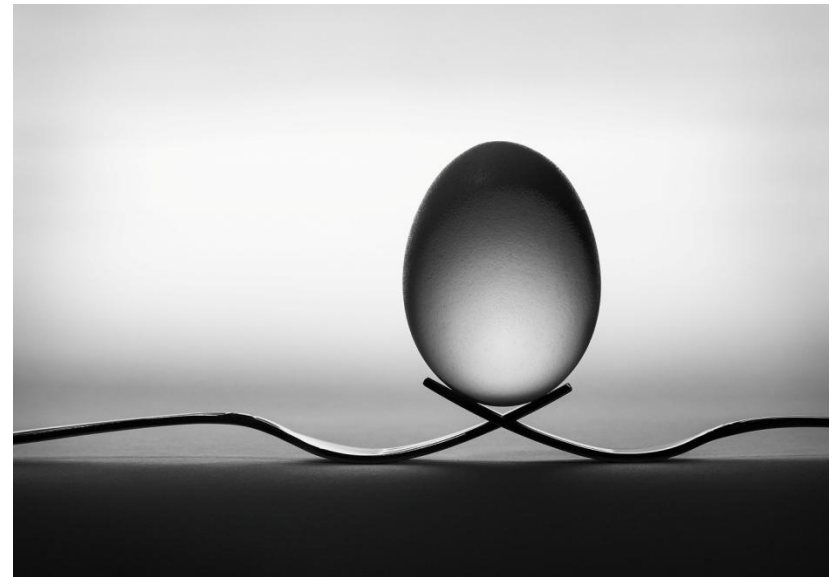


Keep It Simple



Not so simple that it won't hold viewer's attention. Not so complex that viewer gives up.

Focus attention and remove distractions



Move Subject Off Center

Rule of thirds, golden mean,
sweet spot, power point...

- Dynamic
- Provides sense of balance
- Symmetry can be static

Rule of Thirds



Rule of Thirds



Foreground, Middle-ground, Background

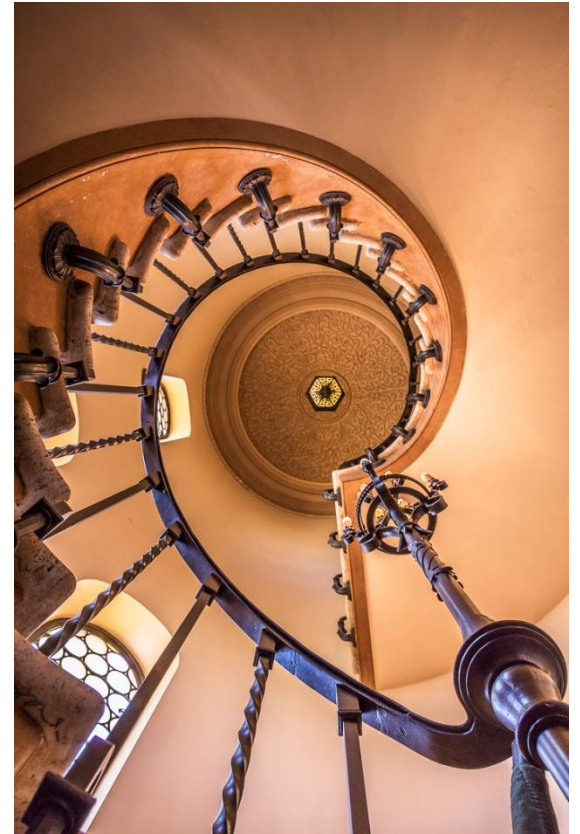
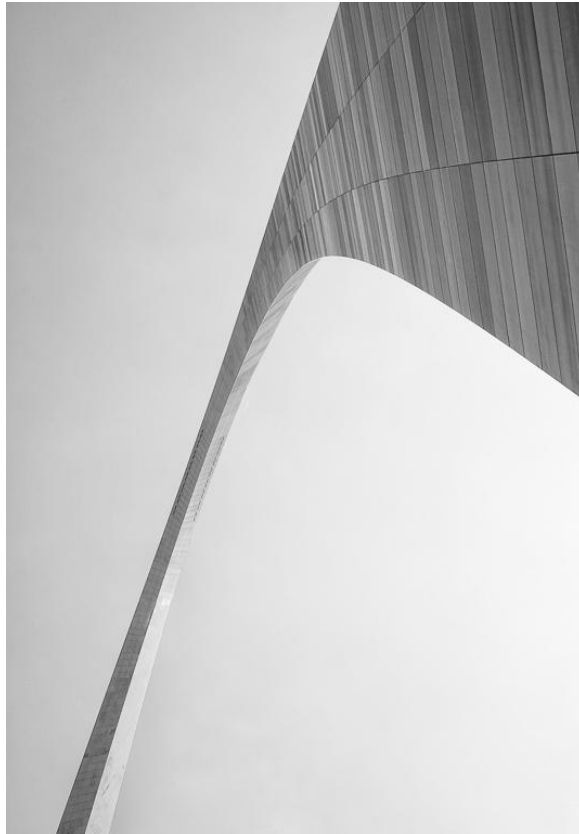


