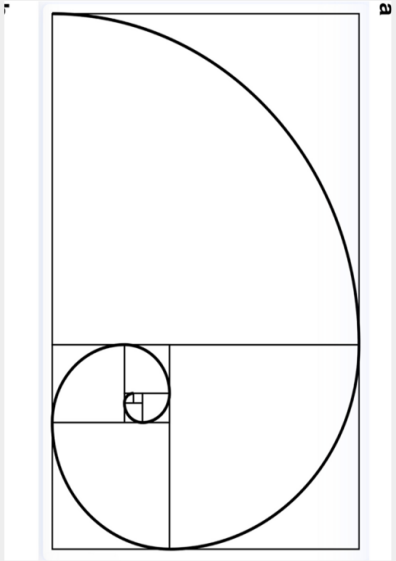
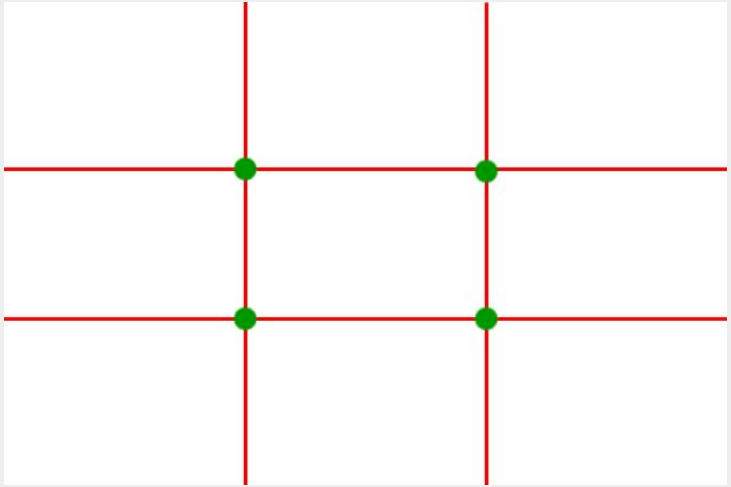
Rusty’s Recommendations

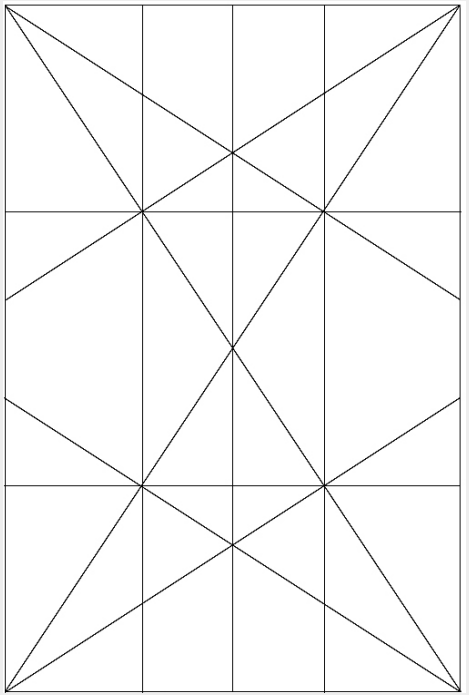


Kings Lynn & District Camera Club

Photographic Composition - Do we need it?







Back to Basics - What is Composition ?

The Oxford English Dictionary definition:-

“The arranging of elements of a drawing, painting , sculpture or photograph so as to form an aesthetically pleasing whole.”

“The putting (of things) in a proper order.”

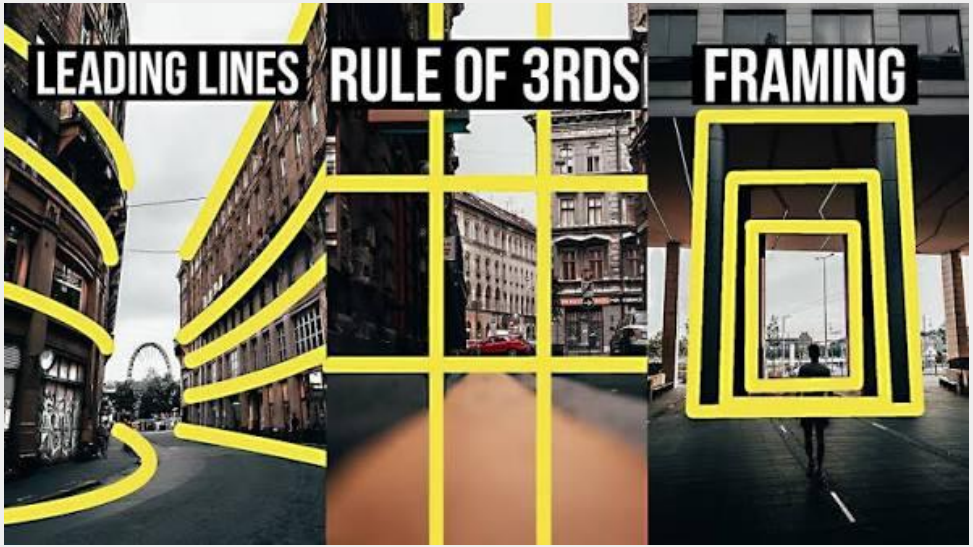


Image by Robert Capa - D Day landings

Not all pictures are meant to be pleasing, some subjects surely transcend the need for composition and technical excellence.



Composition- For V Against

Do we need composition in Photographs?

For composition

- It produces an aesthetically pleasing image?
- It achieves harmony in an image
- It helps us understand/read the story being told in the image

Against composition

- It stifles creativity
- It produces predictable, repetitive image layouts
- Art does not need rules

Compositional Guidelines - not rules

The term “compositional rules” has given composition a bad reputation. They should be regarded as guidelines rather than rules and hence can be followed totally, partially or not at all - that is down to the photographer. They provide the photographer a toolbox of techniques.

Quotes by known artists and photographers

Pro Composition

- “Your eye must see a composition or an expression that life offers you” - Henri Cartier Bresson
- “A Good photograph is knowing where to stand” - Ansel Adams

Against Composition

- “Learn the rules like a pro, to break them like an artist” - Pablo Picasso
- “To consult the rules of composition before taking a photograph is like consulting the laws of gravity before taking a walk” - Edward Weston

Composition is inevitable

Unless you aimlessly point your camera at anything and randomly press the shutter without any thought, you are composing a photograph.

Minimum compositional elements include:-

- Where you stand and what you point your camera at
- What you include/exclude - potentially the most vital choice
- What format you use - portrait/ landscape - 3:2 - 4:3 - square - 16:9
- When you press the shutter
- Your choice of focus point, shutter speed, depth of field etc.

These are all basic acts of composition. The question is are more formal guidelines helpful ?
My view (and it is my view) is that as when we embark on learning a new skill, guidelines are very useful.
As we learn and understand the guidelines we can use them, mix them or make a conscious choice not to use them.
Choice is the key here

Some simple compositional guidelines

- Viewpoint
- Format
- Inclusion/ Exclusion
- Contrast and luminosity
- Figure and ground
- Rules of travel
- The rule of thirds
- Balance
- Fill the frame
- Negative space
- Lead in lines
- Shapes
- S curves
- Symmetry/ Asymmetry

A few of guidelines and there are many more but you are likely to subconsciously following some of these already.

