Lane Cove Creative Photography

Essential Skills

Effective Composition

Introduction

There are many rules that are applied to photographic composition. Some are derived from the age old rules that applied to art, some are rules that have been created specifically for application to photography and many more have arisen by way of photographic clubs.

The rules derived from the art world often have some value, as they have been tried and tested over centuries. Following these rules can be beneficial to gaining pleasing compositions. But, following them too closely can often lead to fairly satisfactory but uninspiring photographs.

The second group of rules were developed to cater for the more mechanical process of image making, brought about by the restrictions of the camera. For example, adding or leaving out subject matter was more difficult using a camera, which tended to include all in its range, than could be achieved with brush and canvas. This is often referred to as "The democracy of the lens".

The third group, photographic club rules, were essentially derived to make judging of photographic competitions and exhibitions a more routine process.

In terms of usefulness in creative photography the first group has the most reasonable application. The second group has less use in these times of digital processing while the third group generally consists of nonsense rules that play no part in creative photography.

In every case compositional rules should always be used as guidelines, rather than something sacrosanct, never to be broken.

Rules from the Art World

The rules of composition from the art world which have been adopted by photographers, and which are the most useable, include rules such as the following.

The Rule Of Thirds

In terms of effective composition, three is a golden number that finds use in obtaining balance in the subject matter. By dividing the picture space in three equal spaces, both vertically and horizontally, we can place key subject matter in a strong visual position and avoid crowding in the centre of the frame.

Of all the rules that may apply, this rule is probably the most universal and useful.

Symmetry

Symmetry in photographic composition is when the two halves of an image hold the same weight. This is also known as formal balance, or symmetrical balance. The two halves can be either vertically orientated, that is, side by side, or they can be horizontally orientated with the top half reflecting the bottom half.

Symmetrical composition does not have to be literal in the sense that one half exactly mirrors the other. Symmetry in composition can also be achieved when different elements are used to appear symmetrical.

Symmetry is one of a number of techniques for creating a static composition, which conveys a sense of calm and orderliness.

Leading Lines

Leading lines refer to lines, actual or implied, that lead the viewer from one part of a composition to another. Leading lines help the viewer read the photograph in an orderly fashion.

When used as a compositional technique, leading lines generally lead the view into the photograph and towards the main subject matter, or the focal point of the photograph.

Leading lines can be actual such as a river meandering through the photograph or a road or fence that leads from the foreground into the photograph. Implied leading lines are not seen as actual subject matter but lines created by a row of trees or a shadow.

Balance

Balance is a compositional technique that involves arranging the subject matter such that each item of subject matter carries equal visual weight within the frame. Balance can be obtained by the physical positioning of subject matter, or the use of colour or tone.

Physical positioning involves placing larger items of subject matter closer to the centre of the frame and smaller items towards the edges of the frame. The use of colour or tone means using equal areas of similar colour or tone, placed in a balanced manner in the frame.

Rules Derived for Photography

There Must Always be an odd Number

There must always be an odd number in the photograph – for example one or three people, one, three or five pebbles. This is really nonsense - the issue is that the subject of a photograph should not be divided, regardless of the number of components in the subject matter. For example, a photograph of a loving couple will contain two people and this will be perfectly acceptable. The subject of the image would be love or eternity and the two people would be valid subject matter. Another example could be a photograph of two athletes neck and neck at the finish line. The subject of the image might be competition or personal challenge and the subject matter is the two athletes.

Fences Must Not be Located Across the Composition

Fences must not be located across the composition. Similarly to the questions of gates being open or closed, this depends on what part the fence plays in the story of the photograph. Is the fence there to provide a barrier or should it be a lead into the image?

You Must Never Photograph the Back of People

This is a good rule when making portraits but if the people are included in the subject matter as a supportive element then seeing their faces could be a distraction. For example, if people are included to give scale and human interest in a landscape, photographing them from behind will do the trick. If they are facing the camera the photograph becomes a picture of people in a landscape and no longer a landscape with people in it. This is an important distinction. One of the most

regarded photographs of all time, Cartier-Bresson's picnic on the banks of the Seine, is largely composed of peoples' backs.

The Main Subject Must Dominate

The truth is a photograph should only have one subject so the concept of a main subject is false. The subject may include several elements of subject matter but the subject should be singular. In simple terms a photograph consists of a subject illustrated by subject matter with a background enclosed in a frame.