Adds depth
Key construct in landscape
photography

Lines

- Horizontal – horizon, baseline, restful, smooth
- Horizon Line – dominant graphic element, divides the frame
- Vertical – strength, height
- Diagonal – dynamic, active, leads eye
- Leading Lines – provides path for eye to follow. Entry into and exit out of image
- Curved – movement, flowing, gentle, carries the eye
- Implied Lines – two points form a line

Lines and Curves



Implied Lines



Horizon Line

- Rule of thirds – often used, generally safe
- Low – emphasizes sky, expansive
- High – emphasizes foreground, heaviness
- Centered – can be static
- Generally want horizon level

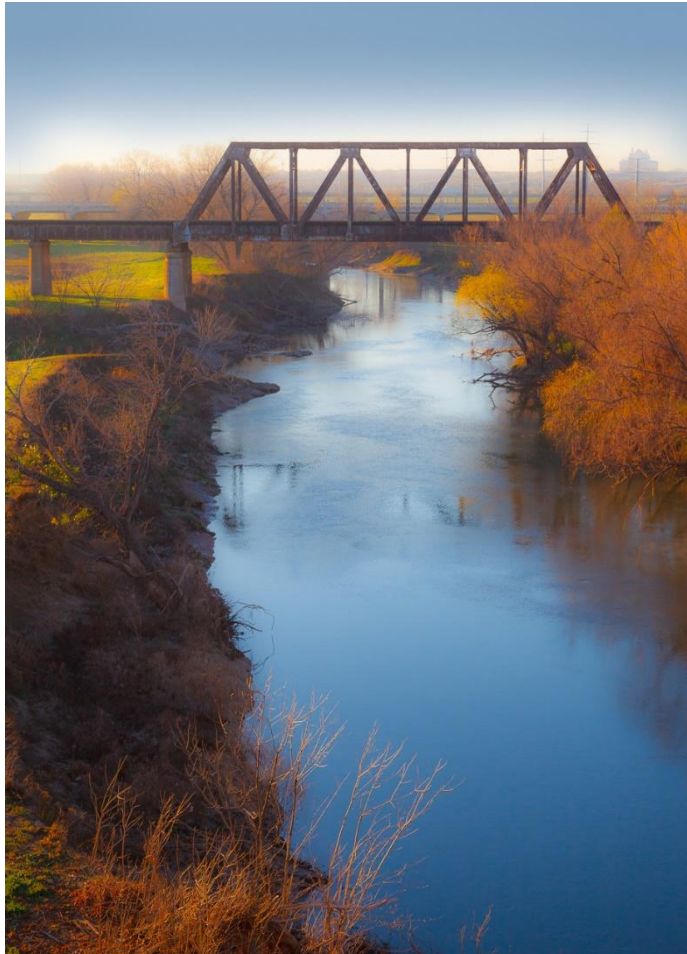
Horizon Line – Rule of Thirds



Horizon Line Low Emphasizes Sky



Horizon Line High Emphasizes Foreground



Horizon Line – Level



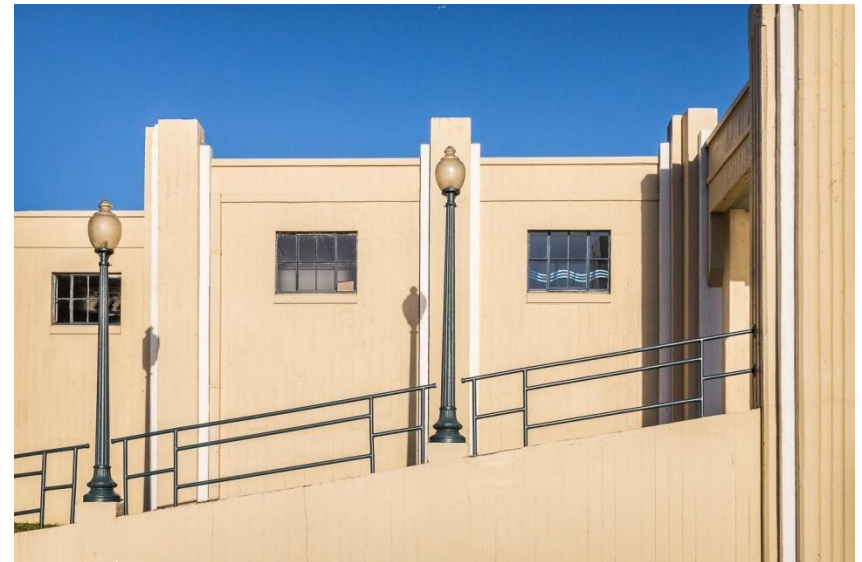
Leading Lines

- Direct the viewer's eye deeper into the composition.
- Create visual engagement that encourages viewer to explore the image.
- Include straight lines, curves or a progression of objects from foreground to background.

