

Booklet #2: The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs

## **BUILDING BLOCKS OF VISUAL DESIGN**

by

Joseph Miller



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## PREFACE

The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs (NVACC) is an informal organization started in 1997 by Joseph Miller with the assistance of Dave Carter and Ed Funk. Our purpose is to promote communication and cooperation among camera clubs. We accomplish this by (a) publishing a monthly calendar of the member clubs' activities; (b) conducting training seminars for photographic judges; (c) maintaining a registry of trained judges who serve the clubs' monthly competitions and critiques; and (d) maintaining a directory of speakers who have been recommended by the various clubs. You can learn more about NVACC by going to our web site at [www.NVACC.org](http://www.NVACC.org).

This booklet is one of a series that was developed by NVACC during the period 1998-2008 to capture the considerable expertise of the many accomplished photographers in Northern Virginia and share it with others. Over recent years, we have seen significant change in the photographic art form and very rapid technical advance in both the media of photography (film and digital) and the tools (cameras, lenses, computers, and software). For that reason, the detail of some of these booklets may seem "dated", although the ideas and techniques presented transcend "progress" and the digital-film divide. Watch the NVACC web for new booklets as well as revisions that incorporate new technology and ideas into the existing ones.

Originally, our booklets were made available through member clubs for a small fee that covered the cost of reproduction. Now, however, the booklets are available on [www.NVACC.com](http://www.NVACC.com) where individuals may download one machine-readable copy and one print copy per page for personal, noncommercial use only. Written permission from NVACC is required for any other use.

If you would like to know more about NVACC or have questions or suggestions concerning our booklets or services, please feel free to contact us at [JoeMiller@NVACC.org](mailto:JoeMiller@NVACC.org).



## **Building Blocks of Visual Design**

One of the most difficult tasks in our development as a serious photographer is to move from subject-oriented photography to design-oriented photography. When we first learned to take pictures, we aimed our camera at the subject, usually placed it in the middle of the picture space, and squeezed the shutter button. Our primary concern was "did it come out". As our photographic skills develop, we become more aware of the importance of visual design in our images.

Our skill as photographers is determined by how well we design our photographs. Anyone can "take" a picture; one must only aim a modern camera and push the shutter button. But to "make" a picture requires an appreciation for visual design as well as an understanding of the technical craft of photography. I prefer the term visual design instead of composition because to me visual design suggests a more active and involved role by the photographer.

We see everything we see because of the contrast of color and the contrast of tone. In a pitch black room we see nothing, but if we turn on a light we can see the red velvet chair contrasted against the pale blue wall and the bright tone of the light fixture contrasted against the darker tone of the ceiling. The contrast of color and the contrast of tone make it possible for us to see the building blocks of visual design — lines, shapes, texture and perspective.

### **Lines**

Lines can be found everywhere. They may be straight or curved and each will have a different psychological impact upon the viewer. The direction of lines also imparts a certain feeling towards the picture. Horizontal lines suggest peace and stability, while vertical lines suggest strength and power. Oblique lines suggest movement, action and transition. Often by moving the camera the photographer can control the direction, and therefore the feeling, of the lines contained in the picture space. The placement of the lines closer to or further away from the corners or edges will influence their importance relative to other design elements in the picture space. Where lines lead the viewer determines the effect of the image. Robert Henri said: "The eye should not be led where there is nothing to see."

### **Shapes**

There are three shapes in visual design. They are the circle, the square and the equilateral triangle. Each is a powerful design element and they can be made more or less influential by their placement within the picture space.

The circle often commands attention disproportionate to its size. Derivatives of the circle, square and equilateral triangle are the oval, rectangle and unequal triangles. The

oval is much softer than the circle, and its direction in the picture space can further contribute to its effect.

The rectangle appears everywhere. Consider a simple landscape with a field in the foreground, a body of water in the middle, and a sky above. From a design standpoint, they represent three rectangles. If we point our camera down and increase the size of the lower rectangle, the field, we decrease the size of the top rectangle, the sky, and in so doing alter the relationship of the three rectangles to each other. Thus it becomes important to think in terms of geometric shapes rather than familiar names of things if we are to master design. Monet said: "In order to see we must forget the name of the thing we are looking at."