Informal Composition

Robert Frank Quotations

“A message picture is something that is too clear”

“When people look at my pictures, I want them to feel the way they do when they want to read the line of a poem twice”



Freedom or Chaos? - Jackson Pollock - Convergence

The famous abstract artist Jackson Pollock has many who appreciate his paintings yet others joke at there apparent lack of structure.

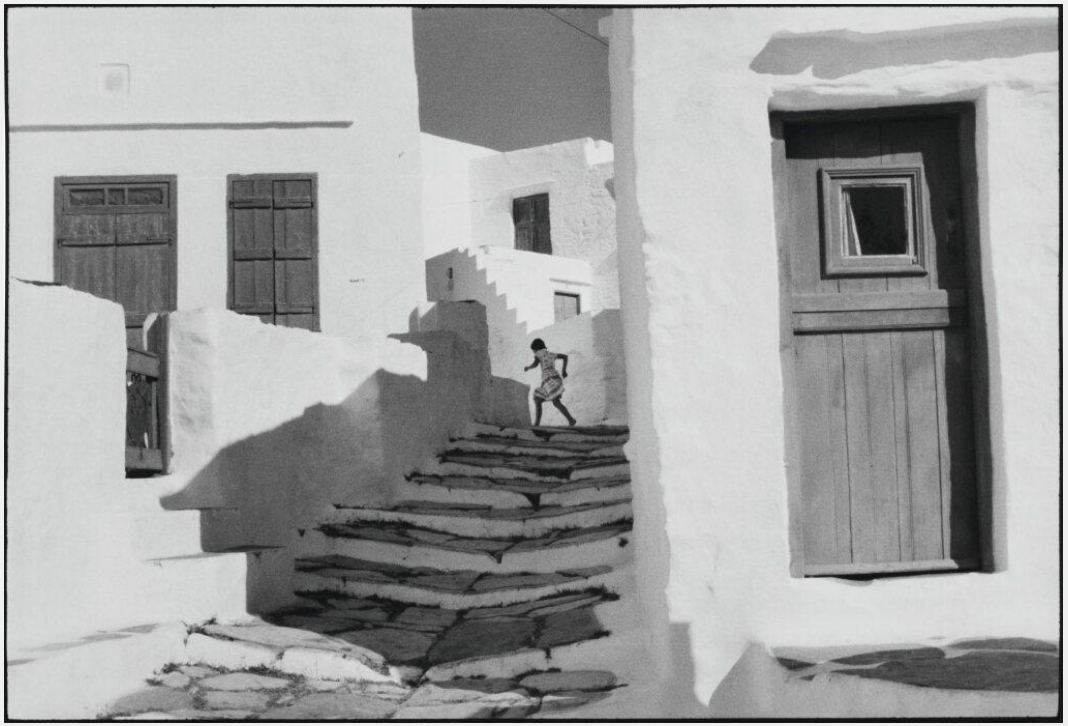


Formal Composition

Henri Cartier Bresson

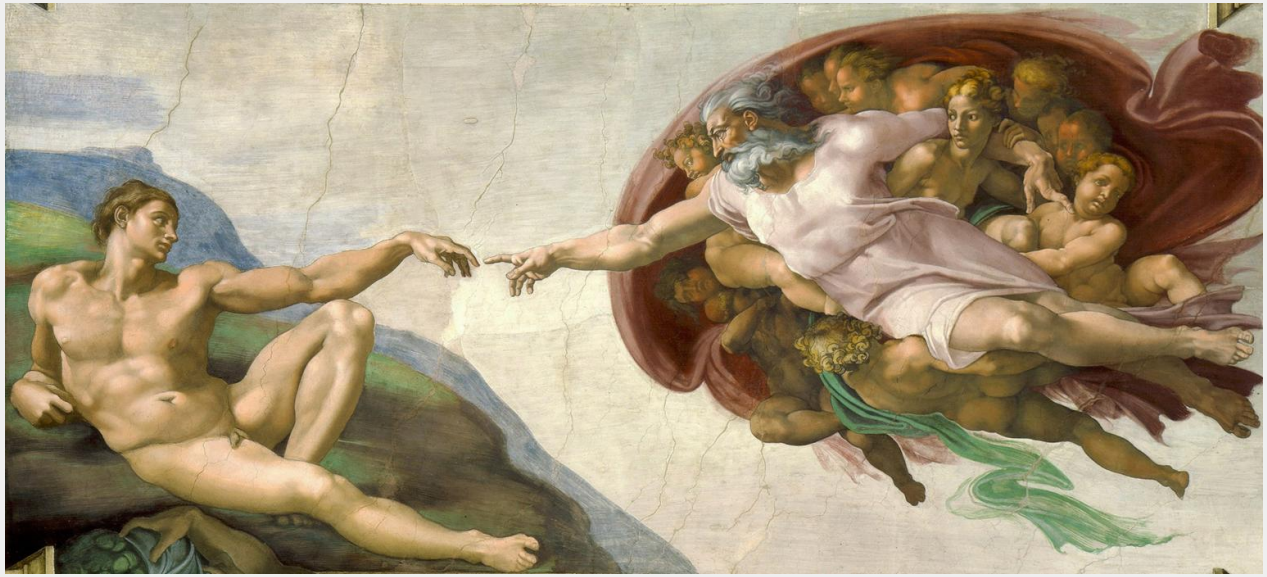
The originator of the phrase and concept of “ the decisive moment”

“ Our eye must constantly measure, evaluate and compose.”



Supreme structure Michelangelo

Respected by many as one of the greatest artists lived.
Use of many compositional tools.
Supremely organised and structured



Composition or not and if yes, why?

So, if we prefer a composed image to non composed, are there possibly fundamental reasons why?



Human visual perception

Why do we need to know about human visionary perception and how can it help us produce better images?

The phrases, “ we all see things differently” or “ art is in the eye of the beholder” and many similar quotes are so true.

Often though this relates to the subject matter rather than the actual composition of the image, but are there any common visual ways all humans perceive the world?

To truly understand our compositional guidelines, surely it would be good to understand how humans visually perceive.

To do this we need to understand how humans visually process images.

We need to question the basis of our compositional guidelines.

Why do humans prefer organised images?

Studies have confirmed - “We need visual help”

We perceive millions of visual stimuli every day. A constant running movie that we somehow need to understand, process and often make decisions based upon what we see.

- Basic movement, coordination
- Communication based on visual signals
- Navigation - driving,
- Reading
- Food choices, colour/texture
- Safety –yellow and black -hazards

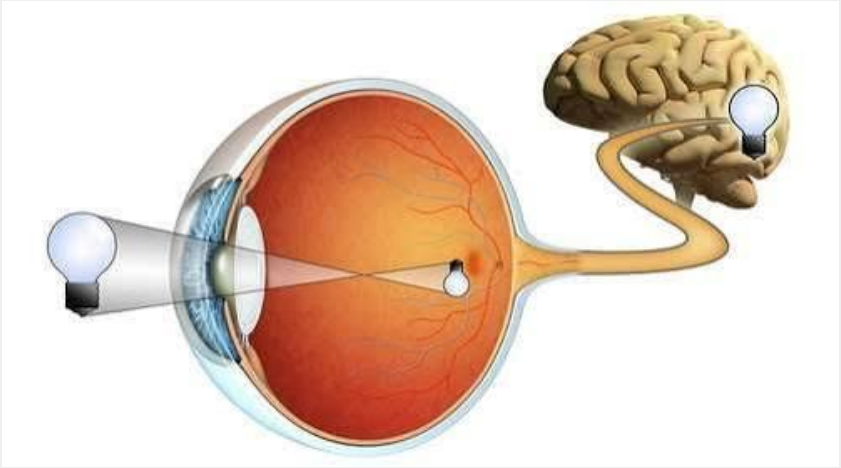
General visual clues we take for granted -The list is endless.