Entry and Exit



Blocked entry with easy exit



Path to enter with exit blocked

Entry and Exit



Easy Exit



Easy entry

Leading Lines

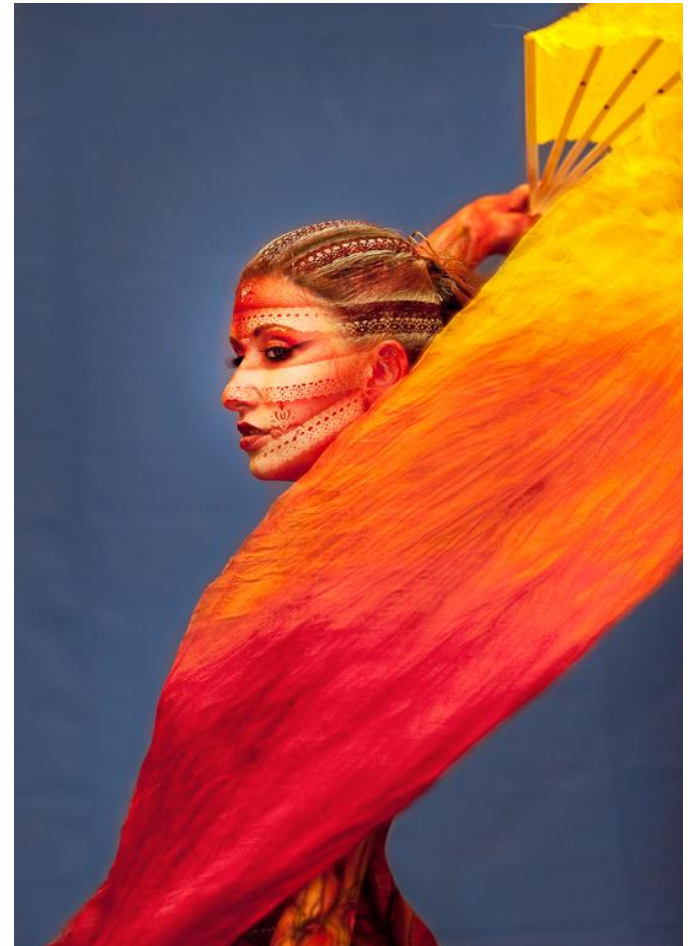


Curves Can Guide Viewer

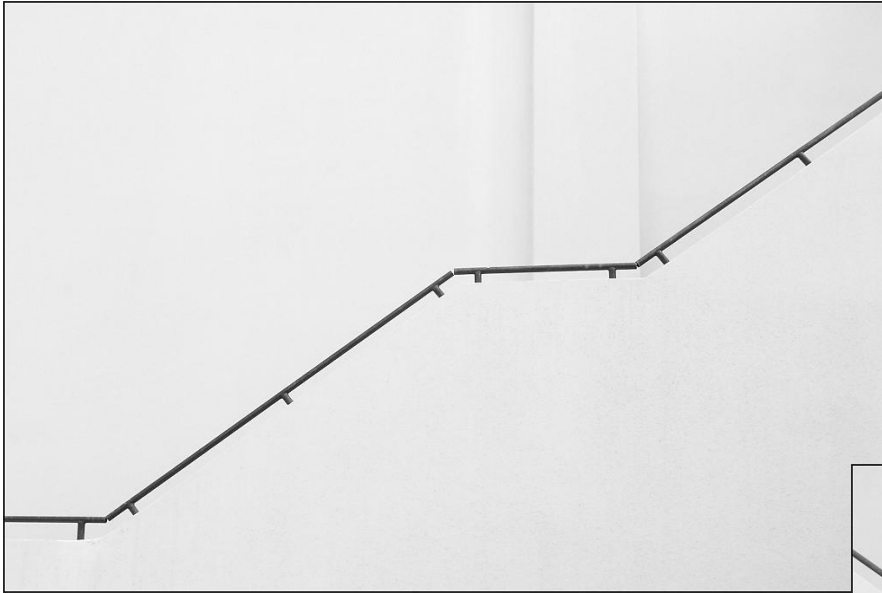


Diagonal Lines

