VISUALFLOW

MASTERING THE ART OF COMPOSITION

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER TWO
A MULTITUDE OF SHAPES

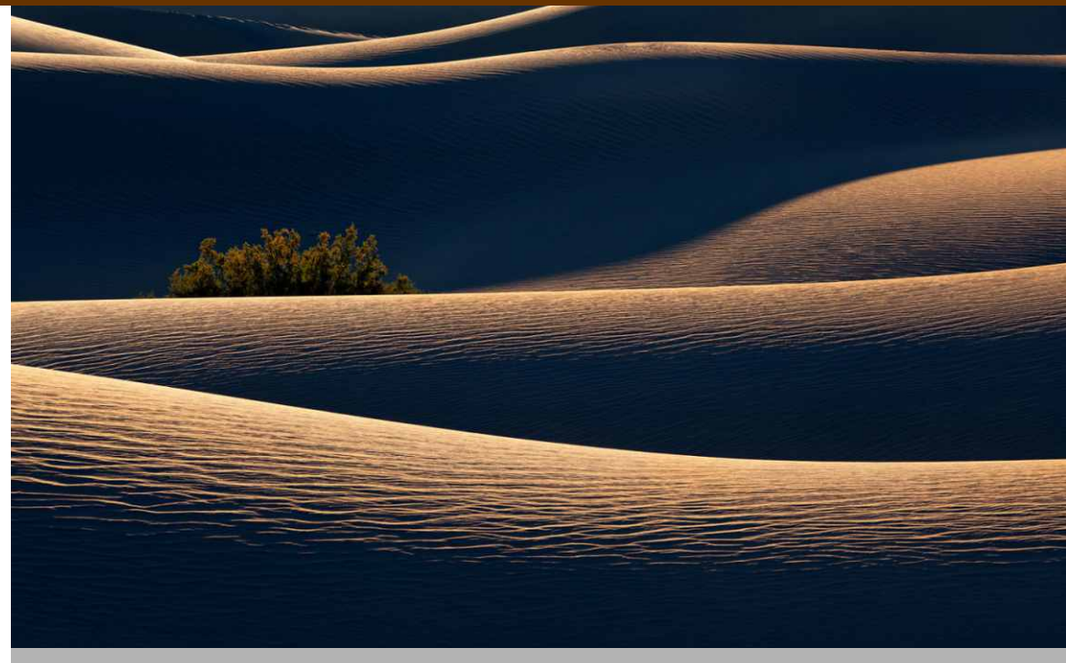
"Art arises when the secret vision of the artist and the manifestation of nature agree to find new shapes."—Kahlil Gibran

"There is always something to make you wonder in the shape of a tree, the trembling of a leaf."—Albert Schweitzer

"I have been a multitude of shapes, before I assumed a consistent form."—Taliesin

To master composition, one must learn to recognize, and establish relationships between, shapes (also known as *forms*). Shapes fill the space within the image frame, and are very important in defining a composition. Shapes are the building blocks of image design, the foundation upon which a composition is built.

Our world contains a seemingly never-ending array of shapes (such as lines, curves, triangles, squares, spirals, rectangles, and circles) and near shapes (such as quasi-lines, quasi-curves, quasi-triangles, and so on), all the way to completely amorphous blobs. Learning how to recognize, identify, and work with all of these shapes—and, more critically, to find a way to make shapes work together—is fundamentally important to mastering composition.