Monochrome Pictures Must Have a Full Range of Tones

This may be often true but what if the image is meant to show boredom or impending storm? In portraying boredom a tonal range of mostly mid greys may do a better job than one that has strong blacks and whites as well. Impending storm may be better depicted by a strong predominance of low key black tones with very little grey at all.

All Photographs are Improved by Cropping

Although this is a seemingly true statement the fact is that strict adherence to the concept can destroy the message. The inclusion of a good piece of the surrounding environment is often important to the message.

A Photograph Should Be Light at the Top and Dark at the Bottom

This concept is spawned by the idea that it is what normally occurs in natural scenes – light sky at the top and dark landscape at the bottom. The concept cannot, however, be applied universally as there are many situations that make it inappropriate.

Monochrome is More Creative Than Colour

This is said to be based on the premise that as the world is in colour and it would require more creativity to translate it into black and white. The implication being that colour pictures only depict reality and lack creativity. This is far from the truth. The resolution of the matter is in the ideation that caused the image to be made. The decision to go monochrome or colour needs to be made during the visualisation phase of the picture creation and then all of the creative steps and processes that follow will build towards achieving the goal.

Rules Developed by Photographic Groups

The rules that have been developed by those partaking in photographic groups or clubs are as numerous as they are useless in creative photography and the quest for effective composition. There exists far more of these rules than is practical or helpful to this discussion, but the more common of them are as follows.

Gates Must be Open

The function of a gate to keep something in or out, while providing access when required. In the real world they are normally shut, if they are to be effective. This is of course not applicable in photography.

The Photograph Must Read from Left to Right

This is presumably a carryover from reading a book written in English. But, it really has little use when reading a photograph, that may be read from left to right, right to left or bottom to top.

There Must be Space in Front of the Main Subject Matter

This OK if the main subject matter is arriving in the scene. But, what if it is leaving the scene? Where the story is where they have come from, not where they are going.

Guidelines for Effective Composition

Effective composition involves observance of higher principles of composition. Principles such as the following.

- Completeness

- Engagement

- Visual Depth

- Perspective Control

- Mood

Effective composition is achieved through the use of visual language.

Visual Language for Effective Composition

We use verbal language when we wish to communicate using speech or writing by putting our thoughts into words and phrases. The words and phrases are the building blocks we use to construct our verbal communication and grammar sets the rules for structure and clarity in the way the words and phrases are arranged. The effectiveness of our verbal communication is not the words, phrases and grammar themselves but the way in which we fuse them into prose or poetry to express our ideas.

We can also create an image to visually communicate our thoughts. Just like verbal communication, visual communication requires us to use the building blocks and rules of visual language to visually communicate our thoughts. The effectiveness of our visual communication will be controlled not by the visual building blocks and rules themselves but by the effectiveness of our use of them.

A drawing, a map, a painting and a photograph are all examples of physical images that use visual language to visually communicate.

The structural units of visual language include line, colour, texture, shape, form, space and light. Each of these structural units is important. When composing a photograph, we need to identify which of these units to use in the photograph to express their message or to create a mood.

Line

The recognition of the power of the line is most important when creating effective composition in the photograph. How many types of lines are possible? How important are lines to the image?

Lines are paths between two points and they can be either straight, representing the shortest distance or most direct route, or curved representing a meandering path. The straight line could be used to represent a direct and dynamic mood while the curve may give a more relaxed feel.

In a photograph a line can be a real object, for example a road or a fence or it can be an imaginary line between two or more dominant points in the composition. Lines can also be created in a photograph by contrasts of light and shadow or through the use of colour or shape.

Whether real or imagined, the line is a powerful tool for effective composition at it provides direction for the viewer within the frame of the photograph. Lines can also be used to enclose or liberate specific areas of the image and to control the spatial aspects of the image. Lines can also be used to suggest movement or direction and to create illusive depth.

Colour

Colour, or tone in monochrome, is a very emotional element of a photograph. Colour has a profound effect on human emotions. It can make us feel calm, aroused, amused, angered or sad – or a number of other feelings. It could be argued that colour has the greatest single effect on the emotion of a photograph. Terms like "seeing red" and "feeling blue" are part of our language.

In terms of photography, colour is normally created from the light reflected from surfaces and objects and captured in the photographic recording media being used. It may also be derived directly from the light source; an electric light, a flash unit, sunlight, a candle or fire. Whatever the source, reflected or direct, the colour will have a certain hue (the named colour such as red or blue), intensity (the purity of the colour) and value (the amount of black or white mixed into the pure colour).