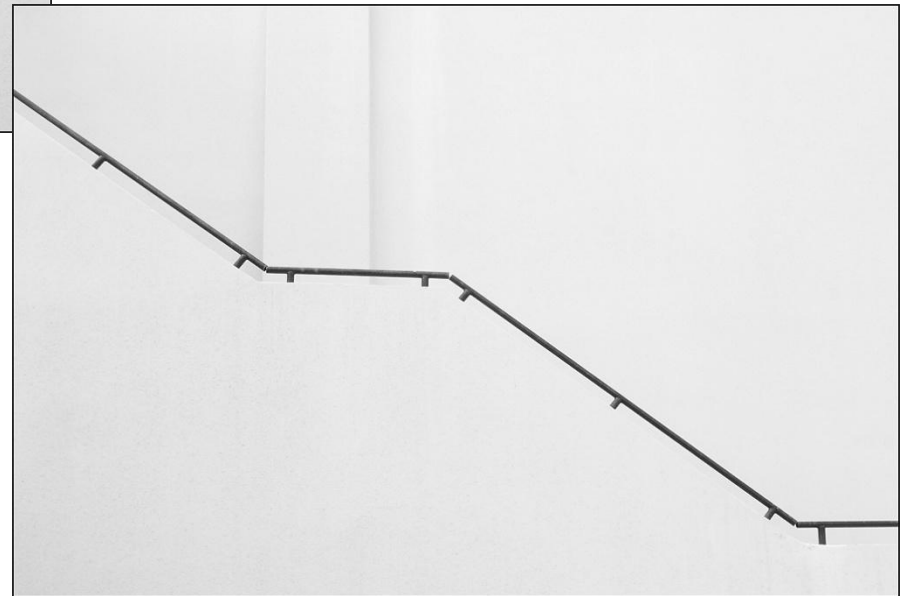
Imply energy and motion



Diagonals



Upward – Lead In



Downward – Lead Out

Perspective – Vanishing Point



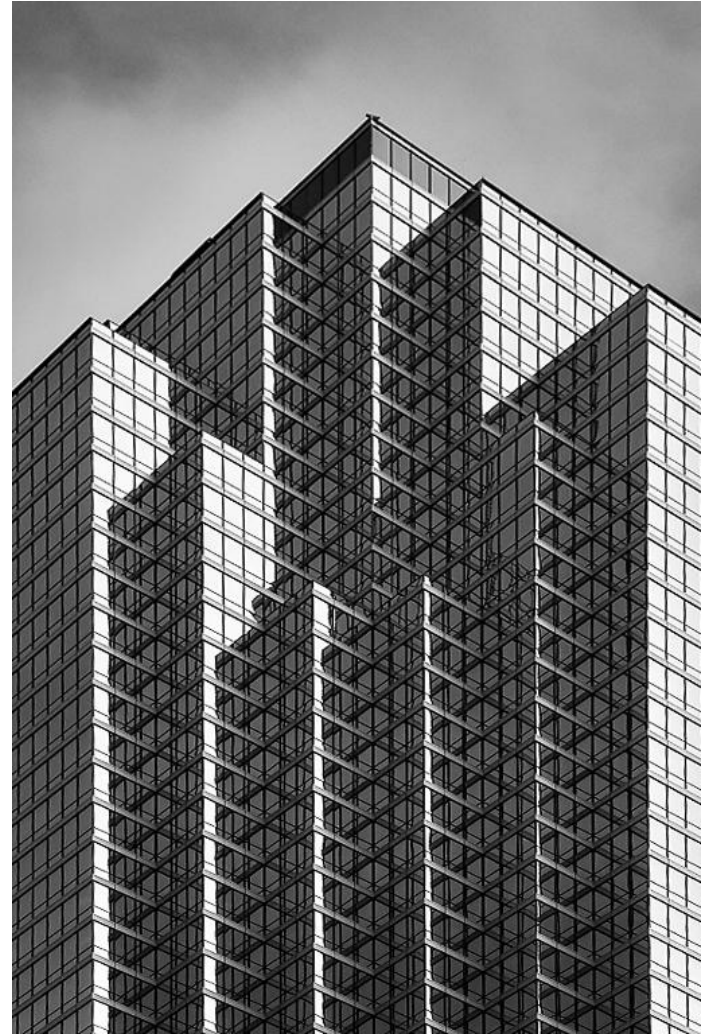
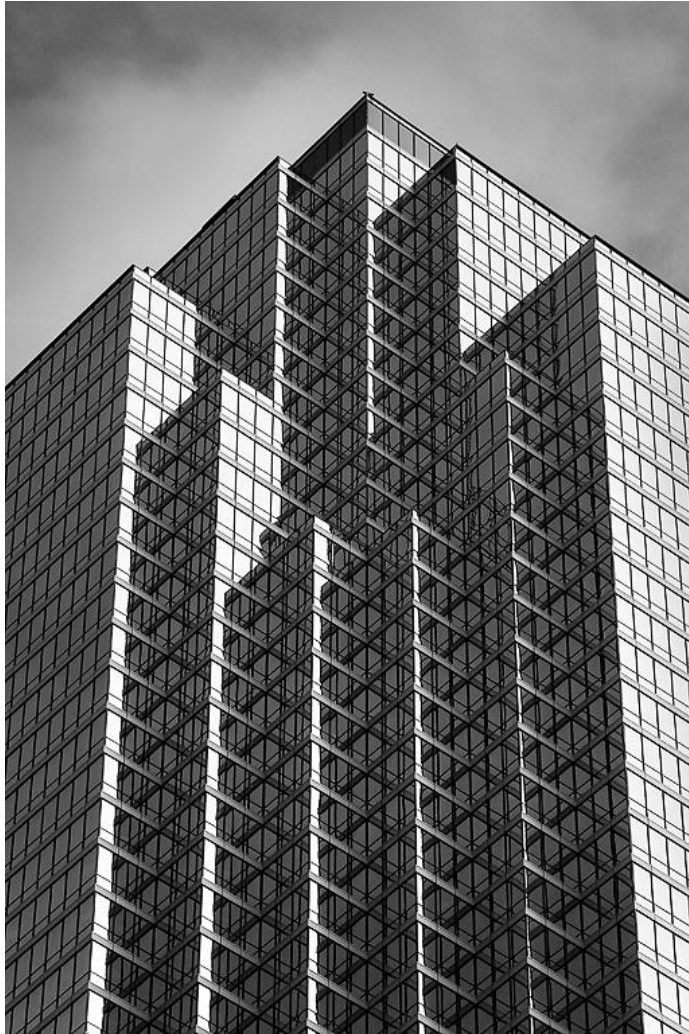
Perspective – Vanishing Point