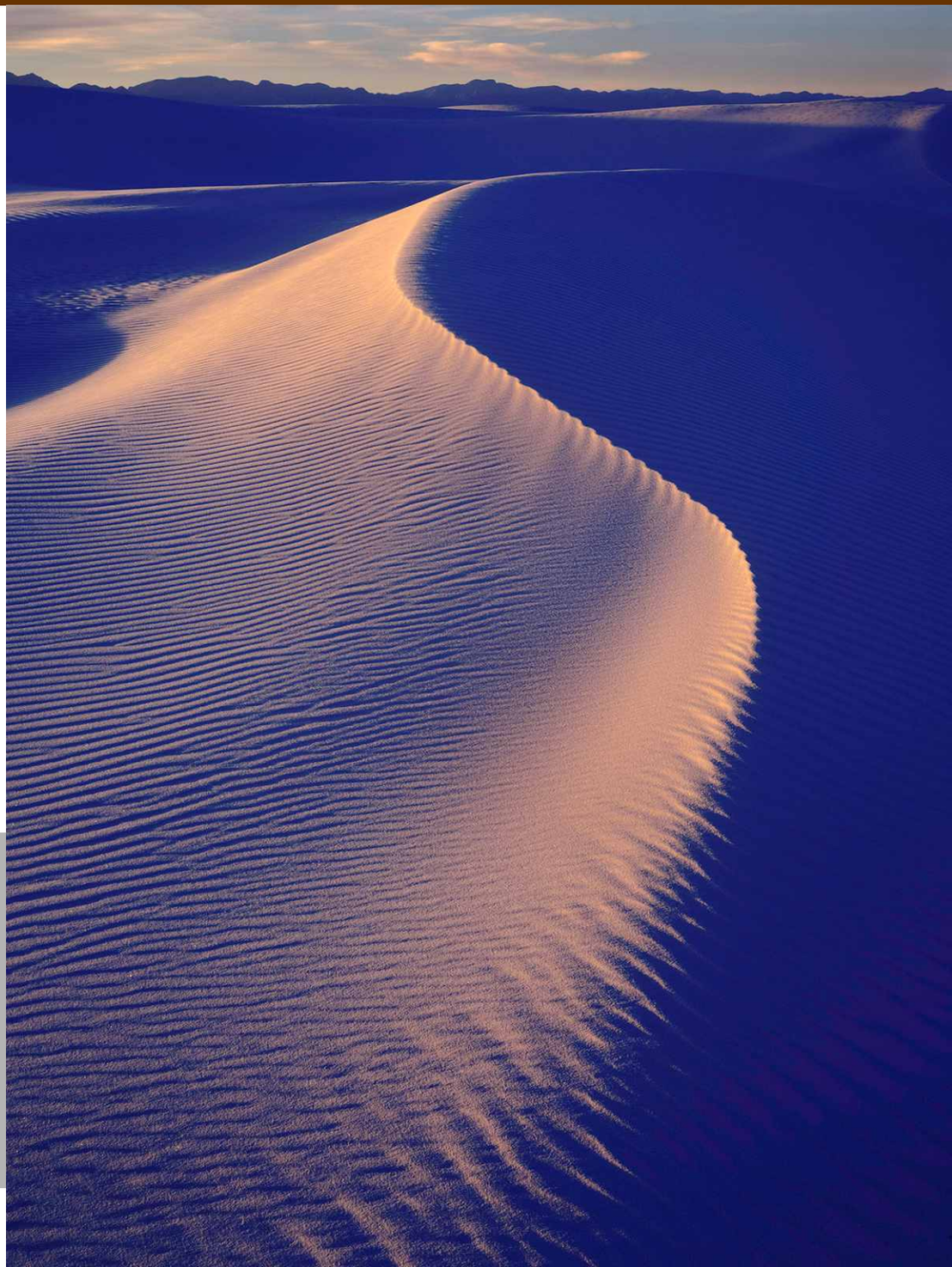
Here, the interplay of light and shadow on the dunes creates a number of repeating curving shapes. Shape recognition is a first and vital step in understanding composition. "Desert Repose" by Ian Plant (Death Valley National Park, California).

Shapes aren't just created by objects (such as trees, boulders, bears, and the like)—they can also be created by empty space surrounding objects, by the interplay of light and shadow, by the interaction of several objects, by areas of color, and by just about anything else you can imagine encountering in the wide world. I'll discuss

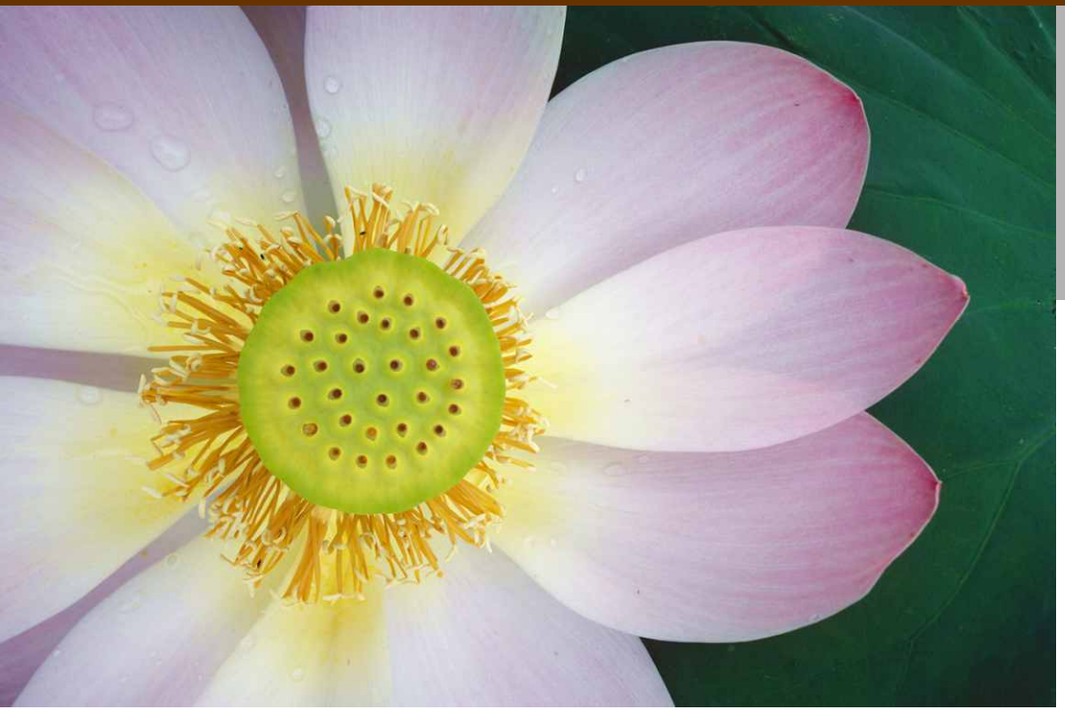
many of these possibilities, as well as their potential uses in composition, in this chapter.

