

Booklet #3: The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs

SOME IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES OF COMPOSITION

by

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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.

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 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.

* Dave Carter, the creator of this booklet and a founding father of NVACC has passed but his photographic skill and artistic vision live on in the technique of all photographers who were fortunate enough to work with him.



Some Important Principles of Composition

1. Decide in advance what the mood or the "message" of the photograph is to be. One way to achieve simplicity is to make sure that every element in the image contributes to the mood or message. Images which are simple in this sense usually have the greatest immediate impact. (Simplicity is not necessarily achieved by reducing the number of elements in the composition.) Using repeating patterns provides another way of achieving simplicity.
2. Give careful thought to how you will separate the main subject matter from the background. This is usually accomplished by establishing some kind of contrast.
 - a. Subjects will stand out when they differ from the background in color, shape, texture, size, brightness, etc.
 - b. Bright spots (highlights) attract the eye. A bright center of interest will attract attention. However, highlights in the background will distract the viewer from the center of interest.
3. Give careful thought to how your composition helps to lead the viewer's eye through the image to the center of interest. This may be done in many ways.
 - a. One way is to establish contrast between the subject and the background (see above).
 - b. Another way is to use leading lines.
 - c. The use of various elements to frame the subject may be effective either because they provide a leading line or because they keep the eye from straying away from the subject of primary interest. (Also see item 4a.)
 - d. Color may be used to lead the eye. Viewers are especially attracted by red. Of course, any color may be used to attract the viewer's eye if that color varies greatly from other colors in the image.
4. Most images benefit from the deliberate use of distance cues to avoid a "flat" appearance. Unless a flat appearance is crucial to the mood or message you wish to convey, build depth cues into your composition. Some of the most useful depth cues are:
 - a. Make sure there is more detail in the foreground than in landscapes and other vistas such as urban scenes and seascapes. Texture gradients work well in this regard, but the transition from foreground to background detail need not be continuous. It is often helpful to establish a clear foreground, middle-ground, and background. The use of frames as a compositional device (illustrated by a well-placed tree branch) is effective partly because frames frequently provide an abundance of foreground detail (bark and leaf detail in the present example).

- b. Linear perspective provides a powerful depth cue. Lines known to be parallel appear to converge in the distance. The edges of receding roadways and railroad tracks provide good examples.
 - c. The role of relative size as a depth cue in photographs usually receives little consideration in composing a photograph. However, it can be very useful. Consider the placement of a series of objects known to be roughly equal in size. Three automobiles in an image, one in the foreground, one in the middle-ground, and one in the background result in a strong feeling of depth. We as viewers know that all cars are roughly the same height. Therefore, when the height of the cars varies in the photograph, the smaller the image on film the more distant we assume the object to be. (This distance cue works only for familiar objects.)
 - d. Overlapping objects (called interposition by psychologists who study visual perception) also provide important information about depth. An object that partially obscures a second element in a picture is seen as being the closer of the two objects.
 - e. Atmospheric haze is also useful in providing information about depth, especially in landscape photography. In general, haze results in reduction of detail in the background and a more bluish appearance of the background. Reduction of background detail makes fog pictures especially interesting as studies in depth perception.
 - f. Objects that have shading or that cast a shadow appear more three dimensional than objects that don't.
 - g. In general, objects that appear low in the frame are seen as being closer to the camera.
 - h. One depth cue alone may not provide the feeling of depth you wish to establish. Try using several cues all working toward the same effect.
 - i. When you wish to create a strong feeling of depth you may find it useful to compose your picture using a vertical format.
5. Light is one of the most important elements in pictorial composition. As photographers we often think of light and composition as separate topics. This may result in the photographer not using light as effectively as possible. If we don't think of light as part of the composition, we are likely not to think of the light at all! Consider three very important properties of light: quality, color, and direction.
- a. Photographers often misuse the term "quality of light" to refer to how "good" the light is. Quality of light has nothing to do with good or bad light. Technically, the "quality of light" refers to how soft or harsh the light is.
 - (1) Soft light occurs when the light source is large. On cloudy days

the whole sky serves as the light source.. In the same way, a large "soft box" in the studio provides soft light. Soft light is particularly useful in bringing out subtle differences in texture and color. Texture is often the most important depth cue in outdoor photography on cloudy days. Fortunately, many subtle textures show up best under soft light. This is one reason cloudy weather often provides the best conditions for outdoor "portraits" of people, flowers, and architectural subjects.

