Composing Good Photographs

CS 178, Spring 2011

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“There are no rules for good photographs, there are only good photographs.”

- Ansel Adams
Outline

- the pictorial elements of photography
  - line and form
  - pattern and texture
  - tone and color

- pictorial design,
  i.e. the design in the 2D picture frame
  - symmetry and balance
  - framing
  - common compositions

- things we won’t talk about today
  - situation, storyline, viewpoint, field of view, focus, lighting, exposure, color balance, post-processing
Learning good composition

- there are no rules
  - there are only tools and heuristics
- like describing wine with words, they don’t mean much
  - they merely give us a framework for thinking about issues
- the best way to learn is to take lots of pictures
  - think about the issues as you take them
  - critique your photographs, and have others critique them
- look at good photographs by others
  - most useful if you’ve also tried the same thing yourself

In response to one student’s clever question about how I would summarize this lecture if I had to do so while standing on one foot, I might say that I hope to convey the message that great photographs are seldom accidents. Good photographers think about pictorial design. You should too.
Lines as a pictorial element

Ansel Adams, Aspens, 1958
Arrangement of lines

(Freeman Patterson)
Lines as a decorative element

(Howard@photodelusions.wordpress.com)
Lines that lead your eye to the subject

Hiromu Kira, The Thinker, 1930

(London)
Lines that lead your eye to the subject

- the lines don’t need to be man-made, or smooth

(Bryan Peterson)
Raphael, 
Galatea, 1513
(Gardner)
Form - lines with meaning

(Bryan Peterson)

first shot

second shot
Form - lines with meaning

Edward Weston, Pepper No. 30, 1930
Georgia O’Keeffe, Grey Line, 1923
Shape - readily identifiable form

- backlighting draws attention to shape

(Bryan Peterson)
Shape - readily identifiable form
Pattern - repeated forms

(Bryan Peterson)

first shot

second shot
Pattern - repeated forms

Abhaneri Stepwell, Rajasthan, India
Frederick Evans,
The Sea of Steps -
Wells Cathedral, 1903
Rhythm - a looser kind of pattern

(Freeman Paterson)
Texture:
fine patterns

• early product of f/64 club
• sharp focus, smooth papers
• reaction against Pictorialists

Ansel Adams,
Boards and
Thistles, 1932
Texture

- co-founder of f/64 club with Ansel Adams

Edward Weston, Dunes, Oceano, 1936
Frank Lloyd Wright, Fallingwater, 1934

(photographs by Galen Frysinger)
Lighting as an aid to pictorial design

Fluor Garduño,
Basket of Light, Guatemala,
1989
Yousuf Karsh, Winston Churchill, 1941

Rembrandt van Rijn, Self Portrait, 1660
Yousuf Karsh, Winston Churchill, 1941

Rembrandt van Rijn, Portrait of Nicolaes Ruts, 1631
Tone as a pictorial element

Robert Mapplethorpe
Color as a pictorial element

(London)

(Hedgecoe)

warm

cool

pictorial
Color as an accent

(Hedgecoe)
Encircled by color

(Hedgecoe)
Giovanni Bellini, Altarpiece of S. Zaccaria, Venice, 1505
Color as rhythmic accent

(Hedgecoe)
Peter Paul Rubens, The Judgement of Paris, 1636
Diego Velázquez, Las Meninas, 1656
Pictorial design

- symmetry and balance
- framing
- common compositions
Symmetry

Arcade in Red Fort, Delhi, 2008

(Marc Levoy)
Symmetry

Place du Carrousel, Paris, 2009
Asymmetry

- off-center placement of main subject underscores the asymmetry of the architecture

Montmartre, 2009

Rajasthan, 2008
Balance

- symmetrical background + dynamic, unbalanced foreground

(Freeman Paterson)
Jacque-Louis David, Oath of the Horatii, 1784
Framing

(Marc Levoy)
More dynamic framing

- shadow edges complete the frame
- slashing diagonals create tension

Dennis Stock,
James Dean,
1955

(London)
The picture frame

(Bryan Peterson)

first shot

second shot
Raphael, School of Athens, 1511
Common compositions

- upright equilateral triangle
  - calm, stability, power
- diagonal
  - tension, discord, dynamism
- S-curve
  - motion, sensuality
  - eye flow
- rule of thirds

