VISUALFLOW

MASTERING THE ART OF COMPOSITION

IAN PLANT
WITH GEORGE STOCKING

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By Ian Plant
with George Stocking

About Ian Plant
A full-time professional nature photographer, writer, and adventurer, Ian Plant has been photographing our natural world for almost twenty years. His photographs and instructional articles have appeared in a number of books, calendars, and magazines, including *Outdoor Photographer*, *Popular Photography, Le Monde de la Photo, Nature Photographers Online Magazine, National Parks, Common Ground, Blue Ridge Country, Adirondack Life, Wonderful West Virginia,* and *Chesapeake Life*, among others. Ian has sold images to a wide range of corporate and environmental clients, including Apple, National Geographic Society, REI, Southern Environmental Law Center, National Parks Conservation Association, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Humane Society, and Tamron. Ian also writes a regular blog column for *Outdoor Photographer* online. Ian is the photographer/author of eight print books, including *Chesapeake: Bay of Light* (2007), and is also one of the lead authors and designer of *The Ultimate Guide to Digital Nature Photography* (2009). Most recently, Ian has authored a number of instructional eBooks, as well as a number of digital processing video tutorials.

About George Stocking
One of the best photographers of the American Southwest, George Stocking is a professional freelance photographer residing in Phoenix, Arizona. He works regularly as a contract photographer for *Arizona Highways*, and his work often graces the pages of *Arizona Highways* magazine, calendars, and books. His work has appeared in numerous national publications, such as *Backpacker*, *Outdoor Photographer, USGA Golf Journal, Country Magazine, Audubon Calendars, Adventure West, America West Airlines Magazine, Impact, and Smith Southwestern*. Other publications include: *Oregon Outside*, *Arizona Foothills*, *Arizona Adventure*, and *Plateau Magazine*. George's work has also appeared in a number of books, including *Arizona Wonder & Light* and *The Ultimate Guide to Digital Nature Photography*.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

George and I are both nature photographers, primarily shooting landscapes (although I shoot a fair amount of wildlife as well). Accordingly, most of the photographs we show in this book are nature images, although we do throw in the occasional "hand of man" picture as well. Although this book's emphasis is on nature photography, I believe that the composition techniques discussed here are applicable to other types of photography, and (more broadly) to other forms of two-dimensional visual art as well. As such, artists of all types should find this book useful. Enjoy!

—Ian Plant

"Edge of the Abyss" by George Stocking (Sierra Ancha Wilderness, Arizona).

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"Art is not what you see, but what you make others see."
—Edgar Degas

What makes a great photograph? Is there any one aspect of the process which separates the merely good from the truly magnificent? Many candidates immediately spring to mind, such as subject matter, light, mood, and moment. In my opinion, however, one aspect clearly rises above the rest, and is the thread which ties all of these other qualities together. Composition—the artistic arrangement and placement of visual elements within the picture frame—is to me the most difficult aspect of the art of photography to master, and also the most important.

If you don't believe me, just ask the great masters of the visual and musical arts. Actually, you can't ask them—almost all are long gone from this world—but their resounding answer nonetheless resides in every painting, symphony, sculpture, photograph, poem, and drawing that ever sprang forth from their collective imagination. Composition—the structure imposed by the artist—raises Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken* above the level of mere verbal articulation; it raises Beethoven's haunting Second Movement of Symphony No. Seven above a progressive scale of notes; and it raises Van Gogh's *Starry Night over the Rhone* above random dabs of paint. Composition brings together everything else—it unifies beat, rhythm, and rhyme in a poem; timbre, melody, harmony, tempo, and dynamics in a symphony; and subject, mood, light, and moment in a photograph—and somehow makes them greater in whole than the sum of their parts. Composition creates a synergy which elevates art above mere expression; it can transform even the vulgar into the sublime.

True, composition is not the only important aspect of photography, but it is vitally important nonetheless. Although the importance of the emotion evoked by a photograph's subject matter and mood cannot be underestimated, likewise the primal visual response evoked by a skillful composition cannot be ignored or forgotten. Composition commands the viewer's eye. Mood, light, and other intangibles are all important as well, but without solid composition they all become much less effective. Combined with a masterful composition, everything becomes a transcendent visual symphony which the eye cannot escape.

Composition, above all, is your way of making others see what you see. A snapshot shows the world what your camera sees, but when you create a composition, you show the world what *you* see. And that, as it turns out, is entirely the point.

INTRODUCTION

This project began like they all do—as a small idea, a glimmer of thought seemingly promising enough that it stayed in my mind and eventually grew to be a seed waiting to bear fruit. I did not so much plunge into this book as I did gingerly place my toe in the water, slowly and increasingly immersing myself, inch by inch. The deeper I sank, the deeper I realized the waters were, until it became clear that I would soon be submerged. Although it is often said that a man's reach should exceed his grasp, this can lead to bad things when one's fingers can no longer find a safe grip on the shore.

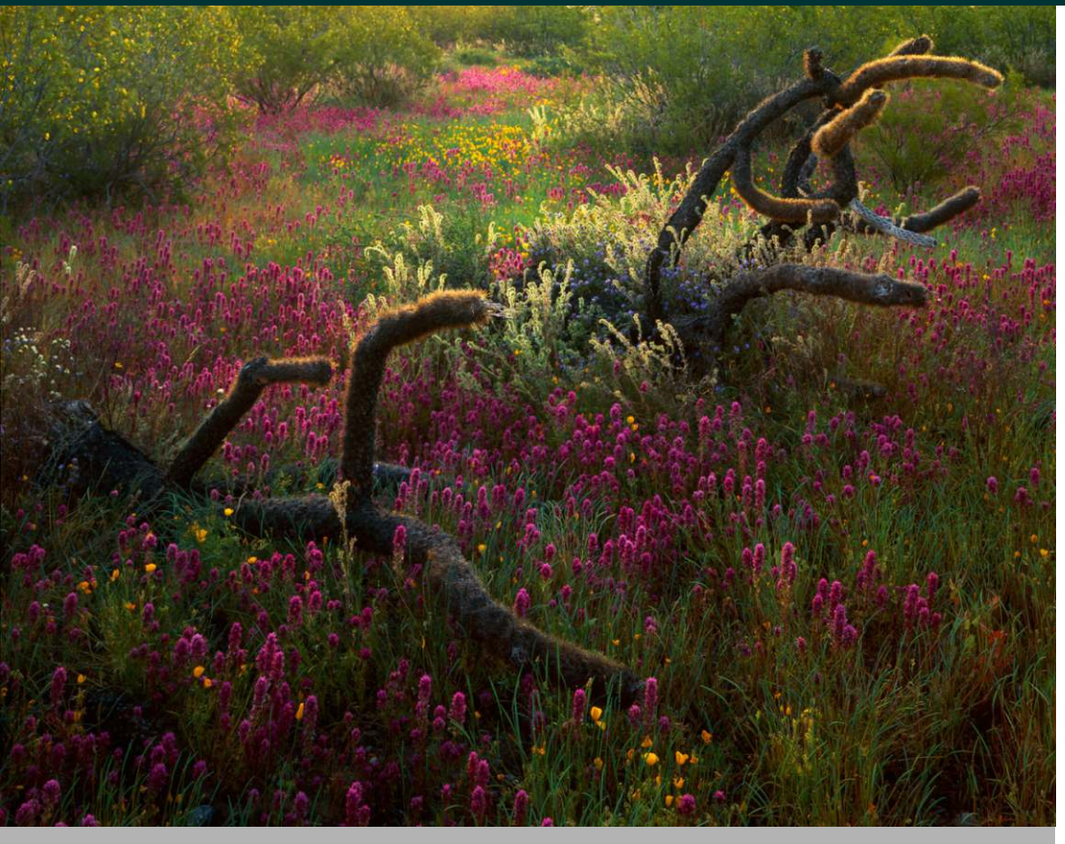
What I had originally intended to be a short but meaningful primer on composition was becoming an increasingly complex, comprehensive, and significant piece of work. I slowly came to the conclusion that no half measures would suffice—this book would either be a definitive artistic statement, or nothing at all. It became increasingly clear that to accomplish what I wished, I needed more photo-

"Treeshadow" by George Stocking (Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming).

graphs, and plenty of them. I faced a fork in the road: either delay the project for a year or more to shoot more images to illustrate the concepts I wished to discuss, or to bring in a partner to keep the book moving forward.

In the end, I made the right choice. I asked my good friend George Stocking to contribute photographs for the book and to offer his conceptual expertise. George is an exceptional photographer, and has an incredibly impressive list of publication credits and professional successes to his name. What's more, he was the logical choice because of his expertise in the area of composition. In fact, George has had a significant influence on my development as a photographer. What at the time seemed like endless hours of repetitive, pointless, and idle discussions with him about composition theory over time grew into an intellectual framework which guides my thinking about art. Even before I asked George to join the project, his words and thoughts were already woven into the fabric of this book. To exclude him would

"Los Cuernos" by Ian Plant (Torres del Paine National Park, Chile).



"Floral Embrace" by George Stocking (Pipe Cactus National Monument, Arizona).

have been a crime; to include him was both a recognition of his influence and the much-needed rocket fuel I required to get this book back on track.

Suddenly, everything started to come together, and a clearer shape of the book began to emerge. I had more raw material to work with, and someone to share ideas with. And although I took the laboring oar in terms of writing, structure, and design of the book, in most other respects, the project soon became a true collaboration.

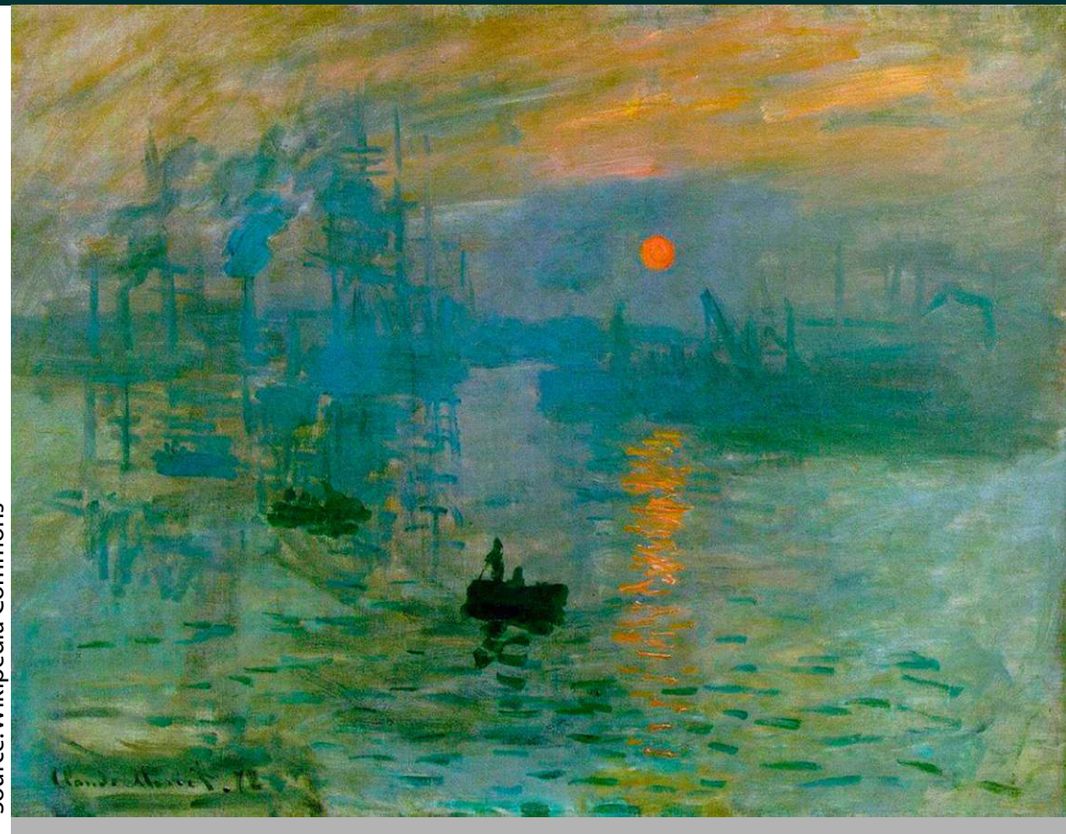
Writing, like all forms of art, is an iterative process, proceeding step-by-step. Sometimes activity on this book would run hot, as I rushed to translate a flurry of ideas into words. Other times, activity was cold, and the project was shelved until some fresh image or insight propelled me into action once more. A project such as this does not just spring forth fully formed, like Athena from the mind of Zeus. Rather, it grows in fits and starts—bit by bit, this book has come to life. I began with a mere skeleton of ideas, and as time and work progressed, flesh and sinew were added. I feel, perhaps, more like a sculptor; rather than starting with a blank canvas, I have chipped away the nonessential, revealing the truth in the process. Either way, after a long year of work, I am proud to announce that this book, for at least the moment, is done.

Ian Plant

If you really want to master the art of composition, then you need to study the work of the true masters of the art: painters. Whereas photographers have been trying their hand at composition for only the past dozen decades or so, painters have been doing it for centuries. I think it is fair to say that painting is the well-spring from which almost all composition theory arises, and this book will rely heavily on composition techniques used by the great masters.

But do the lessons of composition from the painting world apply with equal force to photography? There's no reason why they shouldn't. Painting and photography are very similar, as they are both two-dimensional representational art. Many of the compositional techniques used by painters are equally applicable to photography, and I will discuss a number of those techniques in this book. In fact, I will illustrate many composition techniques with famous paintings.

There are a few important differences between painting and photography, however, that sometimes lead to different compositional approaches. The first main difference results from the process of photography itself. In one chief respect, photography isn't like other forms of art. Painting, sculpting, drawing: they all start with nothing—a blank canvas or sheet of paper, or an uncut block of stone—and through the creative thought and actions of the artist, something is produced from nothing. These forms of art are *creation* media, and spring forth solely from the mind of the artist. Not so with photography.



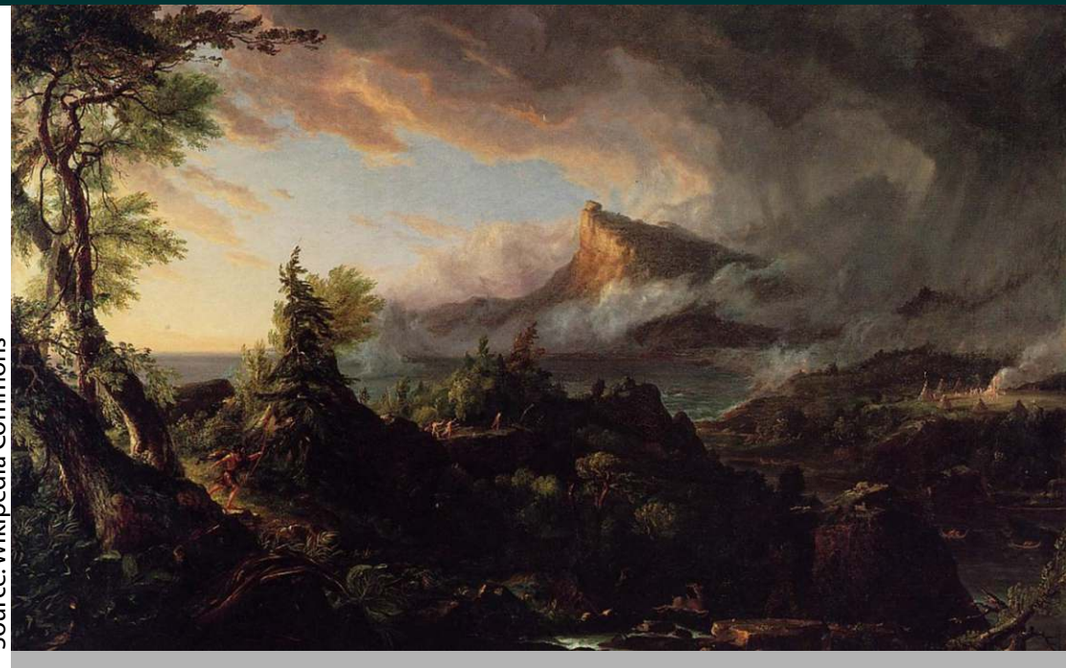
Source: Wikipedia Commons

You may wonder, what does painting have to do with nature photography? Both are two-dimensional art, so all of the same composition techniques apply. We can actually learn a lot from the great masters. "Impressions, Sunrise" by Claude Monet (1872).

Unlike creation media, photography springs forth from the real world around us, relying on actual light coming from illumination sources or reflecting off objects and reacting with film or a sensor. As such, it is a *capture* medium, making it unique among art forms.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that photographers cannot take an active role in the creative process. It's just that, for a photographer, the creative process is very different from the process used by painters. To be sure, a photographer can stage elements in the scene to his or her liking, or add artificial light to achieve a desired look. On the flip side, a painter can base his or her work on a scene in the real world. But, at the end of the day, the painter creates art from scratch, progressively building it brushstroke by brushstroke, whereas the photographer triggers a shutter and captures a selective slice of the surrounding space and time.

Source: Wikipedia Commons



A painter can invent reality, whereas a photographer must capture it instead. "The Course of Empire: The Savage State" by Thomas Cole (1836).

Although this might seem to cut against the grain of conventional wisdom—which suggests that triggering a shutter to make a photograph is far easier than the painstaking process of making a painting—the capture aspect of photography can make photography more difficult (at least really good photography). In the words of British photography icon David Bailey, "It takes a lot of imagination to be a good photographer. You need less imagination to be a painter because you can invent things. But in photography everything is so ordinary; it takes a lot of looking before you learn to see the extraordinary." Of course, Bailey was likely a bit biased, but his point still has force: whereas a painter is not bound by surrounding reality—she may easily include elements that she does not see with her eyes or exclude those she does, or de-emphasize elements by rendering them relatively soft or dark—a photographer has less free-

dom to ignore the real world. A photographer cannot merely *create* a composition as a painter may—rather, the photographer must *find* a composition and then take a picture of it. As a result, photography is more closely tethered to the real world than painting, for better or for worse. And as you may already be aware, the real world rarely lines things up perfectly for the photographer; exploration and patience are the photographer's best tools for creating great compositions.

The second main difference has to do with lenses. As soon as you place a lens between your eyes and the world, you have altered your perception of reality. Lenses see the world differently than human eyes, with this difference being magnified as you approach the extremes of telephoto and wide-angle focal lengths. Simply put, no single lens can perfectly match the binocular field of view of human eyes. The fact that lenses, in effect, alter reality changes to some degree how photographers see the world.

This is probably best demonstrated by studying paintings over the centuries. Although I am by no means an art historian, some interesting studies have concluded that artistic perspectives significantly changed when painters started to use optical devices

Source: Wikipedia Commons

Some art historians argue that many painters used primitive cameras to help create their work, such as the one above which shows a distinct "camera-like" perspective. "The Music Lesson" by Johannes Vermeer (ca. 1662—1665).

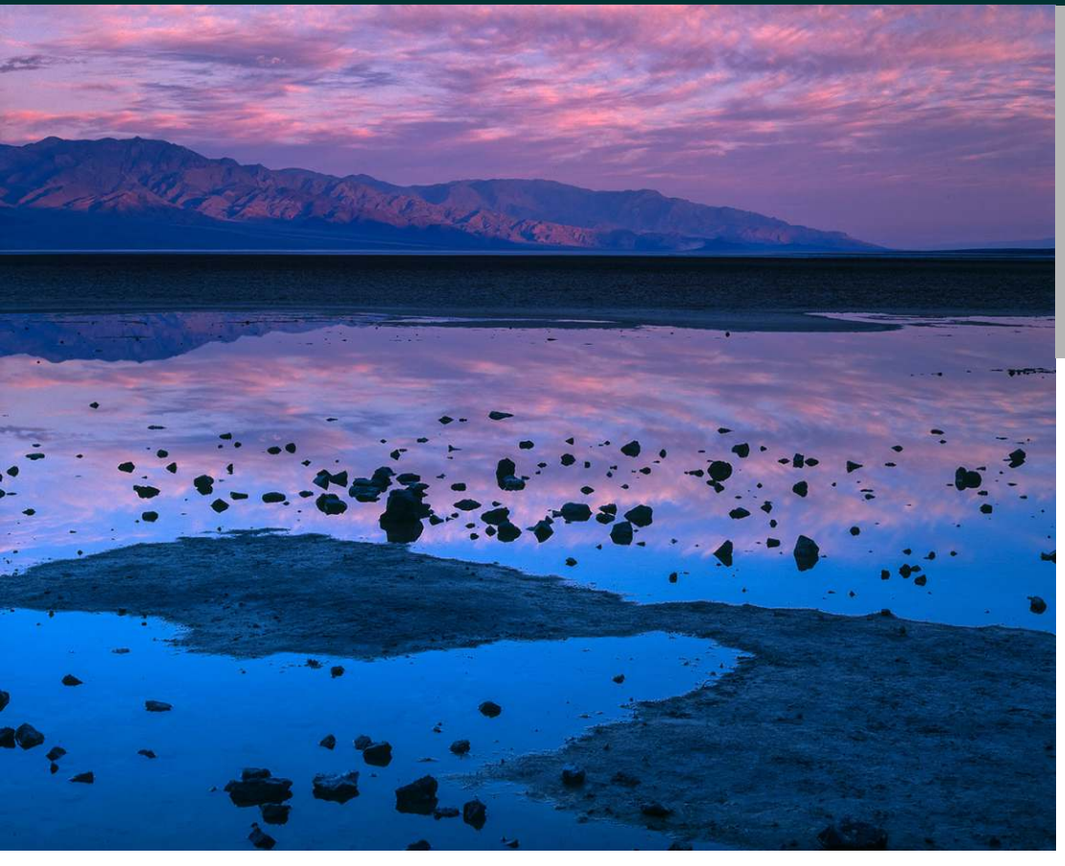
Source: Wikipedia Commons

The greatest painters explored the nexus between light and composition, something which photographs are uniquely suited to do. "The Harvest Wagon" by Thomas Gainsborough (1874).

as aids in painting. These devices, which some argue were used by painters as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, eventually led to the invention of the modern camera in the 1800s. One of the most famous of these optical devices is the *camera obscura*, which is essentially a giant pinhole camera, which many suspect may have been instrumental in the rise of perspective-based painting in the Renaissance and later.

Simply put, before painters started using optical devices as part of their artistic process, the artistic view of most paintings was one that arguably approximated normal human vision; after artists started using optical aids, views that could be characterized generally as "photographers' perspectives" (or as "wide angle" and "telephoto" perspectives) began to appear. Lenses, for lack of a better way of putting it, have changed the way artists and people see the world.

So the truth is that the differences between painting and photography, in terms of composition, are actually quite minor, meaning that we can learn quite a bit from the former. Accordingly, I'll draw a lot of lessons about composition from the great painters in this book, and I will occasionally "deconstruct" famous works to better understand the compositional tools and techniques used in their creation. Compositional techniques are essentially the same whether the subject is people, wildlife, landscapes, architecture, or just about anything else. There are, of course, some differences that might arise relating to subject matter—for example, one could approach portraits differently than landscapes—but



Photographers sometimes are told by viewers that their photographs look like paintings. I always take that as a great compliment—the great painters are the original masters of composition. "Badwater" by George Stocking (Death Valley National Park, California).

then again, this isn't necessarily true, and in any event, as you will discover, the fundamentals of good composition don't change.

One must always keep in mind, however, the differences between photography and painting mentioned above, and I will note any diverging approaches when necessary. For although the compositional techniques for both are the same, paintings are often much more complex than photographs, as the painter can add and delete elements as she chooses, whereas the photographers is constrained by real-world elements. By necessity, photographs often lend themselves to simpler compositions than paintings—but the best photographers nonetheless strive to achieve the rich complexity of paintings.

Furthermore, in the words of American photographer Berenice Abbott, "Photography can never grow up if it imitates some other medium. It has to walk alone; it has to be itself." In this book, I seek not to merely parrot the words and styles of the artists of the past, but rather to further push the envelope of artistic understanding. We may merely be standing on the shoulders of giants, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't stretch to find an even higher vantage point. Art is always in motion, and every artist should seek to contribute to its growth. New concepts, new understanding, and above all, new approaches, are necessary to keep things moving forward—although that doesn't mean we shouldn't stop every now and then and look back at the past.

Composition is a highly subjective, multifaceted, and complex subject. It is susceptible to multiple interpretations, many of which are equally reasonable. There really is no wrong way or right way to teach or learn composition. What I present in this book is my personal way of approaching the subject of composition. Others may have different approaches that are equally valid, and I encourage you to study those alternative approaches with an open mind.

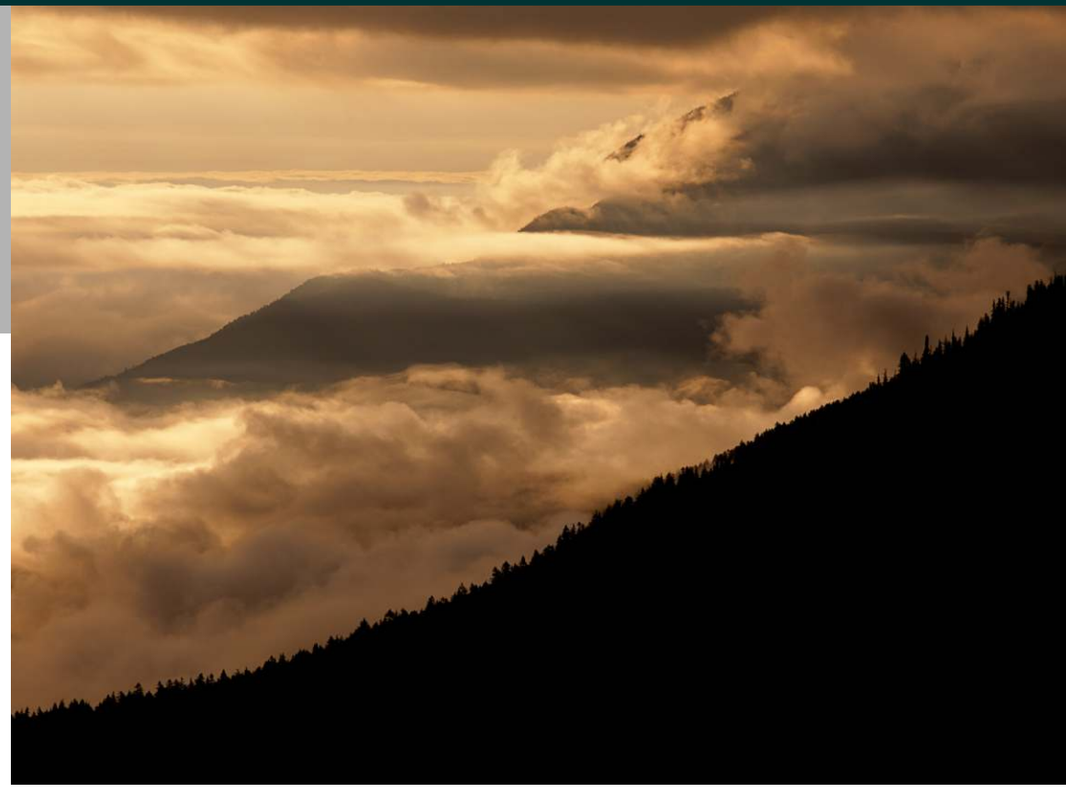
I try in this book not to merely rehash what others have said about composition, but to rethink and re-conceptualize even core concepts. New ideas and approaches, and thinking about old problems from new angles, keep the state of the art fresh and vibrant, and help stave off artistic stagnation. History is but a foundation upon which we must continue to build, lest time begins its slow process of erasure, and the walls crumble to ruins. At no point do I wish to break from the past, but rather to build upon the rich tradition that precedes us, and to honor the mighty accomplishments of those artists who came before.

In this book, I will often approach related or similar ideas from different angles: as is often the case, certain ideas may be expressed in more than just one way. Everyone sees the world in different ways, and people may find certain conceptualizations more appealing or more easily understood than others. That two different approaches get people to more or less the same place merely increases options and artistic flexibility.

There are often several different but valid ways of approaching individual techniques of artistic composition. "Valley of Shadows" by Ian Plant (Death Valley National Park, California).

Although I strive at all times to make sure that when I discuss an artistic concept, especially one that is not of

The words used to describe artistic techniques are important, but try not to get too hung up on semantics. "Hurricane Ridge" by Ian Plant (Olympic National Park, Washington).



"Everyone sees the world in different ways, and people may find certain conceptualizations more appealing or more easily understood than others. That two different approaches get people to more or less the same place merely increases options and artistic flexibility."

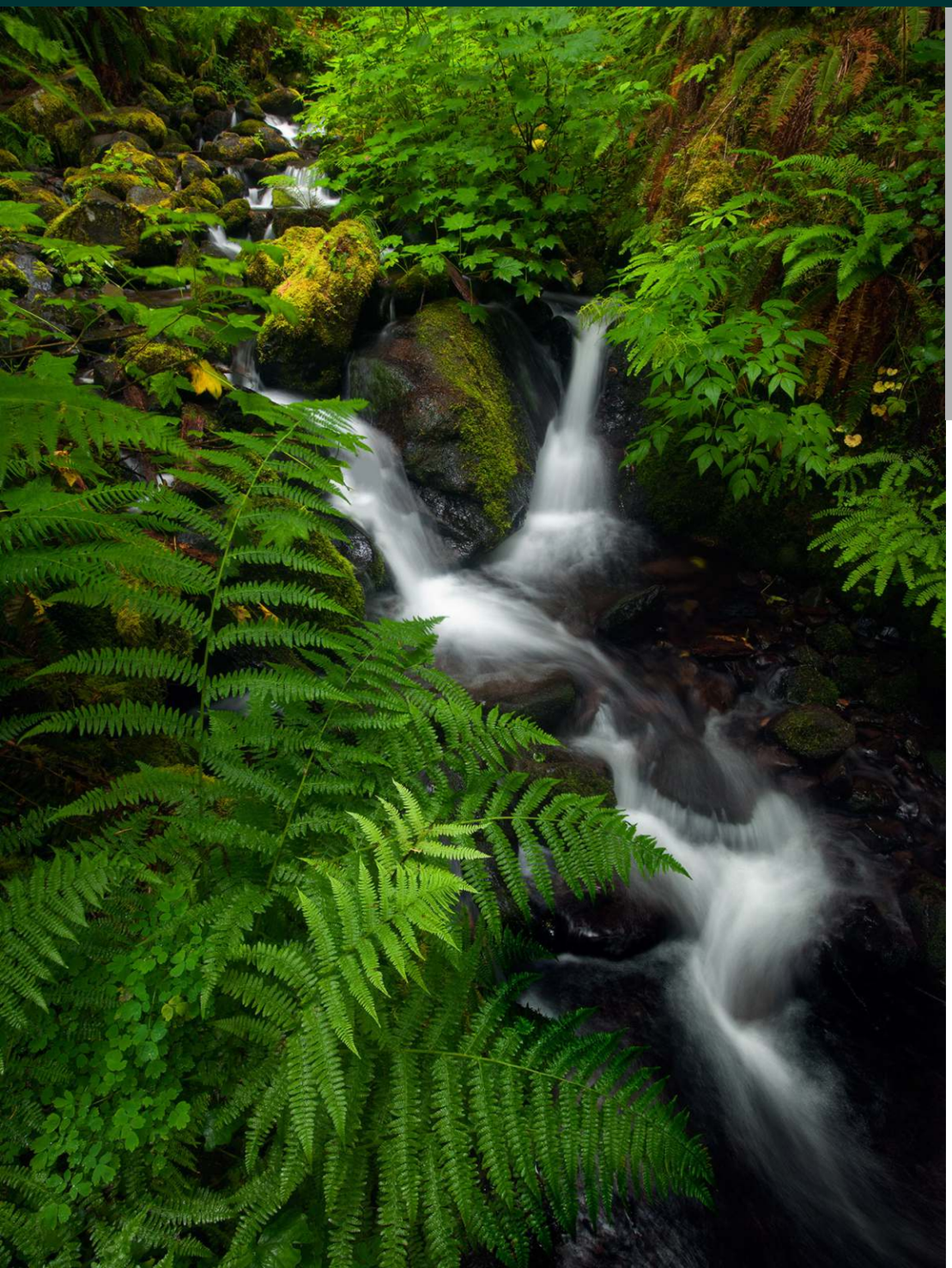
my own invention, I "get it right" and not misstate or confuse the issue. I realize that with a subjective topic such as composition, intellectual rigor isn't really all that it's cracked up to be. Although mental clarity is a laudable goal, if it leads to a series of pointless debates about classification and nomenclature, then the end result is a triumph of form over substance. That said, I do try to always get it right, but I'm sure there are some out there who will quibble with the way I have characterized certain things. Remember, even well-established compositional theories may nonetheless be open to conceptual differences and slightly heretical characterizations. So my advice is simple: don't get too hung up on the words, the definitions, and the semantics—the substance is all that matters.

I think it is fair to say that this all leads to the following important caveat: never forget that the discussions in this book are merely an attempt to delve into fundamental design principles, an endeavor which (as noted above) is perilously subjective, one upon which reasonable minds may differ. There is no right or wrong way to compose a photograph! A reaction is *subjective* when it is based on emotion, feeling, or experience rather than fact. A reaction is *objective* when it is based on facts or

Although composition is highly subjective, there are nonetheless many objective design principles which can help you take better pictures. "Nature's Ballet" by George Stocking (Redwoods National Park, California).

recognized standards rather than pure emotion. Obviously, art is a subjective endeavor. No one can tell you whether you like a photograph or not. Only your own good (or bad) taste will determine whether something strikes your fancy or not. That said, there *are* certain design principles that emerge from the careful study of artistic composition. Artists, for centuries, have learned these principles, have successfully applied them to their work, and have advanced the state of learning with their own techniques and styles. But never forget that history is replete with examples of new types of artistic expression, originally derided by the establishment and treated as anathema, that have triumphed and taken their rightful place in the halls of greatness.

Above all, proceed with an open mind and remember that nothing I say in this book is gospel, prophecy, or science. None of the principles in this book are silver bullets. Composition is ultimately a complex and difficult thing to master. The techniques in this book,



The key to learning composition is to carefully study your own work and the work of others—when you decide that you like or don't like a composition, think critically as to why that might be. This allows you to turn your subjective reactions into objective principles which can be applied going forward. "Summer Cascade" by Ian Plant (Columbia River Gorge, Oregon).

however, should demystify things somewhat and help you better understand the fundamentals of composition. What I present here is merely my way of thinking about composition. It is intended only to help you make better images and to get you moving down the path of finding your own framework for thinking about creative image making.

What you do with the knowledge is up to you.

IF YOU CAN SEE IT, YOU CAN DO IT

The best way to improve your understanding of composition is to study the work of others. You can learn a lot by studying the incredibly rich and sophisticated compositions of the many great artists who have come before us. Here's the cool part: if you can see what makes a great composition work, then there's nothing that will stop you from creating great compositions of your own. *Seeing* is *knowing*, and knowing is one short step away from *creating*. Simply put: if you can see it, you can do it. It may take some practice to get reality to match your vision, but you'll get there eventually. And while it may be true that there is a difference between knowing the path and walking the path, knowing the path is a necessary first step toward being able to walk the path.

That's why I've included so many images in this book. I can talk until I am blue in the face, but in the end, words won't tell you all that you need to know. A careful study of as many pictures as possible will do more for your education than any number of mere words could ever accomplish!

"The Quiet" by George Stocking (Eagletail Mountains Wilderness, Arizona).

“Every creator painfully experiences the chasm between his inner vision and its ultimate expression.”—Isaac Bashevis Singer

“Strike Out” by George Stocking (Coal Mine Canyon, Arizona).

CHAPTER ONE
YOU ARE REMEMBERED FOR THE RULES YOU BREAK

"There are no rules here, we are trying to accomplish something."—Thomas A. Edison

"The hell with the rules. If it sounds right, then it is."—Eddie Van Halen

"You are remembered for the rules you break."—Douglas MacArthur

There is a story I once heard (it's likely apocryphal) about a general giving a speech to graduating cadets at West Point. The general told the assembled crowd that a poor general attacks the center of his enemy's defenses, sending troops straight up the middle. A competent general, on the other hand, knows that his enemy's defenses will be strongest in the middle and sends his troops to attack the enemy's flanks. A brilliant general, realizing that his opponent might anticipate a flanking assault, unexpectedly sends his troops straight up the middle to attack the enemy's center. Thus, the general cheekily concluded, there really isn't much difference between idiocy and genius when it comes to commanding troops in battle.

The difference between the poor general and the brilliant general may not be with the chosen method, but rather the execution. The poorly conceived center attack fails, but the brilliantly conceived center attack somehow succeeds. Bad generals fail because they ignore the rules. Good generals succeed because they heed the rules. Great generals succeed spectacularly because they know when and how to break the rules.

It doesn't matter whether you follow the rules or not: only success matters! "Towers of the Moon" by Ian Plant (Vermilion Cliffs National Monument, Arizona).

This lesson can be applied with equal force to photography and is the principal lesson embodied in this

book: any so-called "rule of composition" can be successfully broken. This understanding is critical to developing advanced compositions, ones that often seem to thumb their noses at the rules. In fact, you will soon learn that there really isn't any such thing as the "rules" at all: there are only compositions that work, and those that don't. General design principles can arise from successful compositions, but there is no single formula that will guarantee success every time. This can be a little scary, but if you think about it, you'll find it to be liberating. It means that you can find your own path to artistic expression, unfettered by the safe (but stagnant) "paint-by-numbers" approaches used by others.

Composition is probably the most difficult element of photography to master, but if you can understand the fundamentals, your work will handily rise above the rest. Notwithstanding my "attack the center" analogy of the previous page, the best compositions come at you sideways, in the sense that they have

The best compositions offer something unexpected and fresh—they offer something unique to engage the viewer's eye. "Old Faithful" by Ian Plant (Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming).

Composition isn't about application of "paint-by-number" rules, but rather requires a solid foundation of understanding of design principles. "Alien Landscape" by George Stocking (Vermilion Cliffs National Monument, Arizona).

something unexpected to them, something surprising and fresh. In this book, I will discuss techniques which will allow you to fully embrace this sideways approach. All it takes is learning how to break your routines and to purposefully shift your perspective to something other than that which is obvious.

In this chapter, I will discuss some core concepts relating to composition theory generally, and my conceptual approach to composition specifically. But I want you to remember this first fundamental lesson throughout all of the discussion that follows:

If you wish to truly master composition, then you must be willing to throw everything you learn here or anywhere else out the window. A truly great artist is remembered by the rules that they break, not the rules that they follow.

Of course, if there are no rules to begin with, that's even better, right?

There's a phrase that gets a lot of use in the art world, but when you hear it, you should place yourself *en garde*. The words in question? "Rules of Composition." The rub, as Shakespeare would say, is found at the beginning of the phrase: "rules."

I hear people quote the "rules" all the time, and they seem to know quite a few of them: the Rule of Thirds, the Rule of Odds, the Law of Simplification, and a whole host of other aphorisms, axioms, commandments, decrees, edicts, formulas, guidelines, maxims, ordinances, prescriptions, regimens, tenets, and truisms. You get the idea.

But do you ever wonder if any of these people have ever stopped to ask the following: Where do these rules come from? Who invented them? Do they actually make any sense? Why do they exist?

I ask these questions all the time. My answer may surprise you. As it turns out—wait for it, we need some

Good compositions don't flow from the rules; rather, the "rules" flow from good compositions. "The Dutchman's Souvenirs" by George Stocking (Superstition Wilderness, Arizona).

"There are no rules for good photographs, there are only good photographs." —Ansel Adams

buildup for maximum dramatic effect—THERE ARE NO SUCH THINGS AS THE "RULES OF COMPOSITION!"

This may sound odd to you coming from a book on composition, but the truth is that if you really want to understand composition, you need to dispense with the notion that there is any formula that will make you a great photographer. Nada. Zilch. Zero. None. They simply don't exist. If you're looking for easy answers, then you've come to the wrong place.

Here's why the rules don't exist: the "rules" do not dictate whether a composition is good or not; rather, a composition either works or it doesn't, and the "rules" are merely an attempt (with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight) to assess common features of successful com-

The "rules" will get you nowhere. A deeper understanding of why the rules exist is critical to mastering composition. "Stirring the Brew" by Ian Plant (Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming).

The "rules" of composition are really just a set of tools. Learning to choose the right tool for the job is vitally important. "Spider Woman's Rainbow" by George Stocking (Canyon de Chelly, Arizona).

positions. This is vitally important to remember: the "rules" flow from successful compositions, not the other way around. I think the legendary Edward Weston said it best: "To consult the rules of composition before making a picture is a little like consulting the law of gravitation before going for a walk. Such rules and laws are deduced from the accomplished fact; they are the products of reflection." While the rules can be useful when creating new compositions, it is not the rules themselves, but a fundamental understanding of why the rules exist in the first place, that should inspire and inform the artist.

To me, the rulemongers mostly sound like parrots, quoting what they deem to be as sacred words, without truly understanding their meaning. What's more, these rules seem to pop up like urban legends, gaining momentum with each retelling. You won't get that in this book. I'll explore beyond the surface of the rules and get to the true reasons why the rules exist. You'll quickly see that the *reasons* are all that matter, and that the rules are at best only useful approxima-

Good composition flows from the patient study of your own work and that of others, attempting to figure out what works and what doesn't and then applying these principles when behind the lens. With time, it will be as intuitive as walking. "Storm Light" by Ian Plant (Los Glaciares National Park, Argentina).

tions. Never forget the following: *simple rules are for simple minds*. This is why the "rules" exist: to give easy answers to people who crave them. You're not simpleminded, right? I didn't think so.

So, rather than thinking of the lessons in this book as the "rules" of composition, think of them instead as tools in a toolbox. Each tool has its uses, and each has its limitations. You wouldn't choose a hammer to turn a screw, so part of understanding composition is learning which tool (or combination of tools) is best for a given situation to get the job done. These "tools of composition," "design principles," or whatever you want to call them should never be taken as dogma. Rather, they merely help us understand in an objective fashion what our eyes and brains perceive on an intuitive level. They force us to think about what works and what doesn't, and they create a framework for analyzing and applying theories of composition.

But first, what exactly *is* composition?

Composition is defined as "the combining of distinct parts or elements to form a whole." Unfortunately, this definition is not very illuminating or interesting. I think it is fair to say that knowing this definition does little to help us understand anything about composition.

Let's try another spin: composition is a visual structure imposed upon an artistic expression and involves the selection and arrangement of visual elements within a defined space. Although more on point, this definition is as bland as the first and completely fails to capture the beauty that composition can create.

