

# Composition Principles - Program Notes

Hank Erdmann, Presenter

**Premise:** I approach photography from the premise that my goal is to make art, not a document of a subject.

While my "subject" of usual choice is Nature and other subjects under natural light, my treatment be it traditional or non-traditional is whatever is needed to execute my vision.

In art, there is no right, no wrong; there are no rules. There are opinions. Ultimately, as to "Good" or "Bad", there are but two votes, mine as the Artist, and Yours as the Viewer

In today's digital world, based on the ease of learning exposure, if you can read a simple graph, you can master exposure, photographers are coming into classes with far great skill sets, including compositional skills...

This is true if for no other reason, based on the sheer amount of imagery we see daily. If I can teach some simple image construction concepts and more so, teach how we see, and how to make images for how people see...

Students will make better images sooner, and will pick up on and learn the finer points of composition easier and more quickly.

## The Two Sides of Composition

Conceptual & Psychological

Mechanical

There are Mechanical and Psychological Sides to Composition

While mechanical things can be easily described and taught the Psychological side is less easy to describe in words and one has to think on a more conceptual basis.

"It's about learning to "see" – learning to be aware of things around you, seeing things you have never noticed before, using your eyes all the time, not just when you pick up your camera. It's about being conscious of your subject matter and your treatment of it - and what it means to you and those who view your pictures of it. ~ *Freeman Patterson*

"Discovery is not accidental. We discover only when we make ourselves ready to receive" ~ *Freeman Patterson*

"Too often, people look at my pictures and say, "Gee, you must have some good lenses." Indeed I do, but not once - regardless of how much I plead with them to do so - have my lenses gone out and taken a photograph." ~ *John Shaw*

"It seems to me that the heart of photography has, perhaps paradoxically, very little to do with cameras and technology"  
~ *David Ward*

Betty Edwards book; "***Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain***" A landmark, eye opening book on the human brain and creativity, and Right and Left brain thinking, a MUST have for any serious artist

More suggested reading; David Ward's Books The BEST books you will find on the conceptual side of composition... not the only books but must have.

## The Conceptual or Psychological Side of Composition

First, some tenants to work by...illustrated by quotes from great artists

"You can't believe your eyes, when your imagination is out of focus" ~ *Mark Twain*

"There is nothing worse than a sharp image with a fuzzy idea" ~ *Ansel Adams*

"Nothing can be more useful to a man than determination not to be hurried." ~ *Henry David Thoreau*

"When you go out to photograph; "Expect nothing, be ready for anything" ~ *Joel Meyerowitz*

Hallmarks of Good Images

Awareness

"I love landscape but I loved the land first, not just those bits that fit neatly into the camera's frame. This affair began long before I thought to make landscape photographs." ~ *David Ward*

"My aim is to make images with my subject not of my subject." ~ *David Ward*

Learn to Trust Yourself

Photograph with your feelings as much as with your eyes. If it feels right and it looks right, ignore so called "rules"!

Inner Voice / Intuition

"If it works, it works ... If it doesn't, it doesn't! ~ *W. Perry Conway*

Seeing With More than Your Eyes

Photograph What you Feel

We need to communicate emotion, feel and mood through our art. We're reaching for Transcendence; Something beyond simple description of subject or scene.

"Technical perfection alone is not enough; it will never be inspirational, never make another human's heart beat faster, never bring a tear to another's face." ~ *David Ward*

We've all seen, AND MADE... technically good and compositionally competent images that fail to arouse any emotion or response from our audience. Why does an image lack emotion and soul? Just what is it that's missing?

## Pre-Visualization

Learn to "See" in Your Mind's Eye What the Scene is Making You Feel

I saw these bright yellow Cottonwood leaves and knew they would have great visual power but had to be the emphasis of the image but the business of the water would take focus away from the leaves, the water had to smooth out.

I "pre-visualized" what the water would look like slowed down and worked out a solution to create my vision.

## Simplification

If I had to select just two pieces of this show that will improve your work more than any other, they would be this piece Simplification and Background Control

"A great analogy I've usurped from a friend (Larry West) is: Imagine you are writing. A bad photograph is a paragraph. A good photograph is a sentence. And a great photograph is a phrase. Unfortunately, what I see in workshops often are novels. The temptation is to stick everything in." ~ *John Shaw*

Overall "snap shot" of the scene with distractions on both sides, the image does not emphasize the color elements and stature of the canyon walls.