Triangles, like rectangles, are found everywhere and are powerful design elements. Of particular importance is the use and placement of triangles relative to the corners of the picture space because the horizontal and vertical edge of each corner already exist as two sides of a possible triangle. At the same time careful consideration must be given to the balance, or imbalance, of each of the four corners relative to the others. Consider a picture where there is a triangle in the upper left and another in the lower right hand corner. If we move the camera in any direction, we will alter the size of each triangle. This will also change the respective balance of each corner to the others. As photographers we must always be aware of the effect and influence of the geometric shapes in our viewfinder. Henri Cartier-Bresson said: "Photography requires concentration, a discipline of mind, sensitivity and a sense of geometry."

## **Texture**

The third building block is texture. We know that in reality texture does not exist on a two-dimensional surface. Slides, negatives, prints and screens are flat. Texture in photography is merely the illusion of texture on a two-dimensional surface. The sense of texture of a wool sweater or desert sand is the result of contrast of tones. Early or late light, because it is lower in the sky, produces long shadows which often increase the illusion of texture.

## **Perspective**

The fourth building block is perspective. Like texture, perspective does not exist on a two-dimensional surface. It, too, is an illusion. To some extent the photographer can create the illusion of depth or perspective by the choice of different focal length lenses. However, as we all know, perspective can best be obtained by the placement of the camera relative to elements in the picture space. Moving closer to elements in the foreground makes them appear larger relative to distant elements, thereby creating the illusion of depth. Converging lines in the composition suggest depth, as do overlapping elements. Often perspective can be increased merely by using a vertical format rather than a horizontal format. Lowering the tripod, particularly when using wide angle lenses,

brings objects on the ground closer to the camera, thereby making them appear larger relative to distant objects which adds to the sense of depth. Good zoom lenses are a great help in fine-tuning composition, but they are not a substitute for moving the camera to find the best location to achieve desired perspective.

Once we begin to look for building blocks as key elements in our images instead of being influenced by the names of what it is we are photographing, we will be free to create design-based photographs rather than subject-based photographs, and our creative potential will be increased. Frederick Frank said: "By these labels we recognize everything and no longer see anything. We know the labels on the bottles, but never taste the wine."

## **The Influence of Color and Tone on Visual Design**

Color and tone (the intensity of light) are critical elements in an image. Certainly placement is important, but to my eye, the balance of color and tone is even more important. Some colors, bright red, for example, can dominate a picture if not handled carefully. Because of the interplay of opposites, I try to examine the balance of color and tone in each of the corners. This is not to say that all images should be balanced. Imbalance, when used successfully, can suggest tension, conflict, and dominance.

Response to color is personal and subjective. People, and indeed some cultures, see the same color in different ways. I tend to prefer soft, muted colors, while many photographers like strong, bold colors. The new generation films which are designed to produce enhanced, saturated colors can be both a blessing and a curse. They are a blessing because they can produce strong colors when lighting conditions are not optimum, and a curse because they may produce enhanced colors when soft, muted colors would be preferred.

Many photographers could improve their work if only they would accept the limitation that film cannot record wide ranges of tones (measured in stops). A difficult challenge in photography is to learn when not to take a picture. Understanding tonal ranges is even more important when working with slides. The generally uncomplimentary term "hot spot" is an example of wide tonal ranges. Usually the solution is to find a composition where the tonal range in the picture space is within the limits of the film.

I try to use color and tone to convey feeling in a photograph. The sense of feeling in an image can sometimes be strong enough to overcome some technical demerits. Exposure changes the effect of colors and tones, and therefore influences mood and feelings. Is the exposure appropriate to convey the feeling which the photographer wants to convey?

## **Visual Design in Abstract Photography**

Visual design in abstract photography can be very individualistic. Obviously, one is

reluctant to show a house upside down or a dog as green. Lacking the familiar, abstract photography is much more receptive to imagination and creativity. What do we mean when we say "abstract"? Here is one definition: "An abstract is characterized by non-representational designs depicting no recognizable thing, only geometric figures of color and form."

While abstracts may appear to be different from other photographs, the same design needs apply. One might argue they are even more important given the absence of the familiar. In addition to lines, shapes, texture, and perspective, other factors that should be considered are color, tone, harmony, rhythm, and balance.