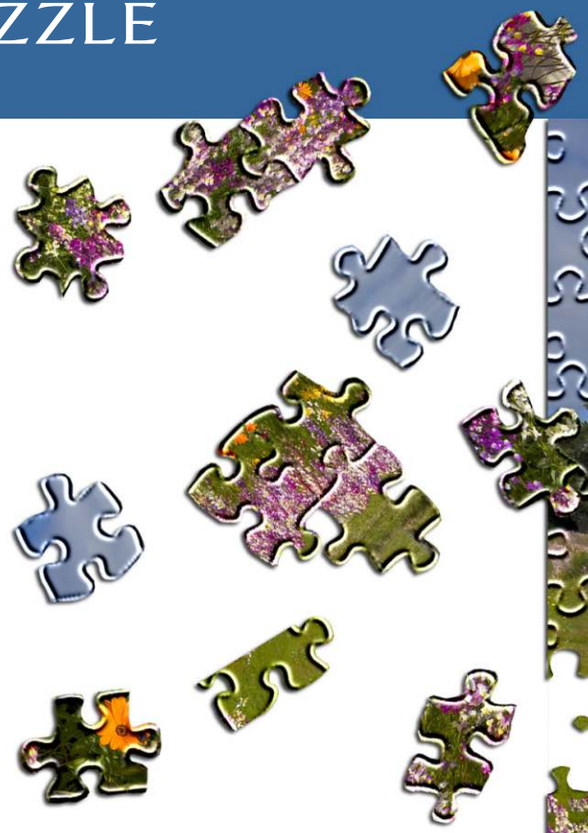
The truth is, no pithy quip can adequately define composition in a few words or sentences. For that matter, even a book filled with words will fail to completely define composition, although it may prove helpful in advancing your understanding of the topic. Composition is much more than just visual structure.

Good compositions capture the viewer's eye and tell a story about the subject. "Desert Dialogue" by George Stocking (Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Arizona).

Composition invites viewers to see the world through your eyes. "Ice Sculpture #1" by George Stocking (Bristlecone Pine Forest, White Mountains, California).

It is how you tell your subject's story to your viewers, and how you relate your artistic expression to others. Composition is all about translating a place, a moment, an emotion into a piece of two-dimensional art without losing that which makes the place, moment, or emotion special. In a sense, composition forces the viewer—perhaps *entices* or *invites* the viewer is a better way of putting it—to see what the artist sees, and to feel what the artist feels. As an artist, composition is your tool for showing others the world in a way that they don't see on their own. It is your way of capturing the mysterious and the fleeting, and preserving it for all to experience.

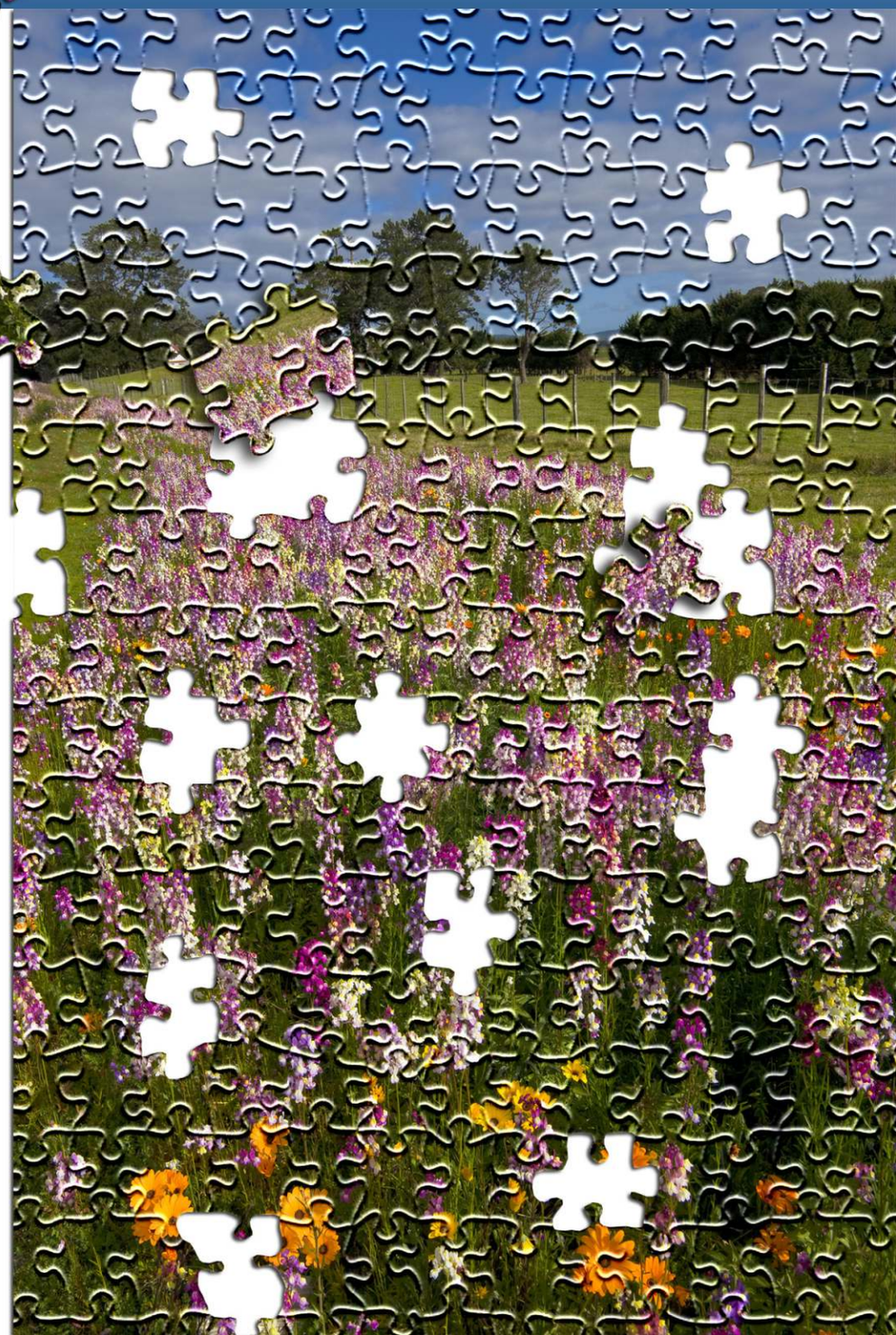
Wow, that's kind of a tall order, isn't it? You betcha. But maybe it is easier to think of it this way: composition is really nothing more than making sense out of and bringing order to a chaotic world. As such, it is no more complex than putting a puzzle together. It may take time, but eventually, you'll find a way to make the pieces fit.



George Stocking said it best when he described the art of photography as "striving to come up with a solution to the never-ending, constantly changing visual puzzle that is our universe."

What arguably began as a tequila-induced rhetorical flourish actually reveals one of the *most profound and deepest truths about the art of photography*. The world is an ephemeral, ever-changing, chaotic place. Our job as photographers is to somehow tie up all the loose ends in a compelling yet natural way. We must do so without the result appearing forced or artificial. We must use "all the king's horses and all the king's men" to put Humpty Dumpty back together again, without anyone catching on that Humpty ever fell apart in the first place.

Thinking about composition as solving a puzzle is a helpful analogy, except with one important difference: the puzzle pieces don't stay where you put them! This maddening truth, however, is what makes photography unique. A puzzle enthusiast arranges the puzzle pieces before her and



sorts through them, looking for matching shapes that fit together. Arguably, a painter approaches composition in much the same way: she isn't constrained by real-world elements, rather she is free to pick and choose and arrange elements as she sees fit, solving the visual puzzle progressively with each brushstroke on the canvas.

Not so with the photographer. The photographer lives in an *Alice in Wonderland* type world where, not unlike the mad Queen of Heart's croquet game, the pieces are animate and have a mind of their own, moving around despite the best efforts of the players to control their positions. In nature, the puzzle pieces either move on their own, such as water flowing down a stream or clouds drifting in the sky; or the sun moves in the sky, causing the shadows on the land to change position; or the pieces "move" when the photographer shifts position, and the visual relationships between elements change relative to each other. And even when you think you have put the pieces together in a pleasing way, one or more of them may decide on their own volition to get up and go about their merry way.

The photographer cannot simply pick up the puzzle pieces and change their arrangement to make them fit together, but instead must shift her position or wait for moving elements to shift their position. The photographer must work with the visual elements as they are, or as they become as they move naturally through the scene.

Photographic composition relies on the photographer moving to make visual elements align in a pleasing way and waiting for moving elements to fall into their proper place. "Alien Transmission" by Ian Plant (Stud Horse Point, Arizona).

Of course, there are exceptions to this, as many types of photography allow the artist to shift visual elements

(such as studio, fashion, portrait, etc.), and even in the natural world, sometimes there is opportunity for creative rearrangement (such as when photographing autumn leaves that have fallen to the ground). But for the most part, photographers are at the mercy of the real world, and must solve the visual puzzle by shifting position, changing lenses to include or exclude visual elements, or by waiting for visual elements to naturally converge in a pleasing way. You should not view this as a

Composition Mumbo Jumbo:
I'm sure you've heard it before: "You must become one with the landscape." Or how about "Learn to capture the mood of the moment." And let's not forget this pearl of wisdom: "Seek to establish an emotional connection with your viewer." Or my personal favorite: "Listen to the voice of Nature; heed her call."

Okay, I'm paraphrasing here (and perhaps making some of this stuff up), but I'm sure you have heard advice to this effect before. While there may be some grains of truth to these quotes, as far as advice goes, they are nothing more than meaningless platitudes. For example, how exactly does a photographer "become one with the landscape"? Frankly, my feeling is that when someone tells you something like this, they might as well have said "boogaty boogaty boo" or some such nonsense. It amounts to the same thing.

You won't get any such mumbo jumbo in this book (well, maybe just a little, but not much). Rather, I try to present pragmatic tips to help you better understand composition. Although composition is very much a subjective endeavor, we can nonetheless discuss certain core design principles in an objective fashion.

Left: "The Dawning" by George Stocking (Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, Arizona).

Sometimes the pieces of the composition puzzle fit together rather intuitively. Such was the case with this simple composition, where I used a small natural arch to frame a larger arch in the distance. I discuss the use of frames more in Chapter Three. More often than not, however, fitting visual elements together is a complex process requiring a full set of compositional techniques. "Sunset Window" by Ian Plant (Arches National Park, Utah).

limitation of the art form, but rather as something that sets photography apart from other artistic pursuits—it is what makes photography unique and special.

How, then, to make all the puzzle pieces fit? When confronted with the extremely chaotic natural world, the "visual puzzle" can sometimes be difficult to solve. In this book, I discuss some concrete solutions to unraveling the mysteries of composition. Hopefully, by the end of the book, finding a compelling composition won't seem so puzzling after all (please pardon the pun).

Let's first start with some basics: what are the potential elements of composition, and what can cause a composition to change?

Lucky for us photographers, we have almost an infinite variety of subjects that can be used as elements of a composition. Generally, compositional elements fall under two broad categories: *physical* elements and *abstract* elements. *Physical elements* include just about everything that is familiar to us in the real world, such as mountains, trees, rocks, stones, waterfalls, wildlife, leaves, clouds, flowers, streams, the horizon line—take your pick, you can use *anything* in the real world as a compositional element. *Abstract elements* include those elements that are not quite as tangible. Abstract shapes and forms (created, for example, by the visual interaction of several objects), patterns, shadows, perspective, color and luminosity contrasts, motion of physical elements over time, and even empty space can all be used as compositional elements.

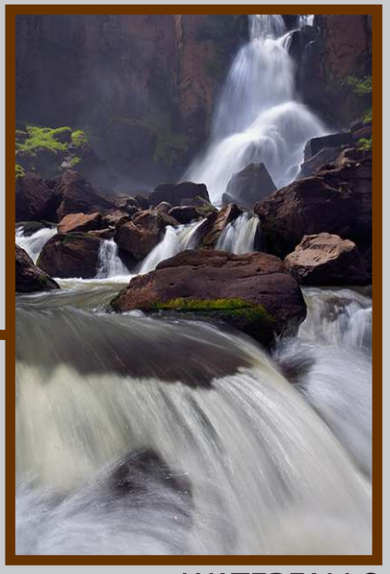
We'll discuss all of these in more detail throughout this book; for now, the chart on the next page should help simplify these concepts.

Compositional elements include physical elements (such as the curved lines in the rock) and abstract elements (such as the contrast between light and shadow). "Kingdoms of Sand" by George Stocking (Vermilion Cliffs National Monument, Arizona).

EXAMPLES OF COMPOSITION ELEMENTS

CLOUDS

MOUNTAINS



WATERFALLS

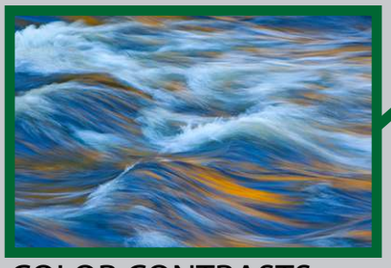
PHYSICAL ELEMENTS

PATTERNS

SHAPES

ABSTRACT ELEMENTS

TREES



COLOR CONTRASTS

SHADOWS

MOTION AND ENERGY

WILDLIFE

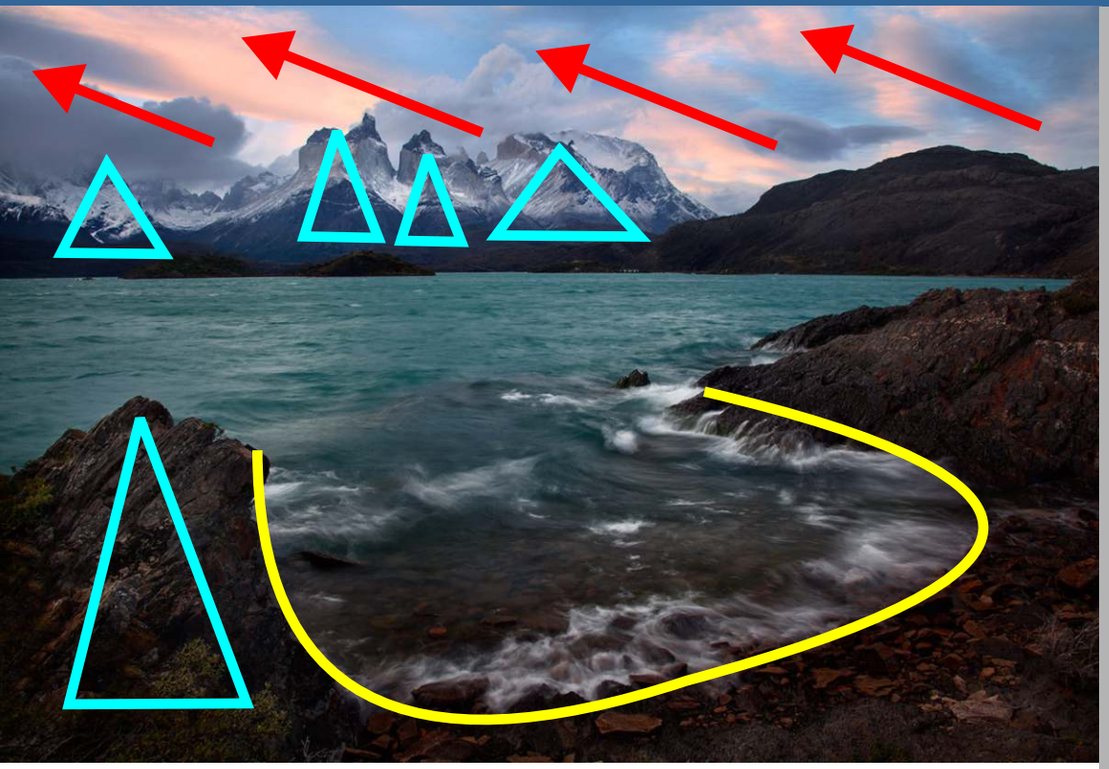
"One should photograph objects, not only for what they are, but for what else they are."
—Minor White

Legendary photographer Minor White certainly knew how to take a great photo, but does that mean he knew what he was talking about? How, exactly, are we to make sense of the quote above? Is it merely mumbo jumbo, or does it reveal something profound? Is there an answer to the cryptic riddle that he poses of photographing objects "for what else they are"?

What do you see in the image to the right? A rock, a stormy lake, sunset clouds, and mountain peaks? Wrong! Well, actually, you are right, but these are merely the *literal* elements of the scene. And herein lies the key to unlocking Minor White's riddle. When White spoke of photographing objects "for what else they are," what he was getting at (in part) is that one must learn to think *abstractly* about visual elements within a photograph. Abstract thinking is the key to making powerful and effective photos—and that's no mumbo jumbo.

But what does it really mean to think "abstractly" about objects? Simple: try to think of your scene not in terms of waterfalls, mountains, and trees, but rather in terms of perspective (depth and scale), space (the placement and arrangement of elements), and shapes (triangles, curves, lines, circles, and other shapes). Composition is nothing more than figuring out a way to make all of these abstract components relate to one another. Learning to think abstractly about visual elements is the single most

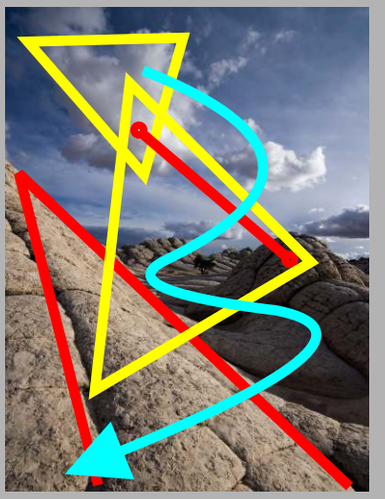
Try to see compositions in terms of abstract rather than literal elements—for example, as abstract shapes rather than as clouds and mountains. "Storm over Pehoe" by Ian Plant (Torres del Paine National Park, Chile).



important thing you can do to improve your composition skills.

Putting on our "abstract thinking caps" and returning to the lake image, we can deconstruct the scene to its constituent visual elements: a curve formed by the shore, triangle shapes formed by the mountains in the background and the rock in the foreground, and lines formed by the clouds in the sky. These elements provide compositional structure and depth, create visual interest, and help lead the viewer's eye deep into the scene.

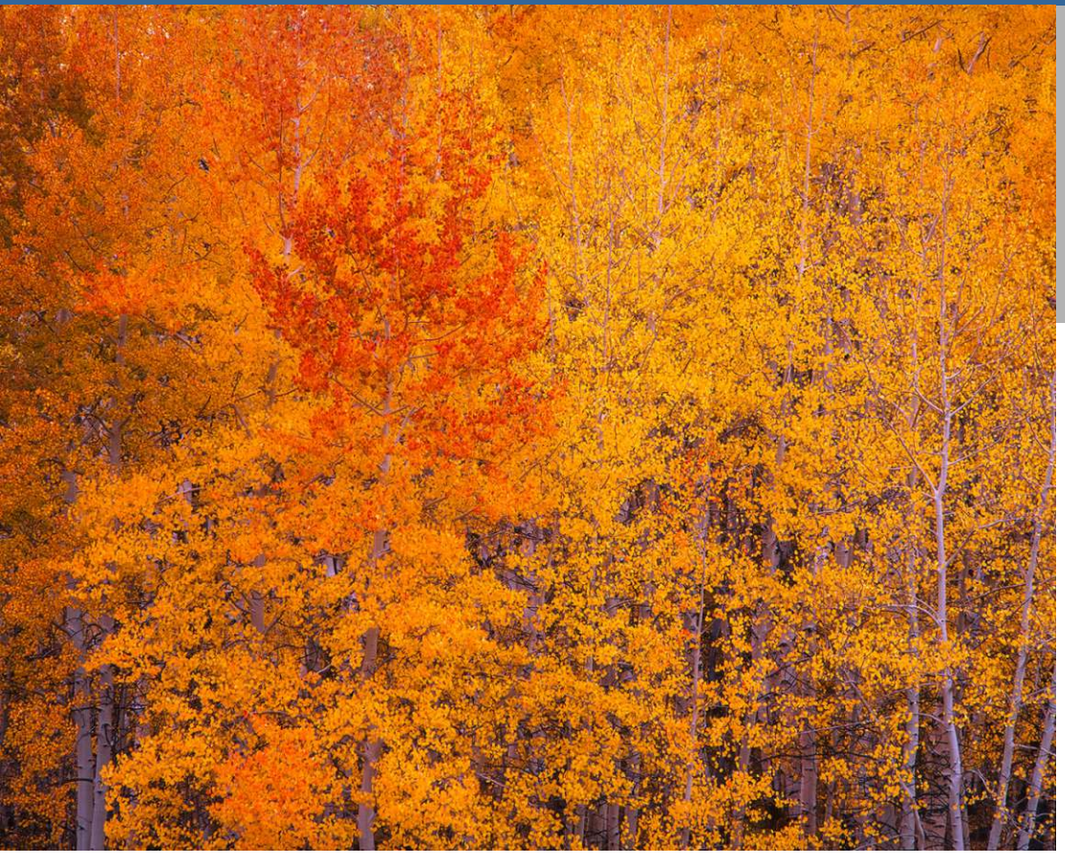
Sports and Composition:



What's up with all the squiggly lines? I don't expect you to just start seeing abstractly on your own. To help push the process along, in this book I will employ liberal use of the "telestrator" effect—that overlay device made famous by television sports commentators over the past few decades. I find the telestrator effect to be very useful when discussing composition, as it allows for an easy-to-understand means of conveying important compositional concepts.

Don't be dismayed by the telestrator display above—it is for illustrative purposes only. By and large, I'll keep the effect much less chaotic, and I will explain everything in great detail in the text accompanying each image. I'll use the display to demonstrate abstract shapes and visual relationships between elements within a photo.

In the end, I think you'll agree that the telestrator graphics help you more easily understand what can otherwise be very difficult concepts to grasp. You'll be seeing abstractly in no time!



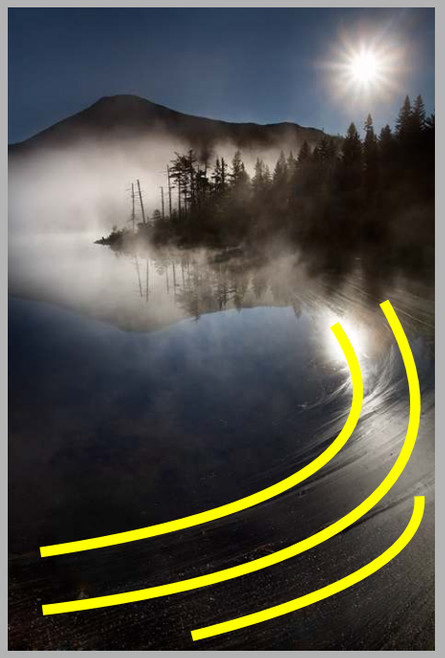
Learning to think about visual elements in terms of light, color, and shape will help greatly improve your composition skills. "Spontaneous Combustion" by George Stocking (Dixie National Forest, Utah).

George used abstract thinking to create the image above. Instead of seeing the image in terms of objects—a bunch of autumn trees—he saw the image in terms of abstract elements, such as color (a splash of red against a wash of gold) and shape (a thousand dots formed by the aspen leaves and a few vertical lines formed by the trunks to add structure). He also saw the image in terms of visual weight and spacing, concepts which we will delve into in more detail later. While literal elements might have initially attracted his attention, George was only able to pull them together into a successful eye-catching composition when he was able to see beyond the literal and think abstractly.

Learning to see abstractly—learning to see visual elements "for what else they are"—is critical to advanced image making and creating sophisticated compositions. Without the ability to see abstractly, you'll never progress beyond the basics.

Abstract thinking can really open up compositional possibilities for you. Don't get snobby when looking for compositions. Never forget that just about *anything* can be used to create a composition, provided conditions are right. Once you start seeing elements of a scene as abstract shapes, you'll be amazed at what you can use to support your compositions: broken twigs, rocks, drainage patterns in dirt, the edge of an incoming wave on the shore, patterns in deadwood, shadows, fallen leaves, mist rising from a creek, and an infinite variety of other natural and man-made objects all become fair game in your quest for great image making.

In this photo, I used the backlit pollen line on the water's edge as a leading element, which is used to draw the viewer's eye into the scene. What is just pond scum to some became an important element of my composition. Only by the process of abstract thinking was I able to find a composition that worked for this scene. "Morning Star" by Ian Plant (Adirondack State Park, New York).



For example, I even once made an image using pond scum. Yep, that's right—pond scum. Where others might have just said "yuck," I instead saw a sweeping curve leading from foreground to background. Besides, when the light strikes the scum just right, it shines like diamonds rather than looking like …well, like scum. The key is that I saw what *else* the scum was—I saw it as a shape that provided compositional structure and helped draw the viewer's eye into the photo rather than a mere literal interpretation.

Minor White would be proud.

THE ANGEL IN THE MARBLE

Master painter, sculptor, and architect Michelangelo once famously said, "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free." Photography is often the same way. When you find a great scene, sometimes you need to wait for elements to converge to bring it to life. As a photographer, you must carve away not with a hammer and chisel—as Michelangelo would have done—but rather with time and patience, waiting for the right conditions to complete the image that exists in your head, allowing it to emerge from thought into reality.

Of course, elements in the real world rarely fall into place as perfectly as they do in our imaginations, but it can't hurt to try. Remember to stay flexible, but never dispense with your vision altogether. Just keep chiseling, and although the angel that emerges might not look *exactly* like the one in your head, as long as it is stunning, I'm sure no one will care!

"Acrophobic" by George Stocking (Coal Mine Canyon, Arizona).

This might perhaps be the most practical lesson in this book, and as such, it is probably the least useful. A number of things can affect your composition, including the following:

- Your distance from your subject.
- Your height (up or down) relative to your subject.
- Your position (left or right) relative to your subject.
- Your focal length (as we will discuss in more detail later, changing focal length does not alter perspective, but it does change your composition as lens choice includes or excludes various elements of the scene).
- Light and shadows can have a profound impact on composition, and they change as the light changes.
- Your focus. Most landscape images are composed with sharp near-to-far focus, but out-of-focus areas can be used effectively to create depth and are much more common in wildlife, portraits, and street photography.

Although these might seem obvious, it never ceases to amaze me when I see a photographer show up at a location, throw down his camera bag, and then start shooting from that very spot without ever walking around to explore the area. Compositions don't just fall from the sky; you need to move your feet and check out different angles, seeing how visual elements align as you move back and forth, left and right, and even up and down.

It was only by moving around and exploring the area that I was able to find the one single position that allowed me to place the rock in the water framed in between the distant shore and the rocks to the left and the right. Using your feet is essential to finding the best compositions. "Red Dawn" by Ian Plant (Scotland).

Even if you think you have found "the spot," it makes sense to look around and explore as much as possible and to try as many different variations on a composition as is reasonable. A little bit of curiosity goes a long

way—if you aren't asking yourself questions like "What would the view look like from that small hill over there?" then you are limiting yourself to only the most obvious shots, which are also the most likely to have been shot over and over by other photographers. Thoroughly exploring a scene is the best way to ensure that you find something fresh, compelling, and original.

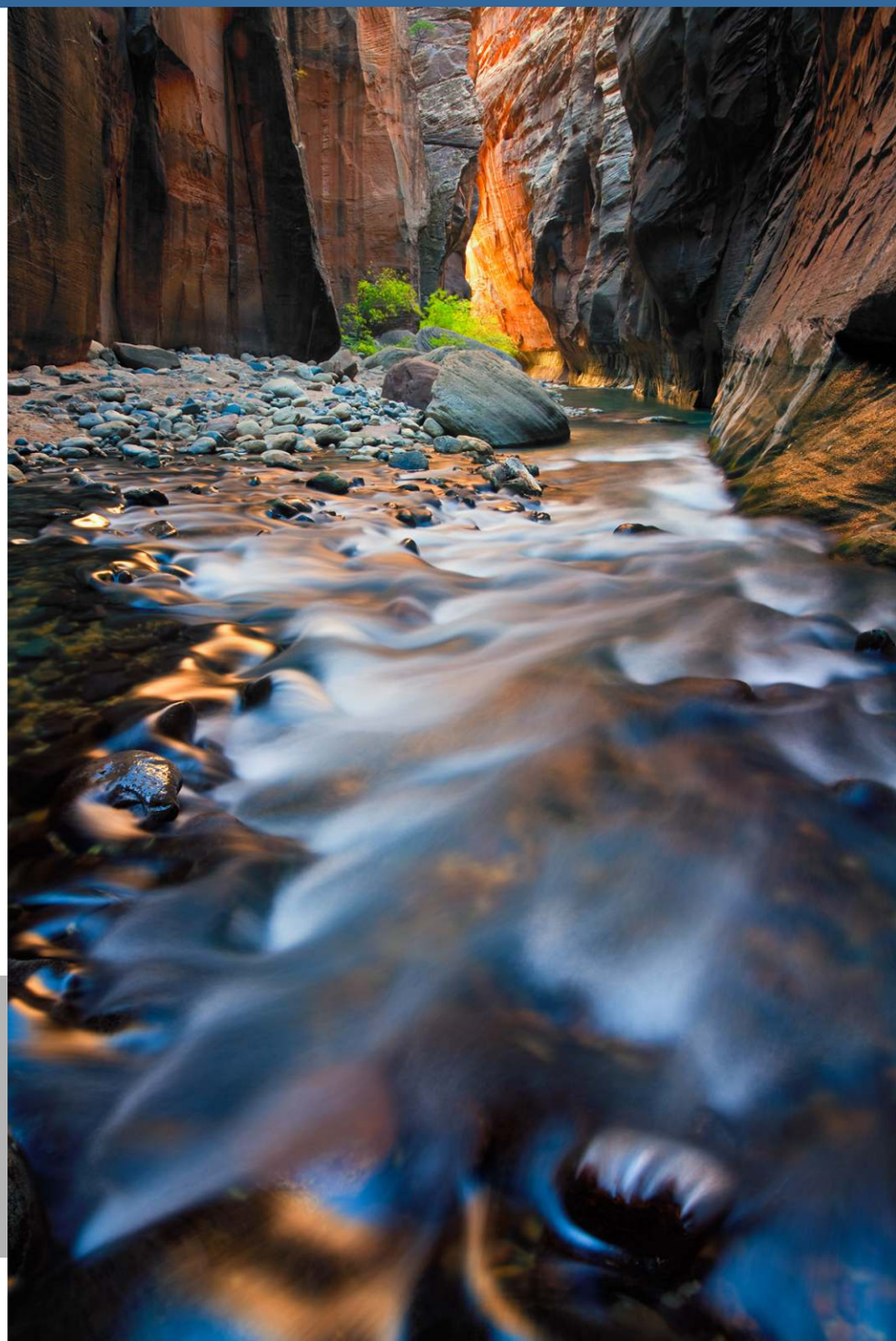
Ansel Adams once said, "A good photograph is knowing where to stand." Good advice. So, the bottom line is this: if you want to make unique and meaningful compositions, you need to get your feet moving, and experiment with different angles, focal lengths, and relative positions. Only then can you really see what the world has to offer.

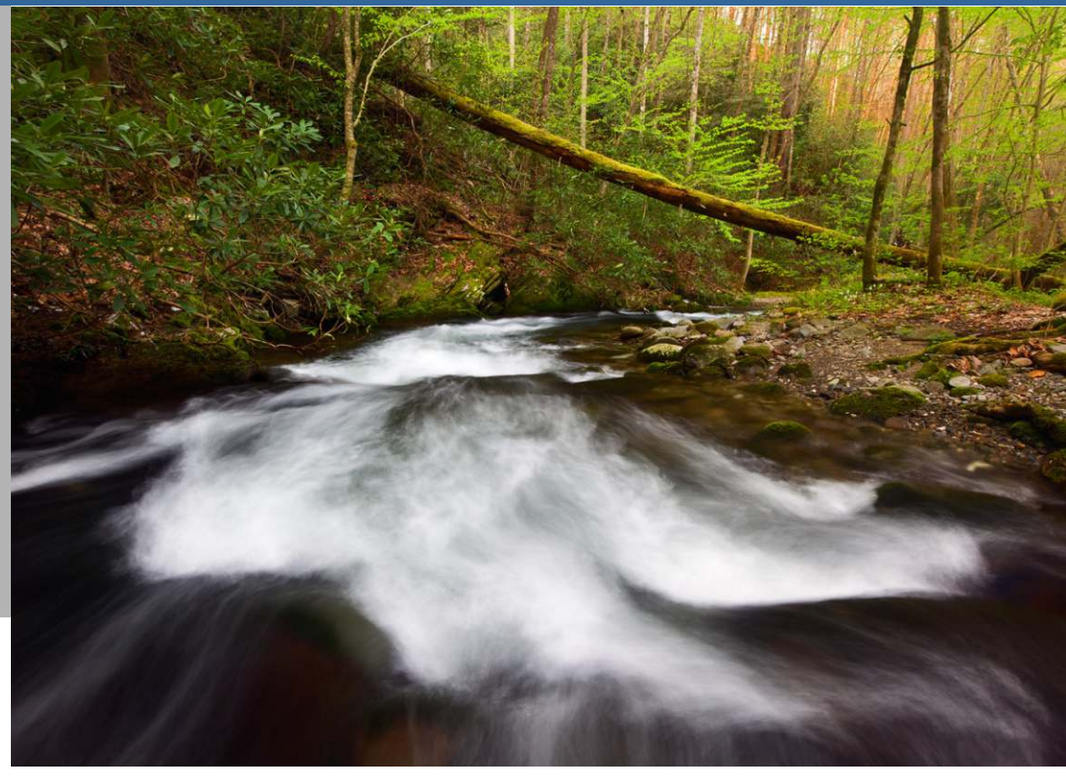
George didn't just show up at this location and start shooting. Rather, he assessed several positions and heights relative to the rainwater pool until he found the best spot, allowing him to create the optimal visual relationship between the pool, the rock formation in the background, the clouds in the sky, and even their reflection in the water. "Slickrock Reflections" by George Stocking (Arches National Park, Utah).

Visual flow is more than just a fancy title for this book. It is my way of conceptualizing photographic composition. It is by no means the only way to conceptualize composition, but I think it is a helpful way of thinking about the visual effect you will seek to create with each and every photograph you make. It goes something like this.

Imagine you are standing in the middle of a small river, gazing downstream. As you survey the scene, you notice that the water flows around, beneath, and past you on its journey into the distant landscape beyond. As the river gets farther away from you, it appears to shrink in size, eventually receding to a single point on the horizon before vanishing from view. Along its way, the water rushes over rocks and small drops and curves and turns around successive bends. The flow of the river is irresistible—anything caught in its path is swept along, following every twist and turn, perhaps getting caught for a moment on a rock emerging from the river's surface, but inevitably transported into the distance.

Not unlike the flow of a swift-moving stream, you want the viewer's eye to get trapped in the "visual flow" of your images, swept along deep into the composition. "Kaleidoscope" by Ian Plant (Zion National Park, Utah).





For this image, I stood in the stream, so the water was flowing around, beneath, and past me on its journey into the background. The resulting photograph leads the viewer's eye deep into the scene and is rich with the illusion of perspective and depth. As a result, it gives the viewer a sense of place, of actually being in the scene that is photographed. With any luck, they might even feel, on some small level, the cold water rushing past their bare legs. "Spring Rush" by Ian Plant (Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee).

This effect—this irresistible pull—is precisely what you want to accomplish visually with your photographs. Your goal as a photographer is to engage the viewer's eye, commanding their attention, leading them deeper and deeper into the scene before them. By doing so, you transform the viewer from a passive observer of the image into an active participant, giving them a sense of *being there*, of being immersed within the scene. This helps establish an emotional connection between the viewer and the photograph and ensures that they will keep coming back to look at it time and time again.

The irresistible pull is what I like to call "visual flow," which I define as the active progression of compositional elements designed to facilitate visual movement throughout the image, enticing the viewer to study important and relevant aspects of the scene. Visual flow is essentially a way of leading a viewer's eye through the scene using composition, tonal transition, and color. Visual flow is a way of creating the illusion of three-dimensional perspective and motion over time in a two-dimensional static capture. It is a way of creating energy and a sense of visual excitement in your photographs. Visual flow helps capture the dynamic forces of our world at work, creating an illusion of movement and vitality. To create visual flow, we can use line, shape, pattern, perspective, space, color, motion, mood, and light.

“Your goal as a photographer is to engage the viewer's eye, commanding their attention, leading them deeper and deeper into the scene before them. By doing so, you transform the viewer from a passive observer of the image into an active participant, giving them a sense of being there, of being immersed within the scene.”

In this book, we will explore three principal ways of controlling the viewer’s eye and leading it on a visual journey through your photographs: (1) recognizing and relating abstract shapes, (2) creating depth through the use of perspective cues, and (3) creating eye-catching images through the spacing of elements in a composition. In addition, we will explore some related concepts which help to solve a number of challenges unique to photography, including (1) creating visual order and simplification, and (2) establishing mood.

You will notice that shape, depth, and space are indistinct categories, blending seamlessly with the next. Depth draws a viewer into a photograph; space provides structure to the composition, whereas shapes fill the space and bring life to the image. In the hands of a skilled artist, the three come together in a carefully choreographed dance, drawing the viewer in and establishing visual interest. Likewise, mood and visual simplification work hand in hand with composition. Together, they form a unified compositional theory, one that I like to call—you guessed it—“visual flow.”

The best compositions use shape, depth, and space to entice the viewer’s eye to travel deep within the picture frame. “Canyonlands Dawn” by George Stocking (Canyonlands National Park, Utah).

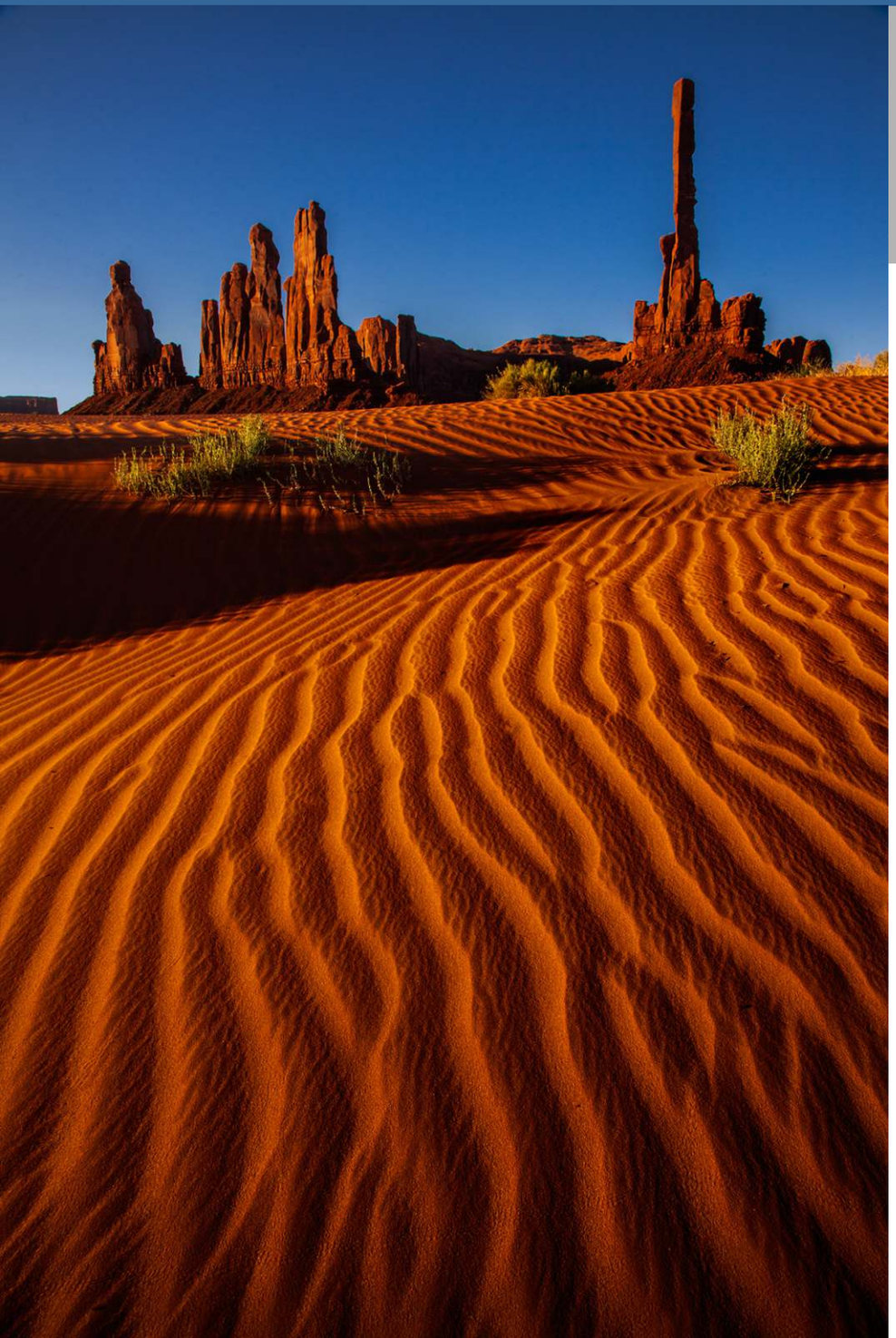
Shrek: "For your information, there's a lot more to ogres than people think."
Donkey: "Example?"
Shrek: "Example … uh … ogres are like onions!"
Donkey: "They stink?"
Shrek: "Yes … No! Layers. Onions have layers. Ogres have layers. Onions have layers. You get it? We both have layers."
—Shrek (DreamWorks 2001)

What do ogres, onions, and artistic composition all have in common? Apparently, they all have layers. And, I guess, for some compositions at least, they all have the potential to stink, although hopefully this book will help your compositions avoid this particular fate.

I say that composition has layers because whenever you think you really understand composition, you quickly realize that you don't: there's another deeper layer just beneath the surface, and whenever you peel back a layer, you see another one waiting to be understood.

Compositions can be like layers in another way. Some compositions are simple, but the very best ones have a layer of complexity and sophistication beneath a

Aaron Amat/Shutterstock.com



The best compositions blend simplicity with complexity and sophistication, always offering viewers new visual treats to discover. "Totem Pole" by Ian Plant (Monument Valley, Utah).

seemingly simple surface. Smart artists keep the basic framework of their compositions simple, but include subtle touches that surprise and delight viewers even after multiple viewings. The best artists go beyond merely simple compositions, and create works with richness and complexity.