Control Perspective Keystoning and Distortion



Control Perspective Keystoning and Distortion



Odd Numbers



Repetition



Objects



Forms

Frame Within a Frame



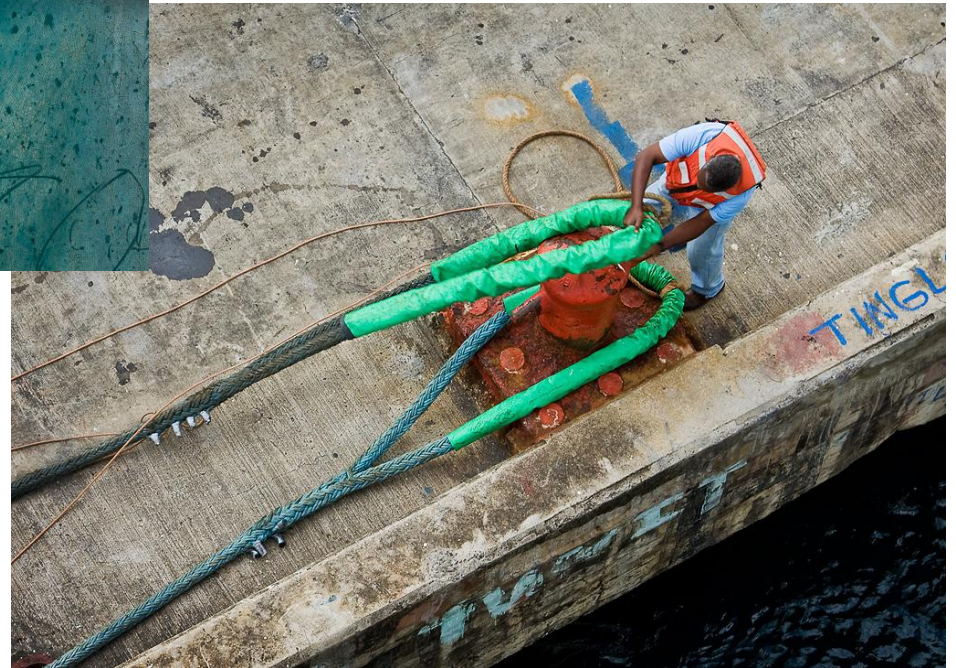
Space to Move Into