Remember the earlier admonition to think about composition in the abstract? This lesson is of vital importance when working with shapes. You must not think of a tree as a tree, but rather as a vertical line; a mountain is not a mountain, but instead is a triangle; and so on. Learning to visualize in the abstract is the key to successfully recognizing shapes and then, in turn, creating a structured and harmonious relationship between those shapes.

But before we charge headlong into shapes, let's start with a few fundamental concepts related to how humans perceive visual information. You might first want to grab some bratwurst and a stein of Beck's—because we're taking a field trip.



For the image at right, George used a very simple and graphic curving shape formed by the leading edge of the sand dune as the focus of his composition. The shape is formed not only by the contours of the dune, but also by the interplay of early-morning light and shadow. "Blue Dune" by George Stocking (White Sands National Monument, New Mexico).

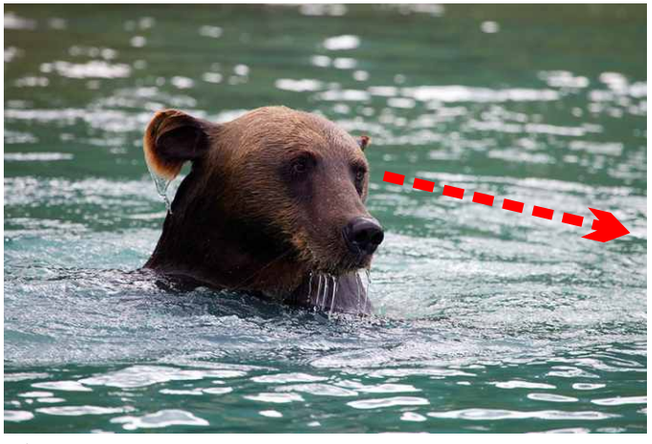


Human brains seek to simplify our chaotic visual world. Good composition can help the process along. "Zen, Unfurled" by Ian Plant (Kenilworth Park and Aquatic Gardens, Washington, D.C.).

As already noted, our visual world is incredibly complex, at times bewildering. Animal and human brains have evolved complex mechanisms for coping with visual chaos, allowing us to essentially filter information and naturally simplify the visual puzzle, reducing it to something more manageable. Psychologists in Germany began some pioneering work into the study of this phenomenon in the 1920s, labeling these cognitive processes as "gestalt" (a German word which roughly translates as "whole" or "form"). Basically, here's how it goes: when confronted by a wide array of chaotic visual information, the human mind tries to simplify incoming data by aggregating information based on common characteristics. As you can probably guess, some artists began to apply this scientific understanding to the creation of visual art. And so the Gestalt theory of composition was born.

Arguably, Gestalt theory didn't really do much more than reconceptualize artistic techniques that had been in use by painters for centuries (and more recently by photographers) and give it a seemingly fancy German name (even though the literal translation of *gestalt* is rather banal). Nonetheless, Gestalt theory has had an important impact on modern art. I will present and refer to Gestalt principles within the broader framework of the techniques and theories discussed in this book, rather than as a stand-alone artistic doctrine.

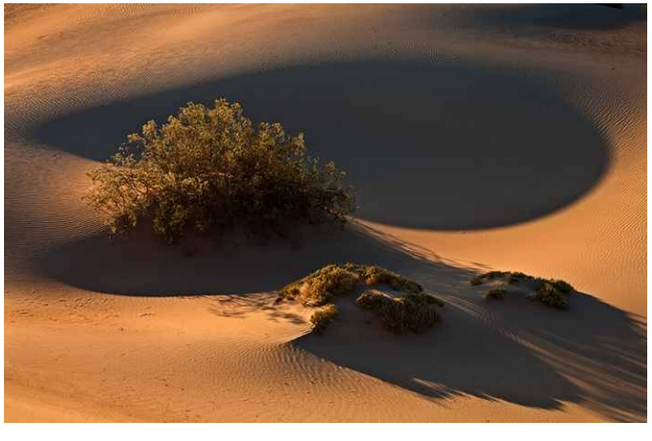
Although Gestalt theory is concerned with the process of visual simplification, it would be a mistake to think that Gestalt calls for reducing a composition to basic simplicity. Gestalt is arguably best used to create a sense of order even with complex compositions—but more on that later!