In abstract photography, the careful and thoughtful photographer (there should be no other kind) may want to consider the following:

- a. distribute dark tones uniformly throughout the picture space;
- b. distribute light tones uniformly throughout the picture space;
- c. balance dark tones with light tones;
- d. balance color and/or tone throughout the picture space;
- e. balance color and/or tone in the corners;
- f. use lines as in all photography — that is, horizontal lines suggest rest and stability, vertical lines suggest power and strength, oblique lines suggest action and movement.
- g. introduce secondary motif lines to support the message of the primary line;
- h. create repeating themes to enforce the primary theme;
- i. use repetition — patterns, colors, tones, shapes, etc.;
- j. seek color harmony and balance;
- k. seek tonal harmony and balance;
- l. strive for compositional balance — but be mindful that sometimes imbalance can be very powerful;
- m. avoid the temptation to include an apparent "center of interest" which may alter the entire mood of the image;
- n. remember that exposure changes will likely change the mood of the image;
- o. remember that even though the image may not be recognizable, all parts of the picture space should make a positive contribution.

Frequently abstract photography is more effective when there is an illusion of texture in the image. Abstract photography, which can be wonderful with or without an illusion of texture, often is misunderstood because there is no "subject". Indeed,

the mood and effect of many abstracts would be destroyed if there were a center of interest.

There is an excellent training exercise to learn to see elements in an abstract. Gently crumple a piece of aluminum foil so as to produce random patterns of lines and shapes. Use colored lights, gels, reflectors, etc., to project light onto the crumpled aluminum foil. Slightly move the aluminum foil or your camera to change the arrangement of colors, tones, and shapes in the viewfinder. Ask yourself why you like or don't like the different images. Why are some more pleasing and some less pleasing to your eye? When you can verbalize your responses, you are on your way to becoming an abstract photographer.

Photographers often ask where one can find abstracts. That is a valid question and fortunately the answer can be given in one word: everywhere. The key to finding abstracts is to abstract — that is, isolate, isolate, isolate. Generally, macro lenses and telephoto lenses isolate best. Wide angle lenses, because of their broad coverage, usually include too much peripheral information.

For whatever reasons, abstracts are not understood by many photographers, and indeed, by many judges. Yet abstracts have long been an important part of the art world. From such diverse styles as Wassily Kandinsky to Georgia O'Keeffe, artists have painted abstracts. Much of today's "Modern Art" would have to be called abstracts.

While abstracts often are not appreciated at the camera club level, many master photographers have produced outstanding abstracts. Think of Edward Weston's peppers or his shells. Harry Callahan and Man Ray were pioneers in creating abstract designs. Among contemporary photographers, Freeman Patterson's abstract landscapes are true works of art.

Don't be discouraged that abstracts are not well accepted in camera club competitions which are bound by traditional dogma such as the rule of thirds, a believed need for a center of interest, etc. In abstract photography talented photographers can elevate the camera from that of a recording instrument to one that creates art.

## **Evaluating Visual Design in an Image**

I review literally thousands of images each year. Some are from classes where students are learning the basics of photography, some are from camera club competitions, and some are from workshops where professional and serious amateurs in the area submit images for critique. My remarks here refer to how I evaluate an image for camera clubs and workshops.

All image evaluators are not created equal. Not only are their skills different, their criteria for evaluating are as well. I prefer the word "evaluator" rather than "judge". I admit to being a maverick in that I tend not to be bound by conventional criteria when evaluating an image.

Is there, however, a common denominator for evaluation? Yes! Good craftsmanship. Simply stated, there is no excuse for poor craftsmanship, and the higher the level of expertise, the less tolerant I am of poor craftsmanship. By "craftsmanship" I mean edges are straight, horizons are level, the picture is sharp (if it should be sharp) the exposure is correct, etc. Does this mean that poor craftsmanship cannot win an award? No, not always, but the other elements in the picture space must be powerful enough to overcome the demerits of poor craftsmanship.

Regardless of what is in front of the camera the photographer is responsible for everything in the picture space. Never mind that there are unappealing elements that could not be eliminated. If these elements are strong, then the picture should not have been taken, or should have been taken only as a record shot which is entirely justifiable, but it should not have been entered in competition.

In my opinion, more images in competition are found wanting because of visual design weaknesses than for any other factor. Good visual design is learned only when it is felt. I like images where the arrangement of elements in the picture space seems free and uninhibited.

I look for images that offer unique but careful visual design. The operative phrase here is "careful visual design". To me that means the photographer gave thought to the arrangement and values of all elements in the picture space. Certainly there are guidelines, but one should avoid adhering to rigid "rules". Freeman Patterson said: "The only rule to follow in photography is never process color film in chicken noodle soup."

I try to see photographs as geometric shapes. Henri Cartier-Bresson said: "Photography requires concentration, a discipline of mind, sensitivity, and a sense of geometry." Good photographers must learn to see geometric shapes and appreciate how they interrelate with each other.