Space to Look Into



Camera Angle-Height or Vantage Point



Negative Space



Negative Space



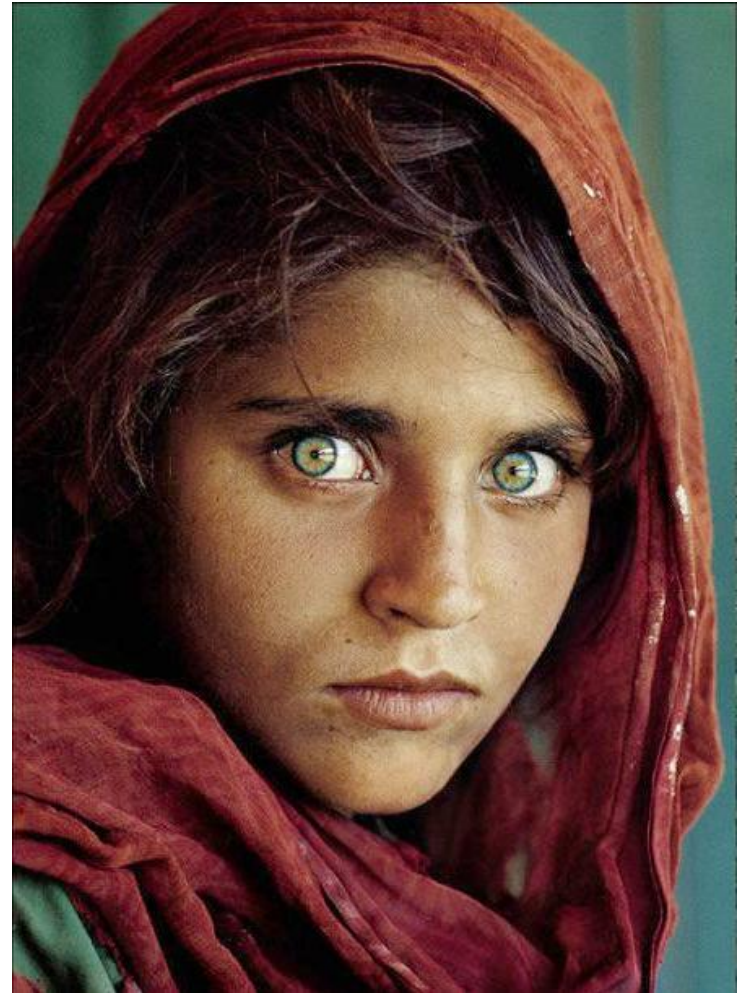
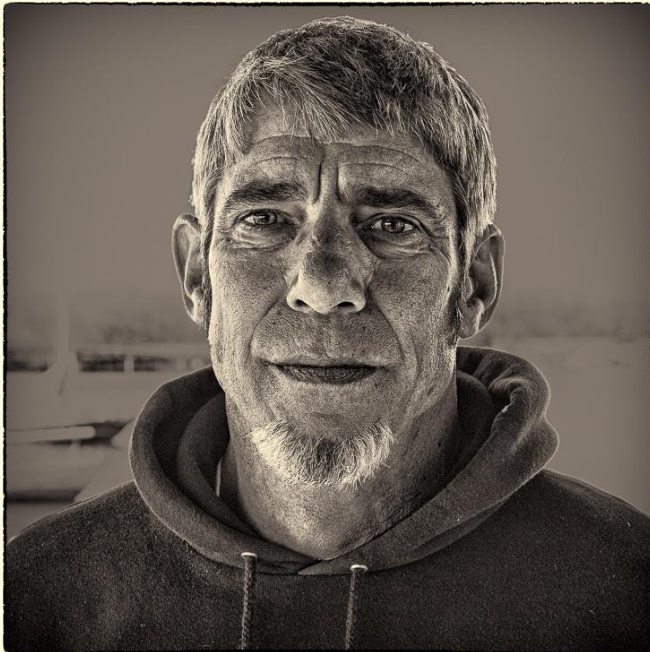
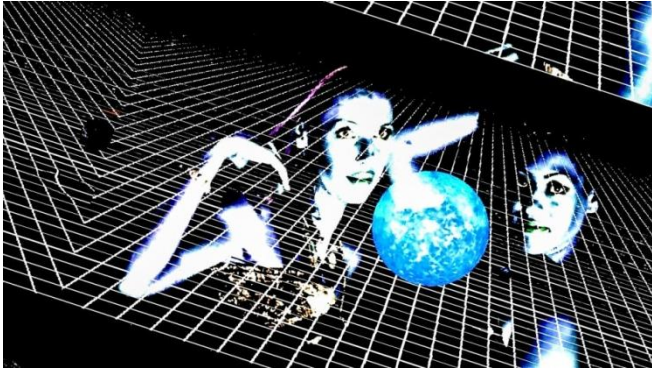
Drawing Attention