⇧ **Continuation**: The human eye tends to follow the path of least resistance, seeking to continue in a given direction unless interrupted. An example of this concept is eye direction (shown above): if the subject of a composition is looking in a particular direction, the viewer's eye will typically follow the line of sight.

⇧ **Proximity:** The closer two or more objects are to one another, the greater is the likelihood that they will be perceived as a group or pattern, or as being a single object rather than several separate objects. For example, the heron and the tree branch are viewed as one single continuous shape.

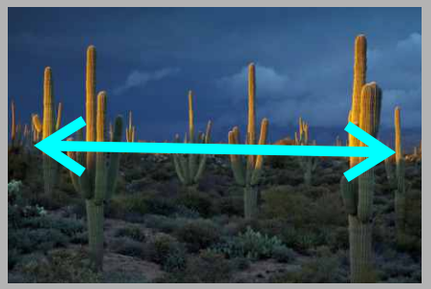
⇩ **Closure:** People have a tendency to complete familiar things that are only nearly complete. An example of this principle is our tendency to mentally "fill in" missing or incorrect words when proofreading a document that has errors. As this relates to artistic design, people tend to view incomplete shapes as being complete, mentally filling in any gaps. For example, with the image below, the brain views the circle formed by the shadow as complete, even though the bush interrupts the shape.



⇦ **Similarity:** People perceive objects that are similar in size, shape, or color as belonging together, such as the lotus leaves to the right.

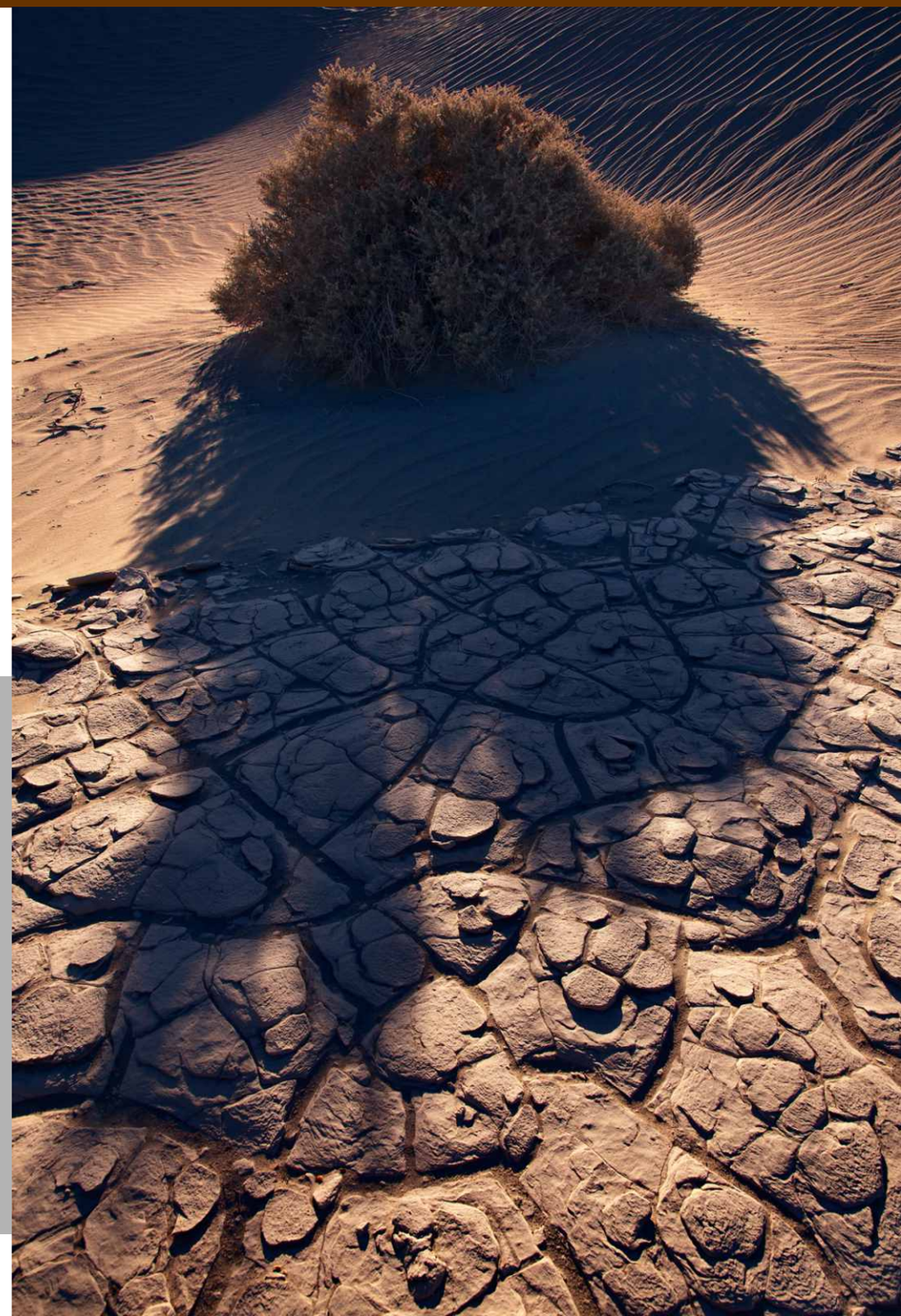
Here's two examples of these Gestalt theories in action. The top image is a clever play on the principles of continuation and closure. The human brain tends to want to continue the horizon line through the vertical cacti that interrupt the line. To reinforce this tendency, George waited for the moment when the sun's shadow lined up closely with the horizon line. In doing so, he emphasized the horizon line, encouraging the eye to travel back and forth from right to left and vice versa in order to visually complete the line. For the bottom image, the eye wants to follow and connect the curve of the incoming surf and the cloud above it to form one continuous shape. We'll see many other Gestalt examples in this book.