Do all humans have similarities in how we perceive the world?

Due to an individual's eyesight and more importantly their brain's interpretation of what has been observed, we obviously all perceive the world around us in our own way, our world.

However, as the same species, studies have suggested there are similarities on how we process visual information.

There is a widely acknowledged psychological theory that claims we naturally perceive things as organised rather than as separate individual parts; our brain takes over from our vision.





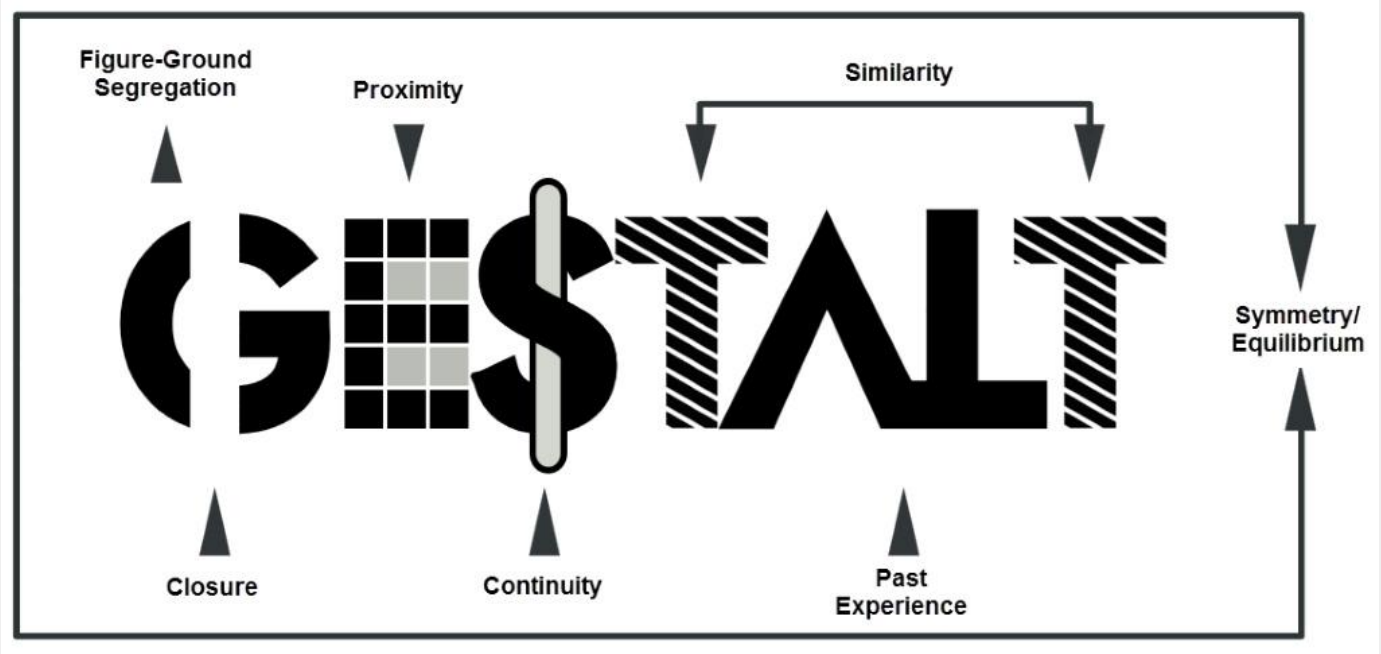
A Theory developed in the early 20th century by a team of German psychologists. It culminated in the phrase:

“The sum is greater than the whole”

So how does this work in real terms?

Gestalt Principles

1. Figure and Ground
2. Closure
3. Proximity
4. Continuity
5. Similarity
6. Past experience
7. Symmetry



1. Figure and Ground, Luminosity, Contrast, Separation

Our eyes and brains are wired to be attracted to contrast. Light on dark, dark on light, contrasting colours, contrasting shapes, textures eg rough on smooth etc.

Photo phrases often used are, “punchy, colours pop, clear separation, dynamic”

Conversely some of us are also drawn to gentle low contrast images conveying the mood of calmness, peaceful.

As image makers, we should be aware of this phenomenon.

Figure and Ground - Contrast, Separation

- Luminosity The lighter part of any image draws your attention to it.
- Contrast or “ figure and ground”- a light against dark or dark against light area has great impact and visual clarity.

Luminosity



Figure and Ground



2. Closure/Continuity - Infill of missing details

Our mind is great at filling in the gaps of missing visual information based on learning from previous experiences, educated guesses. If an object is half obscured, we know the rest is there. This can be useful when constructing an image as we do not need to include the whole. This can lead to intrigue in an image.

Other compositional tools, for instance leading lines can be subtle - implied rather than sledge hammer obvious.

2.Closure - Infill of missing details

A suggested line, hidden details.





3. Proximity

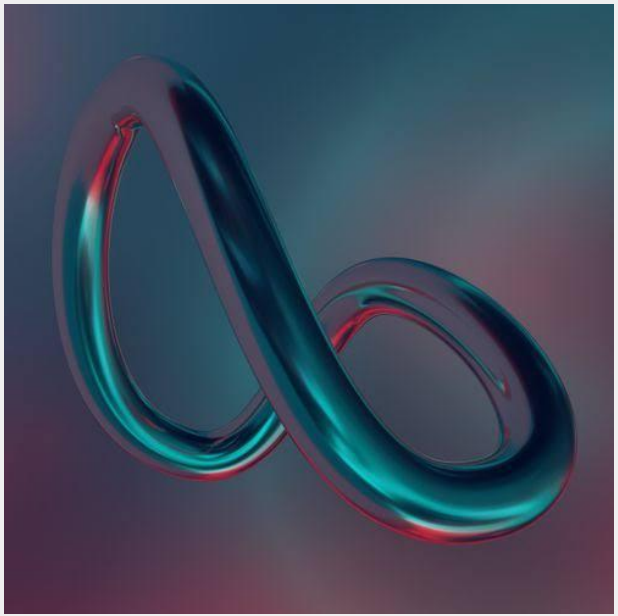
Items in close proximity to each other are strongly perceived as a group. This is a strong visual perception. We want to group things together.