The relationships of colours can be demonstrated by the use of a colour wheel. A colour wheel has the colours of the spectrum arranged in sequence around its circumference. The colours that are directly opposite each other show the greatest colour contrast. These are called complimentary colours with red being directly opposite the secondary green, which contains the primaries of yellow and blue. When complementary colours are placed adjacent one another in an image they have the effect of each making the other appear more vivid. The colour wheel also allows us to see colours that are similar as these lie next to each other on the wheel.

Texture

Texture refers to the surface quality or feel of an object. It can be described as smooth, rough, soft, hard and so forth. In photography textures are simulated as they can't actually be felt in a normally produced image. They are simulated by the way the photographer uses viewpoint and direction of light.

By choice of viewpoint and the application of oblique lighting the photographer accentuates the surface features of the subject to give a simulated 3D representation of the real life surface texture. The finer the surface texture of the subject is, the more oblique to the camera position the light needs to be to obtain a 3D effect. The strength of the light also plays a part in the rendering of texture. Strong directional light will generally be more effective than soft shadowless light.

Shape

Shape is an important element in both the rendering and seeing of photography. Shapes abound and can be seen everywhere. Some shapes are regular and are given names such as circle or square but most are irregular and infinite. Shapes can be combined to create even more shapes.

Shapes are used by photographers for three fundamental purposes.

1. To depict a real life physical form.

2. To achieve order, variety and harmony in the image.

3. To depict different qualities of mood and feeling in the image.

In photographic terms shape is any part of a real object which is defined and rendered by other elements such as line, texture, colour, space or light. Shapes may be symmetrical or non-symmetrical or a combination of both. Through the use of light, to cast edge shadows, shapes in the two dimensional photographic surface can create the illusion of three dimensions.

Form

In photography the term form describes three dimensional solids and contained spaces within the photographic frame. Form represents three dimensional shapes and has both mass and volume.

In terms of photography the meaning of the word form depends on its context.

1. Form can mean the organisation or composition of the photograph.

2. Visually form can be the representation of a three dimensional object on a two dimensional surface.

3. Form can mean the visual representation of real life solids in a photographic composition.

Photographers use form to represent real life three dimensional objects in a photograph that has only two dimensions – width and height. They achieve the illusion of 3D though the use of light direction to create a light side and a dark side on the representation of the form in the photograph.

Space

The space in a two dimensional photograph is represented as a flat area limited to height and width. There is no actual depth or distance in a photograph but photographers use creative techniques to create the illusion of depth or distance.

Some of the techniques used to create the illusion of depth or distance are:

1. Control of Linear Perspective – though the use of linear perspective distant objects are rendered proportionately smaller than closer objects. Photographers achieve this through the choice of lens focal length and viewpoint. By using a wide angle lens and a close viewpoint, close objects will be rendered larger and distant objects smaller. A long focal length lens and a distant viewpoint will have the effect of making all objects in the composition a similar relative size.

2. Control of Atmospheric Perspective – through the control of light and colour and the use of atmospheric conditions, such as mist or fog, the photographer can create visual depth in an image. This technique can render distant objects and spaces with less detail and intensity than closer objects. Some colours are recessive, for example pale blue while others have a tendency to jump out – bright reds, greens and yellows. The use of a strong colour for foreground objects and a recessive colour for the distant objects suggests space or distance between the close and distant objects in the photograph.

3.   Placement of Objects - the illusion of space can be achieved by placing a large object in the foreground close to the camera. This has the effect of making background objects seem more distant.

4.   Overlapping – placing objects in the picture plane so they overlap and recede can suggest space and depth.

Light

The intensity and quality of light can be used to express mood in a photograph. A predominance of light suggests good clarity and completeness. Lack of light or darkness is just the opposite; it expresses mystery, gloom, evil and emptiness. The control of light in a photograph can also describe space, define forms and convey feelings, drama, aesthetics and dynamism.

Photographers use light to create a three dimensional illusion in the two dimensional photograph. One of the ways they do this is by choosing a direction and balance of light that creates shadows as it falls on solid forms. If a single light source is used objects close to the light will be brightly lit while other objects further from the light will diminish in intensity. This will give the illusion of space.