Top: "Cusp of Light" by George Stocking (Tonto National Forest, Arizona). Bottom: "Paradise Lost" by Ian Plant (Gladden Spit and Silk Cayes Marine Reserve, Belize).



Now that we are thinking abstractly about elements of a composition, and keeping the Gestalt theories from the previous pages in mind, you may notice that some elements seem to attract the eye more strongly than others. The ability of a visual element to attract attention—its "eye catchiness," if you will—is known as *visual mass*. The concept of visual mass is an important one, so I suggest you pay close attention to this section.

Think of visual mass as gravity—a large object, such as a star, has a lot of mass and therefore a lot of gravity, and is able to attract the attention of planets, asteroids, comets, and a bunch of other stellar objects. A relatively small



The photograph to the right graphically illustrates the concept of visual mass. Since the bush and its shadow are fairly close to each other in terms of luminosity and color, they essentially merge together into one shape. This shape is very prominent in the image and tends very powerfully to attract the viewer's eye. Thus, it can be said that the bush/shadow shape has a great amount of visual mass. Other elements in the scene, such as the patterns in the desert floor, draw less attention and thus have relatively small amounts of visual mass. "Creeping Shadow" by Ian Plant (Death Valley National Park, California).

Although small, the sun and crescent moon in the photo to the left command a lot of attention and thus have significant visual mass. "Mesa Arch" by Ian Plant (Canyonlands National Park, Utah).

object, such as an asteroid, is unlikely to attract much with its relatively weak gravitational pull. The same goes for visual elements within the picture frame. Bold, powerful elements that immediately attract the eye and demand instant attention—these elements are said to have a lot of visual mass. Elements that are relatively more discreet don't get noticed as much and therefore have less visual mass.

Keep in mind that visual mass is not simply dictated by the relative size of an object. Color, tone, shape, and other elements can give an object visual mass out of proportion with its physical size. Artists use the term "mass" in the same way physicists do: mass is a measure of density rather than size. Small objects with a lot of density (such as a lead ball) have more mass than large objects with little density (such as a party balloon). The same is true for composition: eye-catching elements, such as a bright sun, have great visual mass even though they might be rendered small in the picture.

The relative visual masses of elements within a photograph will dictate (to a large degree) what goes where, how far apart objects are placed, and which elements are included in the image and which are not. Elements with an overwhelming amount of visual mass must be balanced with other elements, or a composition will be left unbalanced and jolting to the viewer. I will of course delve deeper throughout this book into this subject of proper positioning of relative visual masses within the picture frame (which, if you think about it, is the concept of "composition" in a nutshell).

Painters have dealt with visual mass for centuries, so a lot can be learned from studying their approach. For exam-

Source: Wikipedia Commons

This painting is an excellent study of visual mass. "Officer and a Laughing Girl" by Johannes Vermeer (ca. 1657).

ple, the painting at left by Dutch master Johannes Vermeer rather deftly uses visual mass to create an eye-catching composition. The large black hat of the jaunty officer on the left and the shadow and dark hair beneath the hat all merge together to form a single area of visual mass. All of this dark mass could easily dominate the painting, acting like a black hole, sucking all attention deep within without releasing the viewer's eye.