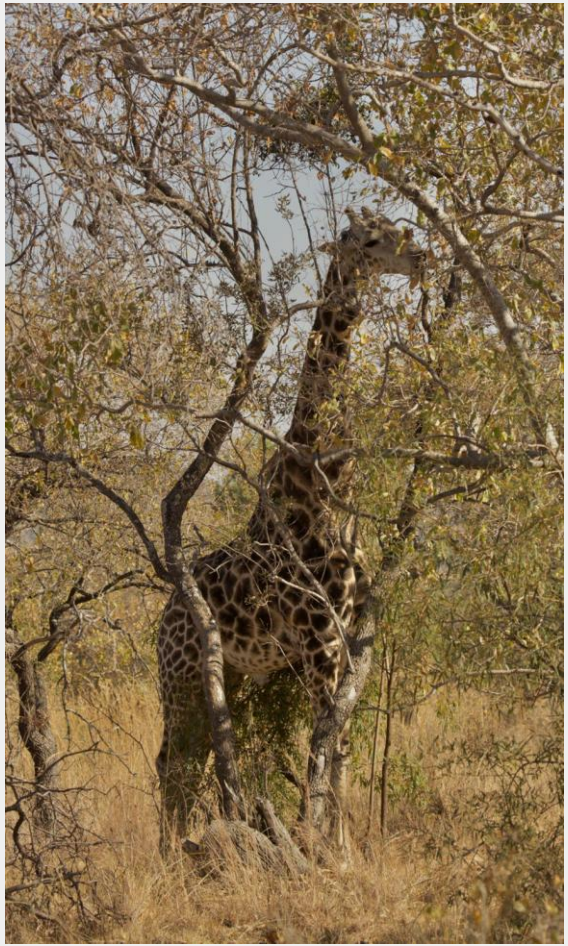




4. Continuity

We see objects as continuous structures even when visually obscured

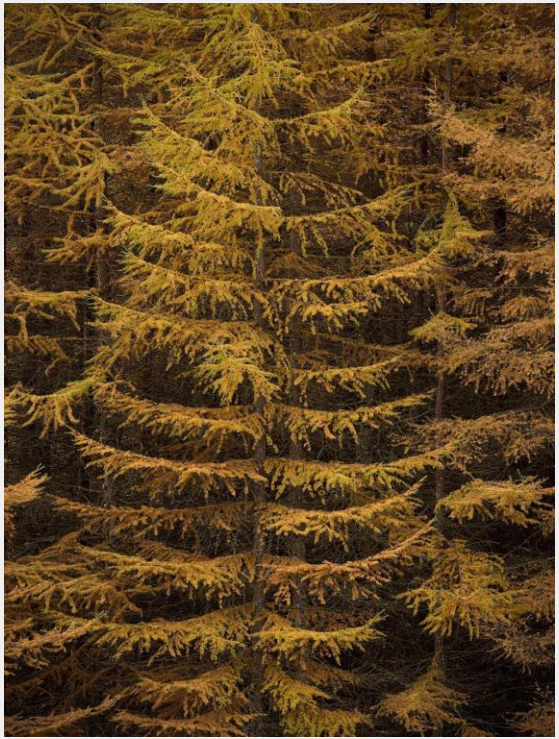




5. Similarity or Individuality

We tend to like Patterns caused by similarity be they repetitive shapes, lines, colours.
In stark contrast we also drawn to juxaposition - the odd one out breaking the rule.

An odd one out can prove to be a strong visual draw of interest.





6. Symmetry

Symmetry

The ultimate form of order - less used in art as it implies complete order, however it can produce a very pleasing visual image.

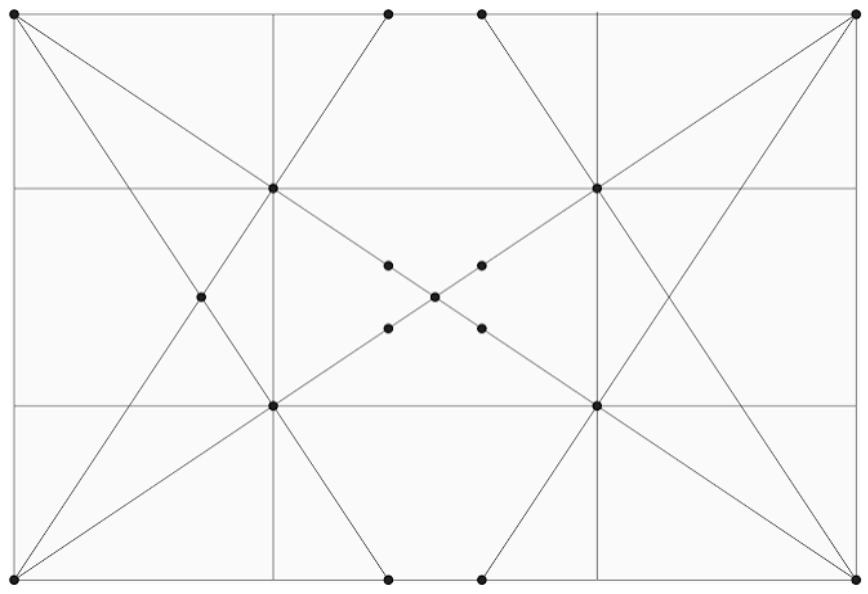


Dynamic Symmetry

A compositional theory developed by Jay Hambidge

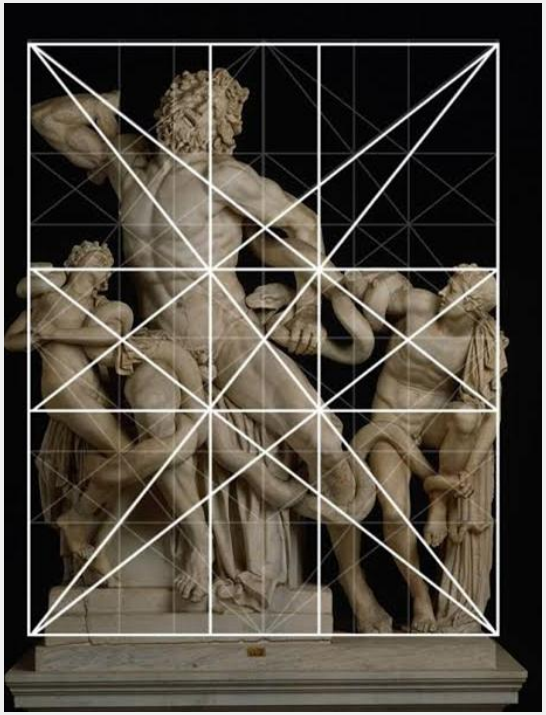
Developed in the early 20th century following intense studies of Greek architecture and artifacts.

It is based on a grid displaying intersection points in all directions indicating a structural intent by the creator. This grid theory has been overlaid on very many grand master artworks and its credibility validated.



Examples of Dynamic symmetry in classical sculpture and art

Considered by some to be the initial footprint for composition in many artistic fields and Greek architecture, dating back many centuries.

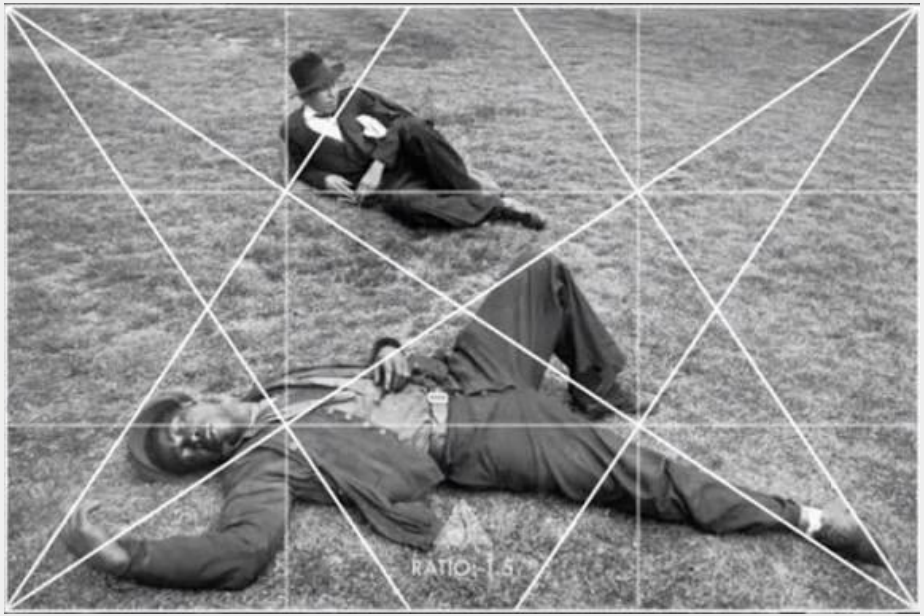




Dynamic Symmetry in Photography

Dynamic Symmetry applied to photography studied by Tavis Leaf Glover.