"Simplicity is the ultimate form of sophistication" ~ Leonardo da Vinci

Economy of Line is taught in many arts and the hallmark of cartoonists and in many Asian painting traditions. A Chinese proverb states; "Yi dào bi bu dào" which roughly translates; "Idea present, brush may be spared performance"

The Great Eliot Porter was famous for making images that were described as making "order out of chaos" He would take a class to the edge of a forest and tell them there was an image there and to see if they could recognize it. He would set up the camera, compose the image and prove his point!

With simplicity we remove any ambiguity and any confusion, as to what the center of interest is.

If you leave the question of why you took the picture in the picture, your image is doomed to fail.

## A Sense of Mystery

Mysteries lie all around us, even in the most familiar things, waiting only to be perceived." ~ Wynn

Bulloch

Ask a question with your image and you create interest. (answers are not required!)

Mystery can be created in many ways. But all mystery in a photograph is the un-answered question posed by some element or elements in the image. The answer however is only what the imagination of the viewer suggests and then often only in a subliminal manner.

We can add mystery / question by making a line, usually a trail, creek, river, path, road, etc. leave or enter an image from within the image. When we do this we ask "where does that go, where does that come from?" Sometimes we can ask both questions, that of going or coming in the same image!

We can add mystery / question by making suggesting a coming event or change or the passing of or impending passing of time." We can ask how long will it be or how long will it last, how long before something happens?

We can add mystery / question by making abstract images that suspend belief or reality. If we leave a sense of reality in an abstract we change the strength of the question but simplify it with subtleness

## Beauty

Beauty...For Beauty's Sake

Why do we Photograph? That answer is personal and varied in each of us. For me, I find most things in the world that inspire me to be beautiful, and/or interesting. As an artist, I want to share my viewpoint of things and their beauty itself. Second, my drawing skills lend themselves to photography!

"It seems so utterly naive that landscape, not that of the pictorial school, is not considered of "social significance" when it has a far more important bearing on the human race of a given locale than excrescences called cities." ~ Edward Weston

"The cost of digital technology is the loss of belief." ~ Edgar Callert

"The promotion of technology in photography has led to the commonly held belief that there is some transfer of creative responsibility from the photographer to the equipment." ~ David Ward

"Like Cooking, photography is a matter of taste, a matter of relative not absolute value. Meaning in photography, beyond denotation, inhabits a range of values, as it does in all other forms of visual representation. Photographs are never wholly mirrors nor wholly windows; they are more akin to semi-silvered glass upon which a ghostly representation of the photographer's intent is mingled with a reflection of our own concerns and through which we see an incomplete image of the world." ~ David Ward

Edward Weston wrote that he started to photograph because of "amazement at subject matter"

## Enhancing Element

The "Enhancing Element" is an added touch, that little something that adds impact to the image far beyond its size and notice, it is usually subliminal.

## Conceptually

Do we "Take" or "Make" Photographs? To me "Take" connotes a negative act. It is almost as if I were taking something that does not belong to me, as if the images were all there, laying around. At best, laying there waiting for some artist, any artist to pick up and show as his/her own, at worst, an act of stealing away with them claiming them as my own. This gives some credence to native beliefs that taking their picture was akin to stealing their soul.

To me "Make" connotes an act of creating. Making something, whether it be art or some other item through personal human industry, is a very positive act. The human ability to create and appreciate art to stir, settle and nourish our soul, is uniquely ours in the animal kingdom, at least to the level that we use art.

Going back to the act of taking...we can attach some positive values to the act. By "Taking" inspiration and wonderment, from our subject, we glorify, celebrate and promote its beauty and wondrous nature.

"My aim is to make images with my subject not of my subject." ~ David Ward

## What do I look for?

Contrast and only contrast.

I look for a subject that I can separate from its background.

Contrast is often thought of as differences in light and dark, but it is so much more

Contrast can be differences in color

- Warm versus cool colors

- Warm versus warm colors

- Cool versus cool colors

Contrast can be differences in texture

Contrast can be differences in pattern

Contrast can be differences in physicality

Now that we have a good understanding on how the people that view our images see, how they sub-consciously receive visual information, and how we the artist can use various image elements to capture the viewer's interest, we can turn our attention to the mechanical side of composition.