I'll present composition in multiple layers so you can go as deep as you wish. I'll start with the basic surface concepts, and then delve a little deeper for each to round out your understanding. But be prepared—in the chapters that follow, I will dig deep into the onion of composition, peeling back layer after layer until we end up with a thorough, if not complete, understanding of this complex and multi-faceted topic. At times, you may feel we've gone too deep, like Alice plunging down the rabbit hole. Don't worry, I promise you will emerge again to see the light of day, unscathed and armed to the teeth with compositional tools and techniques that will help you make the images you have always dreamed about.

Are you ready?

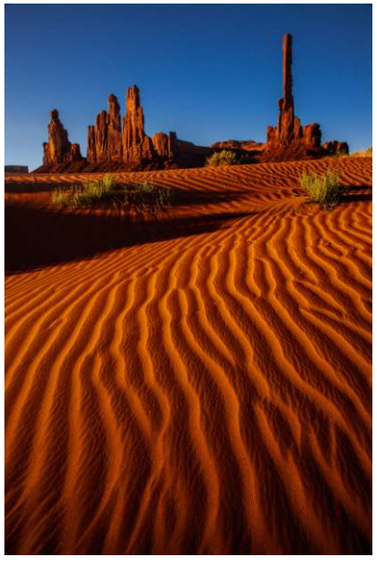
1. Forget the rules; use only tools: There are no such things as the "rules of composition." There exist, however, many helpful compositional styles and techniques which are tools to be used at your disposal.

2. Learn to think in the abstract: The key to successful composition is abstract thinking. Learn to see everyday elements not for what they are—trees, clouds, mountains, etc.—but for what *else* they are—shapes and colors and energy.

3. A good photograph is knowing where to stand: Ansel Adams once said this, and I think it is fair to say that he knew what he was talking about. Your camera's position relative to subjects in your scene will determine not only the content of your composition, but its structure as well.

4. Entice the viewer into the picture: Your job as a photographer is to encourage the viewer to linger as long as possible when studying your composition. Photographs which enthrall the viewer's eye will hold interest over the long term.

5. Never settle for the easy answers: When it comes to composition, there are no silver bullets You should always view "off-the-shelf" approaches with a healthy degree of suspicion. Certainly don't settle for the simplified version of things presented in these top five summaries!



“A work of art which did not begin in emotion is not art.”—Paul Cezanne

“Fitz Roy” by Ian Plant (Los Glaciares National Park, Argentina).

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.

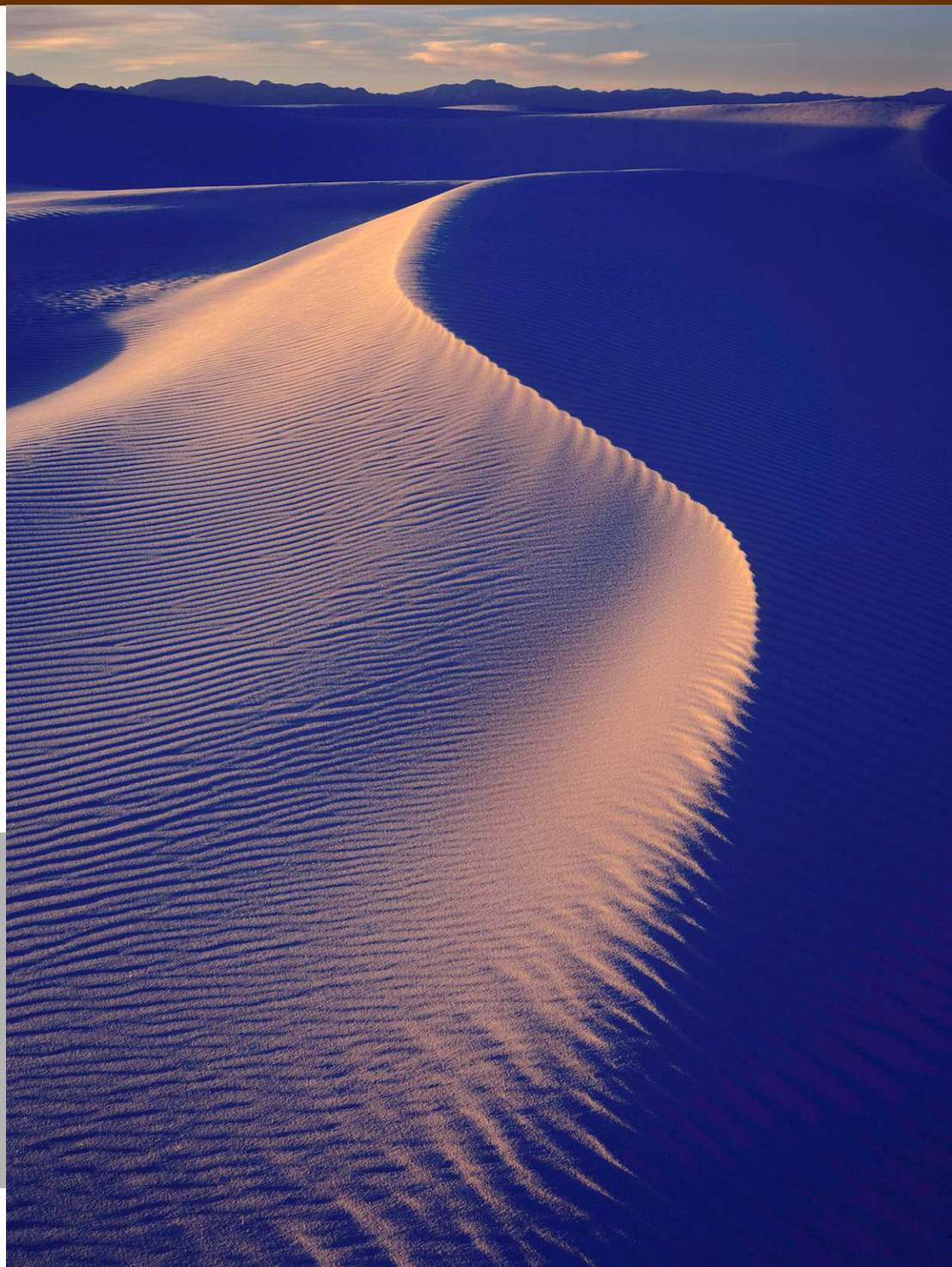
Here, the interplay of light and shadow on the dunes creates a number of repeating curving shapes. Shape recognition is a first and vital step in understanding composition. "Desert Repose" by Ian Plant (Death Valley National Park, California).

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

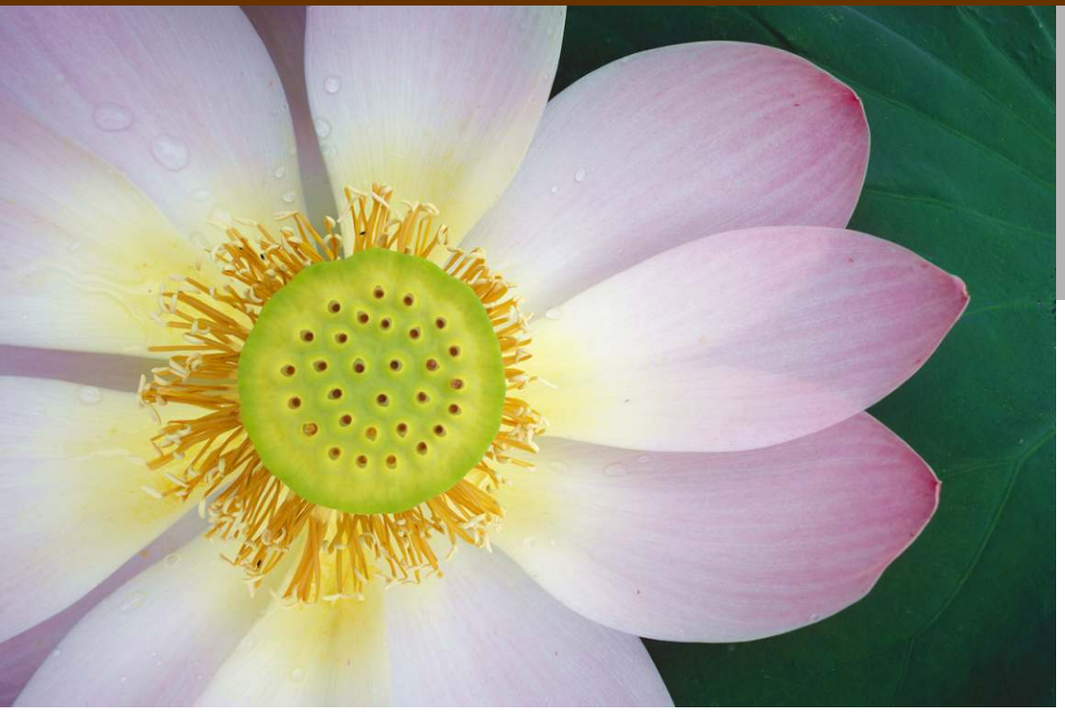
many of these possibilities, as well as their potential uses in composition, in this chapter.

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).

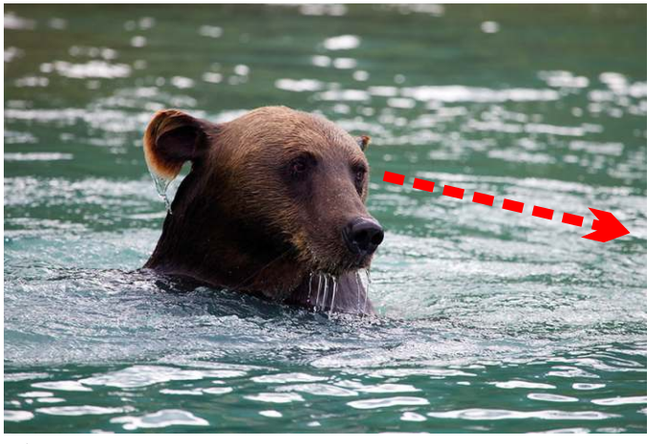


Human brains seek to simplify our chaotic visual world. Good composition can help the process along. "Zen, Unfurled" by Ian Plant (Kenilworth Park and Aquatic Gardens, Washington, D.C.).

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.

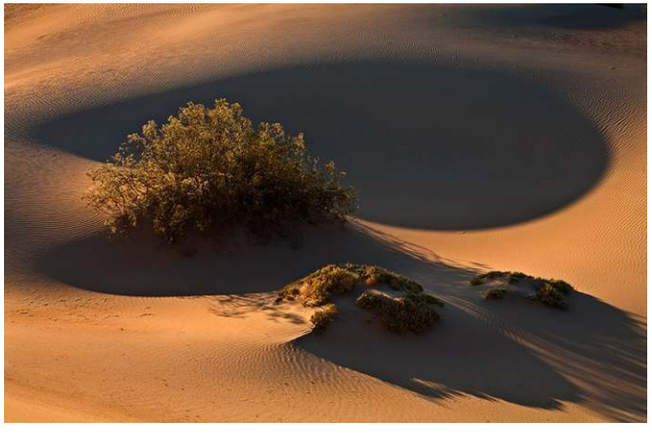
Although Gestalt theory is concerned with the process of visual simplification, it would be a mistake to think that Gestalt calls for reducing a composition to basic simplicity. Gestalt is arguably best used to create a sense of order even with complex compositions—but more on that later!



⇧ **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.

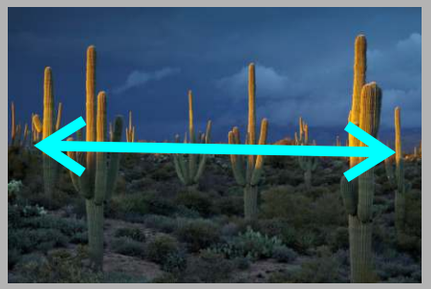
⇩ **Closure:** People have a tendency to complete familiar things that are only nearly complete. An example of this principle is our tendency to mentally "fill in" missing or incorrect words when proofreading a document that has errors. As this relates to artistic design, people tend to view incomplete 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.

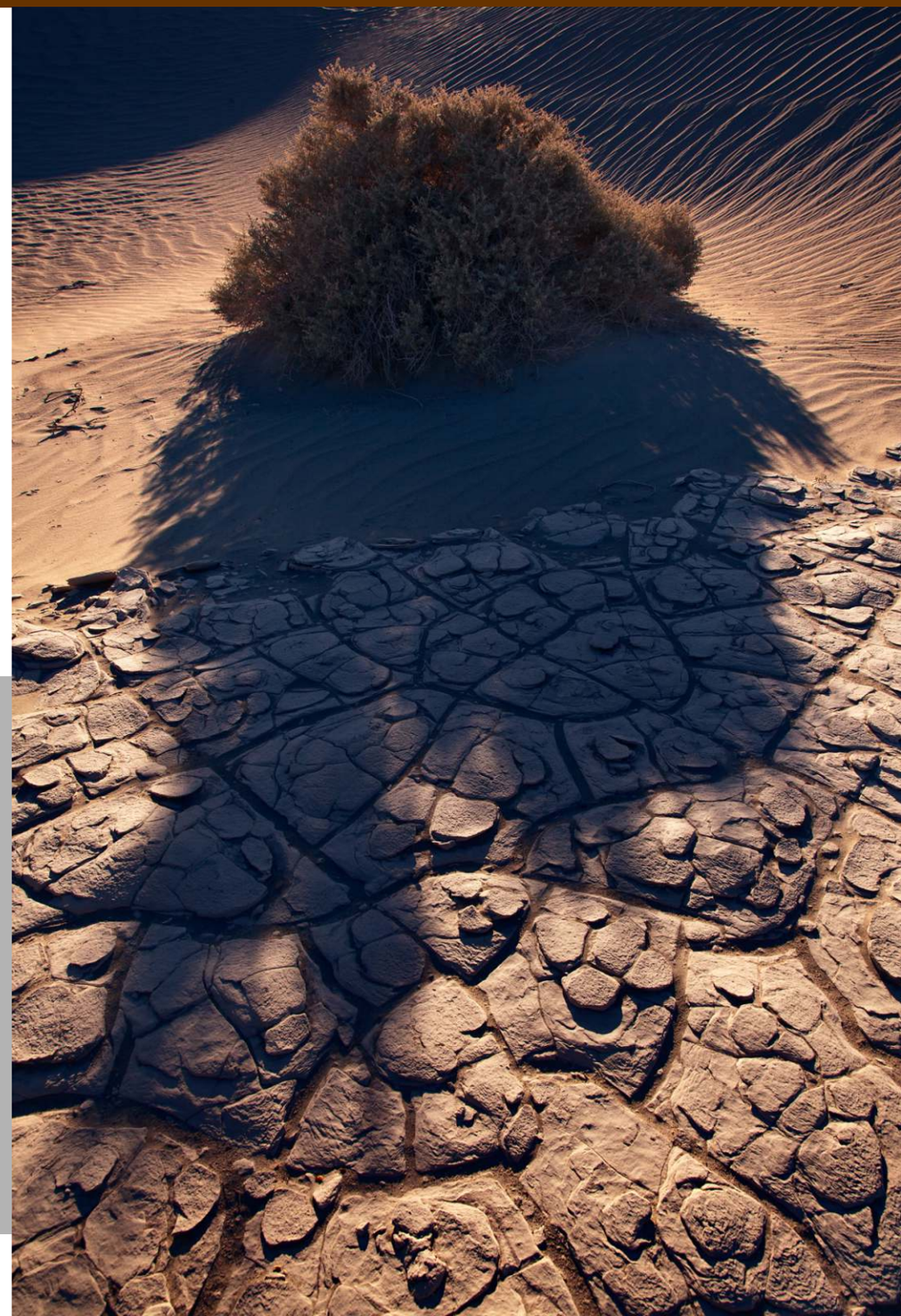
Here's two examples of these Gestalt theories in action. The top image is a clever play on the principles of continuation and closure. The human brain tends to want to continue the horizon line through the vertical cacti that interrupt the line. To reinforce this tendency, George waited for the moment 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).

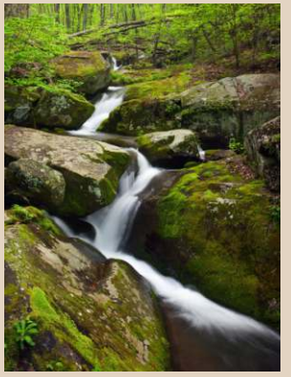
the two prominent areas of visual mass in the painting and creating balance.

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.

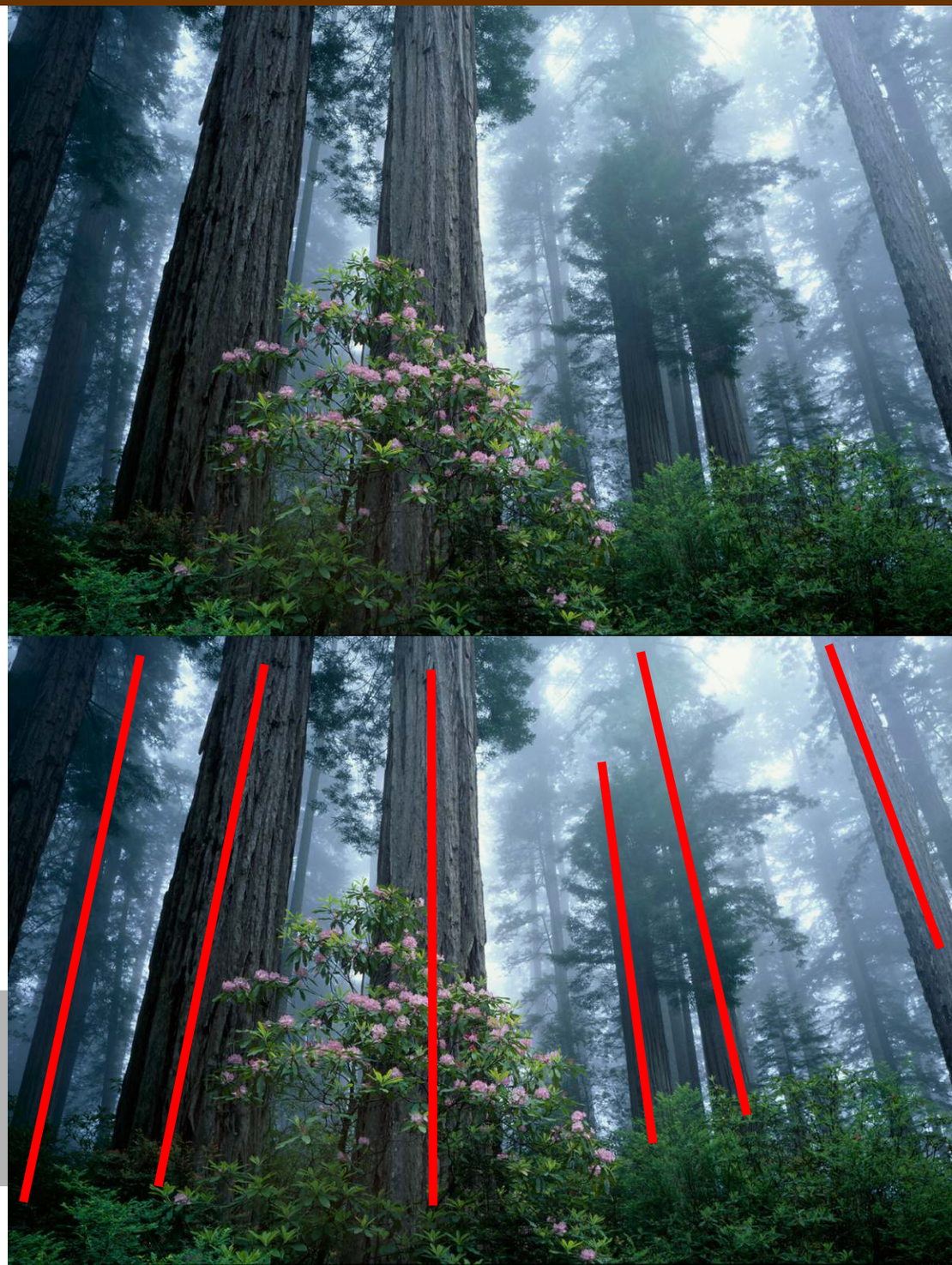
Diagonal Lines: Add energy and visual interest.

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

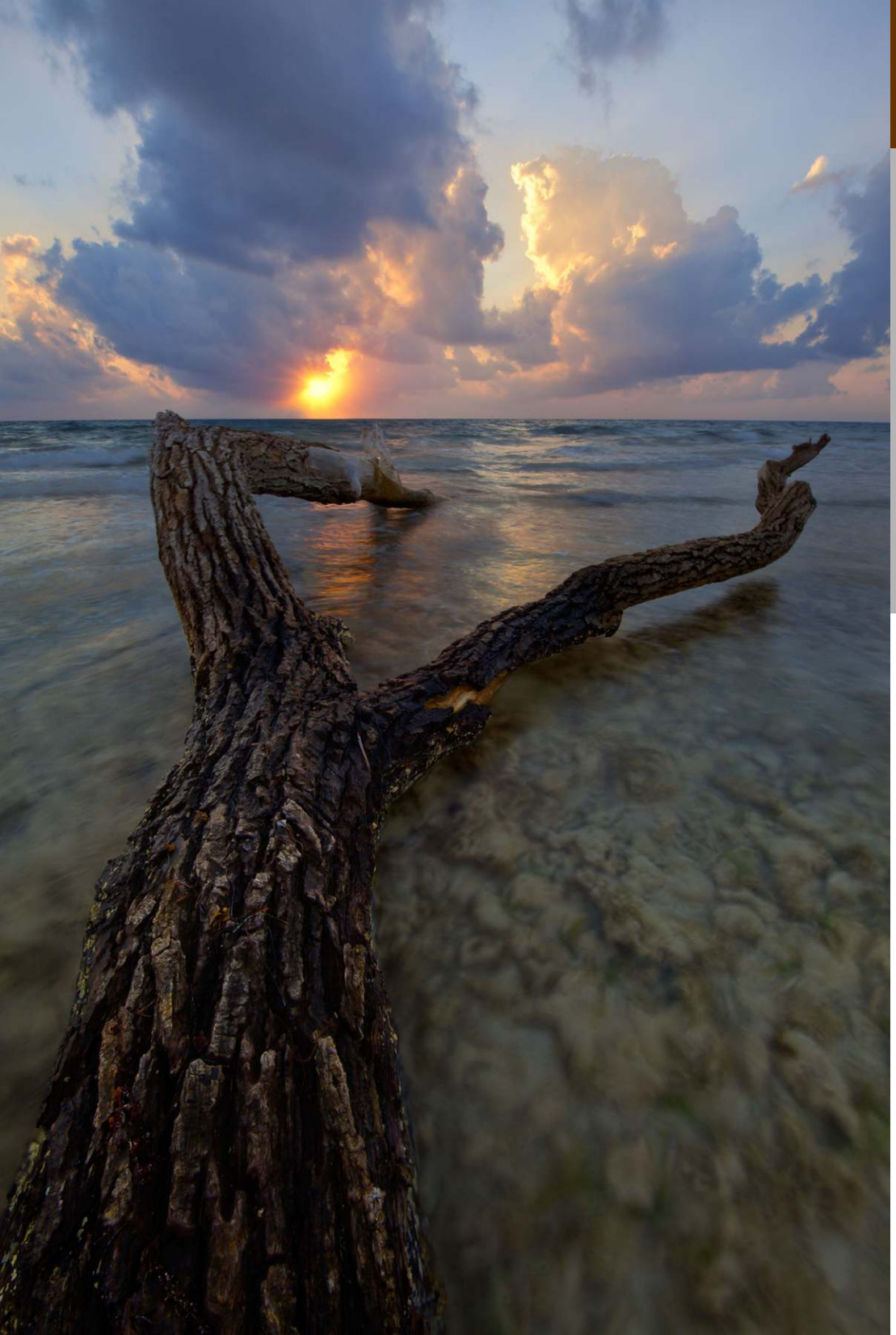
Lines: Powerful shapes which lead the eye.

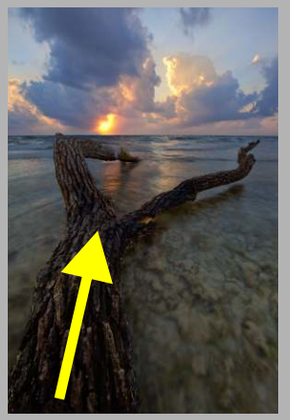
Lines are just that—they are elements of a scene that are more or less straight and that have significant length but relatively little width—you know, *lines*. Fairly self-explanatory, for the most part. Sometimes the lines are obvious: such as a series of vertical tree trunks in a forest. Sometimes 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).



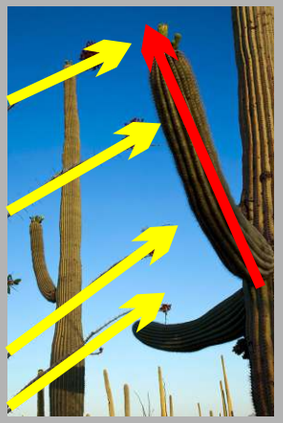


Lines traveling from foreground to background propel the viewer's eye into the scene and thus are known as "leading lines"—such as the line created by this fallen tree, which points deep into the scene. "Moho Mojo" by Ian Plant (Gladden Spit and Silk Cayes Marine Reserve, Belize).

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.

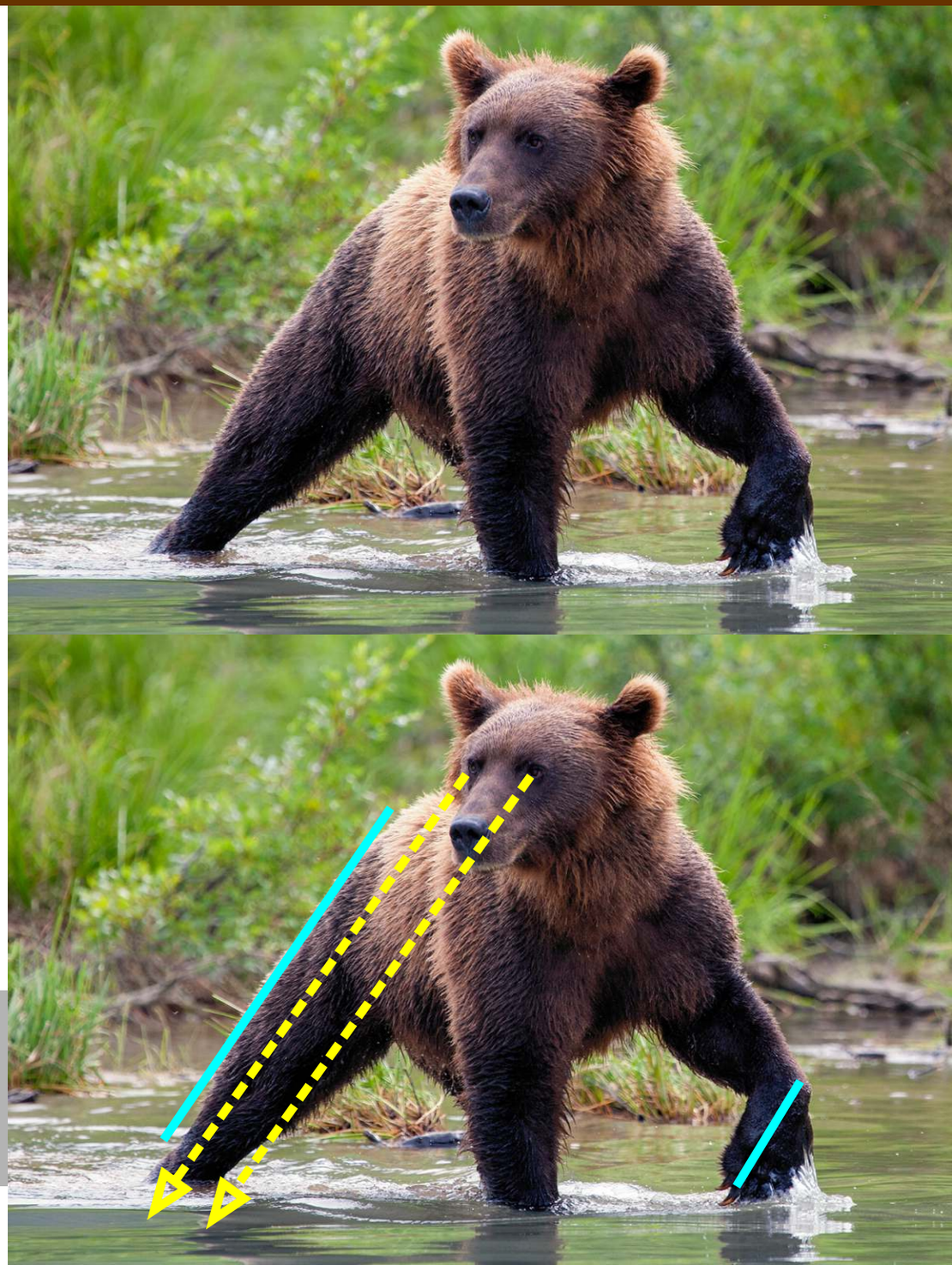
Most photographers tend to rely heavily on lines when making compositions, partially because lines are abundant and easy to find. They are also fairly easy to understand and to visualize, making them useful when you are still trying to master other compositional styles.

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.

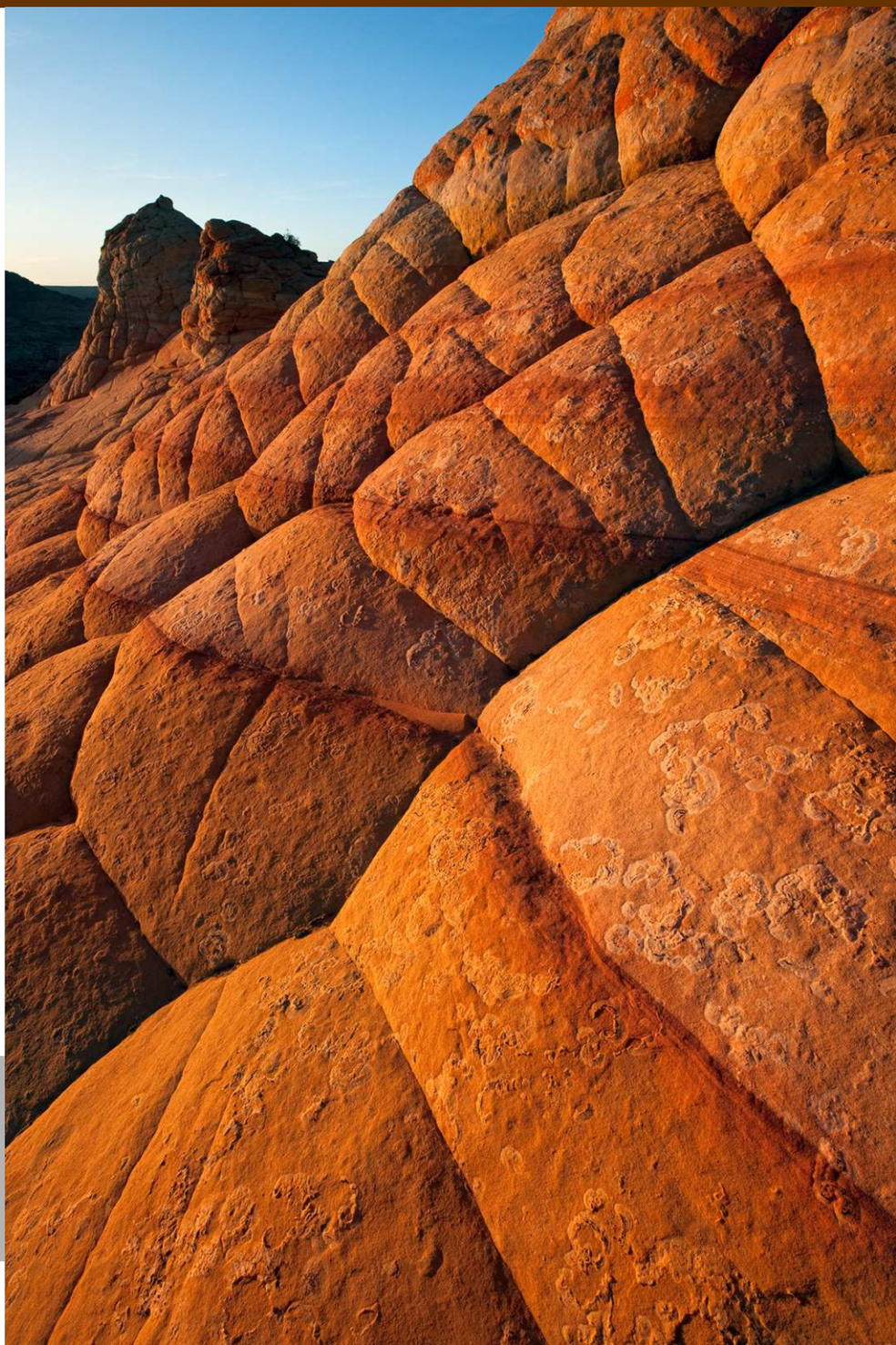


The bear's line of sight creates abstract lines extending out from its eyes. "Honing In" by Ian Plant (Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, Alaska).

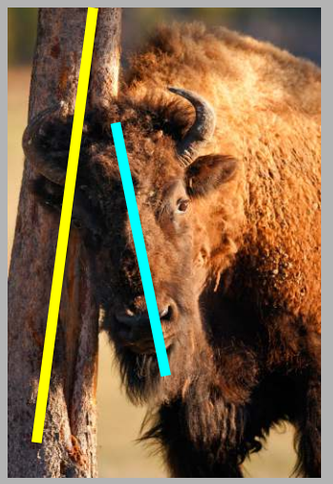
There's something very special about diagonal lines. Maybe it's because we live in a world full of vertical and horizontal lines (such as trees and buildings and horizons), and diagonal lines seem to break from the pattern, screaming to demand our attention. Diagonal lines are effective probably because they force the viewer's eye to traverse the image not only along the left-right axis, but also along the bottom-top axis. Accordingly, they get the eye moving around the image more so than a vertical or horizontal line would do alone. Furthermore, the endpoints of a diagonal line end up in an opposing visual relationship, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Four.

The photograph to the right is a good example. The lines in the rock lead from the lower right to the upper left of the image, forcing the eye to travel through most of the scene. The result is arguably more dynamic than if the lines had been vertical instead.

Diagonal lines get the eye moving more so than vertical or horizontal lines. "Brainrock" by Ian Plant (Vermilion Cliffs National Monument, Arizona).



Diagonal lines can add considerable compositional power to images. Here, the diagonal slant of the bison's head juxtaposed by the opposing slant of the tree creates visual interest. If either or both lines had been vertical instead, the result would not have been nearly as effective or compelling. "Shedding Winter" by Ian Plant (Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming).



Diagonal lines can be particularly effective with portraits and wildlife, as illustrated by the image to the right. The diagonal slant of the bison's head makes for a more compelling portrait, especially when juxtaposed against the opposing slant of the tree.

This concept of opposition—such as the visual opposition created by the endpoints of a diagonal line or the juxtaposition of two diagonals leaning in opposite directions—is a vital concept that we will return to again and again. For purposes of this chapter, diagonal lines lend themselves readily to creating two shapes that hold great compositional energy and power: triangles and zigzags.

Triangles can essentially be thought of as a shape formed by three lines. In terms of composition, triangle shapes have many uses. They can be used to direct the eye to important parts of the image; a triangle can point in a direction which creates an abstract line that can lead into the scene. Triangles can also create compositional balance and stability.

Many elements within the natural world approximate the triangle shape, including mountains, rocks, leaves, and conifer trees. For example, the image to the right is composed almost entirely of a series of triangles, as illustrated by the inset image above. Of course, not every element in the scene is a perfect triangle, but if you use your imagina-

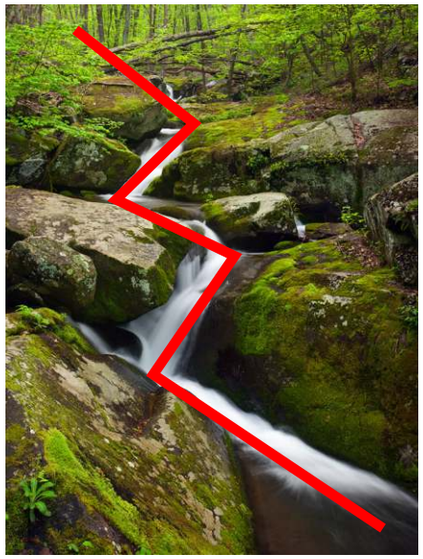
The image to the right relies heavily on a series of roughly triangular shapes, including the mountain and its reflection and the rocks in the water. "Taking Your Medicine" by George Stocking (Medicine Lake, Jasper National Park, Canada).

An abstract triangle arises from the interaction of three primary visual elements within the scene: the two rocks in the water and the glowing canyon wall in the background. The result is a dynamic yet balanced composition which leads the viewer's eye deep into the picture frame. "Light's Passage" by Ian Plant (Zion National Park, Utah).

tion a bit, you can see that more or less, the shapes look like triangles. Remember, we are thinking abstractly here!

Speaking of abstract thinking, *abstract triangles* can arise from the interaction of three significant elements, such as an arrangement of rocks. The image to the right is a good example of three elements interacting to form an abstract triangle. At first glance, the abstract triangle shape may not be apparent, but the inset image demonstrates how the shape arises from the composition.

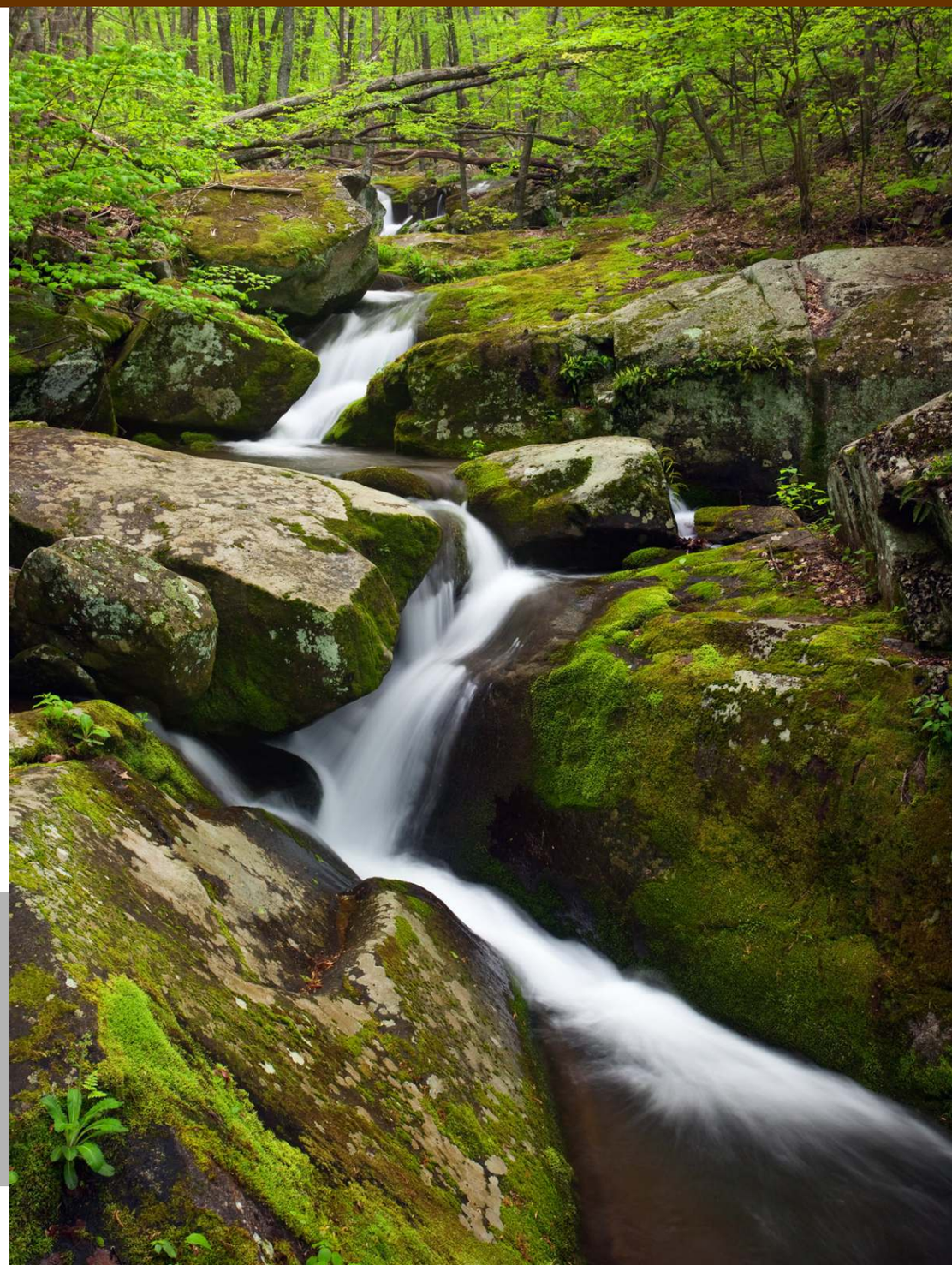
Compositions based on a single unifying abstract triangle can often be very pleasing in terms of composition—we'll get more into why later.



Although it has a silly name, the zigzag is arguably one of the most important compositional tools discussed in this book. Anything that gets the viewer's eye moving back and forth between elements in a photo will hold attention over time and create visual energy. Zigzags, which are essentially a series of diverging yet connected diagonal lines, do this very effectively.