The grid overlays highlight repeated lines in an image and key intersection points.

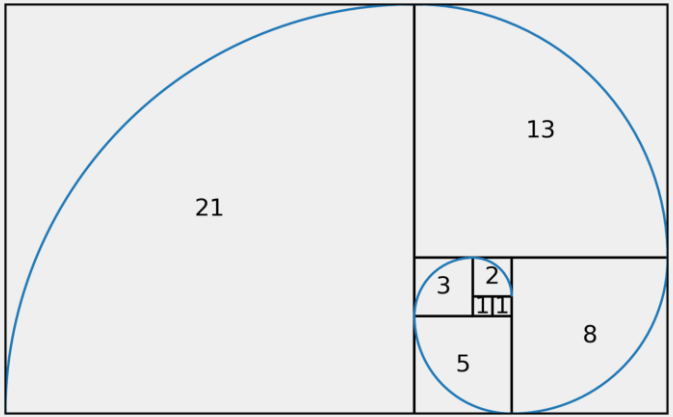




Photos by Henri Cartier Bresson

The Fibonacci sequence-The Golden Ratio- 1.618

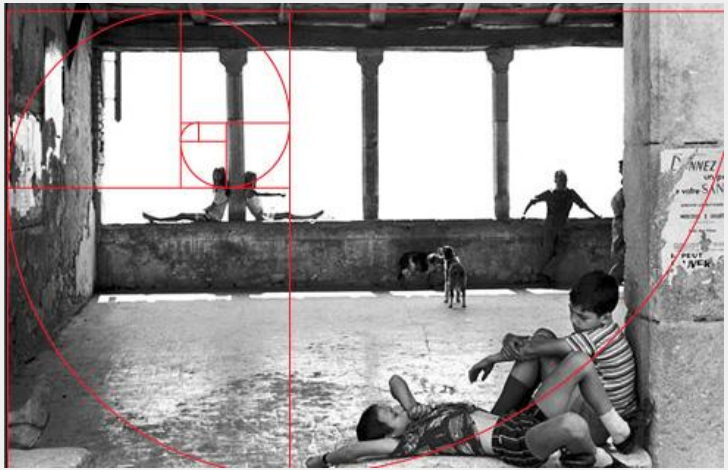
Named after the Italian mathematician from the middle ages. It is a ratio of increasing numbers that when drawn forms a spiral pattern which can be observed in many forms in nature.





The Golden Ratio as a compositional tool

When this spiral is used within an image for placement of objects it is said to create a visual balance, the diagonal lines leading the viewer's eye through the image space .





Photos by Henri Cartier Bresson

Further compositional guidelines reviewed

Viewpoint

One of the most important guideline of all.

“A Good photograph is knowing where to stand - Ansel Adams”

- You don't have to take a picture from eye level. Getting down low and shooting up accentuates something’s height. Conversely looking down reduces scale.
- Shooting from and alternative viewpoint can make a more interesting image.





Image Format

2x3 - 4x3 - 1x1 - 5x4 - 7x5 - 16x9 etc.

The actual image format can have a significant effect of how the images is viewed.
The 35mm standard 3:2 - 2:3 ratios does not suit some images.
While this decision can be made at post production stage, toggling through format options of your viewfinder can help you use this creative compositional tool when capturing the image.

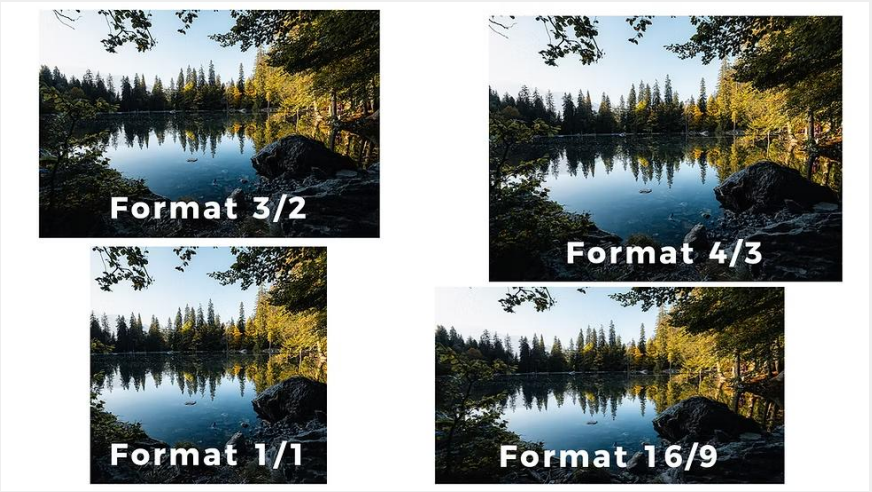


Image Format

Square and rectangular formats can have and effect on the viewer's visual journey.



1:1
A square format holds the viewer’s eye towards the centre by having equal height and width, the viewers journey is limited.



4:3
This format is often use as opposed to 2:3. It gives the choice of portrait and landscape yet the visual space and journey is less imposing than 2;3

Image Format

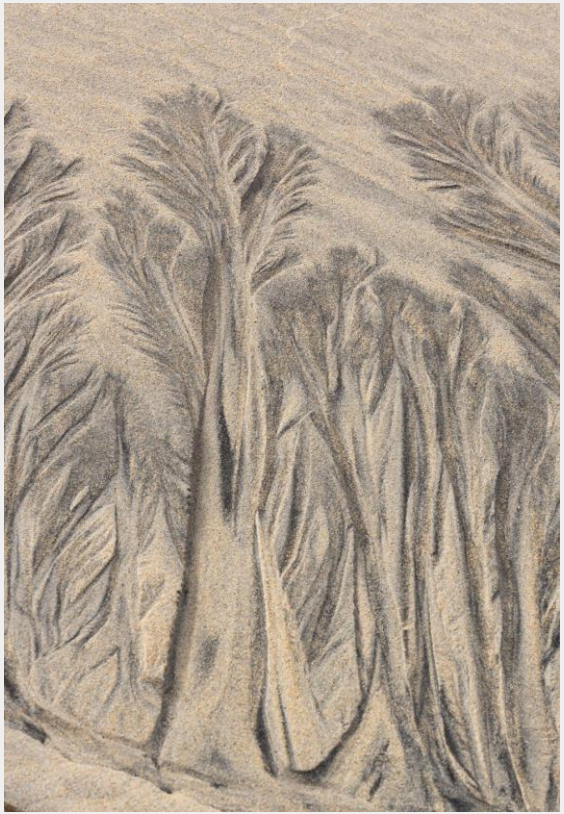
A 16:9 format can suit a panoramic image or in a vertical format promote height within the image.