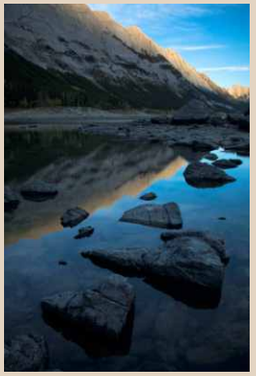
In the hands of a lesser painter, this might have been the result, but Vermeer smartly balanced this area of visual mass with another: the brightly lit face of the girl and her white hood. Although smaller than the dark mass of the officer's hat, the girl's face has an equal amount of visual mass (perhaps even more): her relative brightness and chipper smile easily draw the viewer, establishing a visual relationship between

The photographer can manipulate an object's visual mass by lens choice, camera position, and use of light. "Sanctuary" by Ian Plant (Mary Jane Canyon, Utah).

the two prominent areas of visual mass in the painting and creating balance.

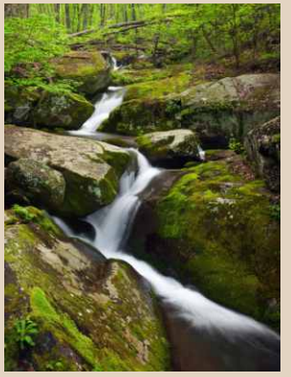
Visual mass is a very important artistic concept. Even more important is the following: visual mass is not a static thing. Rather, the photographer can manipulate the visual mass of an object through lens choice, camera position, and use of light. We'll discuss how in more detail in the following chapters, but for now, remember that the manipulation of visual mass is central to many powerful composition techniques.

Keep this concept of visual mass in the back of your mind for now, but as you will notice in the next few chapters, visual mass will come up time and time again. It is an important way of thinking about the elements of a given scene. But now, on to shapes!



Triangles: Provide stability and balance to a composition.

Patterns: A series of repeating shapes attract the eye and help balance a composition.



Zigzags: Bold, energetic shapes that get the eye moving back and forth.

Circles: Act to trap the eye and hold it over time.

Spirals and Radials: Shapes which inexorably draw and hold the viewer's eye.

Diagonal Lines: Add energy and visual interest.

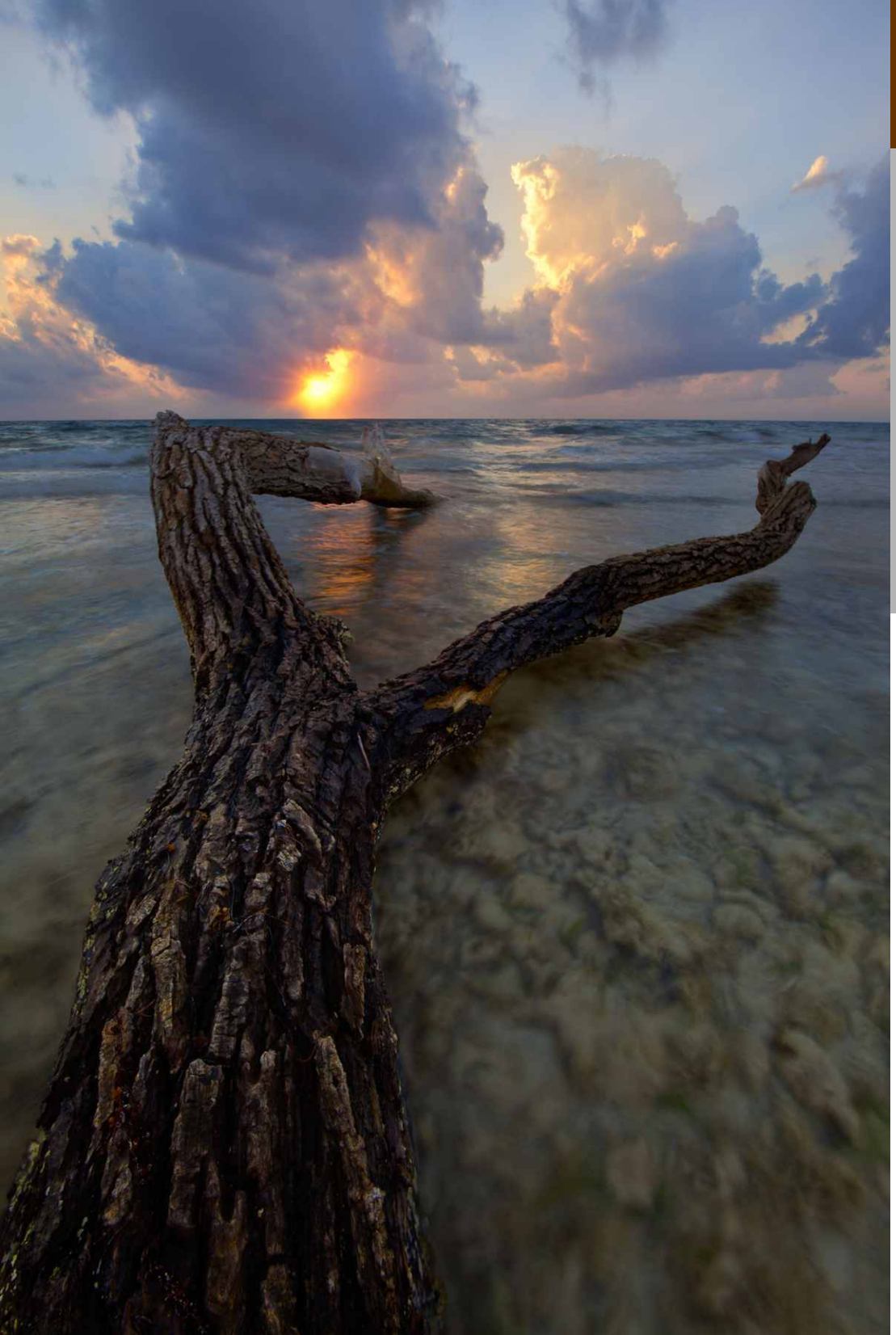
Curves: Elegant shapes which entice the viewer deep into the scene.