In response to an insightful question from a student about whether this lecture would have a different message, or whether this list of compositional ideas would be different, if I illustrated the lecture with examples from modern art rather than pre-20th century art, I conjecture that modern art has contributed additional ideas, but not banished the ones on this list. Later in the course I’ll talk about 20th century photography, interleaved with examples of modern art. Let’s see if my conjecture proves right.
Raphael, Madonna with the Goldfinch, 1506

Titian, Madonna of the Pesaro Family, 1526
Raphael, Madonna with the Goldfinch, 1506

Titian, Madonna of the Pesaro Family, 1526
Titian, Venus of Urbino, 1538
Titian, Venus of Urbino, 1538
Photographic examples

Edward Weston, Charis Wilson Nude, 1936
Photographic examples

- diagonal leading to her eye
- eye and shoulder use rule of thirds
- stems create frame within a frame
- partially hidden face creates mystery

Jimmy Sin
http://www.pbase.com/aloha_lavina/librodo_workshop_malaysia
Photographic examples

- diagonal leading to her eye
- eye and shoulder use rule of thirds
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- partially hidden face creates mystery

Jimmy Sin
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S-curve

large collection of articles about photographic composition

(photoinf.com)
S-curve

Ansel Adams, Tetons and Snake River, 1942
St. Teresa’s Church, Bodega, California

(Samuel Schulenburg)

(Jay Bergeson - converted to B&W)
Pictorial design

Ansel Adams, 1953

(John Shappell)
Alfred Hitchcock, The Birds (1963)

Potter’s Schoolhouse and St. Teresa’s Church, Bodega
Parting thoughts  (from Fredo Durand)

🔹 simplify your picture
  • avoid cluttered backgrounds

• reposition yourself
Parting thoughts

- simplify your picture
  - avoid cluttered backgrounds

- use a shallow depth of field
Parting thoughts

- simplify your picture
  - avoid cluttered backgrounds

- fix it in Photoshop
Parting thoughts

- simplify your picture
  - avoid cluttered backgrounds

- or leave it there!
Parting thoughts

- simplify your picture
  - avoid cluttered backgrounds
  - get close to your subject
Parting thoughts

- simplify your picture
  - avoid cluttered backgrounds
  - get close to your subject
  - fill the frame
Parting thoughts

- simplify your picture
  - avoid cluttered backgrounds
  - get close to your subject
  - fill the frame

- avoid compositional errors
  - don’t center objects needlessly
Parting thoughts

✧ simplify your picture
  • avoid cluttered backgrounds
  • get close to your subject
  • fill the frame

✧ avoid compositional errors
  • don’t center objects needlessly
  • keep the horizontal level, or make it wildly unlevel

(http://www.fotofinish.com/resources/centers/photo/takingpictures.htm)
Parting thoughts

- simplify your picture
  - avoid cluttered backgrounds
  - get close to your subject
  - fill the frame

- avoid compositional errors
  - don’t center objects needlessly
  - keep the horizontal level, or make it wildly unlevel
  - avoid accidental alignments

([http://www.fotofinish.com/resources/centers/photo/takingpictures.htm](http://www.fotofinish.com/resources/centers/photo/takingpictures.htm))
Parting thoughts

- simplify your picture
  - avoid cluttered backgrounds
  - get close to your subject
  - fill the frame
- avoid compositional errors
  - don’t center objects needlessly
  - keep the horizontal level
  - avoid accidental alignments
  - sweep the frame to check for trouble
    - cropped element, distracting object, non-parallel line
Fredo Durand  (MIT)

http://people.csail.mit.edu/fredo/Photos/Links/
Fredo Durand (MIT)

- [http://people.csail.mit.edu/fredo/Photos/Favorites/](http://people.csail.mit.edu/fredo/Photos/Favorites/)
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Matthew Scott  (Stanford Dev Biology),
Snowy Egret, Palo Alto Baylands
Susan McConnell (Stanford Biology),
Bull Elephant Seals, Año Neuvo State Park
Slide credits

✦ Fredo Durand