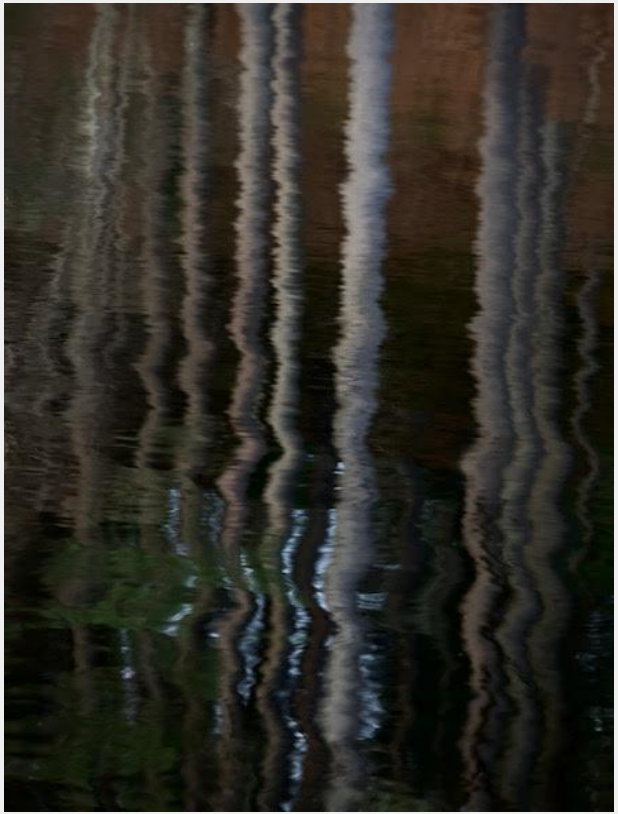


Patterns/ Repetitions

Patterns have been created for centuries in mosaics, carvings etc. as a form of art.

Some image makers prefer abstract patterns to reality, but patterns can be found anywhere. We tend to be drawn to them as an extension of visual repetition.





Inclusions/ Exclusions





Less is more? Or telling the story?
When creating an image we are in the business of deciding what to exclude. This is a key creative tool.

Minimalism - Exclusion

Exclusion can be a very strong creative tool leaving the viewer's imagination to complete the image.

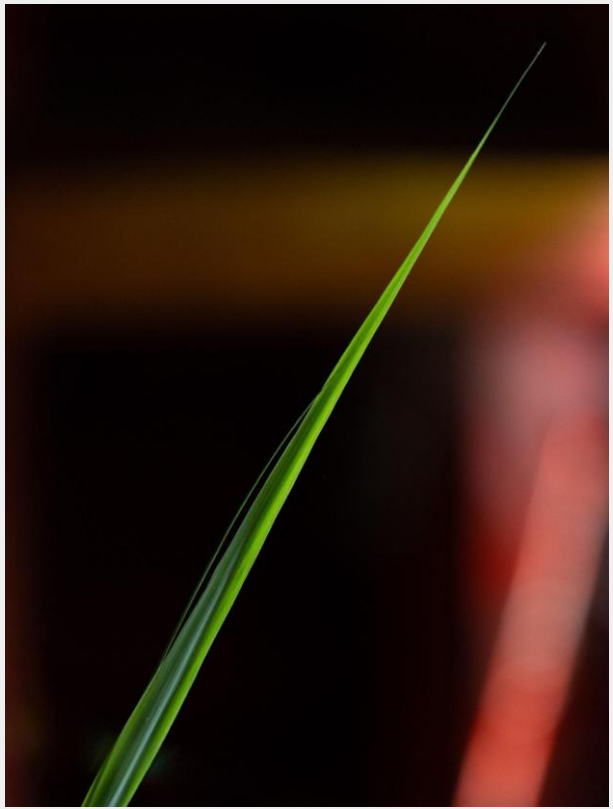
Showing less can sometimes tell a better story and produce a stronger image.





Extreme Minimalism - Exclusion to an abstract image

This can be used to a greater extreme to produce abstract images, the subject is unrecognisable and becoming a shape, colour or texture.

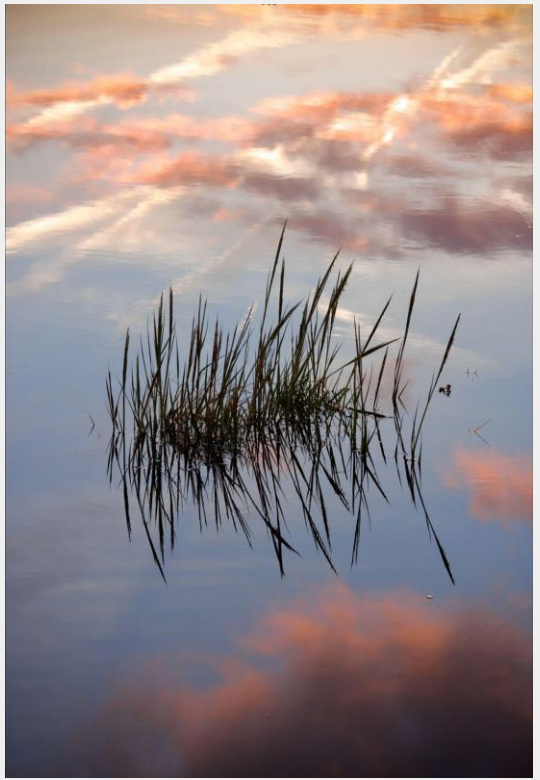




Nature in abstract

Taking a subject out of context and producing a simplified form with strong dynamics in colour can provide a thought-provoking image.





Depth

Unlike reality and indeed our binocular vision, a photograph has no actual depth. However, an image does not have to look flat. Our brains have learnt to interpret certain visual features that suggest depth.

- Lack of contrast to distant objects - grey/blue tones
- Converging lines
- Foreground, midground and background objects
- Same objects diminish in size over distance







Rules of travel

Leaving room for a moving object in the front to suggest forward movement or a gaze out of frame to raise a question?

If you want to instil a sense of unease or mystery, choose to break the rule.



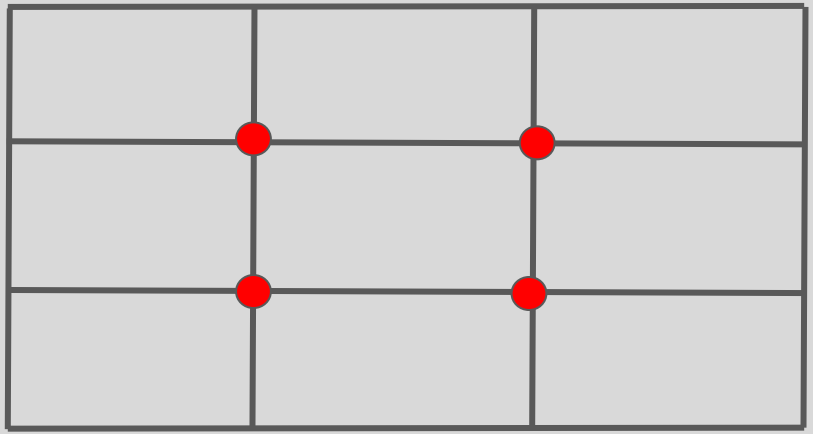


Rules of Thirds- Ahhhh!

Probably the most well known (and in my humble view, over used) photographic guideline.