Lines: Powerful shapes which lead the eye.

Lines are just that—they are elements of a scene that are more or less straight and that have significant length but relatively little width—you know, *lines*. Fairly self-explanatory, for the most part. Sometimes the lines are obvious: such as a series of vertical tree trunks in a forest. Sometimes the lines are abstract: such as an implied line created by a repetition of objects. A line is a *fundamental* shape, in the sense that many other shapes can be formed by an aggregation of more than one line.

Technically, lines alone are nothing. As the famous painter Henri Matisse once said, "A line cannot exist alone; it always brings a companion along. Do remember that one line does nothing; it is only in relation to another that it creates a volume." For example, each tree trunk in the image at right isn't really a line, but rather two lines that form the shape of the trunk and give it volume. For simplicity's sake, however, we will refer to many objects that are really a collection of lines as simply a single line.

The tree trunks form a series of vertical lines. "The Cathedral" by George Stocking (Redwoods National Park, California).

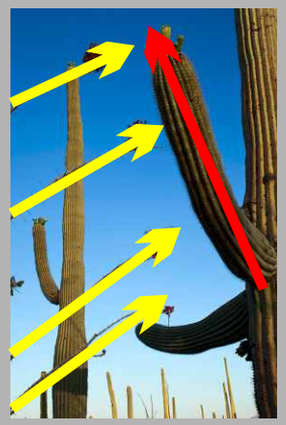


Lines traveling from foreground to background propel the viewer's eye into the scene and thus are known as "leading lines"—such as the line created by this fallen tree, which points deep into the scene. "Moho Mojo" by Ian Plant (Gladden Spit and Silk Cayes Marine Reserve, Belize).

Lines are arguably the most used—and perhaps most abused—compositional tool in photography. Particularly when the lines emanate from the bottom of the image frame and point to important elements in the background, they can be very effective at grabbing the viewer's attention and propelling their eye into the scene. I'll talk more about using lines as leading elements in the next chapter; for now, we'll just focus on their use generally as a shape.

Diagonal and vertical lines often make for a more dynamic composition than horizontal ones, giving a sense of upward or downward motion as they lead the viewer's eye. Horizontal lines, such as a distinct horizon line, can sometimes be problematic as they tend to visually divide a scene and if placed improp-

This image uses a series of repeating diagonal lines to create energy, with one contrary line to break the directional motion created by the four lines coming from the left side. A quirky composition results. "Getting the Point" by George Stocking (Saguaro National Park, Arizona).



erly can interrupt visual flow and trap the eye. Once again, more on this later.