One way to think of zigzags is that they create opposing energy. Zigzags push the eye back and forth, with visual energy and excitement being the result. We'll

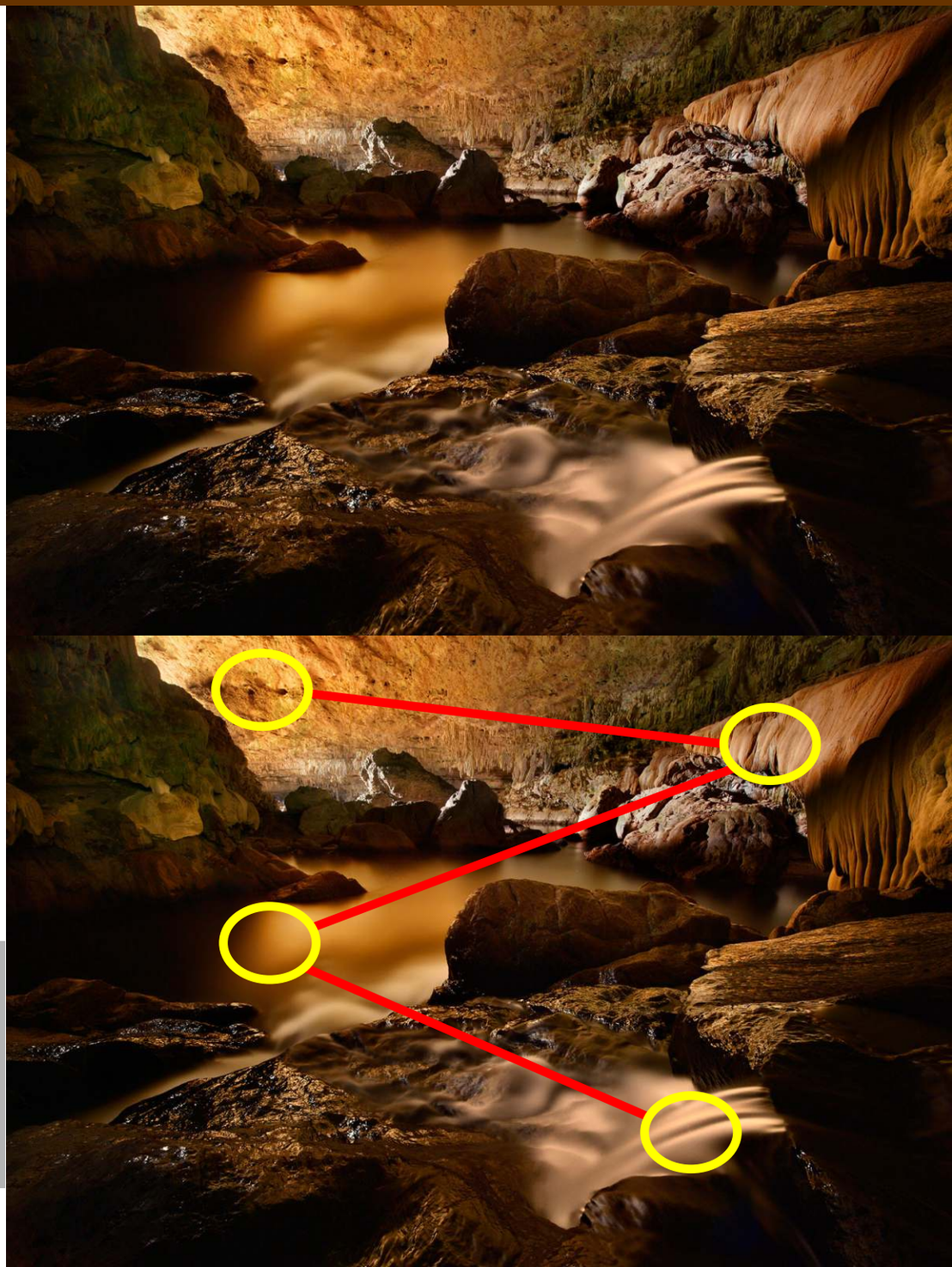
Zigzags are made up of diverging connected lines. They get the viewer's eye moving back and forth within the image space, creating compositional excitement. "Hogcamp Branch" by Ian Plant (Shenandoah National Park, Virginia).



discuss this notion of "opposing energy" more deeply in other sections of this book.

Zigzags can arise literally, such as with the cascading stream image on the previous page. They can also arise from the abstract interaction of multiple, separate compositional elements. For example, the image at right of a cave uses an abstract zigzag, formed by the interaction of various important, eye-catching elements within the scene, including the foreground cascade, the bright reflection, the flowstone formation, and the bright cave wall in the background. The interaction of these four significant features helps get the eye moving throughout the scene, establishing visual flow.

I cannot stress enough the importance of this concept of getting the eye moving back and forth. As you will see as we delve more deeply into composition theory, the zigzag is but one way to accomplish this.



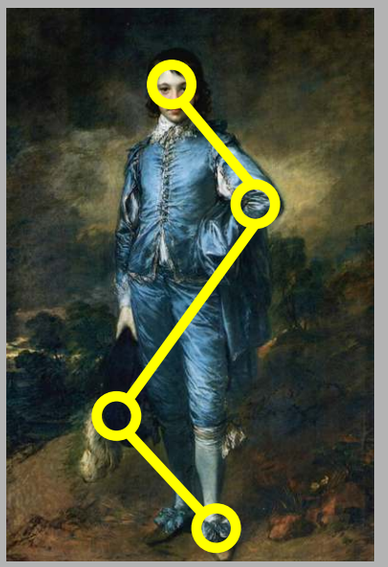
An abstract zigzag arises from the interaction of multiple individual elements, encouraging the viewer's eye to travel back and forth within the picture space. "Mysterious Earth" by Ian Plant (Rio Frio Cave, Belize).

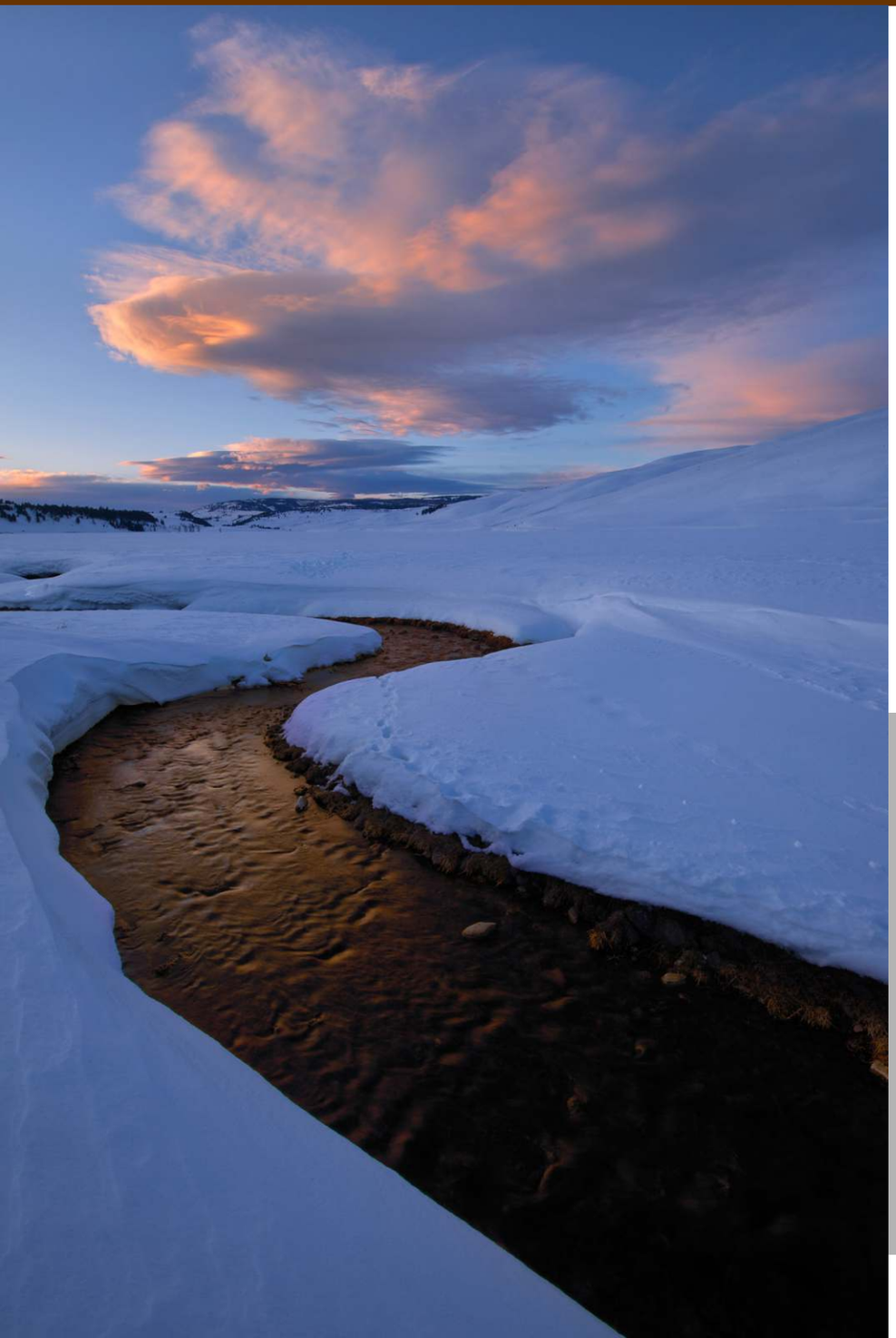
Source: Wikipedia Commons

Artists have been using the zigzag and other devices to get the eyes of viewers moving for centuries, including with this jaunty fellow to the left (he may not seem like much, but his estimated value is at least ten million dollars). Can you see the abstract zigzag? If not, consult the caption below. It's not the only compositional tool used in this extremely famous painting, but it is a powerful and dominant tool nonetheless.

I think we've had enough of all of these blocky and angular shapes for now. Let's move on to something more elegant!

Notice how the boy's right arm, bent at the elbow, forms a shape that is visually opposite the hat dangling from his left hand? A zigzag arises, starting with his head, zigging to his right elbow, zagging to his hat, and then zigging again to his relatively bright right sock, buckle, and shoe. All this gets the eye moving back and forth in the image. Pretty clever, huh? "The Blue Boy" by Thomas Gainsborough (ca. 1770).





Curves are essentially zig-zags with rounded corners. They accomplish much the same as zigzags do, encouraging the eye to move back and forth throughout the image frame, but they do so with a bit more refinement and elegance. It is often said that a "curved line is the loveliest distance between two points." Think of zig-zags as rowdy college kids drinking at the local bar, and curves as a high-class dinner party.

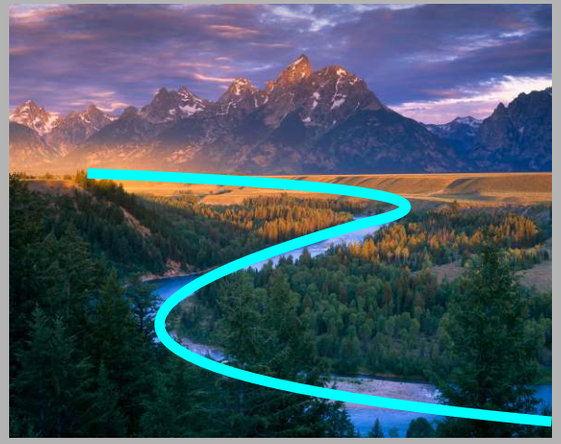
Actually, a curve, much like a line, is a fundamental shape—basically, any "line" that is not straight is a curve, and many shapes can be formed by a collection of curves. Curves are abundant in nature, usually represented by things such as streams and rivers, shapely clouds, or sandy

Curves are more sweeping and elegant than lines. Accordingly, they create less compositional "excitement"—but they are no less effective than lines in engaging the eye. Here, a series of related curves are formed by the meandering stream and the cloud in the sky, which work together to lead the eye through the entire image. "Winter Flow" by Ian Plant (Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming).

shorelines. As will all shapes discussed in this section, curves can also arise between the abstract interaction of multiple compositional elements.

The image to the right includes what is arguably the most famous curve in nature: the Snake River Overlook in Grand Teton National Park, first made popular by Ansel Adams. The trees have grown considerably since Ansel's day, so the curve is not as obvious as it used to be. Gestalt principles tell us that people will perceive and continue the curved shape even through the interrupting trees and will also continue the curve past the bend where the river turns back left but disappears from view. The resulting shape gets the eye moving in the picture, but rather than creating energy and power as with a zigzag, the curve instead creates a more peaceful mood.

Although not always necessary, curves often work best as leading elements when they start at the bottom of a landscape image, working their way though the middle-ground to the background. A curve that leads to something prominent or important in a scene can be especially effective. We'll get into why later on, but here's a hint: it has something to do with the illusion of depth.

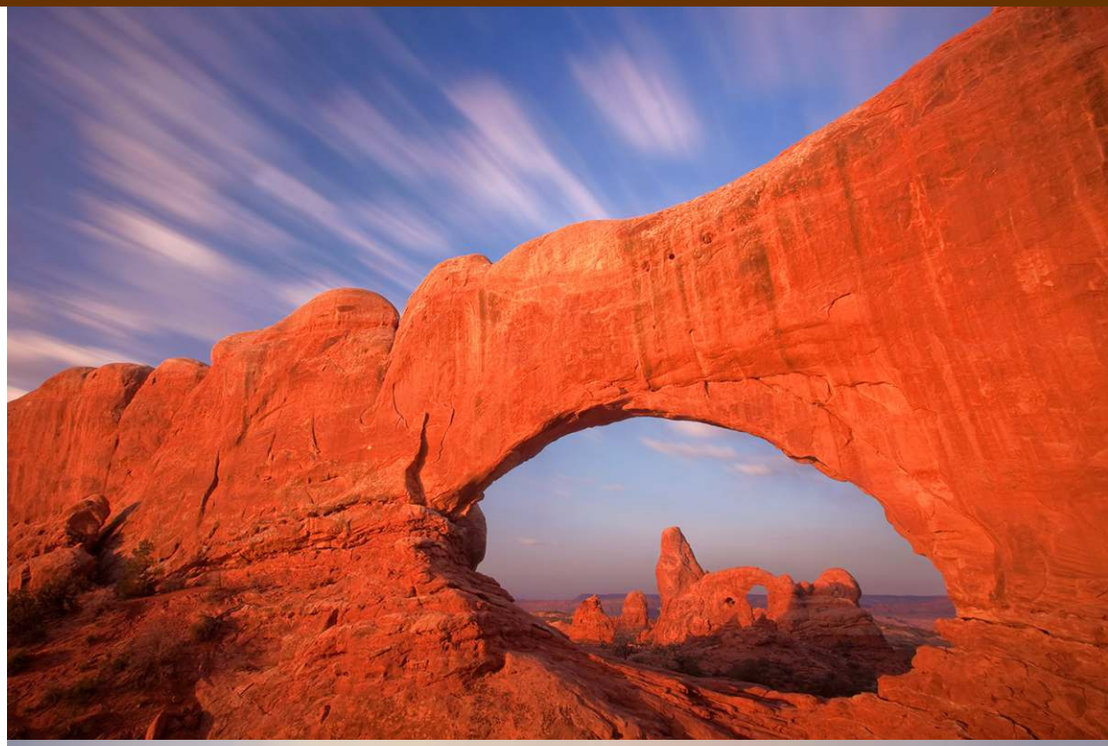


The curve of the river helps lead the eye deep into the scene. "Iconic Sunrise" by George Stocking (Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming).

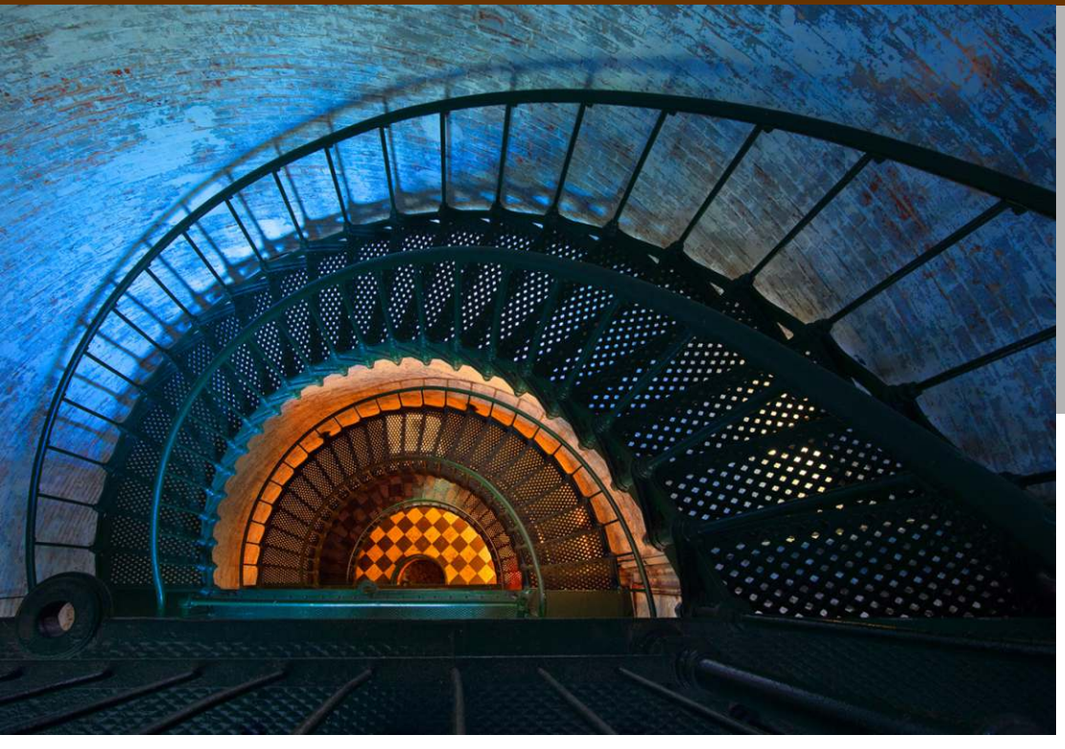
A circle is (for lack of a better way of putting it) a curve that closes in on itself. Although part of the curve family, circles serve much different purposes than curves. Circles capture the eye, forcing it to linger before going elsewhere.

For purposes of this discussion, the term "circles" embraces ellipses of all sorts, as well as fragments of circles, such as half circles. Circles in nature are often represented by pools or small bodies of water, rainbows, the sun and the moon, flowers, pebbles, and natural arches.

Circles can create stability and symmetry and help hold the eye in place or focus attention on an object within the circle.



Above: The circle of the large natural arch is used to frame the distant arch, holding the eye and forcing it to linger on the most important part of the scene. "Desert Window" by Ian Plant (Arches National Park, Utah). Below: The rainbow arc frames the scene, holding the eye in the lower part of the image. "Heaven and Earth" by Ian Plant (Los Glaciares National Park, Argentina).

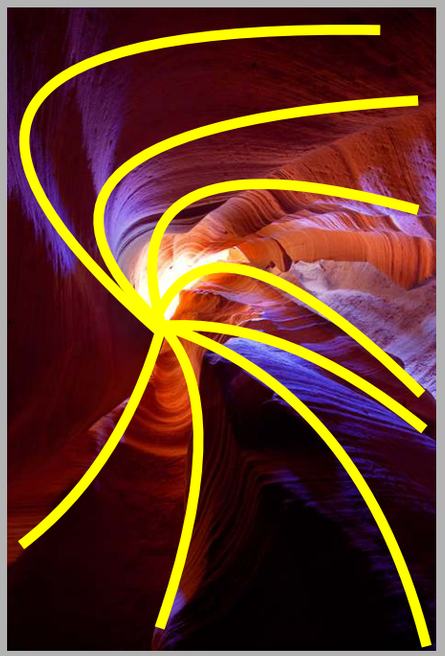


The spiraling shape of the descending staircase in this old lighthouse helps draw the eye deep into the picture frame. The effect is reinforced by the color contrast between the blue walls and the warmly lit bottom floor of the lighthouse. "Currituck Lighthouse" by Ian Plant (Outer Banks, North Carolina).

Spirals and radials are special curve shapes that deserve a little extra attention. A spiral is essentially an internally regressing curve; a radial is anything with a vaguely spiral shape that has lines or curves emanating from a central point. Similar to circles, spirals and radials capture the eye, but in a somewhat different way: the curves/lines of a spiral/radial force the eye into the vortex, holding it there powerfully and tightly—acting much like a whirlpool, inexorably drawing the unwary around and around, deeper and deeper with each pass into the depths of the swirling abyss. This "whirlpool" effect—this drawing of the eye into the center of the spiral or radial—can be seen in the image to the left, which looks down the staircase of a lighthouse. In this case, the effect is heightened by the color contrast between the cool tones of the lighthouse walls and the warm tones of the ground floor, where the spiral eye is located. In any event, the viewer's eye inevitably ends up in the vortex of the spiraling staircase.

In addition to spiraling staircases, many man-made objects have spiral shapes, including such things as pasta shells and coiled rope. In nature, spirals and radials are quite common, typically represented by mollusk shells, spiderwebs, the horns of certain animals such as bighorn sheep, the seed clusters of certain flowers, and fern fronds and other plants. Spirals and radials can also arise abstractly from the interaction of a series of otherwise unrelated lines or curves.

Spiral shapes can create an illusion of "rotation" that in turn implies motion and energy. Thus, they can be very useful when a dynamic composition is called for. As



The roughly spiraling shape that emerges from the interaction of a series of curves helps create energy in this photo. The vortex of a radial shape becomes a place of special compositional interest as it naturally draws the eye. Place the vortex with care! The effect holds the viewer's attention over time, making it hard to look away. "Vortex" by Ian Plant (Navajo Nation, Arizona).

demonstrated by the image at left, radial and spiral shapes can emerge abstractly from the interaction of multiple visual elements—in this case, a series of repeating curving shapes. The resulting radial pattern creates the subtle illusion of motion and helps draw the viewer's eye into the center of the vortex.

We'll study this "vortex" concept in more detail in Chapter Four. But for now, it's time to take a break from shapes to debunk a famous composition myth.

RULE OF ODDS

The so-called "Rule of Odds" states that images are more visually appealing when there is an odd number of subjects. Rule of Odds adherents seem to believe that an even number of subjects results in too much balance. Is there any validity to this rule? Well, as with many of the so-called "rules" of composition, the Rule of Odds is not entirely without merit. It might be fair to say that the myth is less in the reasoning behind the rule and more in its ironclad application. In my opinion, however, any artist worth their salt can make an even number of objects work just as well as an odd number.

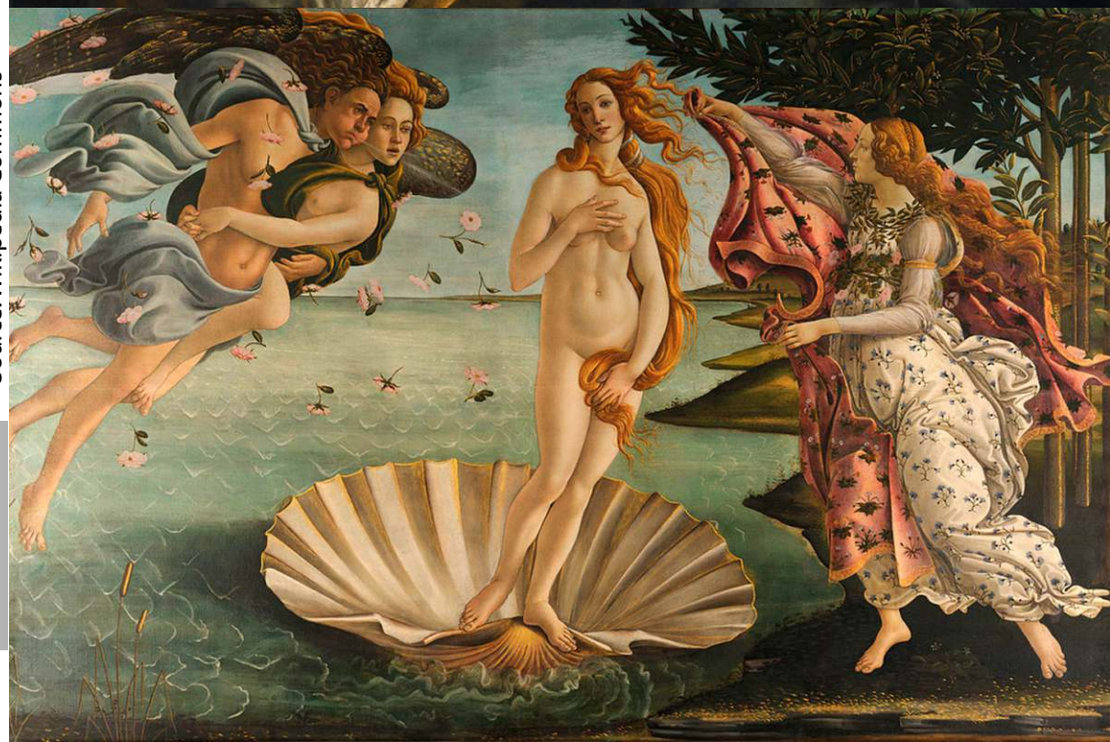
Let's start first with the merits of this rule. When dealing with larger numbers, I think it is fair to say the Rule of Odds is irrelevant, as it is hard to perceive without counting whether there is an even or odd number of objects (studies show that the largest number humans typically can capture at a glance without counting is about four or five). But with small numbers, there does seem to be some dynamic

Is three better than two or four? The Rule of Odds says "yes." I say "maybe" at best—it depends on a number of factors and the overall composition. Sometimes, as with the image to the right, an odd number does seem to work better. But certainly not always! "Blooming Sotols" by George Stocking (Tonto National Forest, Arizona).

appeal to an odd number of subjects, especially (arguably) three, as three subjects form a triangle shape. The photo on the previous page is a good example.

But then again, a quick survey of some of the great works of art through the centuries shows that artists have no problem working with even numbers of main subjects. For example, the Rule of Odds didn't stop Titian, one of the greatest painters of the Renaissance, from using four subjects in *The Madonna and Child with Saints Luke and Catherine of Alexandria* (top right). Nor did it stop Botticelli from painting *The Birth of Venus* (bottom right), one of the most famous paintings of all time. I guess they didn't get the memo.

Now one could argue that these famous paintings actually use clever ways to conform to the Rule of Odds, such as adding an extra visual element (for example, the curtain in the first painting) or bunching two subjects so they visually merge into one visual mass (for example, the two figures to the left in the second painting). Of course, once you start looking at



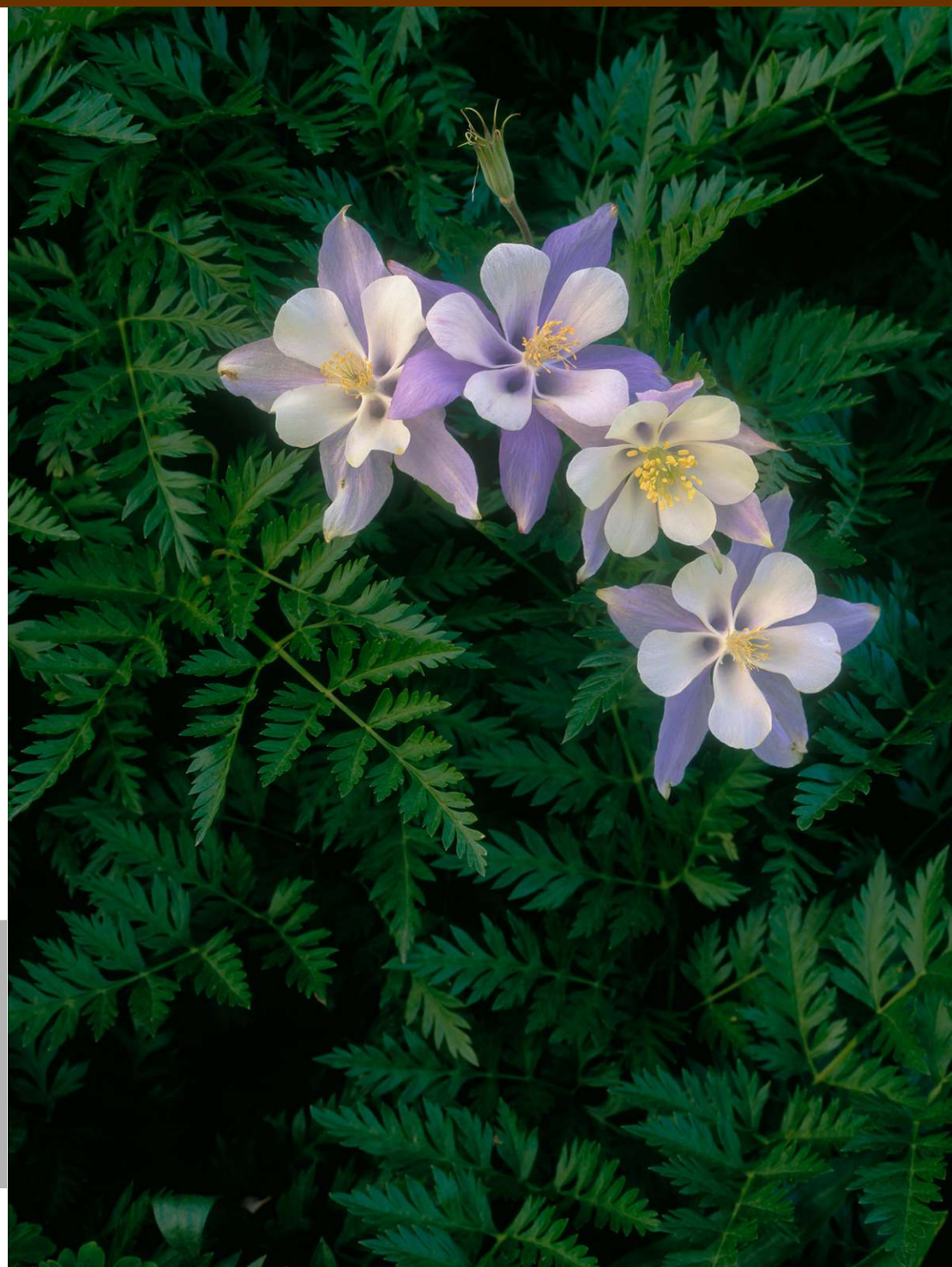
Source: Wikipedia Commons

Top right: "The Madonna and Child with Saints Luke and Catherine of Alexandria" by Titian (ca. 1560). Bottom right: "The Birth of Venus" by Sandro Botticelli (1469).

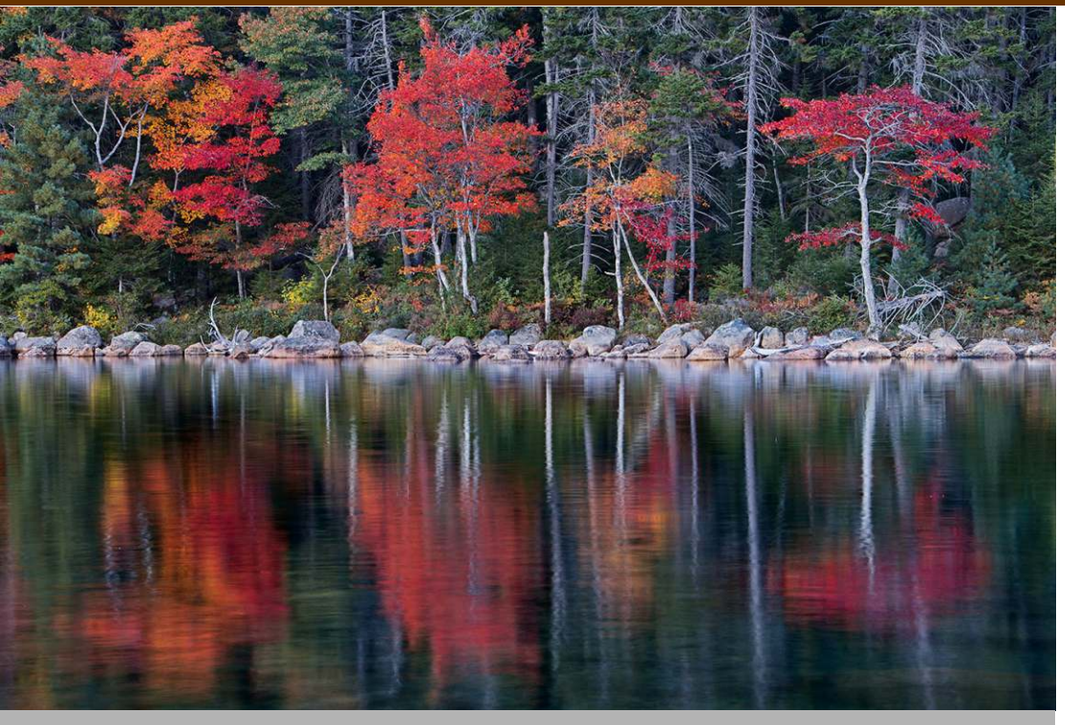
things this way, it makes counting the actual subjects somewhat ambiguous—do trees and books and flowers and giant seashells get counted as main subjects or not? Anyone with a bias for or against the Rule of Odds can likely find a way to include or exclude enough visual elements to get the even or odd count that supports their case—at which point, the whole thing just gets silly.

Somehow, George made the photo to the right work despite the fact that he was working with four flowers. Would a fifth flower have made the composition more dynamic? Frankly, I find it hard to imagine that it would. My suspicion is that George would have made this one work no matter how many flowers he had.

Of course, depending on your subject matter and overall composition, sometimes an even number of primary or important subjects can make a composition look off balance or stilted. For example, with the



Despite having four subjects, the image to the left is dynamic and compelling. Could it be that the Rule of Odds isn't really much of a rule after all? "Arc de Columbine" by George Stocking (Gunnison National Forest, Colorado).



An even number of subjects just doesn't seem to work here, but that doesn't mean that even numbers won't ever work at all. Each image needs to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. "Autumn Zen" by Ian Plant (Acadia National Park, Maine).

photograph above, the brightly colored autumn trees create four visual groupings; I personally find the result to be too static and wish that I had three or five groupings instead of four. But what is good or bad for any one given composition doesn't necessarily hold true for *all* compositions. Just because sometimes an even number doesn't work doesn't mean that this inconvenience should be elevated to the status of an ironclad "rule" of composition.

Frankly, there's nothing more amusing than watching someone count the number of subjects in his shot, and then reject the shot because the number is six instead of seven (I've actually seen this happen). The numbering in each image should be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Sometimes, an even or odd number of subjects just won't work. More often then not, however, a good artist can make a composition work whether dealing with an even or odd number of visual elements. A good artist can make a composition work with one, two, three, four, or ten thousand elements.

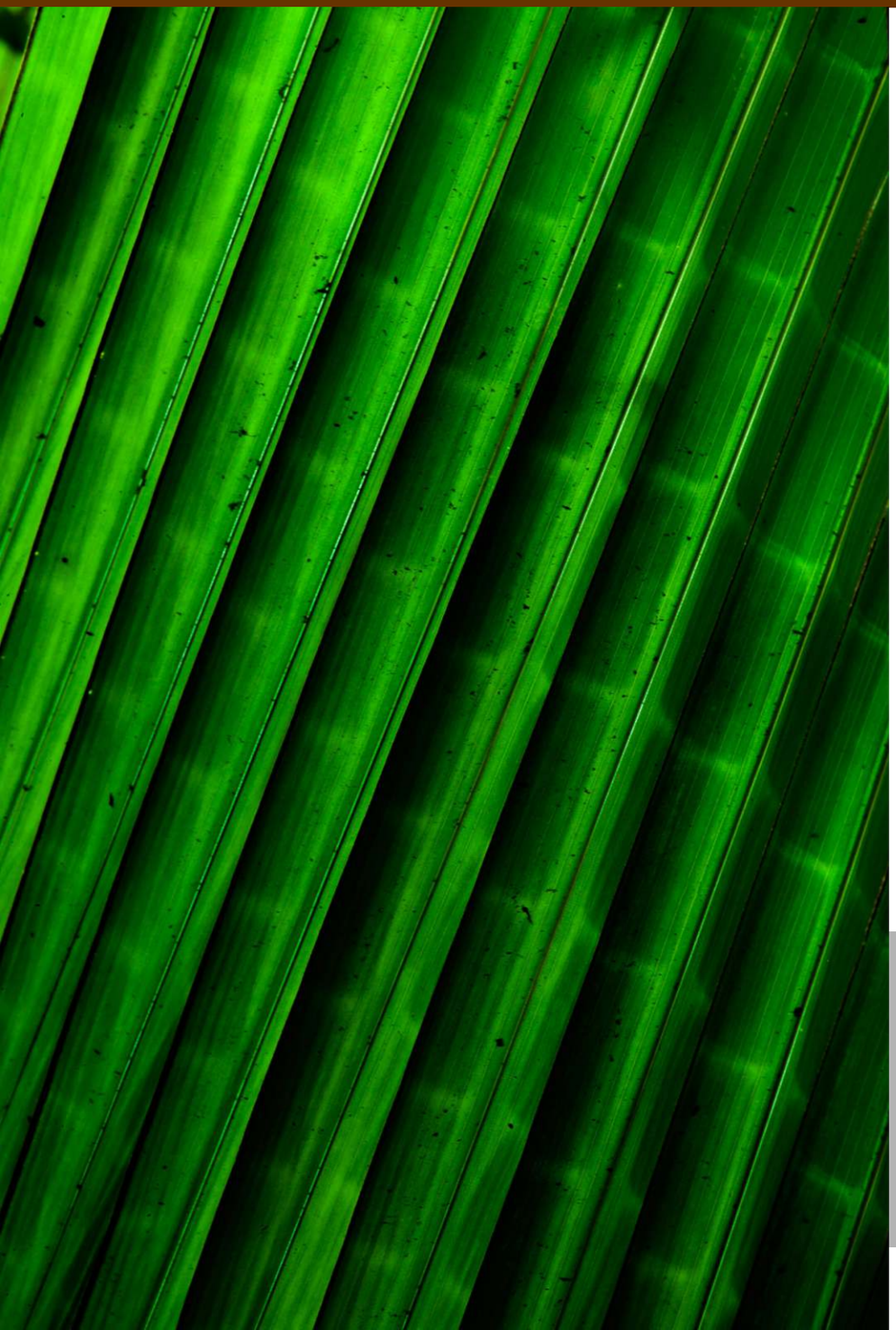
The bottom line is this: Don't worry too much about the numbers. Just worry about creating a good composition, and let the numbers fall where they may.

Counting important visual elements can become especially irritating when working with our next category of shape-based compositions: patterns. But first, let's put some of our learning so far to the test with a detailed image study.

"AGGREGATE TENSIONS"

This image presents a clever, energetic, shape-based composition. First (left), it can be viewed as being dominated by several lines moving in opposite directions. Second (middle), it can be viewed as a series of repeating triangle shapes. Third (right), it can be viewed as forming an abstract zig-zag shape. All three compositional interpretations are valid, and all work together to keep the eye moving back and forth in this dynamic composition. This photograph is a great study in the way multiple compositional techniques can converge to create a rich and sophisticated image.

Three interpretations of the same composition. "Aggregate Tensions" by George Stocking (Vermilion Cliffs National Monument, Arizona).



Effective images can be made using a repetition of shapes. When that repetition becomes the dominant focus of the composition, it is known as a *pattern* image. Patterns usually involve the repetition of one prominent shape over and over—such as with the backlit jungle palm in the image at left, which is a repetition of diagonal lines.

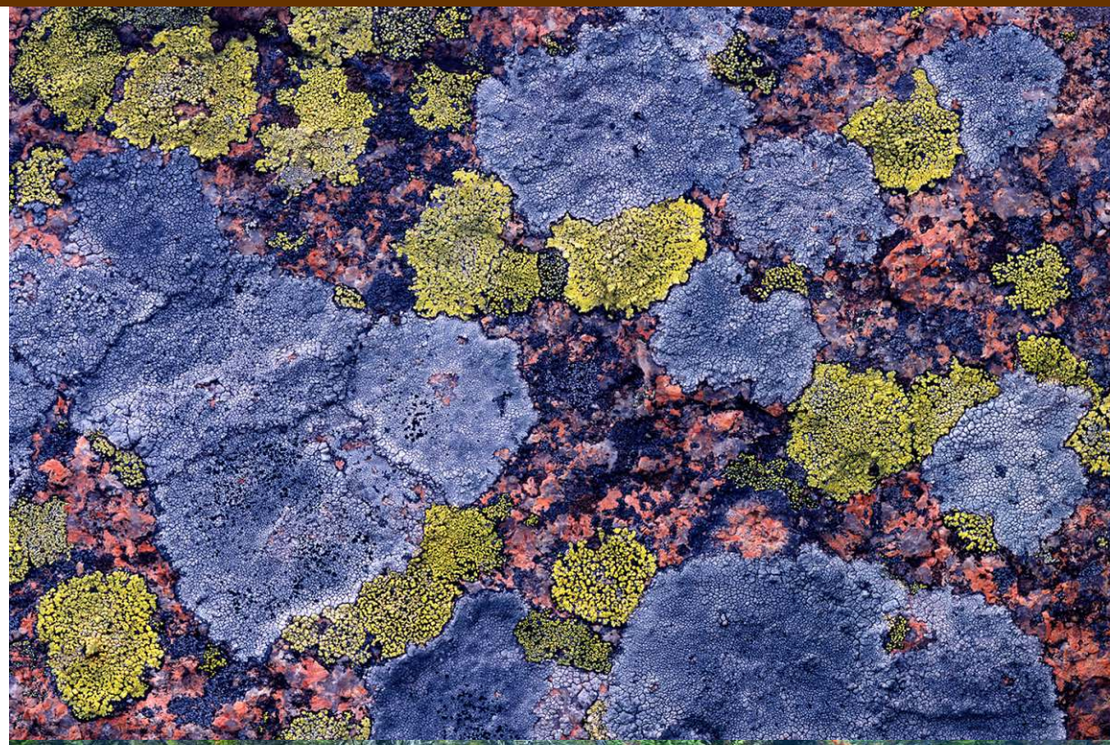
According to Gestalt theory, the human eye is naturally attracted to repeating shapes and patterns, making pattern images particularly appealing. Patterns in nature are fairly common, and can include things like a grove of trees, rippled sand, lichens on a rock, distant mountain ridges, a field of wild flowers, a flock of birds, or pebbles on a rocky shore.

Patterns can take many forms. Some can be uniform, such as with the palms to the left—essentially the same identical shape repeats over and over. Others may be less structured

The pattern of vertical diagonal lines created by a series of jungle palm fronds dominates this composition. The repetition of shapes attracts the eye and encourages it to travel through the image going from one shape to the next. "Jungle Palm Detail" by Ian Plant (Monkey River, Belize).

and not nearly as repetitive. The lichen photograph (top right) is a good example. The image is actually made up of several patterns, including the larger globs of blue lichen, the smaller roundish yellow lichen, and the pattern of smaller black lichen on the pink granite rock. The patterns are somewhat more amorphous, but discernable nonetheless.

Although these first two examples demonstrate using the pattern itself as the primary subject of the composition, patterns can be used in more subtle and abstract ways. Instead of being the primary subject, the pattern can form the overall structure of the composition, helping to guide the viewer's eye through the scene. We'll go more into this concept later; the image to the bottom right is a good example of how repeating shapes can be used to create structure and interest in the overall composition.