I find many images fail because photographers see objects as familiar things — trees, houses, windows, etc., and do not see them as geometric shapes having to co-exist with other shapes within the picture space.

I want the photographer to present more than the obvious, no matter how pretty the image may be. Technical advances in equipment make it easy for virtually all photographers to take a pretty picture of a pretty scene. But that is not enough. Does the photographer put a personal stamp on that pretty scene because of unique composition or camera position? Does the photographer convey an individual or distinctive style that makes the image better than others?

Most evaluators insist on a center of interest. I do not. Indeed, some pictures (particularly abstracts) are destroyed when a center of interest is introduced because a different story is then told. When there is no center of interest to "carry" the picture, it is even more critical that all the design elements work together. I sometimes see images where the photographer clearly concentrated on the center of interest and gave little or



no attention to the other elements in the picture space.

I find corners and edges to be critical in the composition of an image. Corners serve as points, and edges serve as barriers which contain the image, and the eye sweeps these areas in reviewing the picture. The principle of the fulcrum applies within the picture space. Those elements further from the center point carry greater "weight". The thoughtful photographer uses that knowledge to advantage. Most images benefit from "breathing room" around the edges. One of the most difficult lessons in composition is to learn the importance of negative space. Good negative space is not wasted space.

My personal preference is for simple designs. Frequently I see images which include too much information for my eye to interpret, and I wonder what message the photographer wants to convey. In my view, "Simple is Super!" I know outstanding photographers who produce complicated, complex designs which work beautifully. Nonetheless, I think it important to learn how to produce simple designs. Contrary to what one might think, it is more difficult to produce a good simple design than a good complicated design because the arrangement of elements in a simple design must be so precise.

I try to avoid the temptation to like an image upon the first meeting and, therefore, try not to be influenced by initial impact. A good image, like good wine, should age well. Unfortunately, evaluators do not have the opportunity to consider images over a period of time. Nonetheless, good evaluators must develop the skill to recognize those images having immediate impact, but which likely would not endure the scrutiny of continuing review. No doubt Oscar Wilde had evaluating images in mind when he said: "not love at first sight, but love at the end of the season which is so much more satisfactory."

I find that photographers frequently ignore the character of light when taking pictures. Light is neither good nor bad, but it must be appropriate to the subject matter. As we all know, harsh, mid-day light generally should be avoided because it has wide tonal ranges, and the shadows created usually are not pleasing. In spite of that, good pictures can be taken in harsh light if the photographer carefully selects and arranges shapes and tones which work together in such light.

I find many images also fail when taken in flat light, even though the limited tonal ranges are easily recorded by film, because the images often appear dull and uninteresting. Morning photographers have a decided advantage over us sleepy heads in that early light produces some of photography's best images. It is very important for photographers to learn to "read" light and select subjects which can be presented best in that light.

All too often photographers do not understand the importance of the background as a major partner in the overall image. Frequently I find backgrounds that are competitive and distracting, while others seem to intrude into rather than support the story which the photographer wants to tell. More often than not it is good advice to "compose for the background". This is particularly important where wide tonal ranges in the background

can be distracting. It is essential that the photographer learns to assign to the background its proper role in the image.

I am always impressed whenever a photographer conveys "feeling" in an image. Think of the images by Dorothea Lange during the Great Depression, or by Ansel Adams depicting the majesty of the Southwest. The sense of feeling in an image sometimes can be powerful enough to overcome technical demerits. Exposure influences mood and feelings. Is the exposure appropriate to convey the feeling which the photographer wants to convey? Almost always I will rate an image that has feeling higher than one that does not.

I see many images which at best are only snapshots. It is sad when such images are enlarged and entered in one of the print categories. Money and time are wasted. A mediocre image is not made better by making it larger. Even with a good image, larger is not necessarily better. A smaller print is almost always to be preferred when the image has a sense of intimacy.

Finally, the question I ask of myself when evaluating is: would I like this image hanging in my house? To me, that is the ultimate test. Thus, I look for images that are more "art form" in character. This preference is no worse (and no better) than say a photojournalist who likes an image because it has immediate impact, knowing from experience that readers have an attention span of only a scant second or so before turning the page.

Charles Montgomery of Winterthur Museum wrote a paper entitled: "Some Remarks on the Science and Principles of Connoisseurship". Mr. Montgomery listed a number of points to follow when examining works of art (which would include our photographs, of course,) and he asked himself: "Do I enjoy it? Does it sing to me?" If you enjoy the image, and if it sings to you, what other criteria need be met?

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