- (2) Many landscapes benefit from the use of soft light. This is because subtle and very interesting details don't get lost in the shadows. Go to an exhibition of fine landscape paintings such as those by Albert Bierstadt, Frederick Church, or Thomas Cole. You may be astonished to find how rarely they painted landscapes with clear, blue skies. Instead, they tended to use partly cloudy skies to make subtle detail a more important part of the image.
 - (3) Harsh light occurs when the light source is small. Strong sunlight provides a good example. Deep shadows, which occur on sunny days, often obscure shadow detail. Harsh light is usually not desirable when photographing people, flowers, and some architectural shots, especially those requiring detail throughout the subject.
 - (4) Harsh light need not be thought of as inherently bad. Harsh light may be particularly useful when you are trying to create a strong silhouette or record texture by using side lighting. Some kinds of pattern shots are best recorded in harsh light. See item 6 below.
 - (5) Some successful images make use of a mixture of soft and harsh light. As an example, consider a case when the sun "breaks through" on cloudy days. This effect can add drama because it depicts changing conditions. The harsh light may also fall on the center of interest producing a spotlight effect. This is an effective way to control the viewer's eye movements because the eye tends to move toward the brightest part of an image. (This is why bright spots in the background are so distracting.)
- b. A second important characteristic of light is its color. When the sun is near the horizon its light is warm, i.e., the red end of the spectrum is most apparent. On the other hand, at midday, when the sun is high, light takes on a bluish cast giving the colors a cooler appearance. Color helps establish mood. Warm colors are more inviting while cooler colors are less inviting.
- (1) You don't always need a lot of color in your photographs, but it is

important that what color is there be consistent with the mood you are trying to establish.

- (2) Warm colors in the sky often make an image more dynamic because orange or red skies depict rapidly changing conditions (sunrises or sunsets), clear blue skies sometimes give a more static (unchanging) feel to a photograph. Keep in mind that a viewer pays closer attention to changing conditions. (This is characteristic of all human sensory systems. Under laboratory conditions, where a visual image on the retina can be held stable even when the eyes move, the visual image fades completely from sight within a few seconds!)
- c. The third property of light to be considered is its direction. The importance of the direction from which light comes cannot be over estimated.
- (1) Front lighting occurs when the light source is at the photographer's back, and, therefore, falls on the front of the subject. Front lighting is sometimes called flat lighting because it gives a very two-dimensional quality to an image. The main reason for this is that front lighting fails to maximize texture in a scene, thus reducing the role played by an important depth cue.
 - (2) Side lighting, light coming either from the right or the left side of the camera, emphasizes texture.
 - (a) Side lighting need not be harsh. In most instances, soft light has directional properties that produce subtle shading effects without losing shadow detail. Non-directional soft light appears outdoors only on the cloudiest of days.
 - (b) The strongest side lighting usually occurs when the sun is low in the sky. Therefore, it is often warm in color.
 - (c) Side lighting provides the optimal conditions for using a polarizer to darken the sky and make the clouds stand out.
 - (3) Back lighting occurs when the light source is behind the subject. It often produces dramatic results by creating either strong silhouettes or rim lighting. Rim lighting means that a light outlines the subject, thus providing an excellent way to separate the center of interest from the background.
6. Designing (or composing) an effective photograph requires the photographer to "see" (pre-visualize) the image as the film will record it, not as the human eye sees the scene. A good many of Freeman Patterson's photographs illustrate this principle, especially those he made in the African deserts. Knowing that deep

shadows can contribute to the overall graphic design of an image, he exposes his film so that deep shadows produced by harsh light go black. In the warm light of early morning the scene takes on an abstract quality in orange and black. See Patterson's book, "Portraits of Earth," for some striking examples. Note that exposure becomes an important tool of composition in such situations.

- a. All photographers should be aware that film never records a scene exactly the way it is seen by the human eye. Recognize how different films produce different effects. Films differ in how colors are rendered, the amount of grain, and the latitude. Each is important. These too, are important tools of composition.
 - b. Use your knowledge of how a film registers an image to your best advantage.
7. Compositions are sometimes described in terms of being balanced or unbalanced.
- a. Here is one common explanation of balance. Try to think of balancing your picture on the tip of your finger. If equal weight is given to both sides, the image is balanced by placing the picture so that your finger is on middle of the bottom edge of the image. If your finger must go to one side or the other to balance the picture, the image is unbalanced.
 - b. By this analogy, the abandoned house shown below is balanced because the "weight" of the house on the right is offset by the "weight" of the trees on the left.



- c. In general, a balanced image is said to create a static feeling, a feeling that things will not change or that nothing is happening. A balanced (or static) composition is quite appropriate for the abandoned house because it is meant to give the feeling that a way of life is gone forever. Note that static images are not necessarily inappropriate.)
- d. The image below is unbalanced. The "weight" of the trees on the right is

much greater than the "weight" of the trees on the left. Unbalanced images usually leave the viewer with a feeling of tension or a feeling that something is going to happen. Therefore, an unbalanced composition is appropriate for the storm depicted below.



- e. The analogy described above in terms of weight is probably not useful if we think strictly in terms of mass. We don't "weigh" the sides of our pictures in terms of ounces, pounds or tons.
 - f. It may be more useful to think of balance in terms of weighing the relative importance of the two sides of the image.
8. In most cases the treatment of moving subjects involves an unbalanced composition. One generally allows space for moving subjects to move into the picture. Consider an animal running through the forest. Conventional wisdom tells us to place the animal closer to the edge of the frame from which it came, thus allowing some place for the animal to go.
 9. Placement of the center of interest is usually critical in pictorial composition. Both photographers and painters frequently use the rule of thirds. Divide the image into thirds both vertically and horizontally. The four points of intersection are known as power points or sweet spots. Power points are often said to provide the best placement for the center of interest.
 - a. Moving the main subject out of the center of the image leaves more room for other compositional elements such as leading lines.
 - (1) Moving the main subject out of the center of the image is useful when other compositional elements are used to produce a balanced image.
 - (2) Of course, central placement of the subject matter can also yield a balanced composition. For example, symmetrical compositions are always balanced.