Placing objects so that some are blocked from the light causes the shadow of objects close to the light to fall on objects further from the light again creating depth in the flat surface of the photograph.

The effects of light direction and intensity are important for our understanding and appreciation of how three dimensional forms are successfully rendered in two dimensional photographs. Light and shadow are used to define these forms.

Another aspect of light that defines forms is the control of highlights. Highlights in the photograph give it life and contrast and help define the subject matter in the photographic space.

Art Composition

Composition is the process of selecting and arranging subject matter elements within the photographic space to effectively communicate the subject of the photographer's ideas and feelings to the viewer. Composition is the major factor involving aesthetics in an image; it can create a strong and interesting photograph, or a weak and confused photograph. Composition can make the photograph readable or unreadable.

The main objective of composition is to combine and arrange forms in the photographic space to produce a harmonious whole that is a meaningful statement that conveys the idea behind the image.

Composition doesn't just happen, when you see a really great photograph it was not the result of some accident or the throwing together forms and a background. It is the result of the photographer's skill, knowledge and careful planning. A well composed photograph causes the viewer to stop and look and it effectively communicates the photographer's idea.

There will almost surely be a number of possible compositions for any scene or subject that will be effective. In composing a photograph the photographer decides what the main point of focus will be; different photographers may see the same subject, but each is likely to choose a different composition. Decisions that photographers make in regard to the composition include the placement, orientation and size of the point of interest; should it be moved or made larger, clearer, stronger or brighter.

Composition allows the photographer to control which part of the image the viewer will linger over. This is achieved by choosing and placing a definite focal point and then leading the viewer by the use of visual language either directly or indirectly through the photograph.

An important compositional tool is the use of tone – it is well established that light tones attract and dark tones recede. Effective use of light and dark tones will emphasise the focal point of the subject matter and hold the viewer's interest within the frame.

Before pressing the shutter, the photographer needs to have an idea; without an idea it is difficult for the resulting photograph to have real purpose or message. Before even pointing the camera, the photographer needs to determine the subject matter needed to illustrate the subject and the composition needed to effectively arrange the subject matter. Other decisions to be made about the final image include:

1. What mood is going to best convey the message?

2. What emotions need to be evoked?

3. What is the most effective viewpoint?

4. Have all of the possible distractions been removed?

5. Is the composition completely resolved or are there areas of incompleteness apparent?

Only after attending to these issues it is time for the photographer to press the shutter and capture the image.

In photographic terms there is a large number of compositional guidelines – Rule of Thirds, Golden Mean, Leading Lines, Balance and so on. Most of these were derived from painting art and are well known to most photographers. At a higher more artistic level there are other compositional tools available. The main ones are:

Image Area

The image area is the surface within the four borders of the photograph that are used to contain subject matter. The image area defines the placement of the objects that make the subject matter, how they are arranged and how big they should be relative to each other. An important aspect of the image area is its shape. As well as width and height, consideration of the relationship of these dimensions to each other is important. This aspect ratio should match the shape of the subject – a tall subject decrees a tall thin image area while a wide subject requires a wide or panoramic image area.

Depth

Because photographs are generally two dimensional, the illusion of depth or distance (third dimension) is required. Illusionary depth creates a three dimensional effect in the two dimensional photograph, making objects feel closer or further away. When the creation of the feeling of depth is carried out effectively the finished result will not appear flat in the photograph.

Line

 In photographic composition line plays two important roles. Line can be used direct the viewer through the photograph to the point of interest. Line can also be used to create depth in the image.

Lines can be imaginary created by the placement of objects or forms within the photograph, so that the viewer is lead to the focal point by moving from one object to the next or they can be actual lines created by objects – a fence or a road. In a well structured composition the lines lead the viewer but will not allow the viewer to keep going all the way out of the photograph.

Value

Value in a composition relates to the lightness or darkness of an area or shape contained in the composition. The value given to an object, shape or form in the composition will have a bearing on its importance or weight. Light objects will generally attract the viewer to a greater extent than dark objects, although this attraction is also influenced by the placement and area given to the objects. To gain equal attention from the viewer a dark object would have to be considerably larger and more dominantly placed than a light object.

Value also relates to the overall feel or tone of the image – is it low key or high key? The key of the image has a profound effect on the mood. High key suggests feelings like happiness, hope, enchantment, success, inspiration and rapture while low key suggests feelings like doom and gloom, despair, fear, disaster and failure.

Michael Smyth

Jim Crew