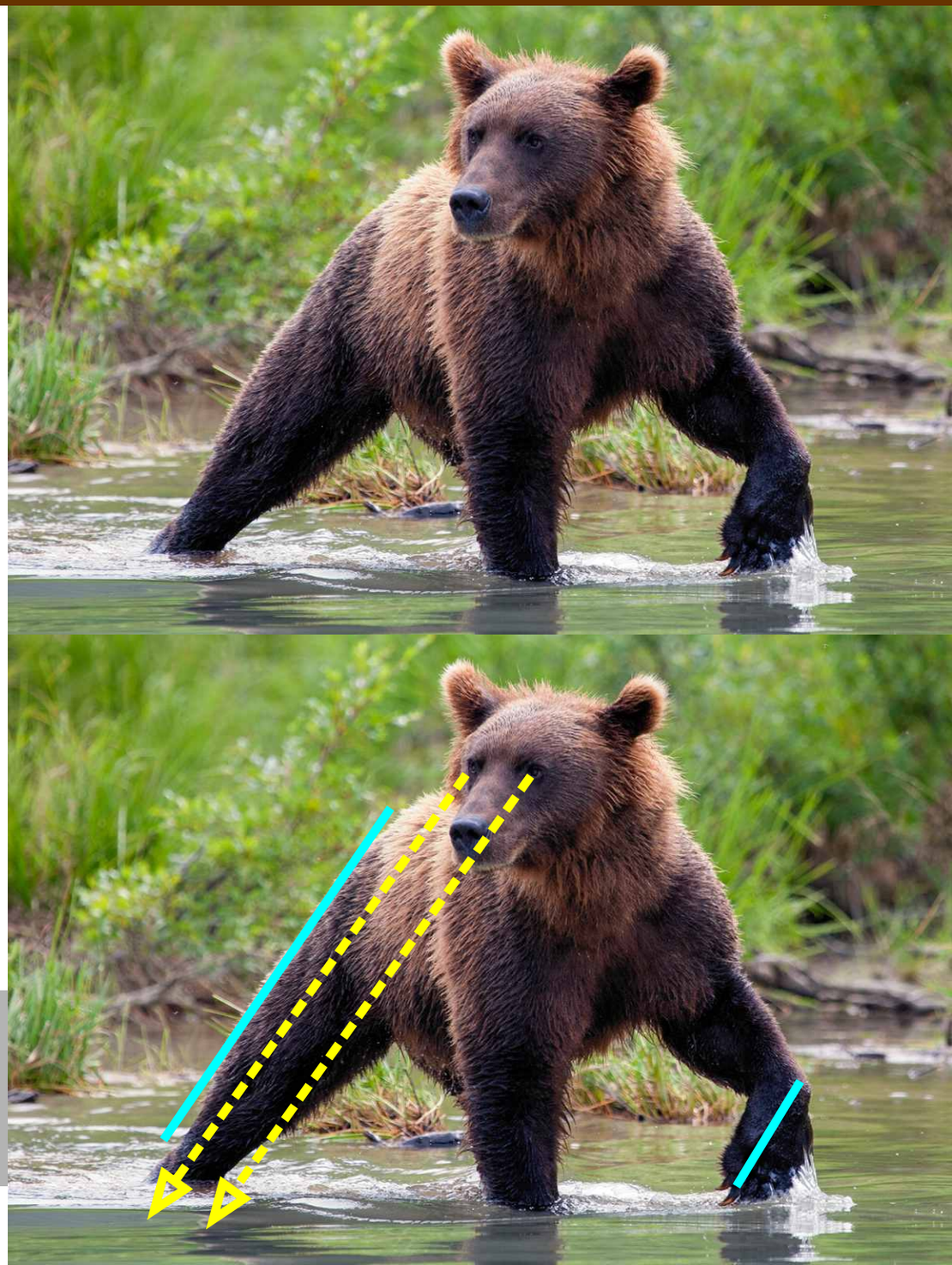
Most photographers tend to rely heavily on lines when making compositions, partially because lines are abundant and easy to find. They are also fairly easy to understand and to visualize, making them useful when you are still trying to master other compositional styles.

Even when not used as leading elements, lines can still be used powerfully and purposefully. The image to the right demonstrates this principle. The four cacti branches coming in from the left lead the eye into the middle of the photo, where they encounter another line, formed by the prominent saguaro branch pointing up. This line, represented in red in the diagram above, creates visual opposition to the four lines coming in from the left. Rather than traditionally leading the eye from

foreground to middle-ground to background, here the interaction of lines creates a quirky and energetic composition.

Lines can also form abstractly by the direction that other elements point. A very clear example is the "line of sight" of an animal or a person, which creates an abstract line extending from the eye in the direction it is pointing. For example, with the bear photograph to the right, the bear's line of sight creates two abstract lines pointing diagonally to the lower left side of the image. Notice how the sight lines parallel the lines created by the bear's back leg and raised front paw. This repetition of shape can be very effective, but I'll get more into that later.

Combinations of lines can form many other shapes, such as triangles, squares, pentagrams, etc. All of these shapes can be useful when composing images. Two of these shapes—the triangle and the zig-zag—are of special importance to composition and will be dealt with separately.



The bear's line of sight creates abstract lines extending out from its eyes. "Honing In" by Ian Plant (Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, Alaska).