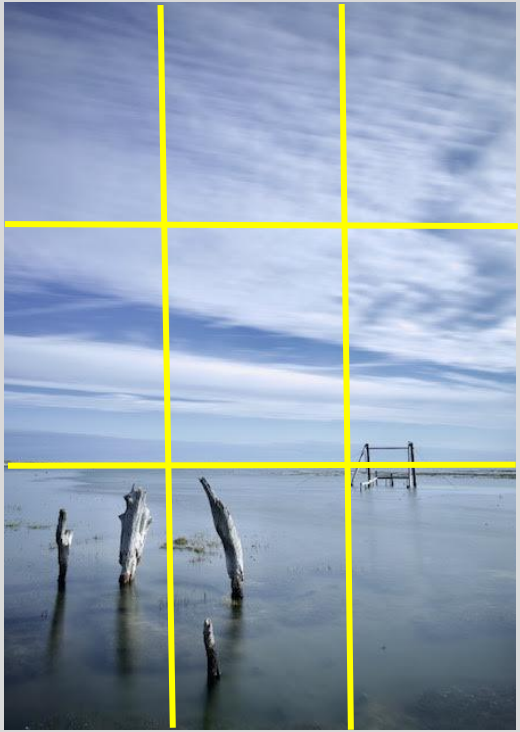
Placing points of interest at certain locations within a frame can provide a pleasing and comfortable image, but on its own it does not achieve a good image. It leads to a predictable viewpoint but it can lead to an unbalanced composition.

First quoted by John Thomas Smith in 1797, it is not a longstanding compositional tool. It is a very simplified version of complex grid know as Dynamic Symmetry used for centuries by great artists.



Rules of Thirds -Beware of visual imbalance

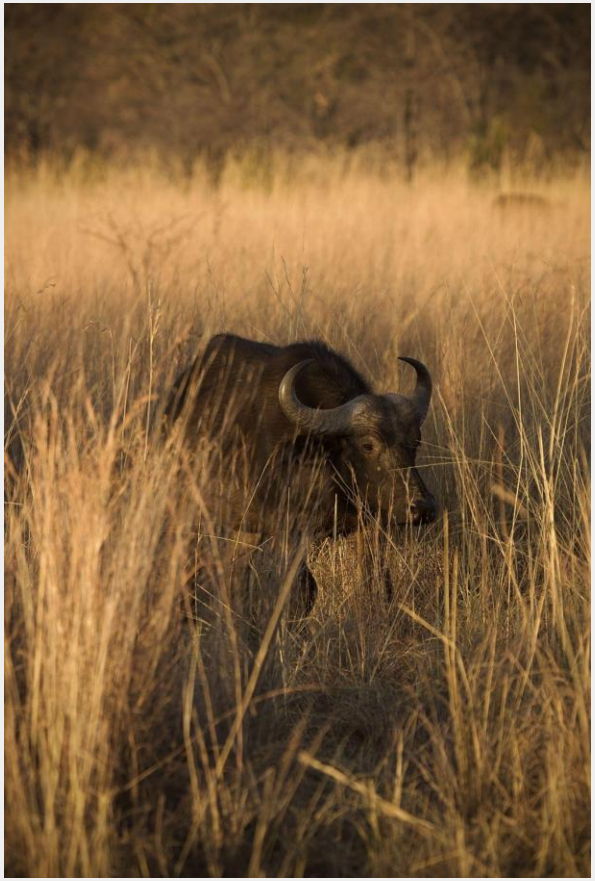




Thirds

Depth of field



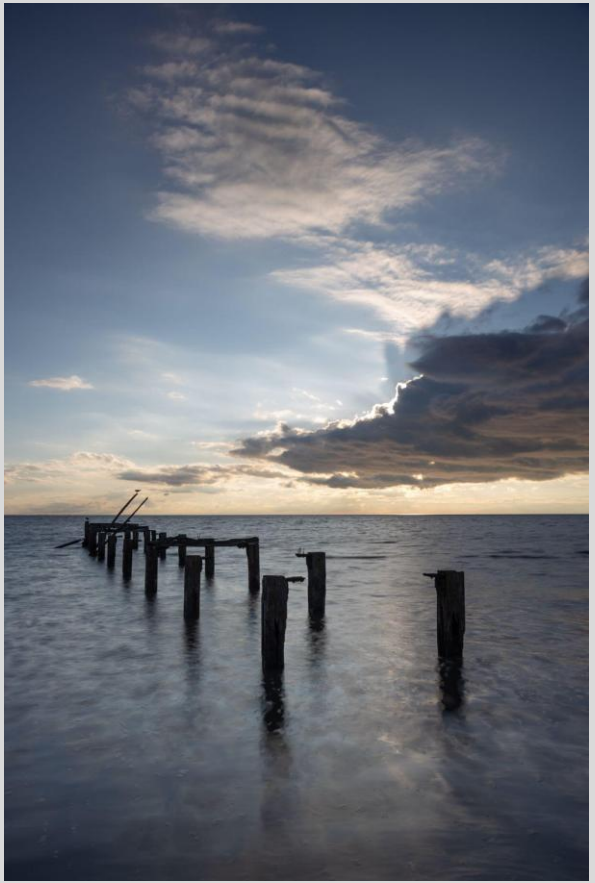


The choice to include subject and background in focus or isolate an object. Foreground blur can also be used to isolate

Repetition

Repetition is a form of obvious order. Visually our minds are happy to group items together that are similar.





Lead in Lines

These can be straight or curved, solid, suggested, subtle or exaggerated and help the viewer's journey through the image







Solid and suggested, sledge hammer and subtle

Diagonals

Diagonals are said to add a sense of movement and dynamics to an image.

Theories suggest we scan images from the bottom left rising to the top right.

Lines that follow this path and follow our natural visual flow and can feel calming.

Lines forcing flow right to left can feel less comfortable?





Frame closure - perimeter control

The edges of a frame play an important part of the image.
High contrast areas at the frame edges can pull the viewer's eye away from the rest of the frame.
Conversely, placing a suitable object on the frame edge can encourage the viewers attention to stay within the frame.





Clear framing a subject

The introduction of a frame within the image to direct the viewer's eye to the subject and hold the visual attention within " the frame"





Picture by Tracey Turton

Advanced visual framing -Photo by Mark Seymour

A great example of framing by a great photographer.
Many other compositional elements also included.
We can learn so much by studying high-quality images.

We shall return to him later.



Negative Space

Having a small subject in the frame with significant space around it can emphasise it by its isolation and tell a story about its location rather than the object itself





Photographic Composition - Do we need it?

I believe that learning these guidelines helps you understand the “ visual language” that helps us tell stories in our images.

It assists you in seeing patterns within the language to help you construct images thoughtfully. Break the “ rules” by all means but with intent and choice.

Further Studies

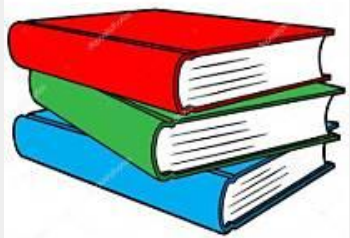
For those who have already grasped the fundamentals of composition, there are many further elements not covered in this brief talk. Composition can be a wonderful field of learning.
A few other elements not covered are highlighted below. I’m sure you can think of many others

- Studies in dynamic symmetry
- Visual weight and balance
- Colour theory
- Storytelling in images
- Black and white concepts
- Study masters in your chosen field
- Practice studies in observation - “seeing”

Rusty’s recommendations

Have spent far too many hours on youtube and with my head in books these are a few recommended sites i would suggest for further pictorial development.