- Attractors draw our attention to the subject *and to distractions*
- Subject based attractors
 - Human faces and eyes
 - Animal faces
 - Text
- Technique driven attractors
 - In focus
 - Bright
 - Colorful
 - High contrast
 - More detail
 - Lines and curves
- Attractors often used in combination

Faces



Eyes



Photos by
Steve Evens (upper left)
Steve McCurry (right)

Animals



Text

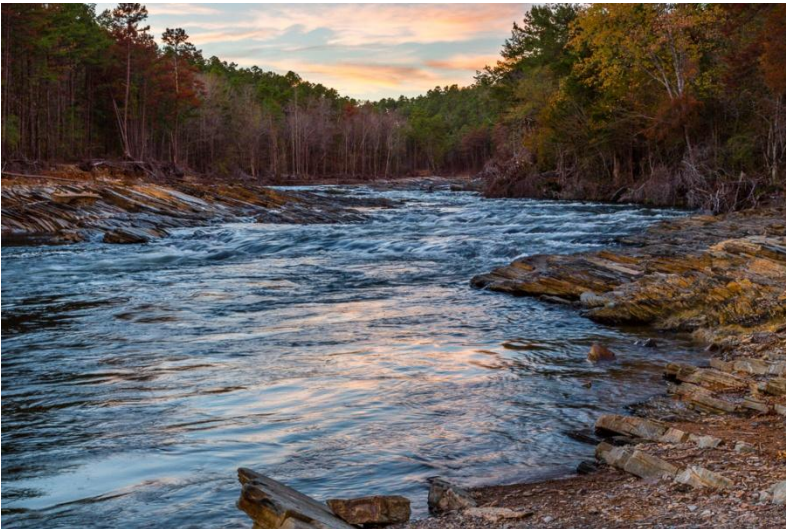


Bright

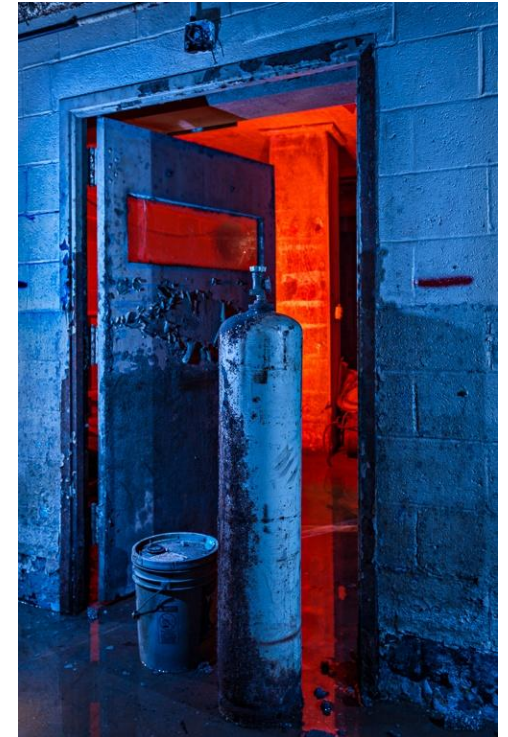


Bright spots tend to draw attention while we tend to ignore dark areas.