Top right: A series of related patterns arise from the interaction of lichen blobs on a rock. "Lichenscape" by Ian Plant (Acadia National Park, Maine). Bottom right: Repeating shapes create compositional structure and get the eye moving through the image. "Wonderland" by Ian Plant (Acadia National Park, Maine).

One type of repeating pattern shot is a layered composition, which consists of distinct repeating bands stacked one on top of the other to fill the frame. Layers are usually arranged horizontally or diagonally and create multiple areas of interest for the viewer to explore, and can be very effective when the progression of layers leads the eye from the foreground to the background.

For the image on the top right, multiple layers of horizontal bands are stacked one on top of another, starting with the band of snowy field on the bottom, followed by the band of frosted trees, the bottom band of the mountains, the layer of fog, the top part of the mountains, and, finally, the sky above. Another example of a layered composition is the image to the bottom right. It consists of a band of trees changing with the season, another band of more distant trees, a layer of backlit fog, dark mountains, and then, finally, the sky.

Layers can be very effective at encouraging the eye to travel from the bottom to the top of an image. Top right: "Winter Dawning" by Ian Plant (Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming). Bottom right: "Layers of Autumn" by George Stocking (San Juan Mountains, Colorado).

1. Learn to see and work with shapes: A "shape-based" approach will help you better understand composition. Learn to recognize shapes, especially abstract shapes arising from the interaction of multiple visual elements.

2. Think of objects in terms of visual mass: Visual mass is a relative measure of an object's "eye catchiness." Remember, however, that visual mass is not fixed—you can manipulate an object's visual mass by changing your position relative to the object or altering its brightness.

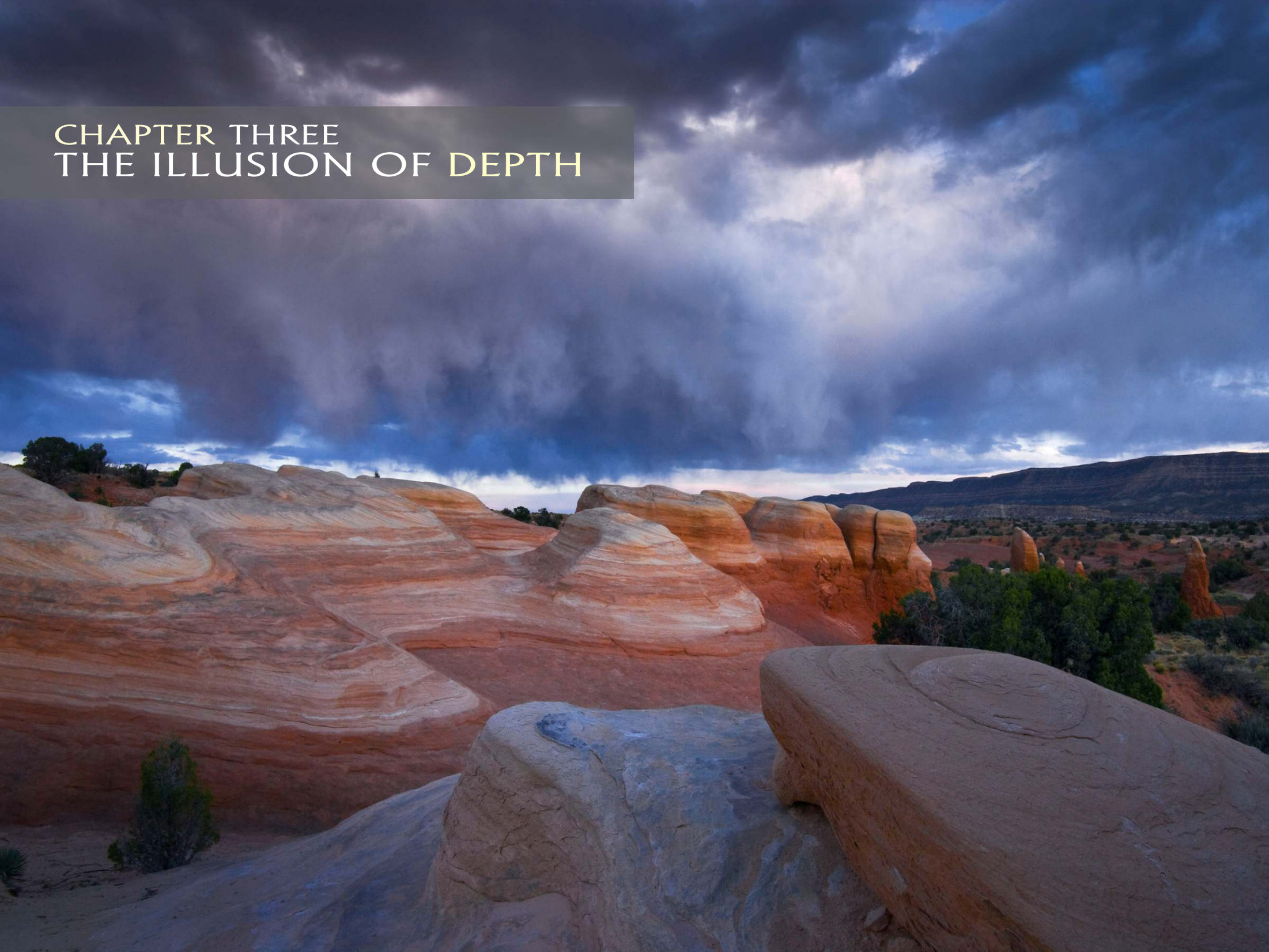
3. Diagonal lines are particularly effective: Vertical and horizontal lines are great, but diagonal lines encourage the eye to travel to more areas of the image.

4. Use "power shapes" to create bold compositions: Simple shapes such as triangles, circles, radial patterns, curves, and zigzags attract the eye, lending themselves to simple yet bold compositions.

5. Repeating shapes and patterns help lead the eye: People are naturally attracted to repeating shapes and patterns—use this to your advantage! The eye will want to travel to each element within the pattern, making it an effective tool for leading the viewer deep into the image.

“Great art demands to be seen! It follows you around the room.” —George Stocking

“Plateau Light” by George Stocking (Vermilion Cliffs National Monument, Arizona).



CHAPTER THREE
THE ILLUSION OF DEPTH

"There are three aspects to perspective. The first has to do with how the size of objects seems to diminish according to distance: the second, the manner in which colors change the farther away they are from the eye; the third defines how objects ought to be finished less carefully the farther away they are."—Leonardo da Vinci

"To increase the illusion of depth in your landscape … keep your active lines up front and slow the linear quality down in the distance."—Tony van Hasselt

"Perspective is a ghastly mistake which it has taken four centuries to redress."—Georges Braque

We live in a vibrant, dynamic world full of a seemingly endless array of sensory stimuli; not only do we perceive objects in three-dimensional space (height, width, and depth), but we also experience the passage of time and witness the movement of objects through time and space. The world around us is rich in a variety of shapes, colors, noises, smells, textures, and motions that we perceive

"Patience and Persistence" by Ian Plant (Blue Ridge Parkway, North Carolina).

A photograph robs us of most of our senses. Skillful composition allows the photographer to recapture some of that which is lost, especially the perception of three dimensions and depth. "Sonoran Sunset" by George Stocking (Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Arizona).

with a number of senses. A photograph, however, is a two-dimensional, static representation of the world around us, which excludes most of our senses and allows us to experience with only one: vision. What's more, even this perception is severely truncated: a photograph takes in only a small portion of a scene that our eyes can see, can only render a small fraction of the variety of colors and luminosities that our eyes can perceive—and to add insult to injury, we are further robbed of depth, perspective, and the experience of motion and the passage of time. Accordingly, a photograph only reveals an extremely myopic reflection of the world around us. The conundrum, then, is how to inject the vibrancy of our dynamic three-dimensional world into the 2x3-ratio static rectangle that results when we trigger our camera's shutter button.

Perhaps future cameras will use a laser beam to carve a three-dimensional output from a lump of space-age material, but for now, our options are somewhat limited. We are left with using optical illusions to trick the eye into seeing depth and motion—in other words, visual flow. So then, what tools can we use to create the illusion of depth?

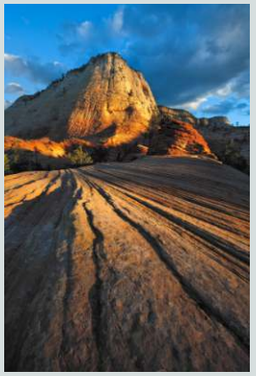
Lucky for us, there are many at our disposal. We can broadly classify these tools as *perspective cues*. Basically, these are visual cues borrowed from common experience that imply a sense of depth, giving us a notion

"The conundrum, then, is how to inject the vibrancy of our dynamic three-dimensional world into the 2x3-ratio static rectangle that results when we trigger our camera's shutter button."

about whether something is relatively near or far. Although I have classified these cues into several broad categories, you will likely note that these classifications are by no means exclusive; rather, they often overlap a considerable amount. Perspective cues include *scale* (the relative size of objects), *vanishing point* (the tendency of objects to visually disappear as they get closer and closer to the horizon), *overlap* (the perception that overlapped objects are farther away than the overlapping object), *shadows and shading* (which help create the illusion of three-dimensionality), and *atmospheric perspective* (the tendency of objects to appear increasingly vague and blue the farther they are in the distance). I'll deal with each of these in turn, along with a number of related concepts.

A number of perspective cues give this composition depth, helping draw the eye into the photo. "Paradise Found" by Ian Plant (Gladden Spit and Silk Cayes Marine Reserve, Belize).

Diminishing Scale: Objects appear to recede in size the farther away they are.



Leading Elements: Draw the eye into the scene.

One-Point and Two-Point Perspective: Depth techniques which lead the eye.

Overlap: Overlapping shapes give the illusion of depth.

Atmospheric Perspective: Distant objects appear progressively hazier and less distinct.

Framing: Focuses the viewer's attention on important elements.

Vanishing Point: Parallel lines seem to converge at the horizon, drawing the eye into the composition.

Forced Perspective: Juxtaposing a small close object with a large far object creates depth.

Bottom to Top: Creates a near-far relationship which leads the eye.

Forced perspective is a technique that employs optical illusion to make an object appear farther away, closer, larger, or smaller than it actually is. It manipulates visual perception through the use of scaled objects and the correlation between them and the vantage point of the camera.

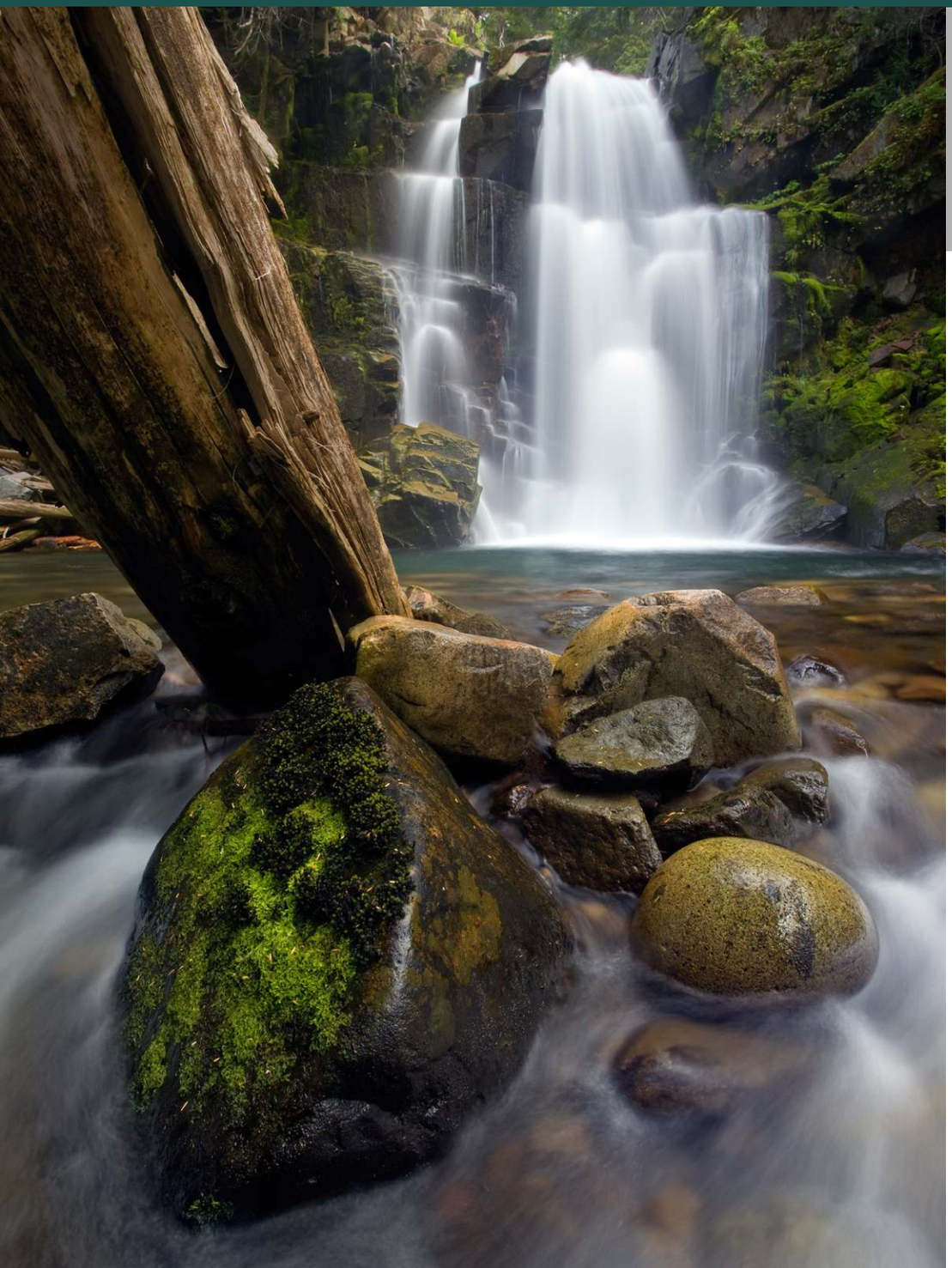
Source: Wikipedia Commons

Chances are you've already played with forced perspective at one point or another in your lifetime. If you have ever posed for a tourist shot showing you "holding up" the Leaning Tower of Pisa (left) or other similar sight gags, then you've been using forced perspective. So you're already a master!

Arguably the most famous example of forced perspective is Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, which depicts a monstrous wave threatening to engulf several fishing vessels. Mighty snowcapped Mt. Fuji lies in stately repose in the distance. Even though Mt. Fuji is many times larger than the wave, the use of forced perspective makes the wave look truly enormous, providing an exaggerated sense of scale, perspective, and menace

Source: Wikipedia Commons

Forced perspective is an optical illusion that relies on the juxtaposition of two or more visual elements. The illusion messes with our sense of relative scale and can be a useful technique when creating depth. Left: A common sight gag employed by tourists. Above: One of the most famous examples of forced perspective in art. "Great Wave off Kanagawa" by Katsushika Hokusai (ca. 1830-1833).

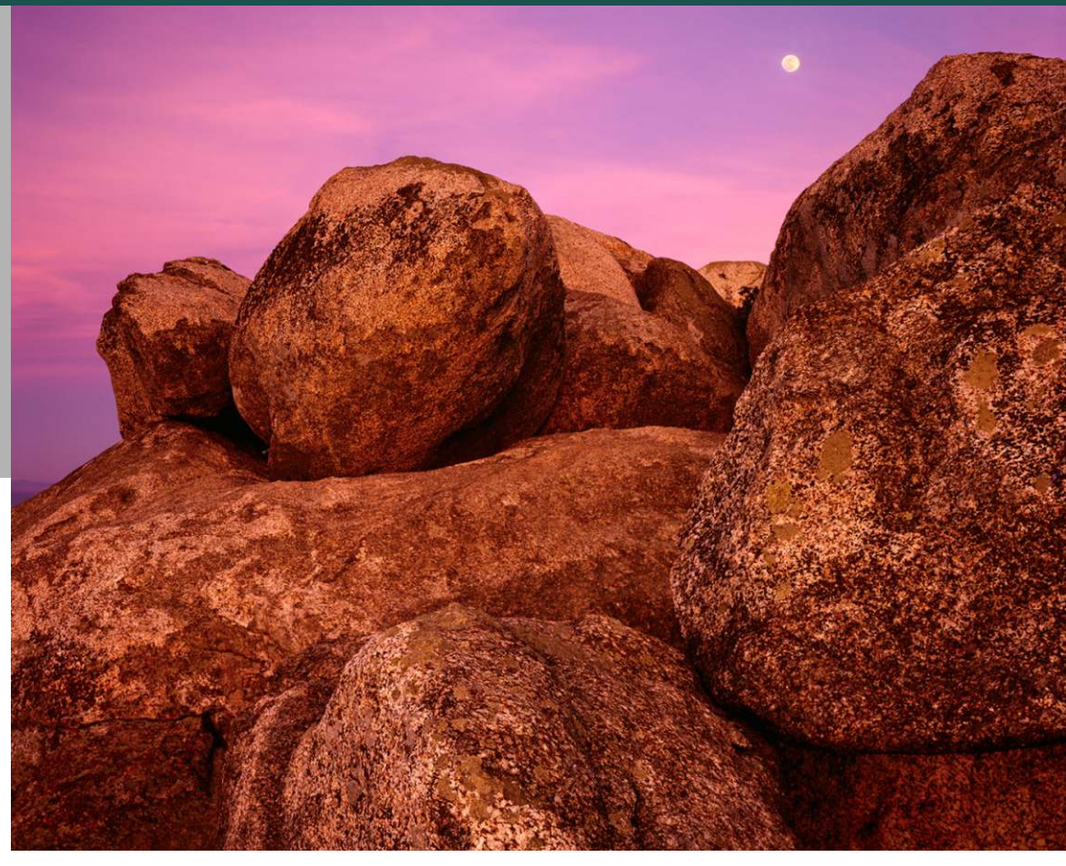


The use of forced perspective provides an important visual cue to the viewer. "Carter Falls" by Ian Plant (Mt. Rainier National Park, Washington).

that could not be accomplished alone just by using the boats as reference. By juxtaposing a large but distant object near a smaller but closer object, the closer object seems to loom much larger.

As it so happens, photography is uniquely suited to capture forced perspective. As photographic capture effectively demolishes three-dimensional perspective, the forced perspective "illusion" is frozen, denying the viewer the chance to make sense of the perspective from their typical three-dimensional sensory perception. Accordingly, in the hands of a skilled artist, forced perspective can become a powerful tool used to create images that challenge common perceptions or to present the world in a unique or ironic fashion.

Or, more simply, it can be used to create dynamic visual relationships between objects through the manipulation of relative visual mass. The image at left is a good example. Forced perspective exaggerates the size of the foreground rocks and fallen log relative



By getting close to the foreground boulders, I was able to manipulate their size relative to the background boulders. In reality, the foreground boulders were only a few feet across, whereas the background boulders were each as big as a truck. The result is a photo with more depth than would have existed otherwise. "Full Moon over Old Rag" by Ian Plant (Shenandoah National Park, Virginia).

to the background waterfall, giving them a visual mass that is equivalent to the waterfall's mass. The resulting visual relationship gets the viewer's eye moving between the foreground elements and the waterfall. This visual relationship would not be as powerful if the foreground elements were smaller in size (thus reducing their visual mass). In fact, forced perspective's manipulation of visual mass is behind the principle of *diminishing scale*, which helps create depth. I discuss diminishing scale in more detail in the next section.

The image to the right is another example of forced perspective. By getting very close with a wide-angle lens to the foreground boulders, they seem to be much larger than the ones in the background. In reality, the opposite was true: the background boulders were ten times as large as the foreground boulders. By manipulating scale, however, I was able to create depth in the photo that would otherwise not have been apparent, and a visual relationship reinforced by the increase in visual mass of the foreground boulders.

The ability to manipulate visual mass through forced perspective is vitally important to photographic composition. It will influence where you stand, what lenses you use, and how you position objects relative to one another within the image frame. So don't forget this!

We perceive objects that are relatively close to us as larger than same-sized objects that are far away. These are known as *relative-size relationships* and can add depth because the viewer's mind translates the perspective cue as revealing that one object is closer than another. Thus, a nearby flower will appear larger than flowers of the same height in the distance, with each flower appearing to be smaller the farther away it is. This is known as *diminishing scale*. Depth can also be revealed by the juxtaposition of objects that have a *known size or scale*. People know that a mountain is larger than a flower. If the two are juxtaposed in a photograph and have approximately the same scale, then the viewer will perceive the flower as being close and the mountain as being farther in the distance.

The image to the right illustrates these principles. Each wildflower is (more or less) the same size as the others, and thus, they provide important perspective cues to the viewer. The foreground flowers appear larger than those in the background, helping to create the illusion of depth and

Even though the flowers are all the same size, they appear to diminish in scale the farther away they are, providing an important perspective cue. "Tranquility" by Ian Plant (Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument, Washington).

Top right: The artist used diminishing scale to help draw the eye deep into the scene; each soldier gets smaller and smaller in the distance. "Battle of Solferino" by Carlo Bossoli (1859). Bottom right: The repetition of sandstone mounds creates depth in the image. "Ancient Mounds" by Ian Plant (Virgin Mountains, Nevada).

Source: Wikipedia Commons

three dimensions in this two-dimensional photograph. The distant mountain, which in reality is many thousands of times larger than the flowers, becomes another important perspective cue: it appears no larger in the photograph than the flowers in the foreground, telling the viewer that it is very distant and that the flowers are very close.

A really stunning example of the use of diminishing scale can be found in Carlo Bossoli's *Battle of Solferino*, at the top right. The seemingly endless line of troops extends from foreground to background, with every soldier getting tinier and tinier until they are just dots. This technique, along with a number of other techniques, draws the viewer's eye deep into the scene and refuses to let it go. The photograph to the bottom right also uses a diminishing scale progression (this time, of sandstone mounds) to lead the eye from foreground to background.

WATCH YOUR SCALE

We all love to capture the grand sweep of the landscape with a wide-angle lens. With some scenes, however, there is peril in going too wide. Although the forced perspective created by a wide-angle lens can assist in creating depth and three-dimensionality in one's photographs, if you are not careful, background objects can be rendered *too* small. Watch your background scale carefully when working with wide-angle lenses. If your background becomes too small, reposition and change your focal length. Typically, you can get a similar perspective of a scene by backing away and zooming in.

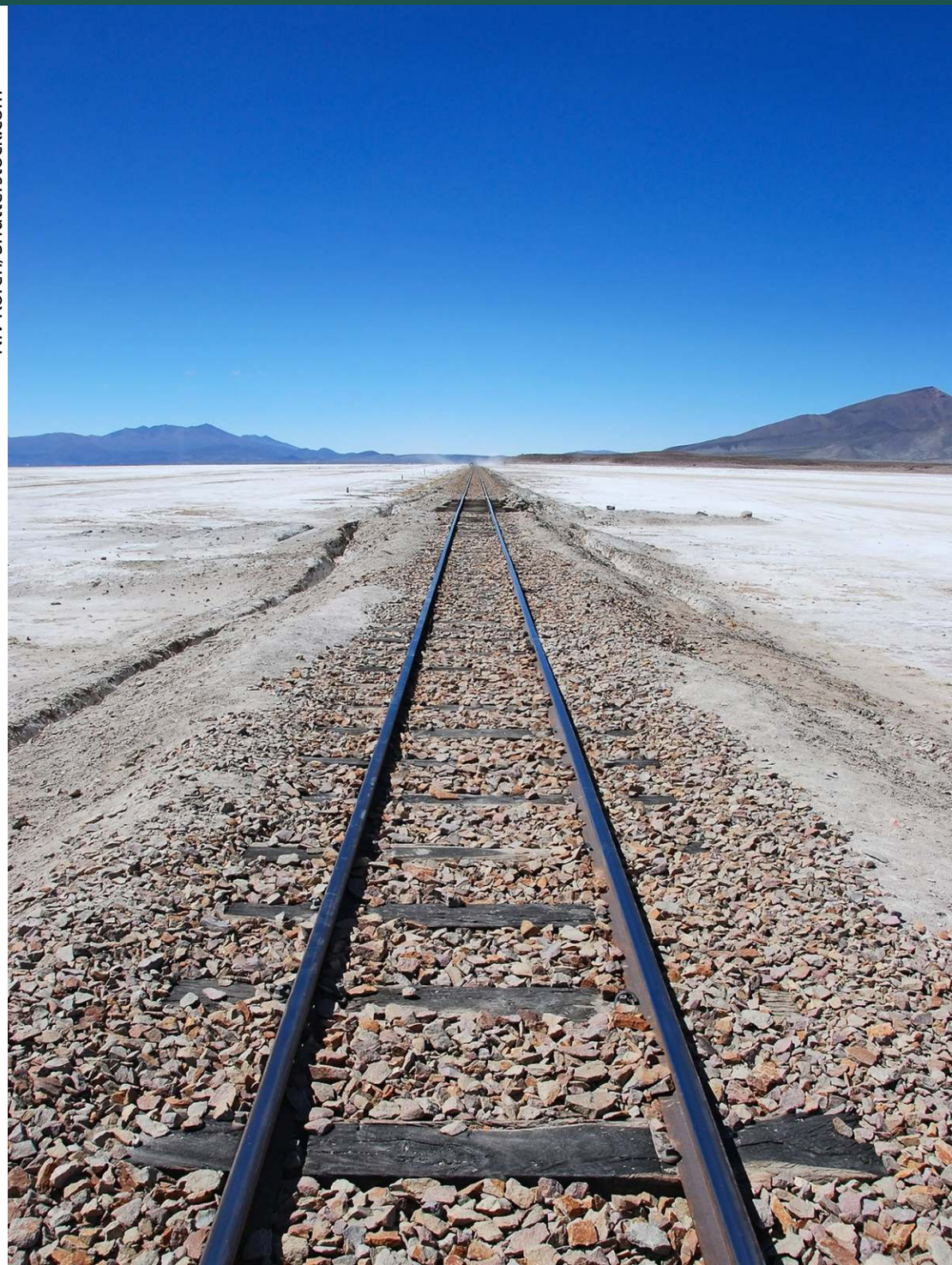
I got in very close with a wide-angle lens in order to capture this scene. Unfortunately, in my effort to capture the image, I didn't notice how small the towering mountains in the background had become. I needed to back away and zoom in to get a perspective that would have kept the mountains at an appropriate scale. Although the composition still has merit, it demonstrates how easily improper scale can leave a photo feeling unbalanced between foreground and background.

Going ultrawide reduced the background mountains too much. "Sunrise Storm" by Ian Plant (Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming).

The point in the distance at which objects become too small to see is called a *vanishing point*. This concept is easily illustrated by something that most readers will find familiar: railroad tracks. Even though they are parallel, when you look down a set of tracks, they seem to steadily converge to a point at the horizon—this point is the vanishing point, and it creates an important perspective cue and can be very effectively used to create depth in a photograph.

Vanishing point is closely related to scale-based perspective, as the convergence of parallel lines implies a proportional reduction in scale as distance increases. In fact, any shape you have that leads from foreground toward the background—be it a line, curve, or amorphous blob—will display this tendency to reduce in size as distance increases.

This realization—that objects receding in size with distance (especially parallel lines) appear to converge on a single point—revolutionized perspective in



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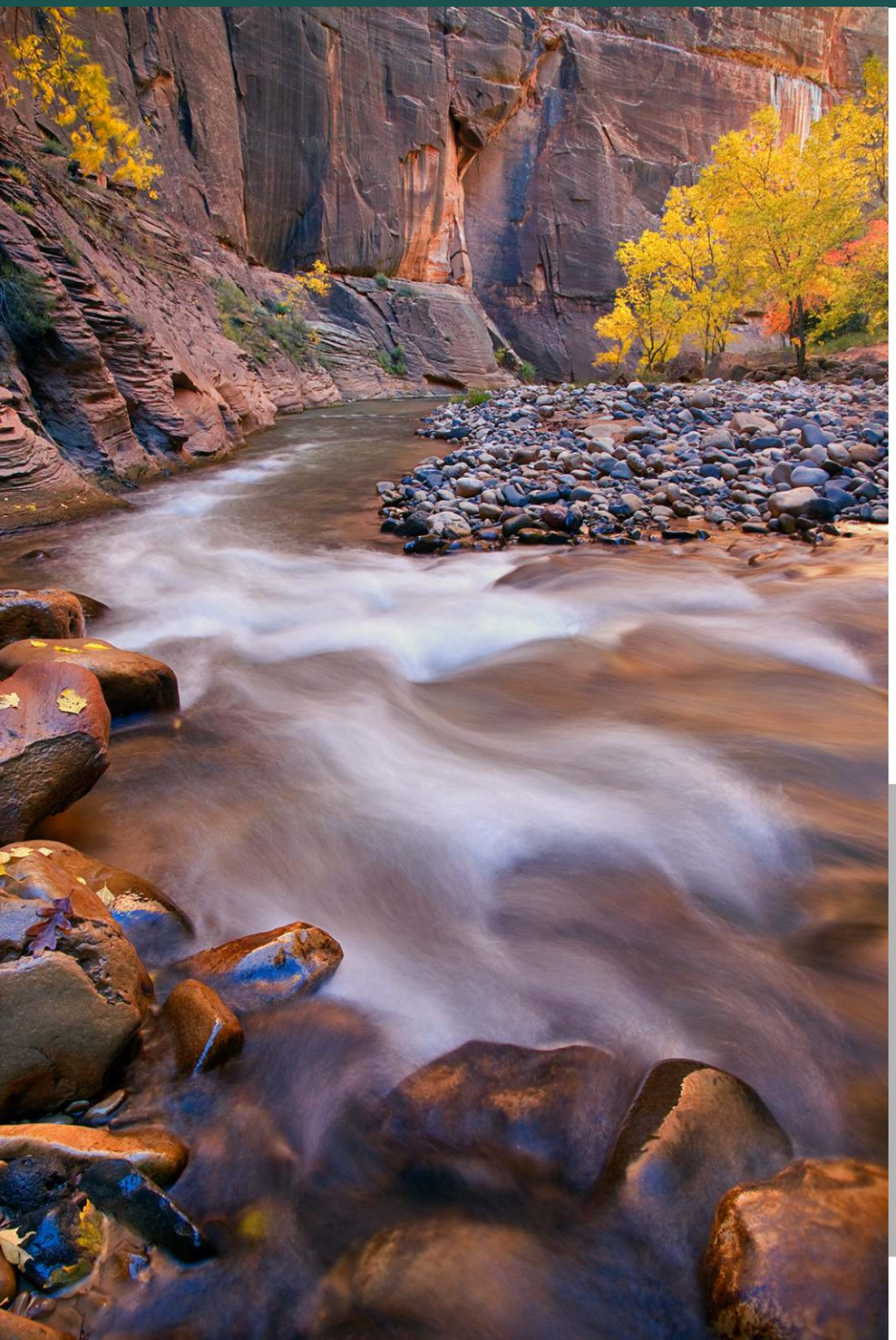
Renaissance painters used vanishing point to create perspective and depth in their art. "The Wedding of the Virgin" by Raphael (1504).

painting during the Renaissance. Painters such as Raphael (above) took full advantage of the use of vanishing point, using it to create depth in their paintings and to create a realism of perspective that had not been seen before in art.

It didn't take painters long, however, to figure out that the use of vanishing point didn't just create depth—it also riveted the eye, compelling it to travel headlong deep into the image. This realization revolutionized art. But why does it work?

If you can recall from our discussion of Gestalt principles, the human eye is naturally inclined when it encounters a line to follow that line to its conclusion and to keep traveling in the direction of the line even if the line has ended. This is what makes vanishing point so powerful, as it is where multiple lines in an image terminate. If all the lines in the image terminate in the same place, the viewer's eye is inevitably drawn to that point, sucked in much like when a spiral draws the eye into its vortex. Think of a vanishing point as a black hole—nothing escapes the force of its gravity.

This is why leading elements such as lines and curves can be so powerful in photography. Remember, even though we might call a river a "line" or a "curve," it is really made up of two lines or curves, one on each side of the water. Although these two shapes are parallel to each other, as they recede in the distance, they appear to steadily converge, eventually creating a vanishing point. If these shapes are properly used in conjunction with other shapes in the image, the results can be very powerful, creating depth and visual energy at the same time and also drawing the eye deep into the scene.



For example, the image to the left shows a vanishing point created by the curving stream flowing into the distance. Two abstract lines are created by the cottonwood trees, coming out of the upper left- and right-hand corners of the image, respectively. All of the important lines in the image converge on the vanishing point created by the stream. The eye, on its journey through the image, is eventually and inevitably drawn to this point.

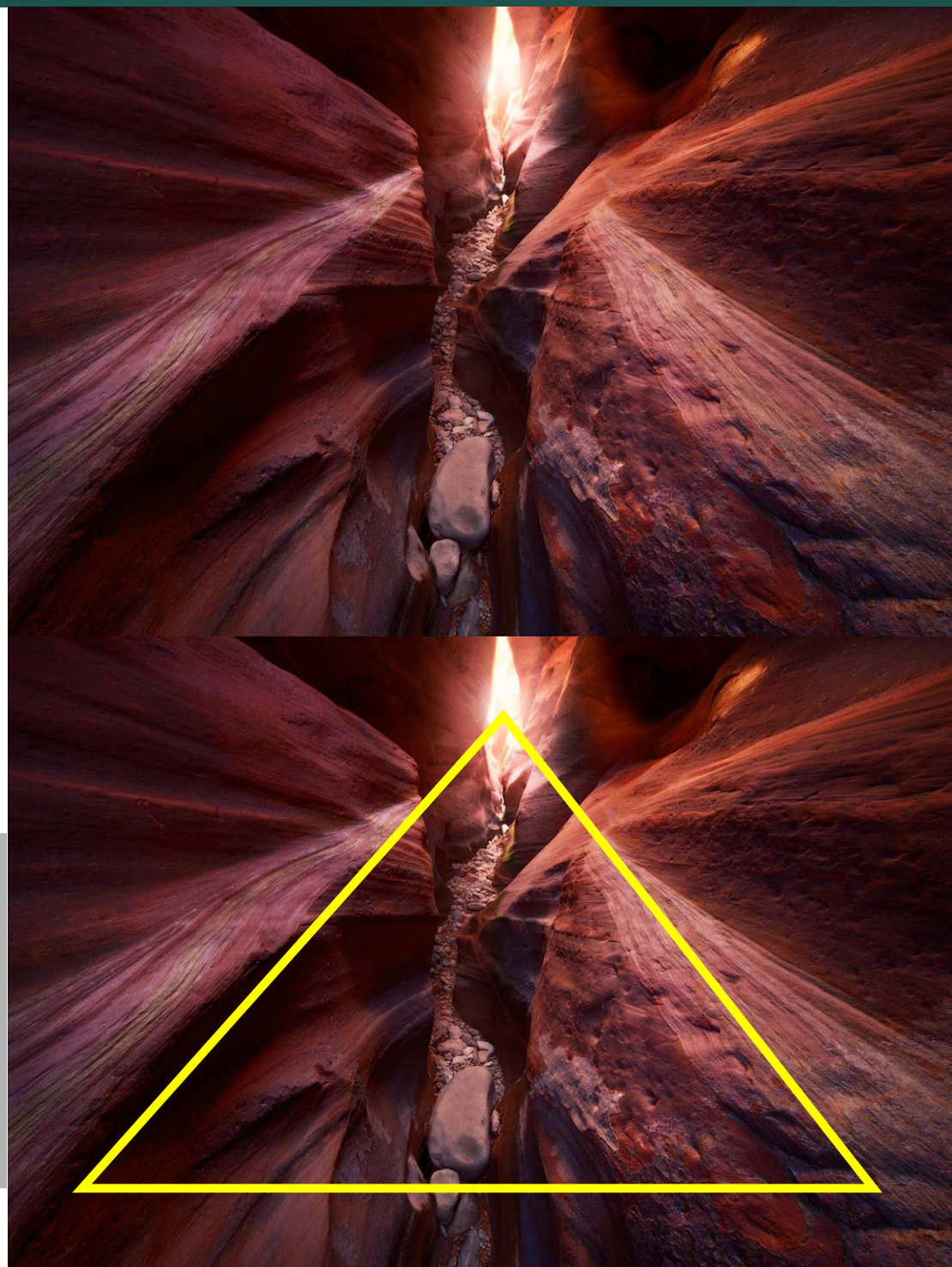
Remember our discussion of triangles in the previous chapter? Part of what makes triangle shapes so powerful is that they naturally create a vanishing point—provided that one pointy end is up, that is. As you may have already noticed, when you draw the lines to a vanishing point and mentally close off the lines at the bottom, a triangle is formed. This is

The river appears to diminish to a single point as it recedes into the distance. This effect is reinforced by the convergence of abstract lines coming in from the upper left and right corners, formed by the line of trees. The resulting composition strongly draws the eye. "Around the Bend" by Ian Plant (Zion National Park, Utah).

part of the reason why the triangle has become an increasingly important shape in art over the past few centuries.

The photograph to the right demonstrates this relationship between the triangle and vanishing point. The two dominant striations in the canyon wall, one coming in from the lower left and the other coming in from the lower right, both lead to a vanishing point in the upper part of the image. Closing off these lines at the bottom forms an abstract triangle shape. So as you can see, an upward pointing triangle can be very effective at leading the viewer's eye deep into an image, helping to create depth at the same time.

The effective use of vanishing point does not require that the lines in the image originate at the bottom of the frame. Vanishing point can be just as effective if



The image to the right demonstrates the relationship between the triangle shape and vanishing point. The two dominant lines in the image terminate near the bright opening of the canyon, forming a vanishing point. If you mentally close the lines at the bottom, a triangle is formed. "Shadow of Light" by Ian Plant (Zion National Park, Utah).

the lines (or the triangle shape) originate higher up in the image. For example, Raphael's brilliant painting *Transfiguration* powerfully uses an abstract vanishing point, not just to create perspective and depth, but also to focus all attention on his main subject. Two abstract lines are formed by the angle of the figures to the left and right of Jesus (the prophets Moses and Elijah, in case you are wondering), which create a vanishing point that leads the viewer's eye to Jesus's face. Although Raphael's use of perspective is very subtle and deft in this painting, the result is extremely commanding and effective. By the way, there is so much going on in this painting, I could spend pages upon pages writing about it. Top-shelf stuff, in my opinion.

Here, vanishing point is used to propel the eye toward the main subject. This painting was unfinished at the time of Raphael's death, and it is believed to have been completed by his pupil Giulio Romano shortly thereafter. "Transfiguration" by Raphael (1518-1520).

Source: Wikipedia Commons

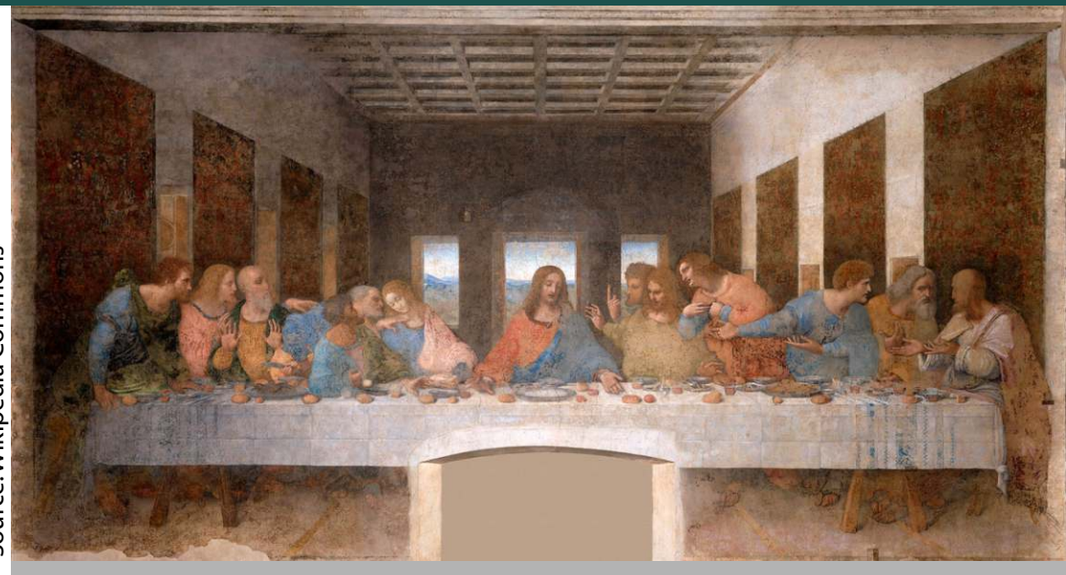
I used a similar technique with the image to the left. By positioning the sun just outside of the image frame, I was able to creatively use lens flare to include a triangle "starburst" effect (at least, the bottom part of the star burst) at the top of the image. Although the vanishing point created by the lines of the starburst is outside of the image frame, that doesn't matter: the receding angle of the lines creates the vanishing point effect all the same. I used the starburst to focus attention on the lone tree in the field of wildflowers and to create a sense of depth and perspective.

I bet by now you've noticed a curious commonality with these vanishing point images: the vanishing point often seems to be centrally located (at least in terms of left to right, that is). I'll get into why later. But for now, on to more perspective cues!

The lines created by the "starburst" flare form an abstract vanishing point, drawing attention to the lone tree in the background. "Light Is Life" by Ian Plant (Mt. Rainier National Park, Washington).

One-point perspective is so named because it uses a single vanishing point to represent depth in an object. It is the simplest form of perspective, and one that is perhaps somewhat abused by painters and nature photographers alike.

Arguably the most famous example of one-point perspective in Western art is Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece *The Last Supper*. All perspective lines lead straight to Jesus, who is centered within the picture frame. Although other compositional tools are present in this painting, the use of one-point perspective dominates the image structure and powerfully leads the eye to the most important element contained within.



Source: Wikipedia Commons

"The Last Supper" by Leonardo da Vinci (1495-1498). All perspective lines lead to Jesus—who was an extremely popular subject of Renaissance art— in the center.

Of course, here is where da Vinci reveals his mastery. Even though one-point perspective propels the eye into the center of the image, Leonardo managed to keep things interesting by creating other areas of visual interest. All of the side discussions and finger pointing of the surrounding apostles act to draw the eye away from the center, creating visual energy. There is a constant tension between the leading lines that push the eye into the center, and the compositional elements that push the eye into other areas of the painting. The result? The viewer's eye keeps bouncing around the image back and forth between the various elements, trapped in an endless spiral of conflicting yet complementary visual cues. Da Vinci is considered a master for good reason.