- Ted Forbes - The Art Of Photography
- Pat Kay
- Sean Tucker -
- Jamie Windsor
- Alex Kilbee - The Photographic Eye
- Tatiana Hooper



- Worlds of Books -WOB.uk great source of material
- Ted Forbes - Visually Speaking
- Michael Freeman -numerous books on image making
- Joe Cornish - First Light - Landscape photography as art
- Ian Jeffrey - How to read a photography

Have a Break





Now for some work!

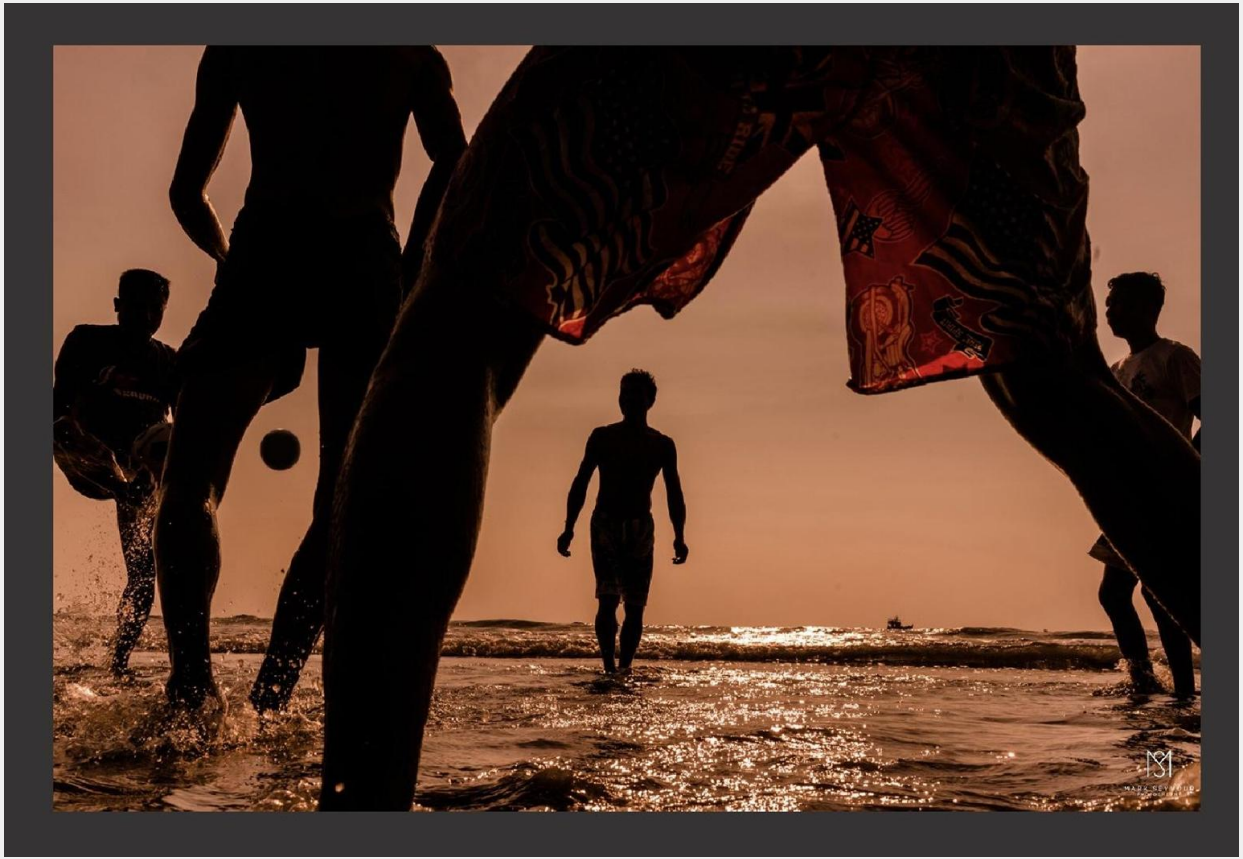
As mentioned previously, you can learn a lot from studying high-quality images from professional photographers. Selling images is a tough business so I respect those can achieve this.



Photos by Mark Seymour - spot the composition tools used



Photos by Mark Seymour - spot the composition tools used



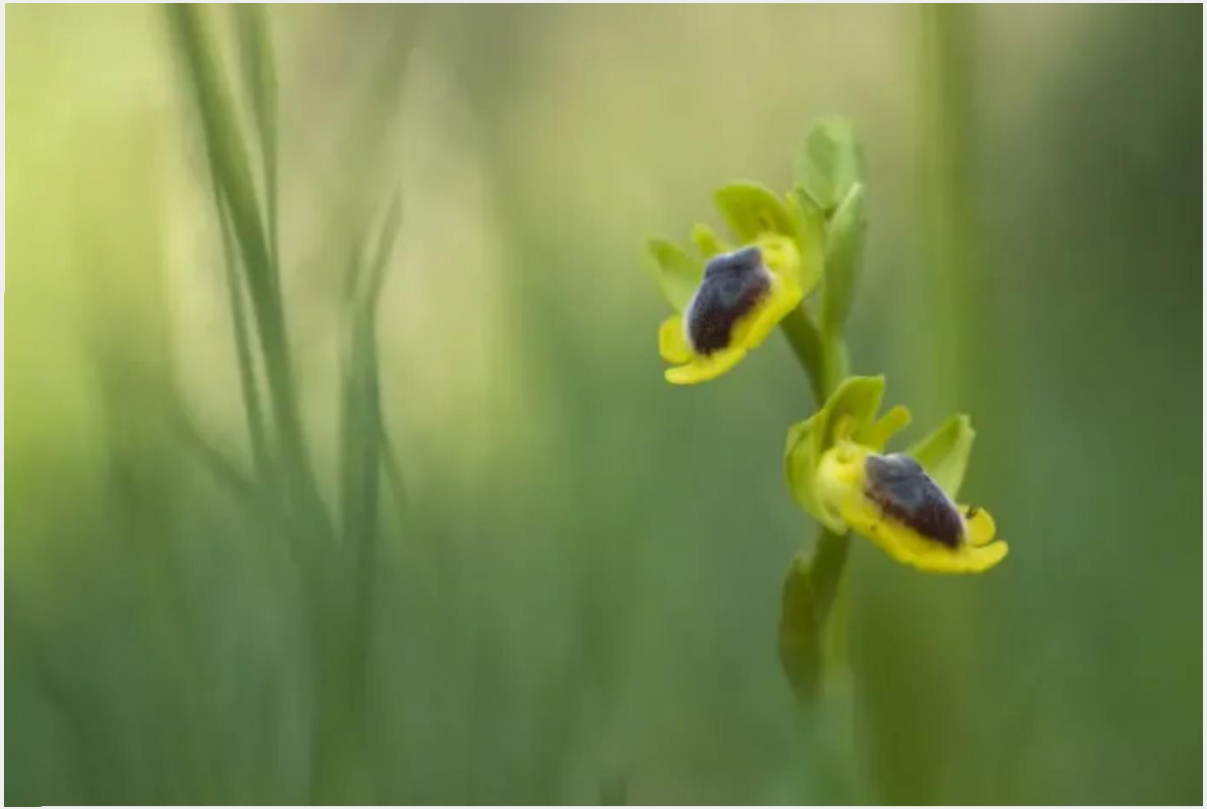
Photos by Mark Seymour - spot the composition tools used



Photos by Sandra Borotcha - spot the composition tools used



Photos by Sandra Borotcha - spot the composition tools used



Photos by Joe Cornish - spot the composition tools used

