

Composition

Understanding the basics of composition helps us to construct a picture that is pleasing to the eye. A correctly composed holiday snap shot for example will look more like a picture postcard and an aesthetically pleasing image will complement our memories of a happy holiday. But what if we hated the holiday, the hotel was a building site, the staff rude and the weather awful? A jarring, unbalanced composition may convey a greater sense of chaos... and get a bigger refund from the tour operator on our return.

We are subconsciously affected by the composition of images on a daily basis. In the weekend supplements and on TV adverts for sports cars are aesthetically pleasing but are also dynamic, emphasising speed, ads for banks look solid and dependable. A TV news photographer reporting on an earthquake will compose footage of jagged rubble and dynamic diagonals but a travel documentary on the Lake District is full of calm, balanced, images and foreground interest.

Composition at the basic level helps us put together the elements of our picture in a coherent way but, at a more advanced level, can help us concentrate the eye on our subject or guide it away from distractions. Beyond that it can help add emotion or enhance a particular message we wish to convey.

Whole books are available on the advanced theories of composition and it is possible to get completely bogged down in the theory and actually forget the practice. The best way to learn about composition is to take photographs. Digital photography, once you have bought your camera is effectively free so there is no excuse for not experimenting. It is also important to note that anything that is expressed as a rule is actually only a guidance.



This off centre composition is generally pleasing to the eye. You may even find that your camera has a setting to display the grid on the screen. This is really a gimmick and the placing of the subject doesn't need to be that precise.

Rule of Thirds

Divide your picture into thirds using two horizontal lines and two vertical lines.

Place the horizon on one of the horizontal lines and your main subject on one of the intersections of a horizontal and vertical line



Three things control out composition of a photograph.

Viewpoint



Put simply this is where we choose to stand and take the picture. Is it better if we look up or look down on a subject? Oliver Cromwell looks very commanding when we look up at him and the mudflats of the Wash seem to stretch out farther when we look down on them from the cliffs.



Changing viewpoint can simply mean crouching down or taking a few steps. The picture of the looked more dramatic from a lower angle and this also hid the buildings that were visible over the tops of the carriages.

Framing

As a photographer you decide what to include in your pictures. Often changing from a horizontal (landscape) format to a vertical (portrait) composition creates a different composition.



Moving closer or zooming in can isolate your subject for a more dramatic effect (zooming in can also change the perspective of your image but we will discuss that later).



Cromwell now looks much more dramatic but is out of context; we cannot see any of the surrounding town or the Union flags

Timing

When do we take the picture? It takes a fraction of a second to record an image but some of the best landscape photographers may wait days for the most dramatic light. To take a candid the photographer may have seen the picture unfolding, composed and taken the picture at precisely the right moment in a matter of seconds.



It took the man in the water several minutes to wade up the creek into just the right position. There was then only a fraction of a second when everyone looked at him

I knew these two aircraft were going to pass close to each other and even though I used a continuous (motor drive) function on the camera timing was still vital.



Rather obviously the Christmas decorations in Vienna look completely different in daytime to night time but look at the colour of the sky at dusk when the brightness of the sky is roughly equal to the lights



Changing the Composition

Foreground Objects

Use foreground objects to lead the eye into the picture



Contain your landscape subject by framing it with an overhanging tree branch. It is interesting to note that classical artists hardly ever do this. There are technical reasons why early photographers started this trend.

Photograph an animal in a zoo without showing the boundaries of its cage and it looks free. Show the cage bars and it is instantly confined.

Space

Give moving objects, people and your subjects direction of gaze somewhere to go. Leave them space.



The horses and the pheasant have a space to carry on walking into.



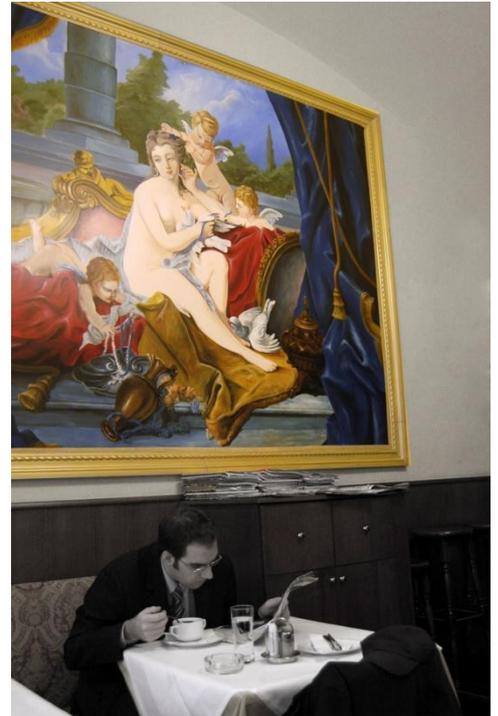
Balance.

Use different or similar shapes or colours in different parts of your picture to achieve a sense of balance.



The figure on the slipway is balanced against the reflection of the tree. The soft lines of natural objects contrast with the hard lines of manmade objects.

There is balance and disharmony in this picture. Colour against black and white, male and female, clothed and nude



Lines

- Straight lines give a sense of stillness
- Triangles are solid and permanent
- Diagonals are dynamic
- Use diagonals or converging lines to lead
- S shapes are aesthetically pleasing



The converging lines of the buildings and the river bank lead the eye into the picture and suggest depth. The horizontal lines of the bridges give a sense of stillness.

Think of the classic picture over the mantel piece. A winding country lane snakes down to a village (the slightly elevated view puts the horizon on the top third). A plume of smoke rises from one of the houses chimneys (on the third) whilst the sun sets (on the other third) its yellow disc balancing the dark, angular shapes of the village buildings. If it's a photograph the whole thing is framed by a mighty oak trunk and overhanging branches.

It has been reproduced a million times; not because it is great art but because it works.

Colour

- Reds attract the eye
- Greens are calm and still
- Blues give a sense of coolness or cold.
- Yellows and oranges are warm

Red, yellow and blue are primary colours.

Their complimentary colours are green, magenta and orange. When you mix two complimentary colours in a picture there is a strong contrast but the result is still harmonious. Mixing non complimentary can produce a more discordant picture



Now Break the Rules - But know why.