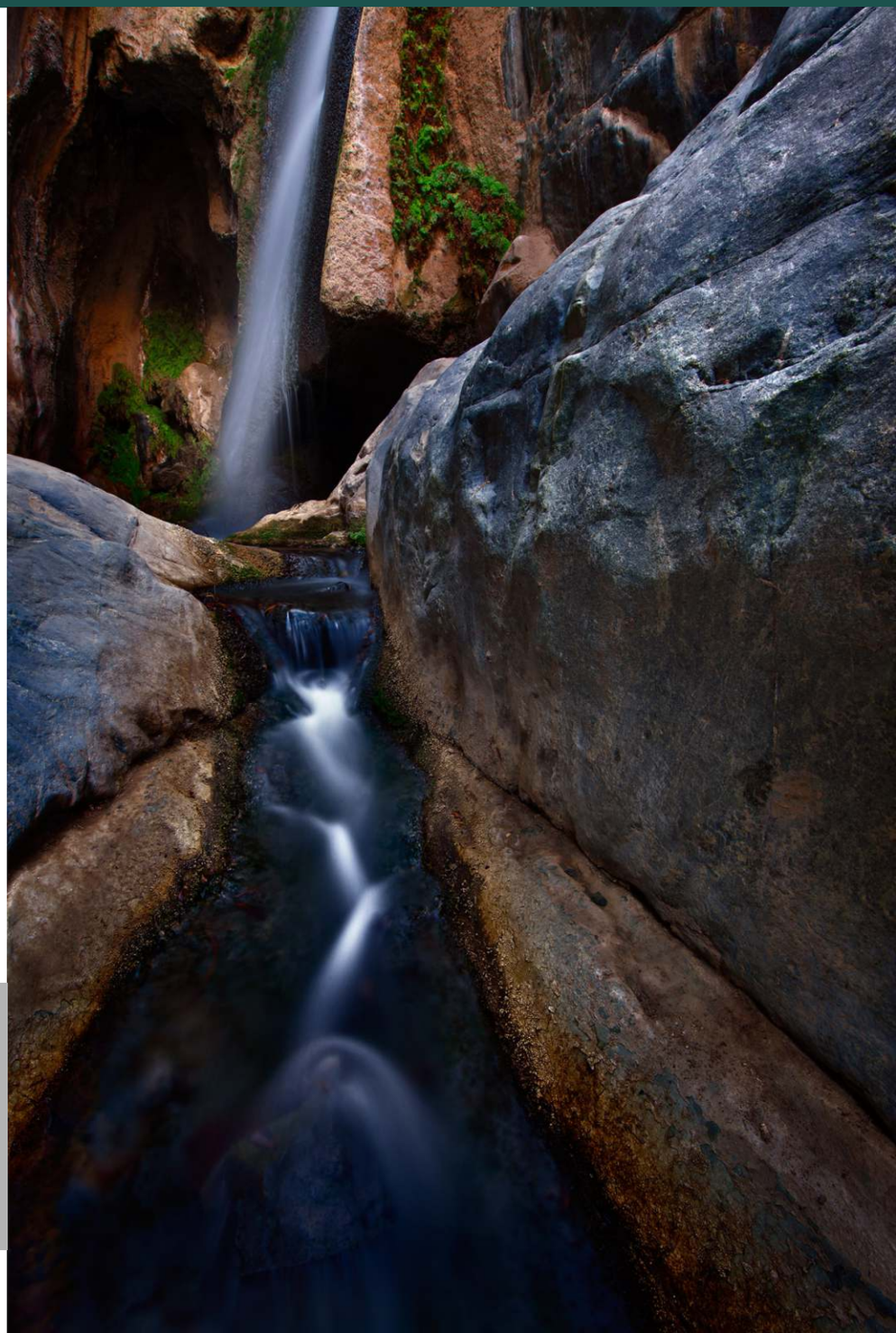
This, perhaps, is where many artists run afoul in their use of one-point perspective: they point all lines to their primary subject but fail to create other areas of visual interest to balance the image. Da Vinci's subtle mastery is revealed by the play of shapes and color throughout the painting, creating a balanced composition which still has energy. Many uses of one-point perspective are not so subtle.

One-point perspective in photography is demonstrated with the image to the right. All lines in the photograph (more or less) converge on a single point. The eye is naturally focused on this single vanishing point, and a feeling of depth is created by the diminishing scale of the lines as they recede in the distance.

Although one-point perspective can powerfully lead the viewer's eye into an image, beware its bewitching siren call. It is but one tool in your kit, and as with all tools, overuse is best avoided.

We'll come back to one-point perspective later on, studying this powerful technique in more depth. But for now, on to two-point perspective!

All of the lines in the image lead to a single vanishing point, creating one-point perspective. The effect powerfully draws the eye deep into the scene and doesn't let go. "Desert Oasis" by Ian Plant (Death Valley National Park, California).



When viewing an object rotated, two vanishing points are used to create two-point perspective. Here, the inverted triangle shape of the sandstone formation is viewed at an angle, and two vanishing points emerge as a result. The effect is not quite as visually powerful as one-point perspective. "The Flying Wedge" by George Stocking (Vermilion Cliffs National Monument, Arizona).

In the image above, the dominant shape is a triangle—but unlike some images that we have just studied, one that is inverted. What effect, if any, does this have on the resulting composition? Does it enhance or detract from the visual flow of the image?

Actually, this photo uses a technique known as *two-point perspective*, which, as you can probably guess, is related to one-point perspective discussed in the previous section. Whereas one-point perspective shows objects with their front facing the viewer, two-point perspective shows objects rotated, such as looking at the corner of a house, or looking at a fork in the road. Two-point perspective actually uses two vanishing points, rather than only one as is the case with one-point perspective (now you know where the "point" part of the description comes from). Going back to the house example, with two-point perspective, when looking at a house from the corner, one wall would recede toward one vanishing point, and the other wall would recede towards the opposite vanishing point.

The image above, which uses two-point perspective, shows us how different this technique is from one-point perspective. When using one vanishing point, all lines converge in one place, centralizing the viewer's attention on that spot. When using two vanishing points,

the effect is the opposite: the viewer's attention is diffused. Hence, two-point perspective is not nearly as attention-grabbing as one-point perspective.

The two images to the right illustrate the differences between two-point and one-point perspective in terms of their relative ability to lead the eye. For the top image, two-point perspective creates diverging lines which lead from the bottom center to the left and right, thus diffusing the viewer's attention (although another vanishing point emerges in the middle of the image, focusing attention again). On the other hand, the use of one-point perspective for the

Left: Two-point perspective creates lines which lead both left and right, diffusing visual interest. "The Narrows" by Ian Plant (Zion National Park, Utah). Right: One-point perspective tends to focus attention on the vanishing point. "Heading toward Spring" by Ian Plant (Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee).

Because two-point perspective tends to diffuse compositional interest rather than focus it, it is less effective at leading the eye as one-point perspective. That doesn't mean it should be avoided—to the contrary, it has many uses, such as with the image to the right. "Changing Seasons" by Ian Plant (Adirondack State Park, New York).

image at the bottom creates converging lines, which tend to focus the viewer's attention leading from foreground to background. The result is that the top image is somewhat more static, whereas the bottom image is arguably more energetic. Now that doesn't mean there is anything wrong with the top image; it's just that it aims for something that is visually less compelling than the bottom image.

We're not going to spend too much time on two-point perspective (and we won't even go into three- and four-point perspective at all). There's nothing wrong with two-point perspective, but keep in mind that you can't rely on it to command the viewer's eye as powerfully as other techniques discussed in this book. It lends itself to a somewhat more "peaceful" approach, which is perfectly appropriate for certain situations.

It is often said that telephoto lenses "flatten" or "compress" perspective, with the end result being that objects do not appear to get smaller with distance and appear to be stacked one upon another. Wide-angle lenses, on the other hand, are said to "extend" perspective—close objects appear larger than distant objects, and objects seem less bunched up. This is known as "perspective distortion," as the apparent flattening or extension of perspective differs from the way the human eye naturally sees the scene.

Neither of these characterizations is true in a technical sense, however, as the lenses themselves do not distort perspective. Rather, it is your position relative to the subject that actually changes perspective distortion. For example, if you take a photograph with a wide-angle lens and crop out a small portion of the scene, and then zoom in with a telephoto lens to frame a photograph exactly to match the crop, you'll end up with virtually the same perspective result. Fill your frame with a cactus from a distance with a telephoto lens, on the other hand, and then walk up close to the cactus and fill the frame using a wide-angle lens, and you will clearly end up with two very different perspective results.

It is the way these lenses are used, therefore, that creates perspective distortion. Since telephoto lenses have a narrow field of view, they tend to be used from a distance, resulting in photos that have the appearance of flatter perspective. Wide-angle lenses, with their wider fields of view, tend to be used much closer to their subject, resulting in photos with the appearance of extended perspective.

An example of so-called "telephoto compression"—there is very little apparent diminishing scale as all objects in the scene are far away. "Panamint Spotlight" by George Stocking (Death Valley National Park, California).

Wide-angle perspectives make it easier to visually separate elements and to create diminishing scale. This is achieved by getting close to a near subject and using the lens' wide angle of view to take in large portions of the scene. "Aguereberry Point" by Ian Plant (Death Valley National Park, California).

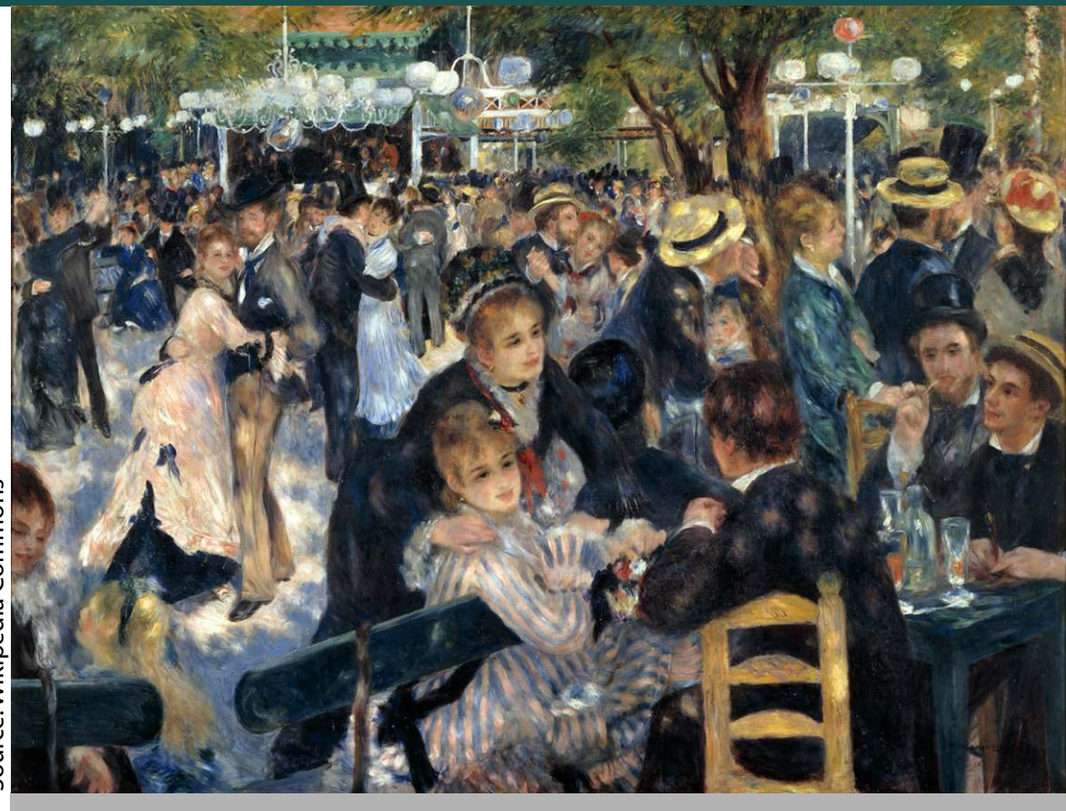
Because of perspective distortion, wide-angle lenses have the advantage of more readily creating the illusion of depth in a photograph than longer focal lengths. When working with wide-angle lenses, objects close to the lens appear abnormally large relative to more distant objects, and distant objects appear abnormally small. This characteristic of wide-angle perspective distortion is very useful for creating the appearance of depth using diminishing scale. Although telephoto lenses can often make the use of diminishing scale more difficult, it may be easier to use overlapping elements with a telephoto lens, as objects often appear to be "bunched up" when using a telephoto perspective.

But wait, you ask, how do overlapping elements help create depth?

The illusion of depth can also be created by placing one object in front of another, a technique known as *overlap*. People perceive the overlapped object as more distant than the overlapping object. Overlapping is a very strong perspective cue, giving viewers a sense of relative distance and creating the illusion of three dimensions.

Used carefully, overlapping objects can unify otherwise disparate elements of a scene in a pleasing way. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that the overlapping objects are sufficiently distinct. Otherwise, they appear to merge, and compositional structure is lost.

Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Dance at Le Moulin de la Galette* is a great study in the use of overlapping forms to create depth. Renoir packed the image frame tightly with as many people as possible. If you study the painting carefully, there is barely anyone who is not overlapping someone else (the person on the far bottom left is probably the only person in the painting who does not overlap another). The overlapping forms in this painting, far from creating a chaotic composition, actually create a sense of visual continuity, as well as a feeling of depth. As an aside, notice how the couple dancing on the left edge of the painting, set aside from the pattern of others with some surrounding space, immediately demand attention—any break in an overall pattern naturally attracts the eye (more on that later).



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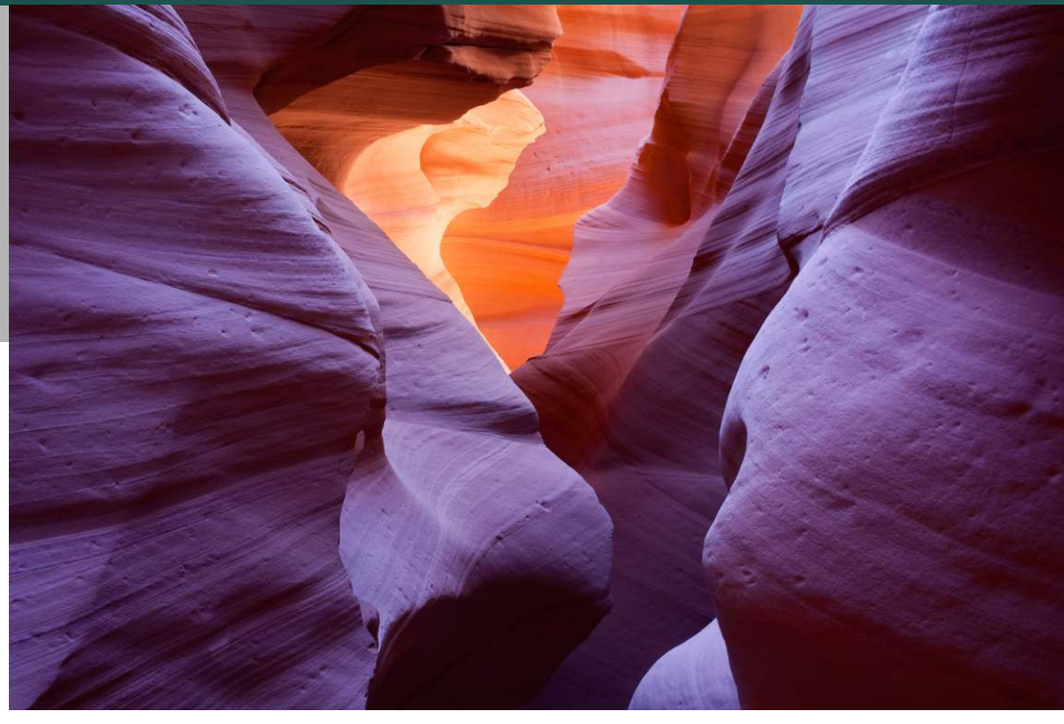
The overlap of multiple visual elements creates depth and leads the eye deep into the scene. "Dance at Le Moulin de la Galette" by Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1876).

Finding overlapping forms is a relatively easy thing to do—let's face it, our world is a chaotic place. The trick, as noted above, it to ensure that there is sufficient visual



The image to the right uses color contrast and diverging shape angles to help maintain visual separation between overlapped layers, creating depth and visual interest. "Canyon X" by Ian Plant (Navajo Nation, Arizona).

separation between elements so that they don't completely visually merge. Renoir accomplished this with a careful blend of tones and colors, making sure to juxtapose light with dark and vice versa as the overlap progressed through the scene. Likewise, in the image to the right, I was able to use the change in luminosity and color temperature to ensure that the overlapping layers of sandstone remained visually distinct.

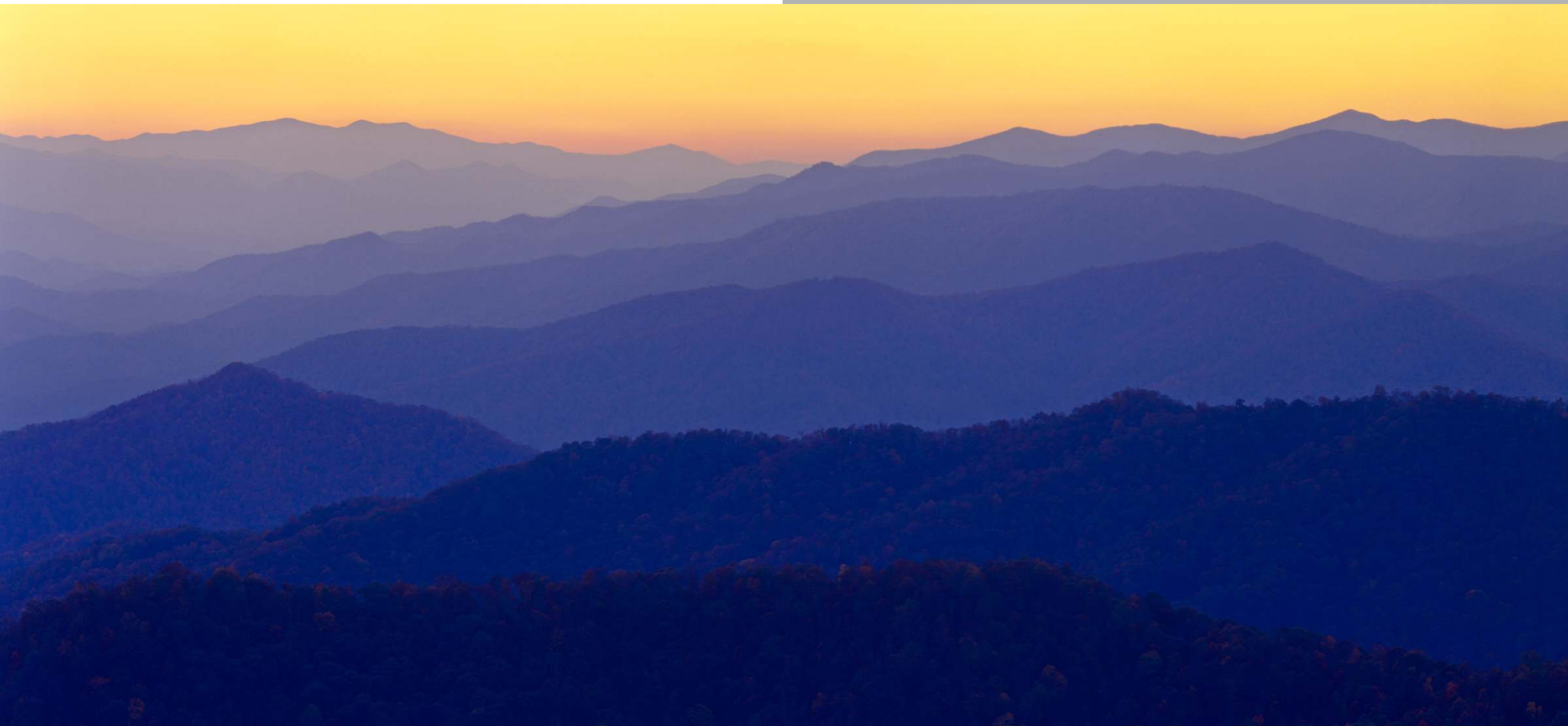
Another way to achieve visual separation is to use shapes that diverge. Once again, the image to the right fits the bill: each overlap layer diverges slightly from the previous layer, helping to reinforce visual separation. Likewise, Renoir often placed overlapping forms at different angles, helping to increase compositional energy and to separate the tightly packed shapes.

As you may have noticed, the shape-based techniques of using zigzags and diagonal lines to create energy and the depth-based approach of using diverging shapes to create visual separation when using overlap have just converged. You will find that many compositional theories overlap (pardon the pun), providing more than one way to think about any specific compositional problem. Neat, huh?

ATMOSPHERIC PERSPECTIVE

Atmospheric perspective, also known as *aerial perspective*, is a well-known visual phenomenon. We view objects in the distance through the atmosphere, and the farther objects are from the viewer, the denser the atmosphere gets, and the more things seem hazy. Objects lose clarity, detail, and apparent sharpness, and colors become less saturated.

Atmospheric perspective is easily seen when looking at receding layers of mountain ridges, such as with the image below. Closer layers show more color saturation and are darker than more distant layers, which progressively appear "washed out" as they recede into the distance. "The Blue Ridge" by Ian Plant (Blue Ridge Parkway, North Carolina).



Source: Wikipedia Commons

Often, distant objects appear brighter relative to close objects, as well as relatively blue or purple in color cast. This is because the color changes as it goes through more and more atmosphere.

Painters have long used atmospheric perspective to create depth in their work. Of course, it is relatively easy for painters to use this technique, as they can easily alter the color, sharpness, saturation, and clarity of objects. Photographers are rather more at the mercy of natural elements, and accordingly, atmospheric perspective is arguably somewhat less useful to us. Besides, with painters, the distant landscape is typically just background and not as important as the primary subject matter; with landscape photographers, for example, the distant background often *is* the primary subject!

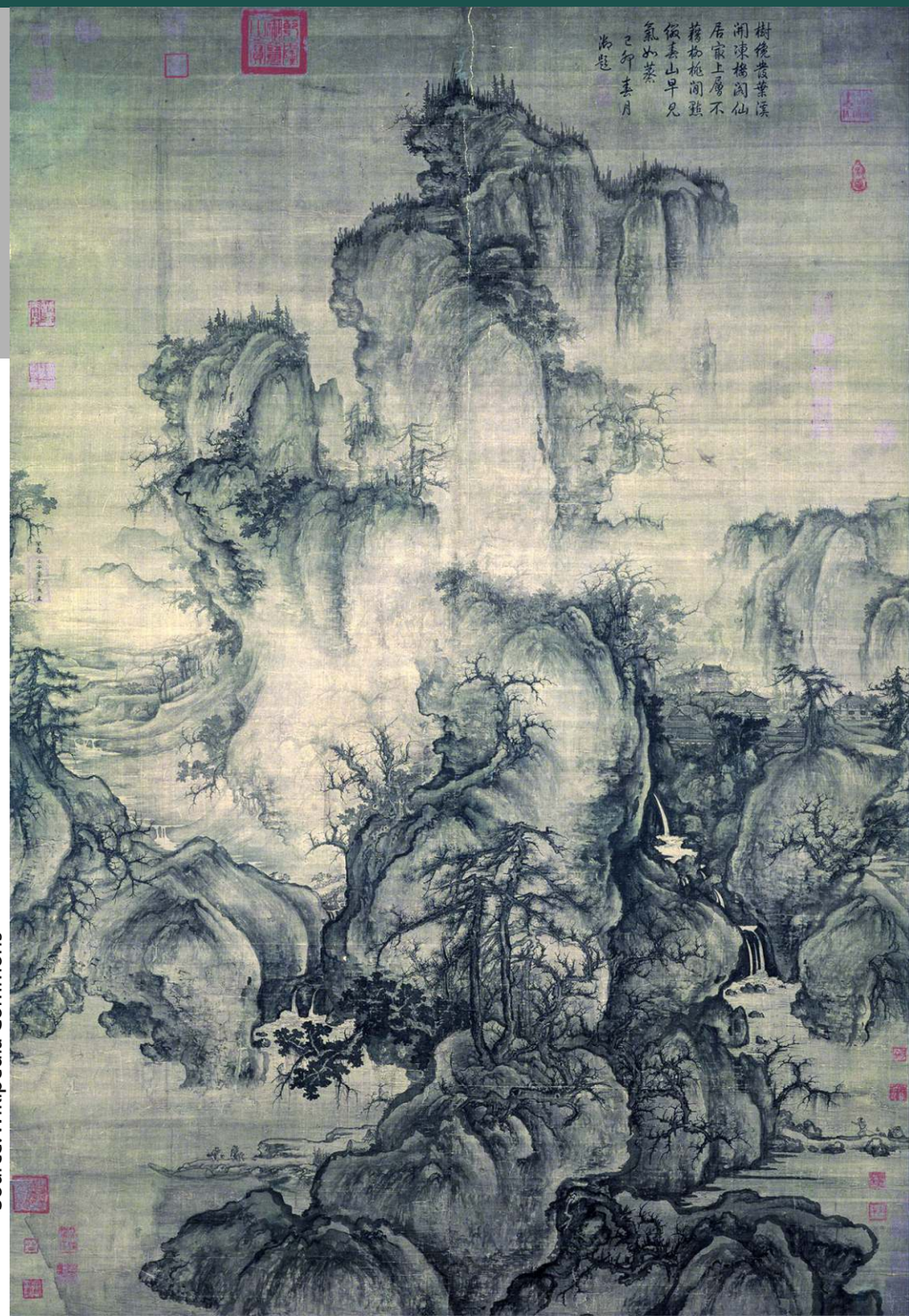
Notice the use of aerial perspective in the painting at left by Leonardo da Vinci. Distant objects viewed

Leonardo da Vinci was one of the early Western pioneers of the use of aerial perspective (in fact, he coined the term). Notice how the distant mountains viewed through the windows are relatively blue and indistinct compared with near objects. "Madonna of the Carnation" by Leonardo da Vinci (ca. 1478-1480).

"Early Spring" by famous Chinese painter Guo Xi (1072) is a fine example of the Eastern tradition of using atmospheric perspective to imply depth—four centuries ahead of the Italian Renaissance. In this case, fog is used to separate relatively near elements from those farther away, and distant forms are rendered softer than near forms.

through the window appear relatively cool in temperature, indistinct, and hazy. Near objects, by comparison, appear relatively sharp, distinct, and warm in temperature. Colors are more vivid and saturated as well, and contrast is greater. This effectively creates the illusion of depth in the scene, and also helps focus emphasis on the primary subjects of the painting.

As photographers, we are of course less able to manipulate color, saturation, and luminosity than painters, but aerial perspective does occur naturally and can be used to great effect. Perhaps we can draw our greatest lessons about aerial perspective from Chinese painters, who were the true pioneers and masters of this artistic technique. As demonstrated in the painting to the right, atmospheric perspective is achieved using two principal techniques: (1) relatively distant forms are rendered softer than near forms, showing less detail, greater brightness, and less contrast than close elements; and (2) mist helps separate near elements from far elements.



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The image to the left is a remarkable study in the use of fog to create depth through atmospheric perspective. Close elements are darkest, whereas elements farther away are progressively lighter. This progression helps draw the viewer's eye into the photograph. "Pardon My Kardon" by George Stocking (Bahia Kino, Sonora, Mexico).

Mist and fog—now there's two things that outdoor photographers occasionally encounter! When you get fog, take advantage of the opportunity to create depth and separation in your photos. Not only does fog add a certain three-dimensionality to your images—it also allows you to more easily separate foreground elements from background elements, softening elements in the distance without sacrificing sharpness.

For the image to the left, George used fog in a manner that might even make the old Chinese masters proud. The key to the success of this composition is the juxtaposition of very near elements against a progression of increasingly distant elements. As a result, the near elements are relatively more dark and "solid" looking, whereas distant objects appear lighter and less distinct. Objects in the middle are rendered somewhere in between. The progression from dark to light mirrors the visual progression of a series of overlapping shapes, thus enhancing the feeling of depth and encouraging the eye to travel deeper into the scene.

You might have noticed by now how George likes to use framing. What's framing, you ask? Read on ...

FRAMING

Framing is an effective tool for creating depth in a photograph, simplifying a composition, and focusing attention on important elements of the scene. As such, framing your subject with other elements in the scene can be a very simple yet effective compositional tool.

Examples of commonly used frames include trees, natural arches, and old barn windows. Frames can also be abstract, formed (for example) by areas of deep shadow or a contrasting color. Sometimes frames are simple, such as with the image to the right, and sometimes they are more complex and nuanced.

Sometimes framing shots work best if the frame and the primary subject are in different light—for example, silhouetted trees framing a sunlit mountain peak. This helps strengthen the contrast between the

The silhouetted cottonwood trees create a perfect frame around the distant mountain peak emerging from the morning mist. Simple frames like this one help create bold, graphic compositions. Atmospheric perspective adds to the mood and enhances depth. "Mystic Temple" by Ian Plant (Zion National Park, Utah).

frame and the subject, making the visual relationship between the two more apparent.

As with everything, there is an easy way of doing frames, and of course, there is a harder way. "Complex framing," as I like to call it, involves a bit more brain-power than simply finding an obvious frame and centering a subject within it. Complex frames are not as obvious as simple frames and are used to subtly focus attention on a subject, although not always the main subject. This is often accomplished using nuances in shade or light or by subtly framing an important subject using minor elements of the scene.

Top right: The saguaro cacti form a progression of frames as the eye travels deeper into the image, much like a set of Russian nesting dolls: the foreground cacti on the far left and right frame the next set of cacti heading toward the middle and so on until the two cacti closest to the middle frame a final centered saguaro. "Vanishing Verticals" by George Stocking (Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Arizona). Bottom right: The dark shadows frame the bright colored reflection in the water, which in turn frames the egret. "Egret Sunrise" by Ian Plant (Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, Virginia).

BOTTOM TO TOP

As a general matter, people typically perceive objects at the bottom of two-dimensional art to be in front and what is at the top to be in the back. This bottom-to-top progression creates a series of perspective cues that encourage the viewer's eye to travel deeper into the photograph. Images with visual progression from bottom to middle to top can be very effective in leading the viewer's eye throughout the scene, and giving the viewer a sense of perspective, of *being there*. This style of perspective progression is commonly known as *near-far* among landscape photographers.

Basically, you start with a foreground element, like a clump of flowers or a rocky outcrop. This foreground element points to or otherwise relates to a middle-ground element, such as a grove of trees or a sinuous river. This middle-ground element, in turn, points to or relates to the background, such as distant mountain

By filling the frame with elements starting at the bottom and eventually progressing to the top, I created depth in this photo and a visual progression of objects which encourages the eye deeper into the scene. "Night Glow" by Ian Plant (Joshua Tree National Park, California).

Fill the Frame:
When working with bottom-to-top compositions, it is often a good idea to fill the frame as much as possible with visual elements. I don't mean that you should try to stuff everything including the kitchen sink into your composition, but you should include a sufficient number of visual elements to nicely fill the frame. For example, for the image below, I took multiple frames until I got a wave that came in just right. If the wave had been farther back on the shore, there would have been too much empty space in the foreground, the result being an unbalanced composition. "The Lonely Shore" by Ian Plant (Cape Hatteras National Seashore, North Carolina).

peaks. Sometimes the progression can be taken a step further, moving up to clouds in the sky. And sometimes it relies on only two elements, such as a foreground and background—although I would argue that middle-ground is a very necessary part of the equation (more on that later).

Bottom-to-top photographs are often made using wide-angle lenses to give prominence to the near elements, which are juxtaposed against an interesting background. By getting close to the foreground element with a wide-angle lens, its size relative to other elements of the scene is exaggerated, thus imparting a sense of depth and perspective to the image.

Filling an image from "bottom to top" seems simple enough, but of course, great care must be taken to pick the right elements to include within the scene. But how to do this successfully? It's easy, really: let's start (quite logically) at the bottom and work our way up from there.

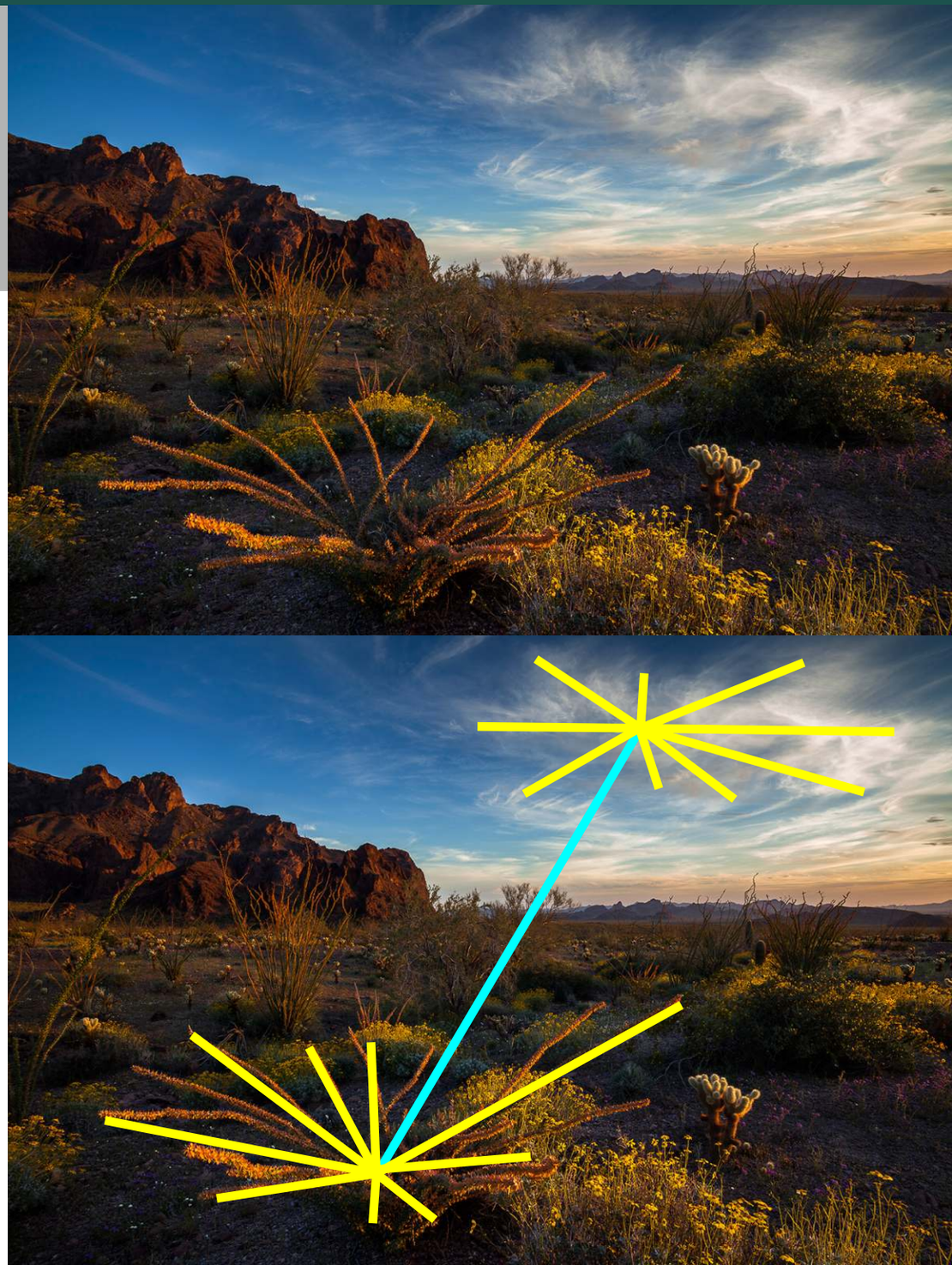
"If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough."—Robert Capa

I sometimes feel like I have a tough time getting this one through people's heads, so I've given this concept its own section, and I'm going to say this in all caps: FOREGROUNDS ARE REALLY IMPORTANT. Although you don't need to include a foreground in every photograph you make, you will find that (for most landscape images, at least) foregrounds add considerable depth and punch to your compositions.

When you use a foreground, it helps establish a visual relationship between the bottom of the photograph and the top, which is important in creating visual interest and leading the eye into the scene. As discussed in the preceding pages, the progression of elements from bottom to top is an important compositional device. Since the foreground elements are the first that the eye encounters, you had

The inclusion of the foreground rocks is instrumental in creating depth in this photograph. "Stacks of Brennais" by Ian Plant (Isle of Harris, Scotland).

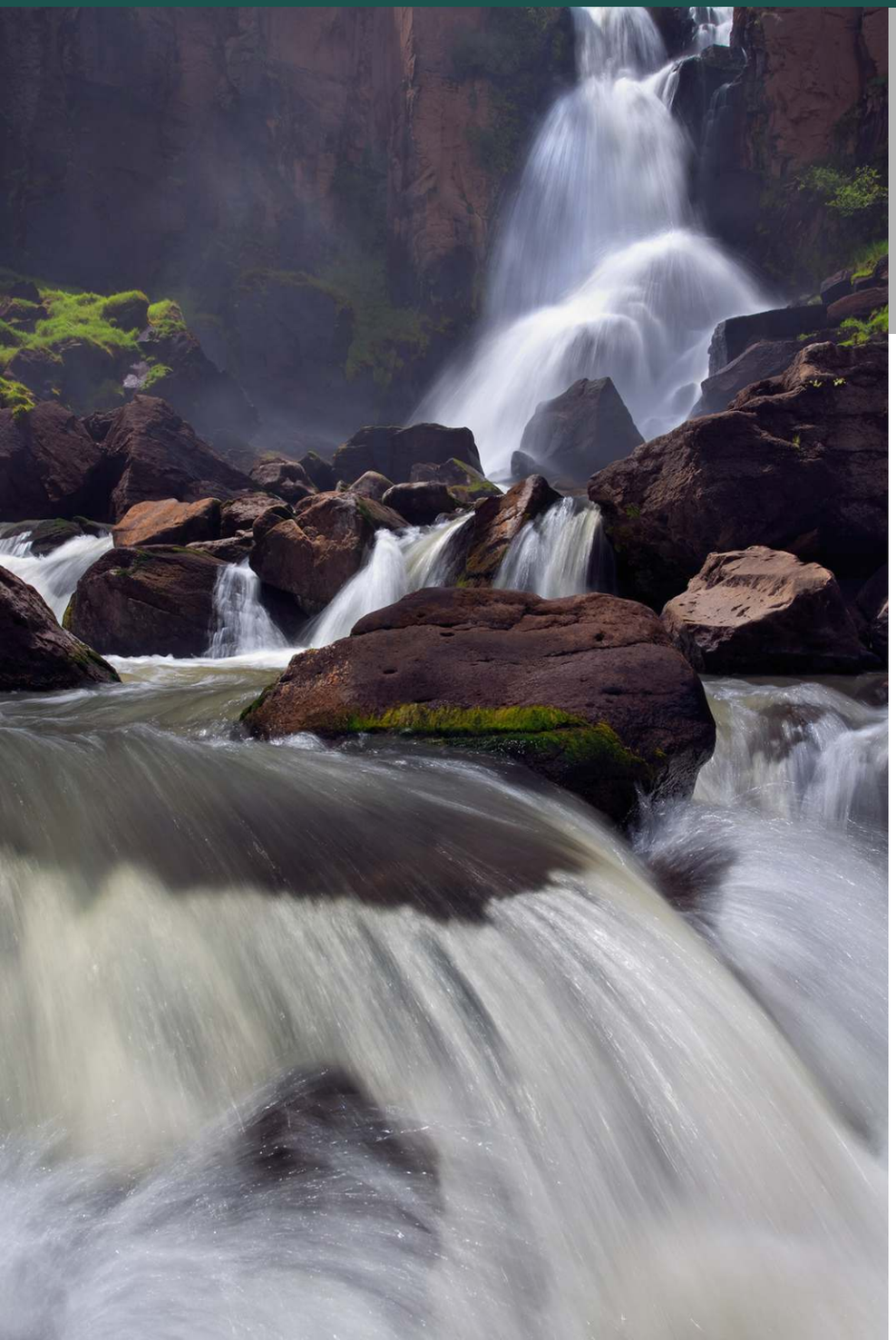
The foreground for the image to the right was carefully chosen to mirror the shape of the clouds in the sky. "The Arizona Wilds" by George Stocking (Kofa National Wildlife Refuge, Arizona).



better be sure that they are interesting and relevant to the rest of the composition—in other words, they must assist you in your goal of creating depth and visual progression into the scene.

In other words, not any old foreground will do! Resist the temptation to find something—anything—to put in the foreground just so you have something there. Take the time to find a foreground that actually works toward your goal of captivating viewers and visually trapping them in your composition.

George's image to the right is a good example of the art of finding a good foreground. Upon seeing the spiraling cloud in the sky, he looked for a foreground element with a complementary shape—in this case, a ocotillo bush with a vaguely similar shape to the cloud. Or maybe it was the other way around—he spied the bush first and waited for the cloud to drift into position. Either way, the repetition of this shape establishes an important visual relationship between



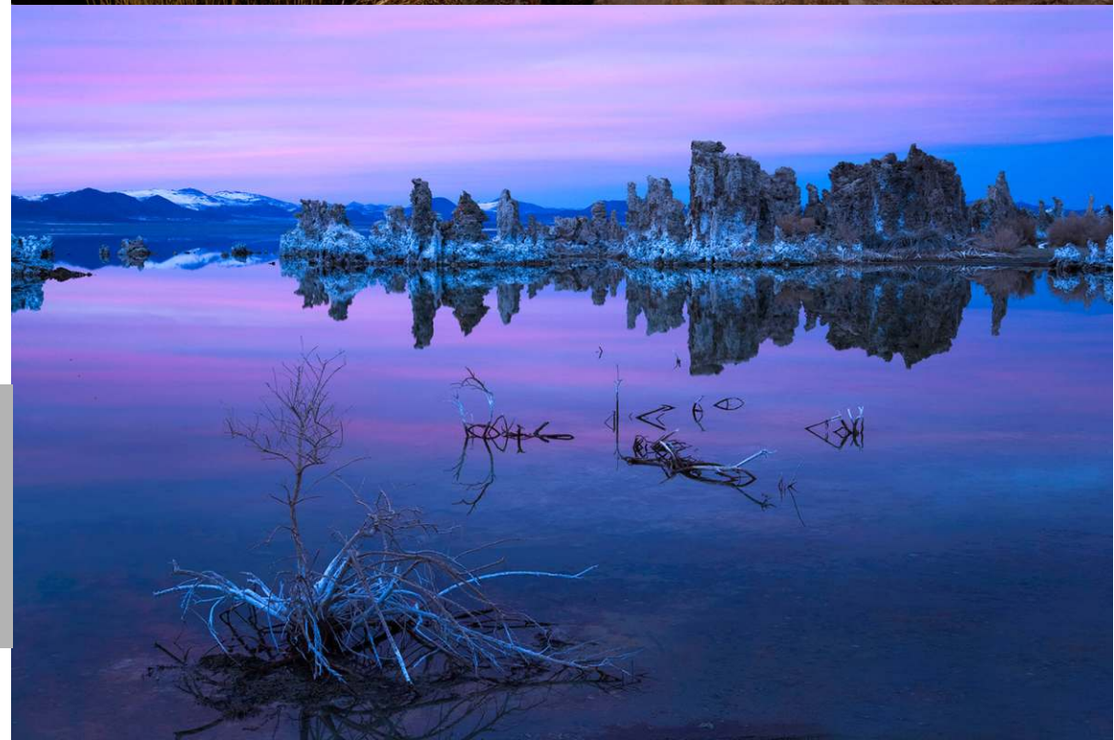
For the image to the left, the foreground creates a diagonally opposing shape relative to the waterfall in the background. The visual relationship between these two elements creates compositional interest. "Cascade of Light" by Ian Plant (San Juan Mountains, Colorado).

the bottom and the top of the image. Notice how he placed these two elements in an opposing diagonal relationship—but more on that later.