- (3) If an unbalanced composition suits the photographer's purpose, this can be achieved only by moving the subject out of the center of the image.
 - b. If the photographer wishes to emphasize symmetry in an image, center placement of the subject is likely to produce the most satisfactory results.
- 10. Keep in mind that effective pictorial communication depends as much upon the viewer's own experience as it does on the content of the picture itself. Of necessity, a viewer must interpret a picture within a familiar context. Pictorial images that move us all are generally those that touch upon our common experience, or at least our common imagined experience. A good example of the importance of imagined experience is a depression-era picture showing a mother with her hungry children.
 - a. Item 10 above is true regardless of the type of picture (landscape, etc.).
 - b. Nowhere is it more true than the case of effective photographs of people.
 - (1) Study methods of non-verbal communication. Photographs of people are often made more effective by catching the subject engaged in some form of non-verbal communication.
 - (2) The context in which a person is photographed is as important as the behavior of the person depicted. Studies show that people, when asked to identify their own emotions, are often heavily influenced by the setting in which they find themselves. Outside observers, including the photographer and viewers of a photograph, of necessity rely even more heavily on context when asked to interpret the mood or message of photographs of other people.
- 11. Lines in photographs convey special meaning. Generally horizontal lines convey a sense of peace and stability. Vertical lines suggest power or strength. Diagonal lines convey tension. Diagonal lines are often used to keep pictures from being static.
 - a. Unbalanced compositions serve much the same purpose as diagonal lines.
 - b. Static images are not inherently bad. It depends upon the purpose of the photograph.
 - c. Static images often fail to do well in competitions because they lack the dramatic impact that tension imparts to a photograph. Judges rarely have more than a few seconds to make decisions. Consequently, images that convey tension are noticed and appreciated more easily. In this sense, they are easier to "read."

12. The format of an image is important, in part, because format can be used to accentuate certain feelings.
 - a. A vertical format can convey strength because it accents vertical lines.
 - b. Similarly, a horizontal format suggests peace and stability because it accents horizontal lines.
 - c. In addition, the traditional vertical format used in portraiture may be effective. The vertical format often gives a greater feeling of intimacy between subject and viewer simply because it emphasizes the subject. There is usually less distracting detail.
 - d. Using a vertical format is a good way to emphasize depth.
13. The best photographs often capture a sense of fleeting time, i.e., they represent a special moment. In landscapes, a sunrise or a sunset, the beginning or end of a storm, and the sun breaking through the clouds to cast a beam of light on the center of interest all represent conditions that do not last long in nature. They attract our attention. We notice these transitional conditions more readily than static conditions and we have stronger feelings about them. Transitional states in pictures help give us a feeling of being there.
14. When similar objects are to be included in a photograph we are usually advised to include an odd number. This advice is easiest to understand when the objects are few in numbers. For example, two tulips in a single frame may be seen as a divided center of interest. With one tulip the center of interest is clear. With three flowers the center of interest may be the triangle formed by the three tulips rather than the specific flowers themselves. Two people facing the camera may make an uninteresting image. On the other hand, two individuals interacting may make a strong image. Use your own judgment. Find a grouping that works. The larger the number of similar objects included in the frame the less it matters whether the number is odd or even.
15. It is worth mentioning the rule of thirds again in the context of point above. Dividing a landscape in half by putting the horizon through the middle of the picture may reduce the impact of the image by dividing the center of interest between the ground and the sky, just as the two tulips in the example above formed a divided center of interest. I have seen many successful pictures with the horizon in the middle, but they all use other compositional devices to direct the viewer's eye to the center of interest.
16. Perspective, the point of view or position from which the photograph is made, can make or break pictorial composition. Look around for the position that best helps you convey the mood or message your image is meant to convey. Remember, approaching or moving away from the subject can change the composition. For example, approaching a tree requires you to look upward as you move nearer. A tree viewed from beneath gives a very different perspective than viewing the same

tree from one hundred yards. The background also changes. Consider changing the apparent distance between you and your subject by choosing a lens with the appropriate focal length. Zoom lenses were not invented to save you from walking. They are important tools in selecting the right composition.

17. Think of your tripod as one of the most important tools for composition in your arsenal. In addition to providing crucial camera support, even with fast shutter speeds, using a tripod allows you to fine tune the exact composition so it best serves your purpose. Once the camera is in position, examine all edges of the frame. Eliminate everything protruding into your picture unless it serves a specific purpose. If it serves no purpose it is a distraction. A hand-held camera moves and does not allow the photographer to concentrate on removing distracting elements or fine tuning the composition.

Many thanks to Lois Long for drawing the two figures used in the explanation of balance.

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