Highlights enhance images.



Colorful



Warm tones read like bright spots when placed against a cool background

High Contrast



Detail



Blur the Background to Separate Control DOF



Sculpting with Light

- Use light and dark to direct eye.
- Lighten element to draw attention and take viewer there.
- Main subject should generally be the brightest.
- Darken elements to deemphasize.
- Burn edges to keep eye within the image.
- Brain does not see gradients so can use soft edged brushes or gradients to adjust brightness.

Sculpting with Light



Sculpting with Light



Burning Edges

Focus Attention on Subject



Distractions

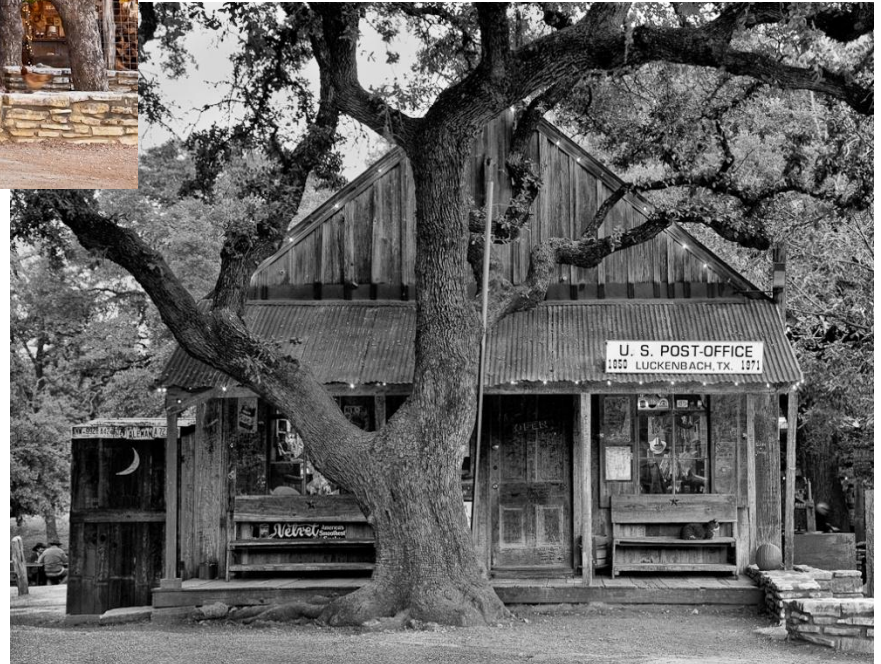
Unwanted Attractors!

- Attractors that pull the eye from the subject become distractions and cause visual confusion
- Remove or deemphasize distracting elements – bright spots, background, borders...
- Busy or competing elements – simplify, isolate, remove...

Distracting Elements Remove



Busy with Competing Elements



Change Palette and Crop

Bright Spots



Bright Spots



Better

Edges Are Special

- Our visual system is wired to see edges and objects with sharp contrast.
- We are drawn to features near edges and in corners.
 - Attractors
 - Mergers and near merges
 - Amputations
- Pay special attention to objects close to edges. These are emphasized, draw attention, create tension and imbalance.
- More apt to see edge problems in final image than in viewfinder – unless you look for them.

Mergers

Near Merge



Space to Breathe

Merger



Amputations



Amputation



Better

Where to Crop?



Merger



Space to Breathe



Purposeful Crop

Leading the Eye

- The eye is drawn to attractors – good and bad
- Use attractors to lead viewer
- Sculpt with light to draw attention or deemphasize
- Deemphasize or remove distractions
- Pay special attention to the edges

Parting Thoughts

- Composition is the selection, arrangement and relationship of elements within the image.
- Over the years, artists have developed techniques to appeal to human perception (sometimes looked at as “rules”).
- We are often in search of a formula which can be counted on to make good images. This, of course, is an illusion!
- There are no absolutes for good composition, only guides and extremely flexible principles that may help us to see more sensitively instead of using a hit or miss process.

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