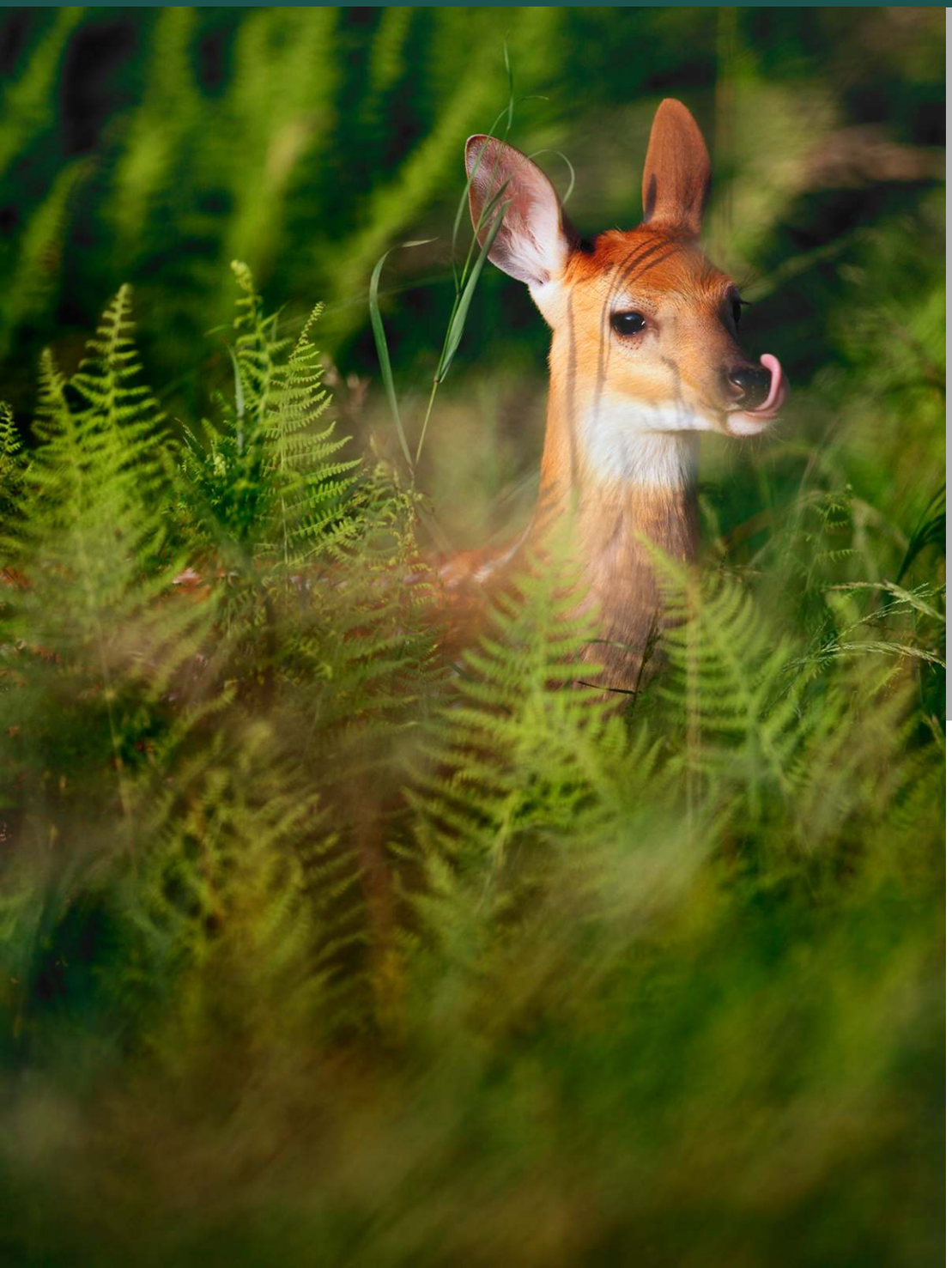
Wide-angle lenses are especially helpful when creating compositions that juxtapose foreground and background, as you can get really close to a foreground element and exaggerate its importance relative to the background. I used this technique with the image to the left. By getting close to a series of foreground cascades, I was able to create a visual relationship between the cascades and the background waterfall—and I was also able to create an image that was more visually compelling than if I had just photographed the waterfall without the foreground.

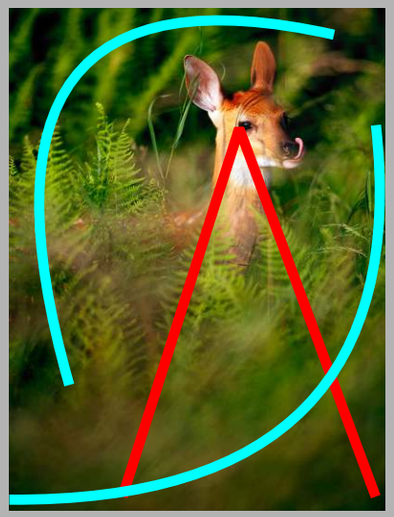
Of course, use of foreground isn't the sole province of wide-angle landscape images. You should seek to use foregrounds with longer lenses too. The foreground elements don't need to be as "in your face" as with a wide-angle shot, but nonetheless, just having something of visual interest at the bottom of the frame can add depth and compositional

power. In fact, foreground elements can be rather mundane. So long as they have a general shape and placement that support the overall composition, you can effectively create depth even using elements that you might otherwise think are not photogenic at all. The two images to the right are good examples. For the top photograph, George encountered some stunning light in the Grand Canyon. Rather than zoom in and take a shot of only the sunlit portions of the canyon, George opted to create depth by including a portion of the canyon rim. The rim is nothing exciting by itself, but its shape mirrors the contours of the deeply carved canyon below. Likewise, in the bottom photograph, George placed a small dead bush in the foreground. Ugly on its own, it is transformed into an important compositional element, juxtaposed against the background rock formations and twilight sky. George recognized that the foreground elements—merely dead weeds to the lesser-trained eye—could be used to create a visual progression from the bottom of the image to the top.



Top right: "Parting Shot" by George Stocking (Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona). Bottom right: "Tranquilo" by George Stocking (Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve, California).





The out-of-focus ferns in the bottom of the frame create a "virtual foreground" for this telephoto wildlife image. They also help frame the fawn, directing interest to the main subject. Notice the vanishing point created by the two converging ferns? The lines of the ferns, if extended forward and back, appear to converge near the fawn's head, helping to further lead the viewer's eye into the scene and emphasize the fawn. "Frolic and Ferns" by Ian Plant (Shenandoah National Park, Virginia).

Foreground can be used with wildlife as well. Wildlife, you say? Yep. For example, with the image to the left, I intentionally included an out-of-focus swash of ferns when photographing this precocious young fawn. The swirls of the ferns (both foreground and background) create compositional shapes that help direct attention to the fawn and create a sense of depth in the photo. I bet you also noticed the abstract vanishing point aiming at the fawn created by the two converging ferns immediately below its neck, right?

As important as foreground is, this next concept is equally important and even more difficult to get through people's heads. So, once again, I've given this concept its own section, and once again, I'm going to say it with all caps: MIDDLE-GROUNDS ARE REALLY IMPORTANT. I see it all the time: photographs that show a "near-far" juxtaposition of foreground and background but don't have anything in the middle-ground. As it turns out, the middle-ground is an oft-ignored part of the equation, one that is vital to creating a progression of elements required to lead the viewer's eye deep into the scene.

Here's why middle-ground is so important. Remember the Gestalt principle that people are naturally attracted to repeating shapes and patterns? Think of foreground, middle-ground, and background as multiple layers. Arguably, two layers don't really form a pattern—all they form is a coincidence. Three (or more) layers certainly do form a pattern. By visually dividing the image into distinct foreground, middle-ground, and background areas, you establish a visual rhythm that gets the viewer's eye moving to the beat.

For example, with the image to the right, I used the low cacti as my foreground, its spiny arms reaching toward the next visual layer, the middle-ground. There, in the middle-ground, I put my primary subject—the Joshua tree—reaching for the sky. The sweeping twilight clouds complete the visual progression, acting as the background layer. Here, the middle-ground becomes

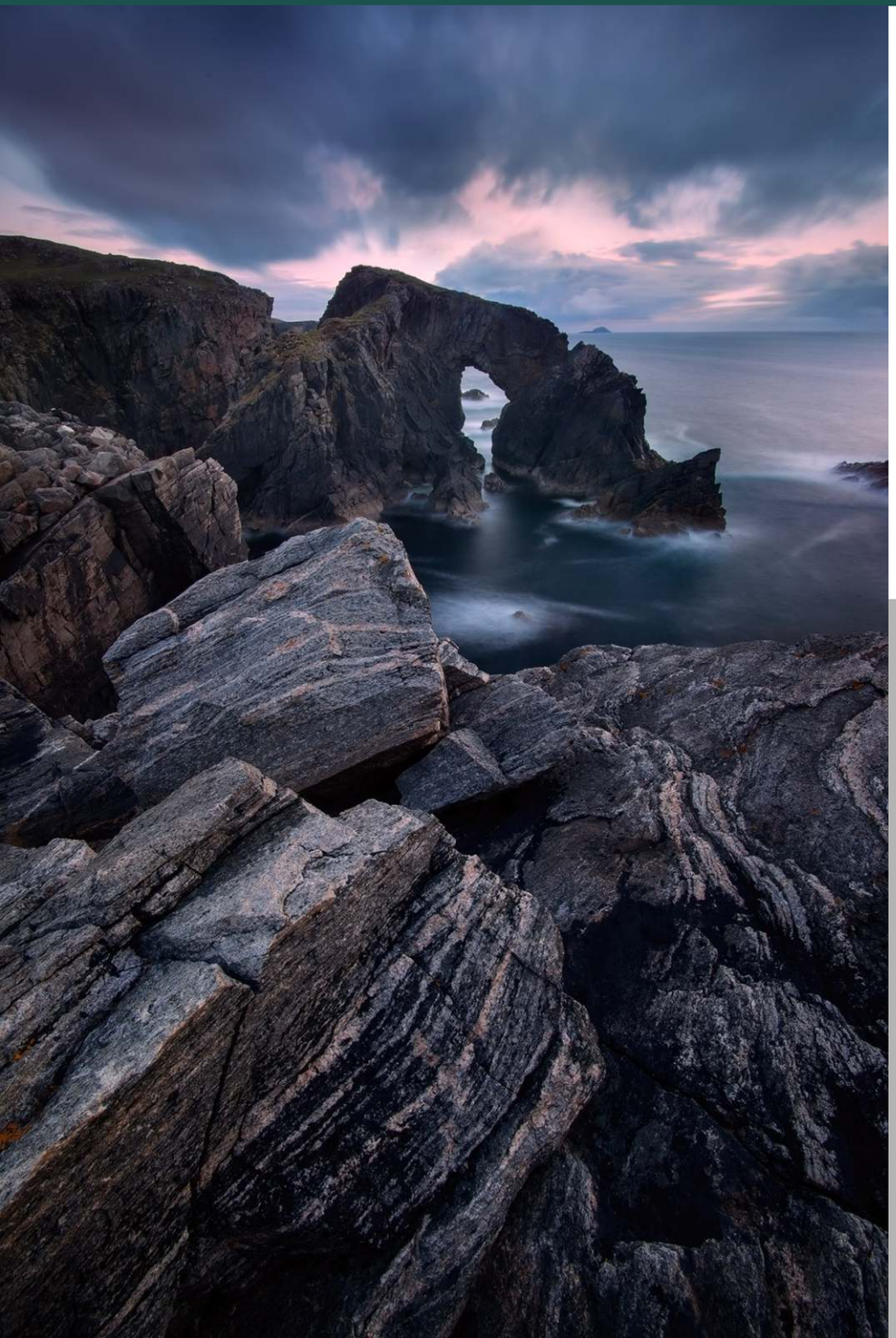
For the image above, the middle-ground (dominated by the clump of Joshua trees) is visually the most important part of the image. The progression from foreground to middle-ground to background guides the viewer into the scene. "The Prophet's Call" by Ian Plant (Virgin Mountains, Nevada).

For the image at left, the tall saguaro cacti in the middle-ground becomes an important part of the composition's visual progression. "Desert Dalliance" by George Stocking (Superstition Wilderness, Arizona).

the most important part of the image, although more often than not, the middle-ground will likely play only a supporting role.

The image to the left is another good example of the importance of middle-ground. The visual progression starts at the bottom with the cholla cacti and continues with the saguaro cacti in the middle-ground. Next comes the mountains and the dramatic sky forming the final visual layer. All of this helps encourage the eye deeper and deeper into the image.

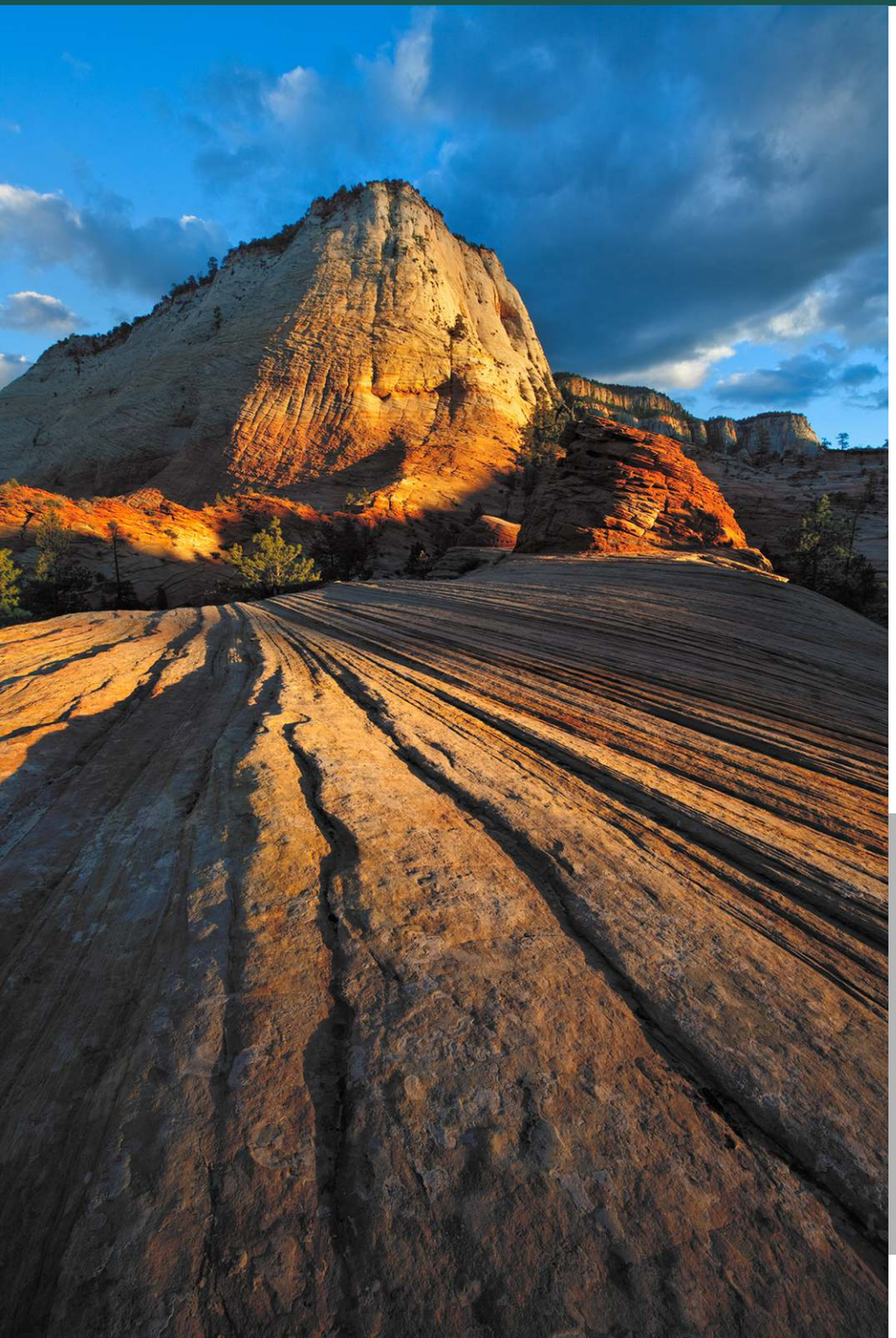
So, when scrambling to look for a foreground, don't forget to pay attention to your middle-ground!



I've been kinda dancing around this issue over the past few chapters, so I might as well just come out and use the phrase I have been avoiding so far: "leading elements."

I've been avoiding the phrase not because there is anything wrong with it, but rather because this is an important concept—one that requires some groundwork before getting into the thick of it. I guess one could say that I've been "leading up" to leading elements (pardon the pun). But finally, here it is: one of the most effective ways to create depth is to use shapes and visual elements that "lead" the viewer's eye into the composition. Leading

For the image to the left, the striation lines in the foreground rocks act to push the eye into the middle of the scene (yellow arrows), whereas the repetition of the triangular shapes of the boulders and the sea arch in the background encourage the eye to travel deeper into the image (red triangles). "Eye of the North" by Ian Plant (Isle of Lewis, Scotland).



elements can be just about anything, including lines, curves, or a progression of visual elements that encourage the eye to travel deeper into the scene.

For example, there can be little doubt about the image to the left: it uses leading lines coming in from the corner diagonals, propelling the eye directly into the heart of the image. They also converge, creating an eye-catching vanishing point. As you may have already noticed, leading lines are very powerful.

Although lines can be very effective at attracting a viewer's attention and leading the eye to critical areas in your image, leading lines can be tricky for several reasons. One, they tend to get overused. If I had a nickel for every time I saw a photographer (including myself) scouring a landscape

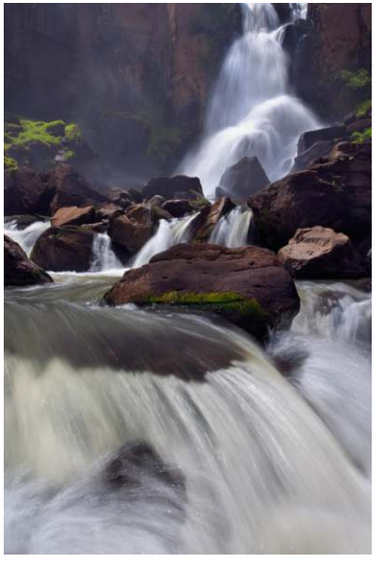
For the image to the left, leading lines effectively propel the viewer's eye deep into the scene. Notice the small tree just above the vanishing point formed by the converging lines? It provides additional compositional interest and a bit of a visual surprise for the viewer. "Timelines" by Ian Plant (Zion National Park, Utah).

The image to the right uses a progression of visual elements to guide the viewer's eye from foreground to middle-ground to background. The repeating rock shapes, the curving flow of the water, and the eye-catching autumn cottonwood trees in the background all get the viewer visually engaged. "Cottonwood Corner" by Ian Plant (Zion National Park, Utah).

scene looking for a leading line, I'd be a rich man. Two, because of their eye-catching power, lines have the potential to run amok. If used properly, they propel the viewer into the scene; if used carelessly, they can confuse the viewer by leading the eye out of the picture frame. Although they have their uses, sometimes a more subtle approach is preferable to beating someone over the head with a bunch of leading lines.

The image to the right is a good example of using a progression of elements from foreground to background to lead the eye rather than using more obvious leading lines. The eye is encouraged to travel to each element in the scene, starting with the foreground water and rocks, winding its way through the image along with the curving stream, and finally ending at the autumn trees in the background.

1. Get close with wide-angle lenses: Manipulate visual mass by getting close to nearby objects with a wide-angle lens. This will allow you to create bold, compelling compositions.

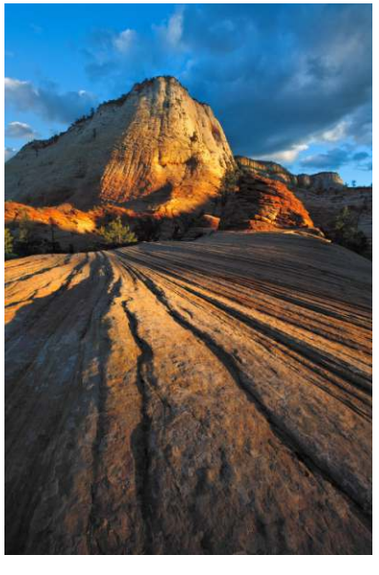


2. Vanishing points help draw the eye Perspective lines leading to a single point help create depth, and they also have the added benefit of drawing the viewer's eye deep into the scene. One-point perspective in particular focuses attention on a single point in the image.

3. Framing is a simple and effective way to focus attention on your subject: By framing your subject, you create depth and focus attention. Simple frames are easy to find and effective.

4. Create a visual progression of elements from near to far, bottom to top: Multiple visual elements, arranged properly, can encourage the viewer's eye to travel deep into the scene. A bottom-to-top visual progression is often particularly effective.

5. Leading lines propel the eye deep into the scene: Leading elements are useful for compelling the viewer's eye into the photo. Leading lines are especially powerful. Look for leading lines when you wish to create powerful compositions.



“What garlic is to salad, insanity is to art.” —Augustus Saint-Gaudens

“Breaking Bad” by George Stocking (Wupatki National Monument, Arizona).

CHAPTER FOUR
THE DIVISION OF SPACE

"The whole arrangement of my picture is expressive. The place occupied by the figures or objects, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, everything plays a part."—Henri Matisse

"Space is the breath of art."—Frank Lloyd Wright

"I think only of . . . the division of space, of the combination of straight lines in relation to curved ones."—Max Beckmann

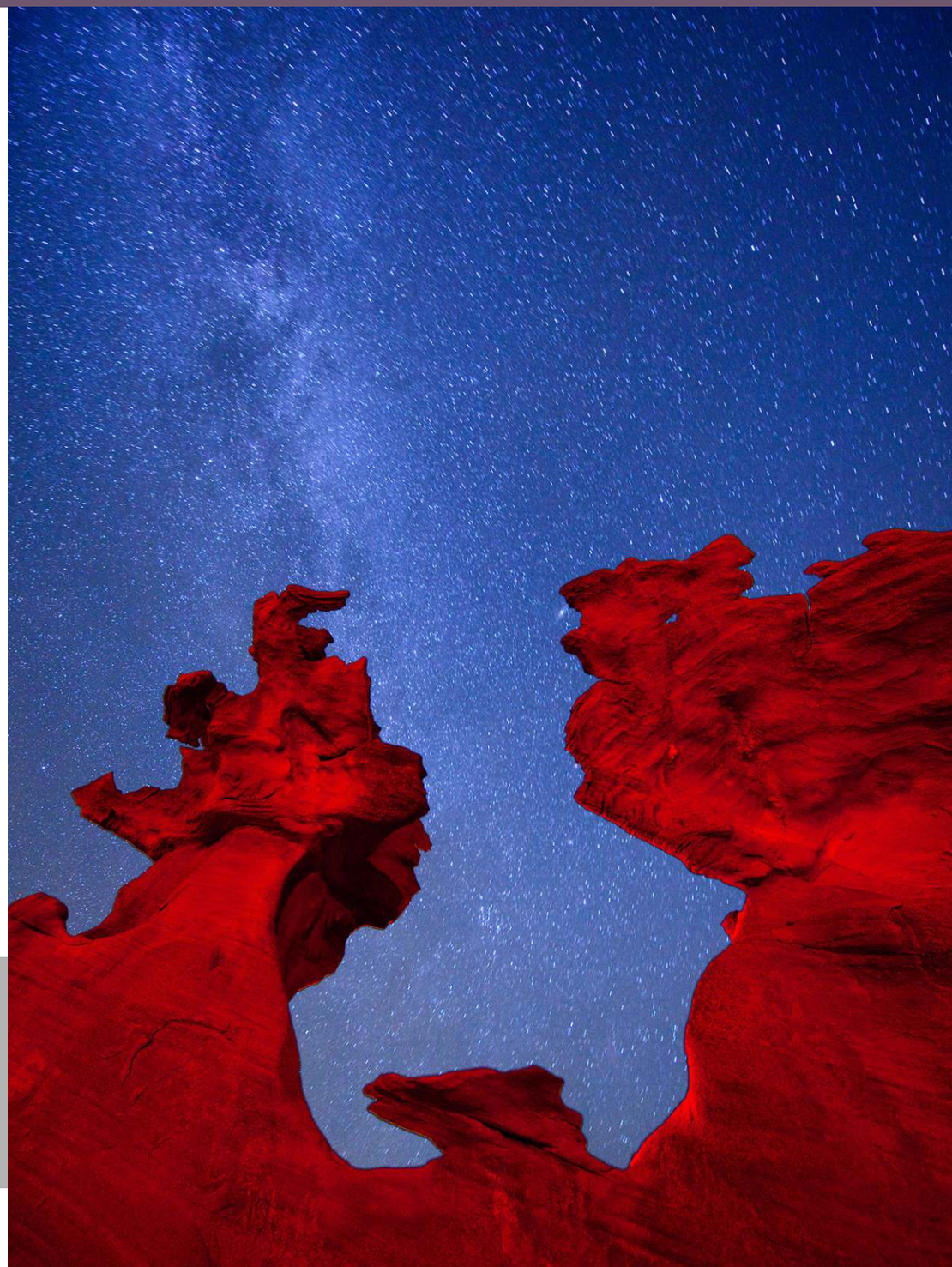
Space—the final frontier. Previous sections of this book have dealt with the things that make up your compositions, such as shapes and forms and visual mass. This chapter is somewhat different. Its mission? To explore the placement of elements within visual space, to seek out new ways of dividing the image frame, and to boldly go where no one has gone before! Cue the dramatic music.

All joking aside, this chapter deals with what is arguably the most important aspect of composition. Primarily, it deals

Where you places visual elements within the picture space is at the heart of artistic composition—and arguably the most difficult part. "Desert Dreams" by Ian Plant (Joshua Tree National Park, California).

with *where* within the image space you should put visual elements—but it also deals with the fundamental nature of visual space itself. "The fundamental nature of visual space," you ask? Don't worry, we'll get rather deep into this concept over the next few pages. Suffice it to say that the *division of space* in a photograph is very important. That is, how you divide the picture frame into areas of visual importance is critical to mastering composition. Once we're done with this chapter, you'll be thinking about the positioning of elements within the image frame in an entirely new way, one that will help you visualize effective and powerful compositions.

And although you won't have to fight any green-skinned aliens in order to get it done, you might have to contend with zealous composition cultists who will stop at nothing to enslave your artistic mind. To learn more, read on—if you dare.



Space isn't just for futuristic explorers traveling at warp speed: it is a vital medium for Earth-bound artists as well. "Gates of Heaven" by Ian Plant (Virgin Mountains, Nevada).

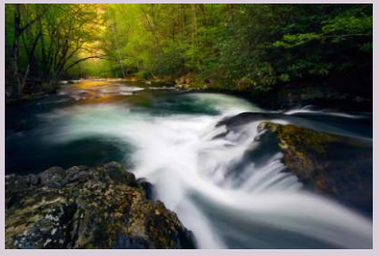
Dynamic Balance: Every composition needs the proper mix of energy and balance.

Counterpoint: The juxtaposition of two or more visual elements.

Opposing Forces: Diverging visual elements create energy.

Rule of Thirds: Easy to use and tried-and-true ...or is it?

Opposing Diagonals: Place objects diagonally opposite one another.



Visual Vortex: All lines lead powerfully to the center of the image frame.

Balance Mass with Space: Even empty space has visual energy.

Centered Compositions: Unlearn what you have learned about the center.

50/50 Splits: Good for more than just reflections.

Center Then Counterpoint: Combine two powerful techniques to produce compelling images.

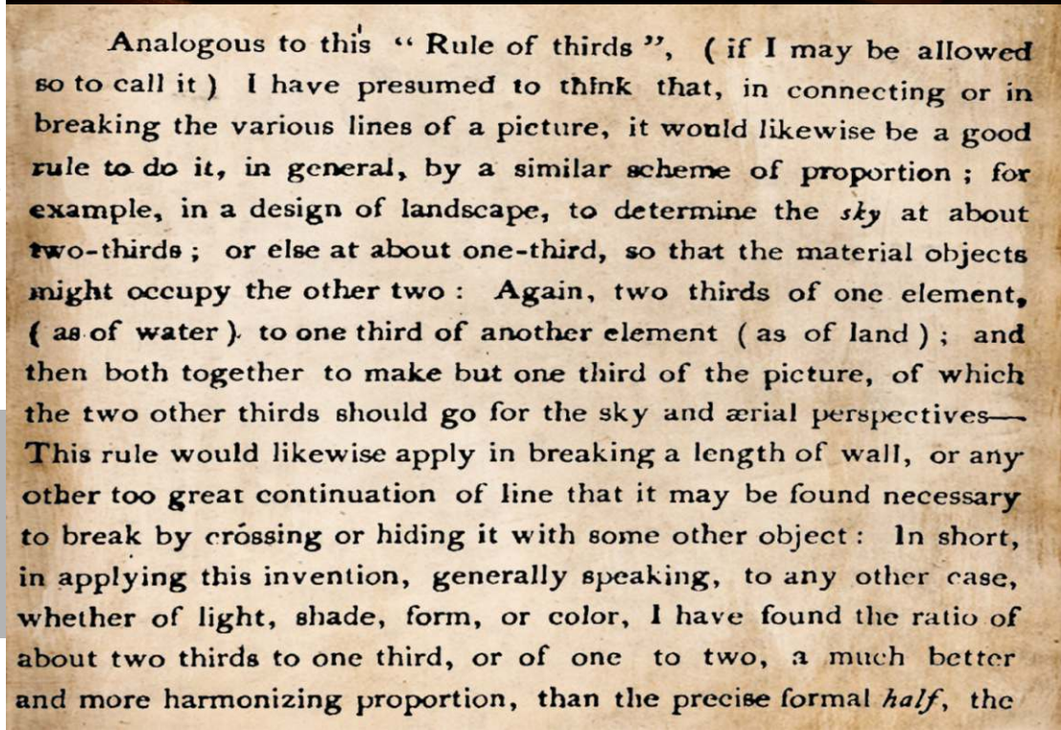
If there is one composition "rule" in photography that is cited more than all the others, it is the Rule of Thirds. The Rule of Thirds' origins are somewhat murky, but the evidence points to the Rule originating in the late 1700s. Arguably the first known reference to the Rule appeared in a book by painter John Thomas Smith in 1797. Wherever, whenever, and however the Rule first appeared, it wasn't until the modern age of photography that it gained remarkable and widespread acceptance, likely in large part because of its ease of use.

These days, it seems that everywhere you go, someone is recommending that you use the Rule of Thirds. The Rule has become so popular, in fact, that many cameras even offer a Rule of Thirds viewfinder overlay option. In fact, the Rule of Thirds is the only composition rule that many photographers learn. To paraphrase the *Lord of the Rings*, it has become the "One Rule to rule them all, One Rule to find them, One Rule to bring them all and in the darkness bind them." Yikes.

So, this must be a good rule to know, right?

The Rule of Thirds might have originated in John Thomas Smith's 1797 book "Remarks on Rural Scenery"—but no one knows for sure.

Sinelyov/Shutterstock.com



Analogous to this "Rule of thirds", (if I may be allowed so to call it) I have presumed to think that, in connecting or in breaking the various lines of a picture, it would likewise be a good rule to do it, in general, by a similar scheme of proportion; for example, in a design of landscape, to determine the *sky* at about two-thirds; or else at about one-third, so that the material objects might occupy the other two: Again, two thirds of one element, (as of water) to one third of another element (as of land); and then both together to make but one third of the picture, of which the two other thirds should go for the sky and ærial perspectives— This rule would likewise apply in breaking a length of wall, or any other too great continuation of line that it may be found necessary to break by crossing or hiding it with some other object: In short, in applying this invention, generally speaking, to any other case, whether of light, shade, form, or color, I have found the ratio of about two thirds to one third, or of one to two, a much better and more harmonizing proportion, than the precise formal *half*, the

Source: Wikipedia Commons

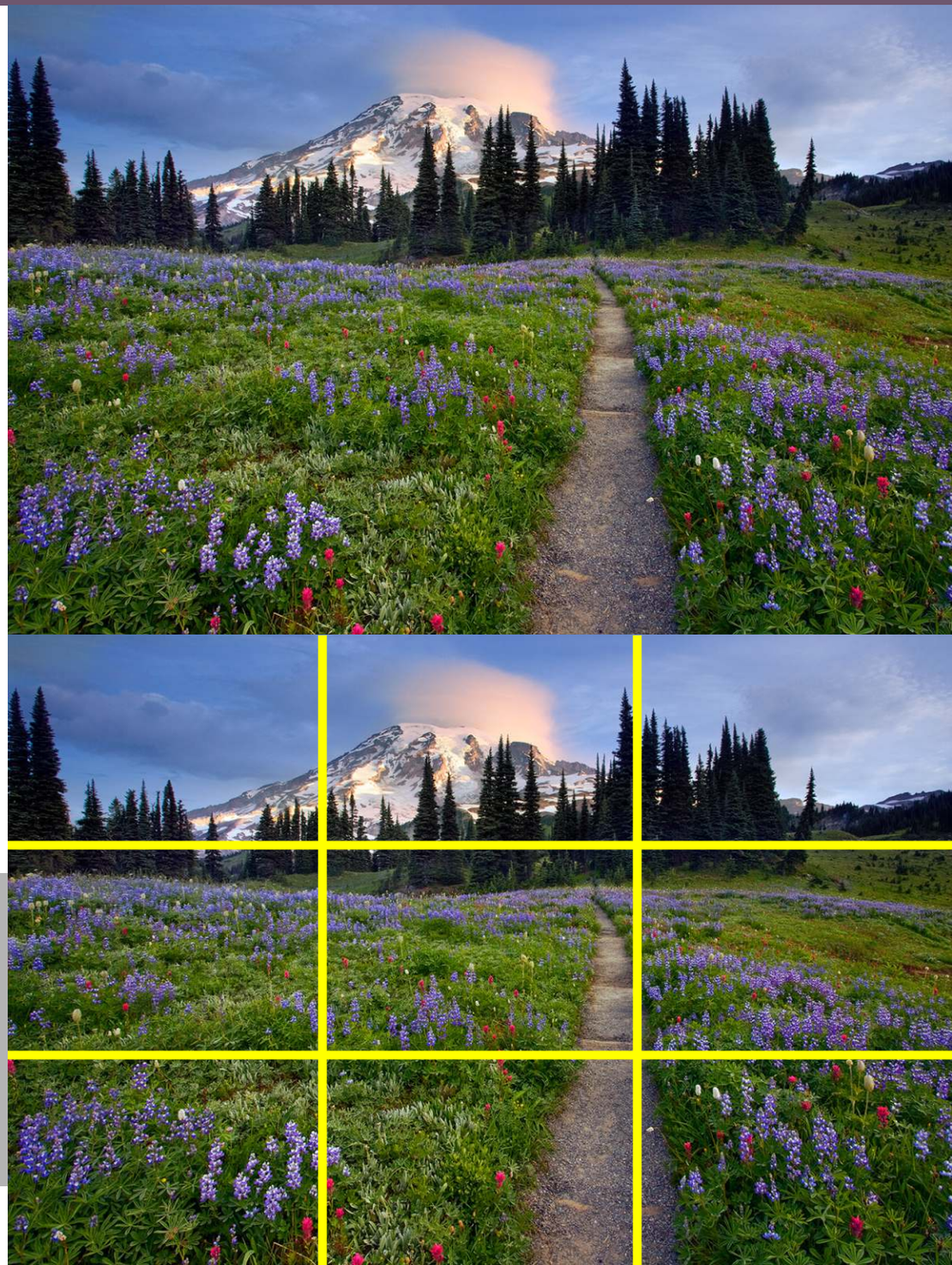
Let's reserve judgment for a moment. First, here's how the Rule of Thirds works: divide your image into nine equal parts by two equally spaced horizontal lines and two equally spaced vertical lines. The Rule holds that there is aesthetic benefit to placing important objects along the dividing lines or at their intersection points.

For example, the image to the right has been divided according to the Rule of Thirds. The horizon line, by far the most prominent line in the image, has been placed along the upper third horizontal line. The sun has been placed near the intersection of the two lines in the upper right, whereas the prominent foreground cholla cacti have been placed near the intersection in the lower left. Although the alignment of these visual elements to the Rule of Thirds grid is not perfect, it is close enough for our purposes here. After all, the Rule of Thirds is not meant to be an ironclad rule of placement of visual elements, but rather a useful approximation (well, in my opinion at least).

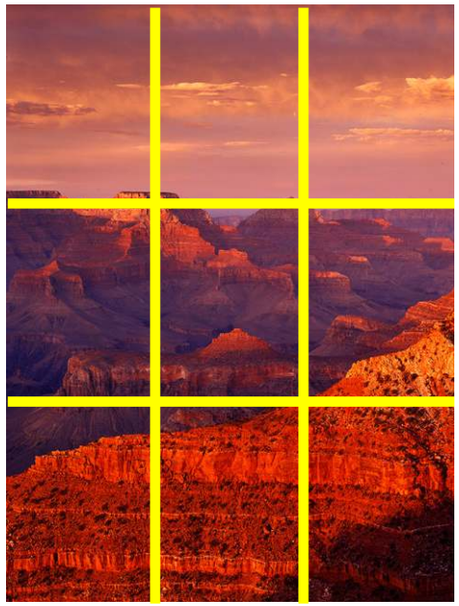
The Rule of Thirds visually divides the picture space horizontally and vertically in an effort to keep important visual elements away from the center. "Standing Ovation" by Ian Plant (Kofa Mountains, Arizona).

Let's look at a few more examples. The image to the right lines up quite nicely with the Rule of Thirds. The horizon is very close to the upper third line, and the path through the wildflowers is aligned with the right vertical line. Note, however, that not all elements fall in the right place—for example, the mountain does not fall on any line or intersection.

As can be seen from these two examples, I think it is fair to say that the Rule of Thirds "dislikes" the center of the image, and seeks to create compositional interest by moving important elements of the picture off-center. While the Rule of Thirds is certainly not mandatory to the success of an image, it can be very valuable nonetheless in avoiding the instinctive urge to point the camera directly at the most interesting object in the scene. By placing important elements in off-center areas of the frame, the composition as a whole may be more effective.



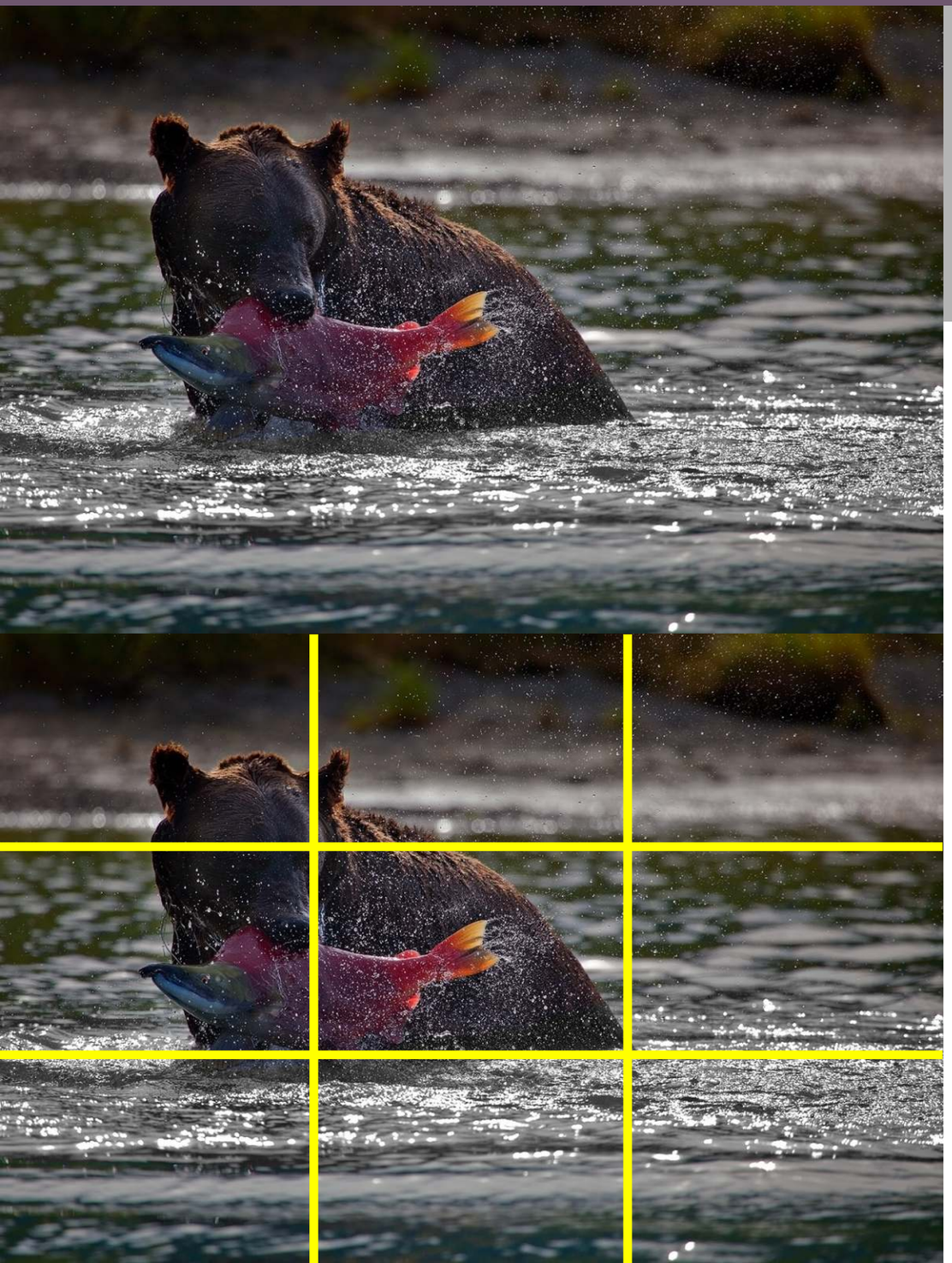
Important elements of the composition, including the horizon line and the path, all fall on lines of the Rule of Thirds grid. Note that when using the Rule of Thirds, not every important element of the scene needs to conform. "Paradise Gardens" by Ian Plant (Mt. Rainier National Park, Washington).