## The Mechanics of Composition

The First Rule of Photographic Composition: **THERE ARE NO RULES!**

Photographic "Weasel Words"

These Words Should NEVER be Used in Discussing Art; never (except in above sentence): Always, Rule, Absolute, Must, "Correct Exposure"

There is JUST ONE Exception

Your Background MUST; Compliment and not compete with the center of interest or distract the viewer

### Background Control

Your background is certainly as important, if not more important than your subject.

If your background competes with your subject, you'll have a snap shot, maybe a picture, but not art.

Yes, I know I said "No Rules". However, make your background problematic, and see if you get more compliments, oohs and ahhs, sales, whatever your success criteria is, with something like the image on the left or the one on the right!

Background Control is the function of four things:

Focal Length

- Inherent in shorter focal lengths is greater depth-of-field

- Inherent in longer focal lengths is shallower depth-of-field

- I use focal length to a large degree as a compositional tool and as a choice as to what perspective I want to use with a given subject or scene

Aperture

- For Landscape It matters greatly what the distance from the camera to the foreground is with regards to the aperture needed

  - A landscape with a near foreground will require more depth-of-field and a smaller aperture

  - A landscape with a foreground farther away will require less depth-of-field and an appropriate aperture for the image

- For close-up images need an aperture appropriate for the subject, it is often not a matter of shallow depth-of-field

- Intimate landscapes often require greater depth-of-field

- All genres of images can often benefit from medium apertures (I like  $f11$ ) and the use of focus slices

Distance from Focal Plane to Subject

- In close up imagery, the closer the camera gets to the subject, the more the background can be made to fall off in sharpness, but distance to the background will play a key roll

Distance from Subject to Background

- The longer this distance is, the easier it can be to make the background soft and non-competitive

- When subject and the background are in roughly the same plane of focus, all that is required is to select the appropriate aperture to insure sharpness across the subject or where you desire it

## Image Construction

In a full composition class, we would discuss every facet of image construction and describe every image element, but this is not a full class nor is it a standard offering. There are 7 aspects of image construction that I want to cover with the rest of the time remaining.

### Format

#### Horizontal and Vertical

I shoot and think vertically, but that wasn't always so. Like most folks, when I first picked up a camera, I shot almost exclusively horizontal. One is not right or wrong but format should support the subject.

Both may work, only one may work, the important thing is to look at both. And yes, if you want to, you can use Portrait and Landscape!

### Perspective and Viewpoint

Two separate terms, meaning different things

Perspective is more of how we see something, mostly through what particular angle of view (what lens we are using)

Viewpoint is more of where we are seeing something, eye level, low, high sideways, etc.

### Center of interest

Without an obvious center of interest, you have no image, without an obvious center of interest you have confusion, ambiguity, and you are displeasing your viewer.

The Center of Interest can be obvious and instant.

The Center of Interest can also make the viewer think a bit, but don't make them search for it.

### The Power of Corners & Edges

Placement of any image element close to a corner or edge gives it more visual power and importance.

Move an element away from a corner or edge, you lessen its power, its and notice.

Corners need things in them that fit. Those things could be numerous, but they need to work with the image and not fight the center of interest. We call them anchors.

If the center of interest is also an anchor, it becomes a very powerful composition.

However, I don't put my center of interest an anchor, just to do it, The center of interest belongs where the image dictates.

### Lines

The most powerful of image elements, they lead you into and around the image and to the center of interest.

Vertical, Horizontal, Diagonal

Horizontal "Out of the Box Position", Horizons, Waves, Clouds

Vertical, Trees, Buildings, Plants, Nautical

Diagonal, the most powerful of lines

Bringing the viewers eye into the image from a corner works quite well

Power Shapes

Special shapes or lines that are recognizable and eye catching

S curves, circles, C curves, L, V, X, Y and Z or zig zag and diamond shapes.

### Movement

Adds the element of emotion, feel, travel, etc. Moves beyond two-dimensionality

Water is the most traditional subject pictured using motion.

Other subjects can be subject to using motion as well.

### Moment

Adds the element of something impending, adds mystery, adds time. Moves beyond two-dimensionality

In the end, we study composition to know where to put what, how to organize and arrange the parts and pieces of our images.

That's great, but remember to trust your intuition, to keep feel and your wonderment at subject in the image.

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