The Rule of Thirds, like so many so-called "rules of composition," is merely an articulation which attempts to distill basic design principles from the works of great art created throughout the centuries. It is nothing more than a simple articulation at best, a useful guide for beginners, perhaps, but not really a one-size-fits-all tool. As you know, my goal in this book is to go beyond the simple and to delve more deeply into the sophisticated fundamental design principles that give life to the rules.

Besides, I analogized the Rule of Thirds with the Dark Lord Sauron's evil ring of power for a reason: too many people have become far too beholden to the Rule of Thirds. It's almost like an addiction, and you'll find

"Entourage" by George Stocking (Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona).



The Rule of Thirds even works with wildlife, such as this grizzly bear eating a salmon to the left. The bear's head was placed near the intersection in the upper left of the photograph. "Catch of the Day" by Ian Plant (Lake Clark National Park, Alaska).

goose-stepping proponents of the Rule everywhere you go, from Internet photo-sharing sites to the halls of local firehouses and schools where camera clubs meet on Tuesday nights.

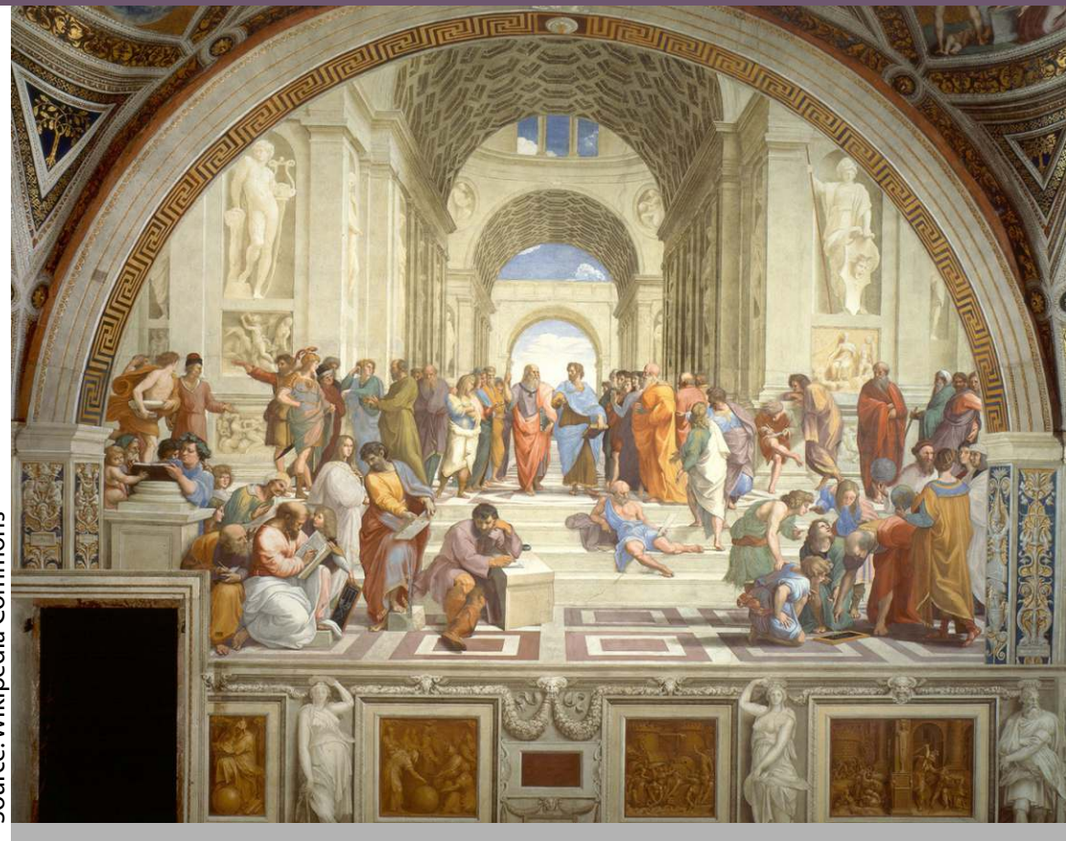
So the bottom line is this: does the Rule of Thirds work? Many compositions that adhere to the Rule of Thirds *do* look rather pleasing. Basically, the Rule often does work quite well, so it is worth discussing in this book. Although the Rule of Thirds has its uses, it is by no means a perfect compositional structure, and it certainly does not provide the best framework for every photograph. Many of the works of art and photographs shown in this book do not conform to the Rule at all. And guess what? They work just fine without the rigid parameters set by the Rule.

THE DIVINE PROPORTION?

What do ancient Greek mathematicians, Leonardo da Vinci, falcons, Tom Hanks, and beans all have in common? They are all improbably connected to a seemingly innocuous number known as *phi*. What does any of this have to do with artistic composition? Good question. It probably wouldn't have anything to do with art at all if it weren't for a wacky ancient Greek cult, some bad pseudo-science, Hollywood histrionics, and a lot of wishful thinking.

Phi is known by many other names, the most popular being the *Golden Ratio*. It is also known as the Golden Mean, the Golden Rectangle, the Golden Proportion, the Golden Number, the Golden Cut, the Divine Proportion, the Harmonic Ratio, the Cosmic Code, the Fingerprint of God, and many more equally lofty titles which are sure to get your eyes rolling in disbelief. These pompous names arise from the fact that some people believe that the Golden Ratio is the most aesthetically pleasing artistic proportion known to humankind—and furthermore, that it is the universal organizing principle of all we know, a cosmic and divine number that is "written into" every one of us, all of nature, and the very Universe itself.

So what is all the fuss about? In mathematics, two quantities are in what is known as the "Golden Ratio"



Source: Wikipedia Commons

The ancient Greeks gave us democracy, philosophy, and organized competitive sports—and perhaps the secret to artistic composition? "The School of Athens" by Raphael (1509-1510).

if—and I'm quoting someone much smarter than I—"the ratio of the sum of the quantities to the larger quantity is equal to the ratio of the larger quantity to the smaller one." The end result is an irrational number (that is, a number that has a decimal representation which

never ends and never repeats) whose decimal expansion begins with 1.618. The most famous irrational number is *pi* (you know, the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter); the number behind the Golden Ratio is known instead as *phi*.

Really? All the fuss is about some number? Why would anyone get so excited about a number, even one as fashionably irrational as phi? Let's start at the beginning.

The Golden Ratio was likely first discovered by the Pythagoreans, an ancient Greek cult which originated over two thousand years ago. The Pythagoreans were known for their almost religious reverence of numbers. Indeed, they were obsessed about mathematics and made some significant contributions and discoveries in this regard (remember the Pythagorean theorem from math class?). Then again, they also believed in some wacky stuff as well, including a prohibition on the consumption or even touching of beans (one of the more fanciful explanations for this proffered by historians is that the Pythagoreans believed that the passing of gas shortened a man's life).

The Pythagoreans were fascinated with the number five, the five-pointed star, and the pentagram, which for various mathematical reasons that are too complex for

Source: Wikipedia Commons

"Pythagoreans Celebrate Sunrise" by Fyodor Bronnikov (1869). The Pythagoreans loved numbers but for some reason feared beans.

me to fully understand or summarize here led to the discovery of the Golden Ratio. They didn't call it that, however—they referred to it by a much more mundane name, the "extreme and mean ratio."

The "extreme and mean ratio" slumbered for the next few centuries (and then some), known only to a handful of mathematicians, until a Franciscan friar named Luca Bartolomeo de Pacioli decided to rev up the ratio's

public image with a new name and its own book—the *Divina Proportione*—in 1509, which contained a detailed summary of the mathematical properties of the Golden Ratio. Pacioli—who history records as a mathematician, plagiarist, and roommate of none other than Leonardo da Vinci—asked his bosom buddy to create illustrations of various geometrical forms arising from the Golden Ratio for the book. Hence, da Vinci's name would thereafter be associated with the Golden Ratio. The *Divina Proportione* opened up the Golden Ratio to many mathematicians and artists, although arguably most useful to the latter where Leonardo's three-dimensional illustrations of geometrical forms.

The Golden Ratio didn't even get the label "golden" until 1835, when German mathematician Martin Ohm called it the "Golden Section" ("Goldene Schnitt") in a footnote in his 1835 mathematical treatise, *Die Reine Elementar-Mathematik*. Early in the twentieth century, an American mathematician gave the ratio the name of *phi*, which is the name most commonly used by mathematicians today.

In the modern age, some rather preposterous claims have arisen regarding the Golden Ratio, including that it is the most aesthetically pleasing way to

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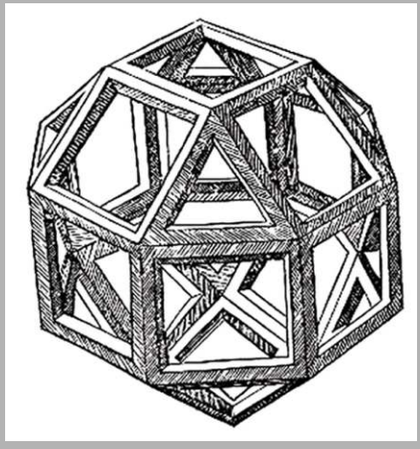
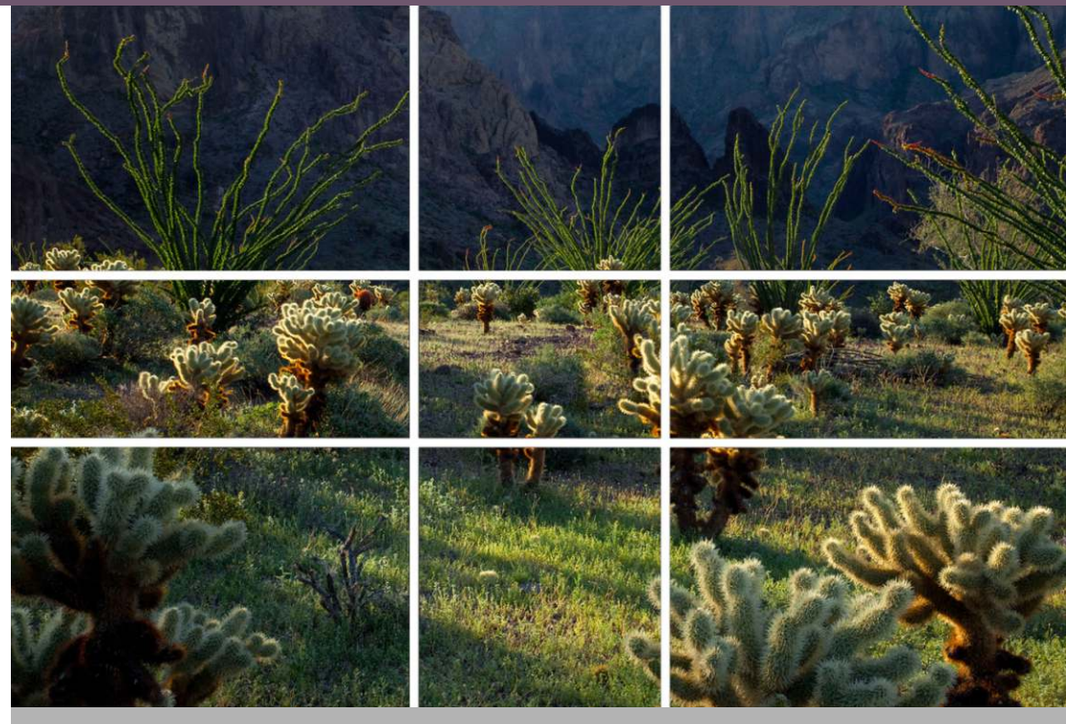


Above: "Portrait of Luca Pacioli," which is traditionally attributed to Jacopo de' Barbari (1495). Left: One of Leonardo da Vinci's three-dimensional geometrical form illustrations from Pacioli's "Divina Proportione" (published in 1509).

proportion art, that the ancient Greeks and Egyptians used it to create art and architecture, that human proportions are based on the Golden Ratio, and that it is "written into" *everything*—apparently even the stock market. In recent years, the Golden Ratio has even begun to pop up in TV and Hollywood, most notably in the on-screen adaptation of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* starring Tom Hanks.

Despite my healthy skepticism regarding most Golden Ratio lore, it is nonetheless a remarkable number with many uses for mathematics and science, including analysis of the path a falcon takes when it swoops upon its prey and the growth of flowers and seeds in certain plants (which, as it turns out, can both be mathematically explained by the Golden Ratio). But most of the claims surrounding the Golden Ratio are pure fantasy.

Okay, this has been a fun math, science, and history lesson, but at this point, you must be asking, "How does the golden ratio apply to artistic composition?" Here's how it works, more or less: Basically, the image space is divided according to the math of the Golden Ratio. In its most simple form, some artists superimpose a basic grid on the image, using vertical and horizontal 1:1.618 divisions of the picture based on the Golden Ratio (shown above right); important visual elements (including dominant lines such as the horizon) are placed on the lines of the grid or at their intersection. In this formulation, the Golden Ratio looks a lot like the Rule of Thirds—so close, in fact, that some Golden Ratio proponents have argued that the Rule of Thirds is a "lazy" version of the Ratio. As noted in the previous section, however, the weight of historical evidence is that the



A grid based on the Golden Ratio superimposed upon an image. Looks a lot like the Rule of Thirds, doesn't it? "The Greeting" by George Stocking (Kofa National Wildlife Refuge, Arizona).

Rule of Thirds arose independent of the Golden Ratio, not as a derivative. In more advanced forms, Golden Ratio compositions are based on the *Fibonacci Spiral*, which arises from the math of the Golden Ratio (pictured at right).

But has the Golden Ratio actually been used by artists? Golden Ratio adherents argue that it can be found in the work of several prominent artists (including da Vinci), but their evidence is controversial and inconclusive at best, typically involving rather arbitrary measurements in order to produce positive results—and for the most part, their conclusions have been largely discredited by most serious art historians. From all available evidence, artists did not begin to expressly use the Golden Ratio until the late 1800s and early 1900s, and then it was only used occasionally by a few painters, sculptors, architects, and musicians, most notably Salvador Dali. Today, you can find plenty of web pages extolling the virtues of the Golden Ratio in art, but for the most part, they simply repeat the unsupported or outright fictitious claims made by others in the past.

A Golden Ratio grid and Fibonacci Spiral seem to superficially align with some of the important elements of this scene—but it is a matter of pure coincidence. "Whiplashed" by George Stocking (Vermilion Cliffs National Monument, Arizona).

Okay, so let's get back to the basic claim: that compositions based on the Golden Ratio are inherently more aesthetically pleasing than those that are not. All I can ask is what exactly is the basis for these claims? Why would proportions based on a (very) specific number, 1.618..., seem more pleasing to the human eye than proportions based on any other number? The only way you get there, in my opinion, is if you take a leap into the superstitious, believing that the Golden Ratio is a "magic number"—which, clearly, most Golden Ratio enthusiasts have done. As for me, I am inherently suspicious of any claim regarding magic numbers. I am even more suspicious of any claim which offers a simple, silver bullet solution to art, life, or anything else for that matter. And let's face it: even Golden Ratio proponents can only point to a few artists they claim have used the Golden Ratio. The vast bulk of art created in the past few centuries clearly was *not* created using the Golden Ratio—including many pieces that are considered among the greatest works of all time.

This myth of the power of the Golden Ratio is fairly enduring, however, despite the lack of evidence supporting it. Proponents claim to see the Golden Ratio in action all the time, but then again, if you look hard enough for something, you are likely to find it. As the saying goes, to a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Superimpose enough Golden Ratio grids and Fibonacci spirals on works of art and you will likely find many that seem to superficially align with the ratio. But then again, many of the greatest works of art don't bear even a superficial resemblance to the Golden Ratio. And to be clear, I never use it for any of my compositions, nor do I know anyone who does. Yet many composition books I have read treat it seriously nonetheless.

Oops! This composition does not conform at all to the Golden Ratio—yet it is one of my most successful. "Light from Above" by Ian Plant (Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming).

You don't have to believe me if you don't want to. Setting aside all of the arguments and counterarguments regarding the specific claims, here's a few solid, practical reasons for rejecting the Golden Ratio is an artistic guide:

- *The Golden Ratio is impractical to apply in the field.* This is, after all, a complex mathematical formula. Unless you bring along a ruler, calculator, and protractor, don't expect to be able to do anything other than roughly approximate the Golden Ratio when peering through the viewfinder.
- *The Rule of Thirds is easier to use*. If you are looking for a simple guide (which, by the way, I *don't* recommend that you do), the Rule of Thirds gets you to essentially the same place as the Golden Ratio, without all the math.
- *Real-world compositional elements rarely line up with the Golden Ratio*. Most of the time, you're just going to have to make great art without it.

I dare you to find a single Golden Ratio proportion in this stunning image! Sorry, folks, but ancient Greek mathematics just doesn't hold the secret to beautiful art. "Classic AZ" by George Stocking (Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Arizona).

In the end, no "magic formula" will ever make you a better artist. Sorry, there are no shortcuts! "Ancient Portal" by Ian Plant (Isle of Lewis, Scotland).

Besides, I can't help but feel that anyone who wants to reduce something as creative and subjective as artistic composition to mere numbers is looking for some sort of illusory comfort zone. Remember what I said earlier: simple rules are for simple minds. Trying to reduce art to numbers is just that. To be fair, the Golden Ratio might have some merit—indeed, some compositions that appear to conform to the Golden Ratio are aesthetically pleasing—although I suspect this has little to do with the specific proportions. But I can tell you this: all great art is great because the artist was able to successfully convey his or her vision to others. Mastering composition, mood, and moment are all elements of creating successful art, but the precise proportions and ratios are not. To claim otherwise is to trivialize the genius behind each masterpiece. The mystery and awe we experience when we view da Vinci's *The Mona Lisa*, Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, or de Goya's *The Third of May* have nothing to do with the numbers.

In the end, the only "divine proportion" is any you can make successfully work in a composition. If it happens to be 1.618..., then more power to you. If it happens to be some other number, then even better.

For a more detailed explanation and an analysis of the various claims surrounding the Golden Ratio (both spurious and real), I suggest you read Mario Livio's excellent book *The Golden Ratio: The Story of Phi, the World's Most Astonishing Number*.

Arguably, the Rule of Thirds—and maybe even the Golden Ratio—has its merits, but it should be clear by now that neither is particularly golden, divine, or even an ironclad "rule" that should be applied to all of your photos. This, of course, begs a few questions: Why do "paint-by-numbers" approaches such as the Rule of Thirds work sometimes? Why don't they work other times? Are there any deeper principles that contain a more sizeable chunk of "truth" than that offered by dividing your image pursuant to a seemingly arbitrary formula?

One-size-fits-all approaches like the Rule of Thirds do seem to offer some sound compositional advice. Arguably, the Rule of Thirds is a simplified approximation of more complex compositional techniques that seem to successfully create visual interest and power. But I think you can agree that our only choice is to dig deeper and attempt to ascertain the nature of these more fundamental techniques.

If you are hoping for some sort of "metatheory" that will tie all the loose ends together and emerge as the Ultimate Compositional Rule, I suggest you look somewhere else. You won't get it here, and for that matter, you won't get it anywhere else. It doesn't exist. Rather, I'll discuss a number of concepts and techniques that will deepen your understanding of the division of space within the picture frame. There won't be any easy answers; rather, all I can offer you is the chance to peel the skin of the onion back a few more layers.

"Divide This" by George Stocking (San Juan Mountains, Colorado).

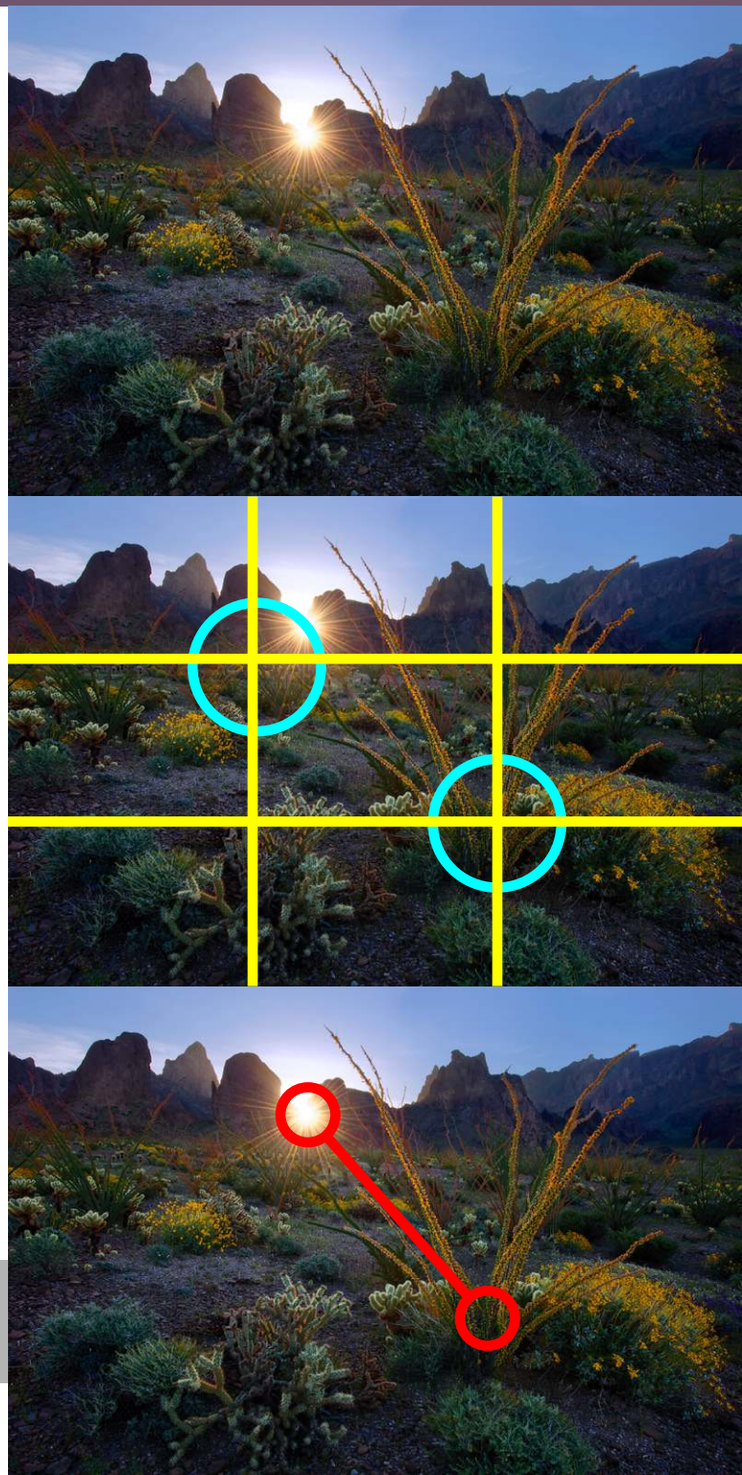
So let's start digging a bit deeper and discussing some of the underlying principles of composition that make many Rule of Thirds images successful. Let's begin with an image and overlay it with a Rule of Thirds grid.

Although most elements don't really line up exactly with the grid, the sun and the wispy ocotillo do come fairly close to hitting the upper left and lower right intersection points (which I have circled in blue). Is the fact that these important elements are near the Rule of Thirds "power zones" the secret to the composition's success? Let's peel back the superficial top layer and see what is really going on beneath the surface.

When we compose an image to fit the Rule of Thirds, what are we really doing? Basically, by trying to place important elements at the intersection points of the grid, the Rule of Thirds will often push elements into off-center opposing placement, as is the case here. It is not the Rule of Thirds proportions themselves that are important to the composition. Instead, this opposing visual relationship is the key to understanding why this composition works.

The bottom image dispenses with the artificial imposition of the Rule of Thirds grid. Rather, I have simply illustrated the visual relationship between the sun and the base of the ocotillo. To the extent that the image conforms to the Rule of Thirds is largely a matter of coincidence. It is the visual relationship between the sun and the ocotillo bush that is the key.

But why? Because opposing visual relationships such as this help create something known as *dynamic balance*—a concept of critical importance to the creation of successful compositions.



"Sunrise Garden" by Ian Plant (Kofa National Wildlife Refuge, Arizona).

"Art is harmony." —Georges Seurat

Georges Seurat was an incredibly talented Post-Impressionist painter, one of the great masters of the art. His famous quote, "Art is harmony," contains an important truth: the goal of any composition is to create balance and harmony. But let's step back for a moment of definition: by balance I don't mean pure symmetry or even spacing of elements within the image frame. Rather, the artist is looking for something that creates *dynamic balance*, a harmonious union of energetic visual elements. So to paraphrase Seurat, "Art is dynamic harmony."

What do I mean exactly by dynamic balance? Well, dynamic balance is achieved when a composition succeeds in keeping the eye engaged in an image, getting the eye moving around and visually interested in the photograph, but at the same time not leaving the viewer feeling awkward, uncanny, or otherwise confused by the composition.

With few exceptions, good compositions will almost always exhibit dynamic balance. Even compositions with huge amounts of visual energy will not work if the overall result does not seem balanced, harmonious, and

Source: Wikipedia Commons

Georges Seurat knew a little something about creating dynamic balance. In this piece, he manages to create a visually compelling work of art that is simultaneously energetic and harmonious. "The Laborers" (1883).

natural. The trick is to learn to use spatial arrangements, shape, depth, and space to create an unforced balance of visual elements which nonetheless still maintains a sense of vibrancy and energy. How to do this, of course, is the subject of this book.

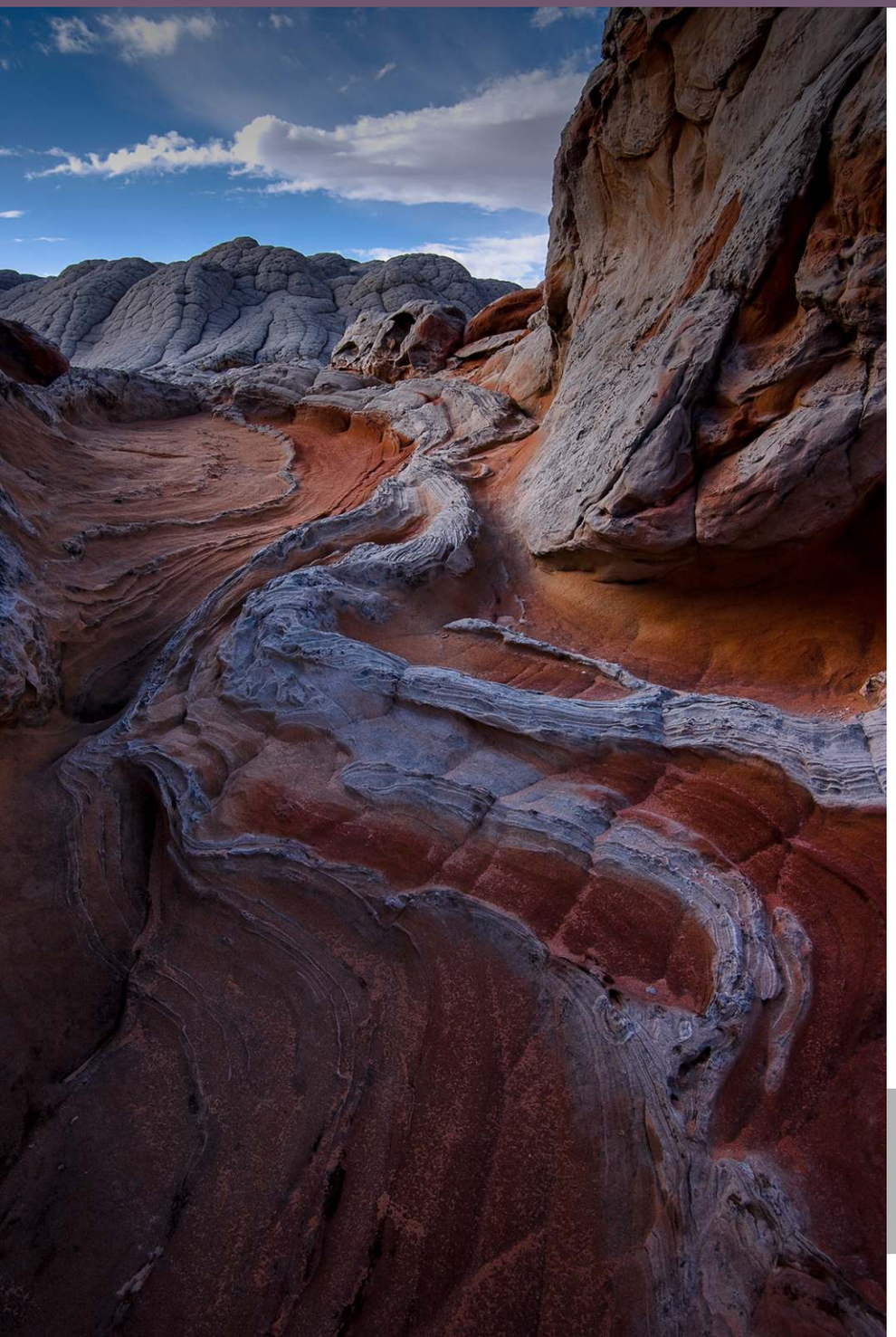
This concept of dynamic balance is vitally important to achieving visual flow. Your goal as a photographer is to

get the eye moving, to engage the viewer, and to pique their interest. Done incorrectly, the viewer is left feeling jilted, their visual journey through the image incomplete. Done correctly, the viewer won't be able to tear their eyes from the image, even after looking at it for months or years to come.

Combining visual power with artistic harmony can sometimes feel like balancing an elephant against a feather. In time, as you slowly begin to master the tools and techniques that create visual flow, this combination will become more and more intuitive. Eventually, you will learn to recognize the elements that create power and balance, and without even thinking about it, you'll find a way to stitch them together on the fly.

That's what I did with this image—I had only a few moments of perfect light, so I jumped right in and let intuition, shaped by years of experience, guide me. Here, power and energy result from the sweeping curves created by the foreground rocks and the clouds in the sky above. Harmony results from the balance and positioning of visual

"Dynamic balance" is the art of simultaneously capturing visual energy and harmony. "Eventide" by Ian Plant (Acadia National Park, Maine).



elements within the picture frame. Then again, the reverse is also true: energy results from the tension arising from the relative positioning of important visual elements, and harmony results from the use of repeating and complementary shapes. Funny how that works.

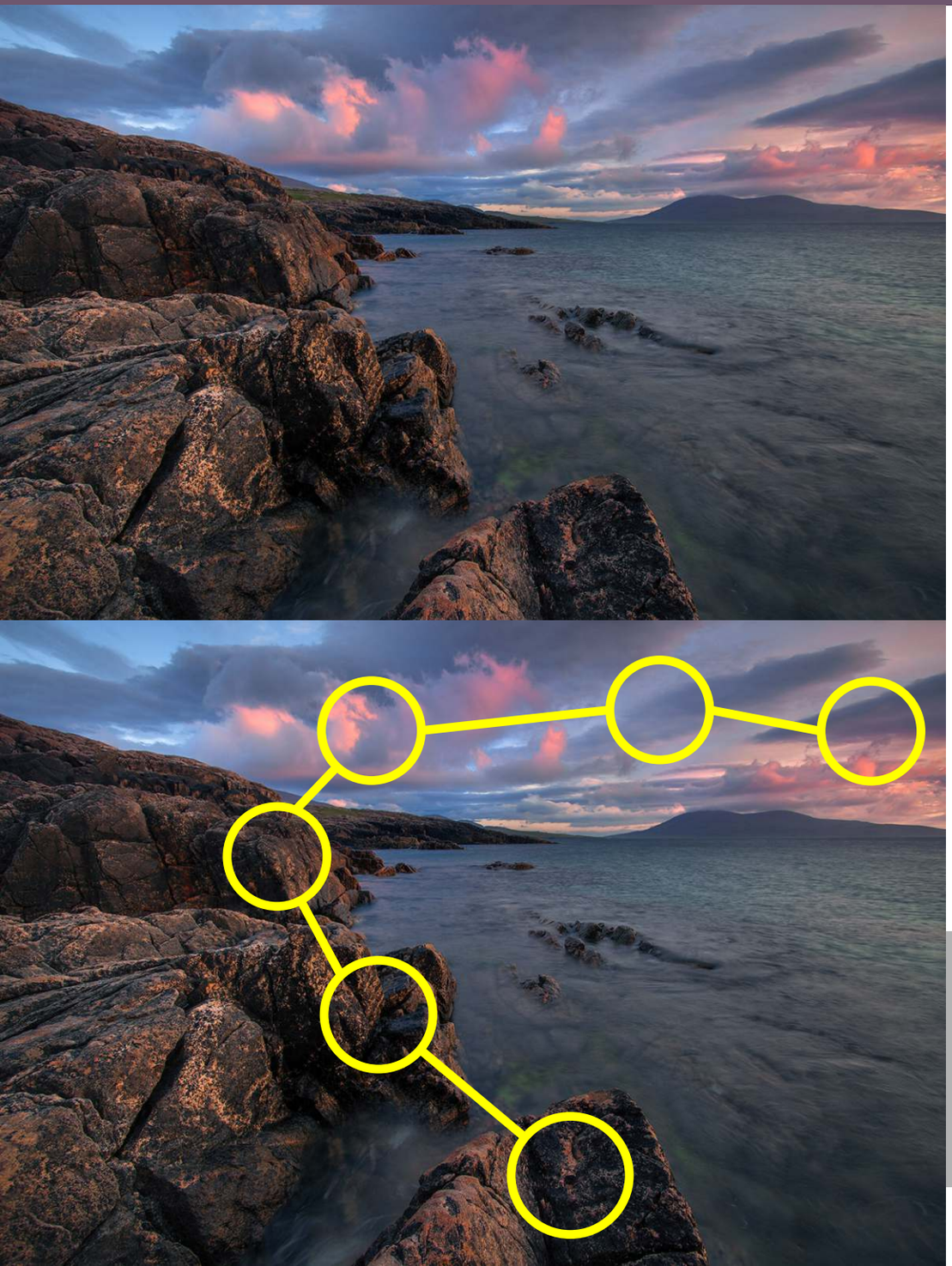
All right, so I think by now you have a good idea of what I mean by dynamic balance, but now we come to the crucial question: how is dynamic balance achieved? At a most fundamental level, you need more than one visual element to create dynamic balance.

"Retreat from Mordor" by George Stocking (Vermilion Cliffs National Monument, Arizona).

A single element standing alone typically fails to achieve compositional power. When juxtaposed with another element, however, a relationship between the two is established. The trick is to ensure that the spatial arrangement between the two elements creates a dynamic, yet visually harmonious, composition.

Take the image to the right as an example. The key to the success of this composition is the visual juxtaposition of two primary elements with the image frame: the cacti in the foreground and the smaller cacti in the background. These two elements create visual ten-

Energy is created by the opposing visual relationship between the two cacti. Balance is created by their relative positioning. The result is a dynamically balanced composition. "White Sands Glow" by George Stocking (White Sands National Monument, New Mexico).



sion which gets the viewer's eye moving back and forth between the two, whereas the relative positioning of each element creates a harmonious, balanced composition.

Note that this principle applies to arrangements of more than two elements. Too many elements, of course, can create a chaotic composition. The more elements that need to be balanced, the more difficult it can be to create a successful composition. Positioning and spacing of multiple elements is the key to achieving dynamic harmony. For example, the image to the left uses a progression of visual elements to lead the eye through the scene. The visual progression starts at the bottom of the frame with the foreground boulder, continuing onward to other parts of the seaside cliff, finally making its way through several cloud shapes into the top right of the image. This progression of elements (and resulting abstract curving shape) encourages the eye to travel

The progression of multiple visual elements leads the eye throughout the scene, creating compositional energy. "Road to Faerie" by Ian Plant (Isle of Harris, Scotland).

through the photograph, creating both visual energy and harmony, and establishing dynamic balance.

But wait, aren't there lots of great compositions using only one element, such as portraits or wildlife photos? As we'll discuss in detail in the next few sections, almost always there is more than one visual element in these compositions; typically, even "one" subject such as the hungry grizzly bear to the left is made up of multiple visual elements—the shape of the bear, the direction of its line of sight and the angle of its pointing ears, the tilt of its head, and even the shoreline in the background all count as visual elements.

And here's the kicker: even empty space itself can be a visual element. The key to being able to successfully create dynamic balance is to understand the relationship between visual mass and space, and how to orchestrate the two to create pleasing and eye-catching compositions.

Even what appears to be a composition made up of just one visual element is really a collection of multiple visual elements. "Swim Break" by Ian Plant (Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, Alaska).

Remember the concept of visual mass from Chapter Two? I certainly hope so, as it is a fundamental principle of composition. To recap, physical objects all have visual mass, which can be loosely defined as an element's "eye-catchiness." Visual mass is one of the fundamental building blocks of design.

Equally important to visual design is the flip side of visual mass, which is *visual space* or merely *space*. For our purposes, space can be defined in three ways:

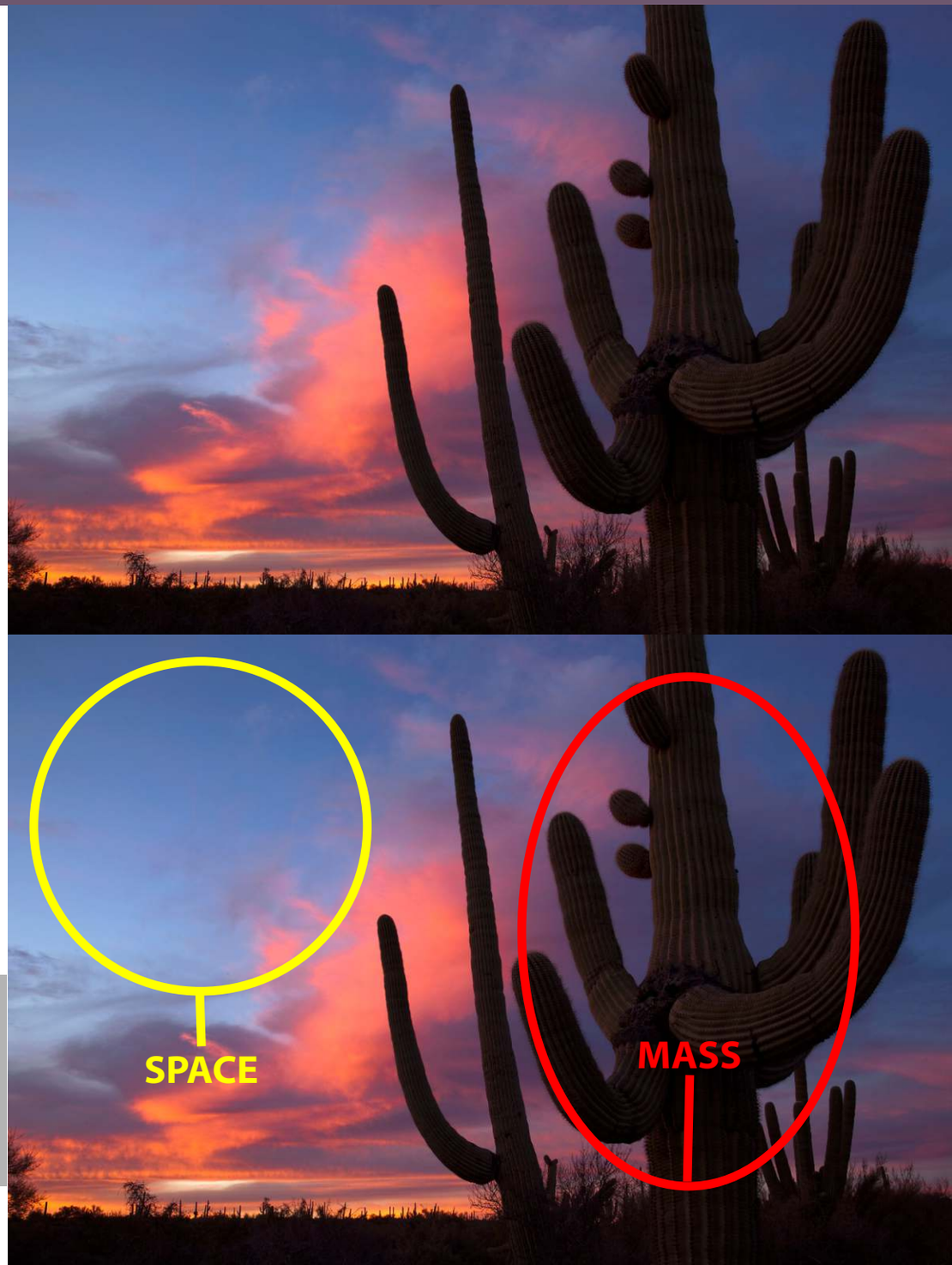
One, space is simply the image area in which objects with visual mass are placed. In this sense, everything within the picture frame incorporates the entire universe of a photo's visual space.

Two, space can be thought of as the distance between discreet visual elements. As such, what I am really talking about is *spacing*—that is, the physical spacing of visual elements in relation to each other.

"Space" can be thought of as the entire picture frame and the relative positioning or "spacing" of elements within that frame. "Desert Sunrise" by Ian Plant (Kofa Mountains, Arizona).

Three, space can also be thought of as any relatively "empty" area within the picture frame which is not occupied by an object with visual mass. Think of a blank sky as empty space. Yes, it is not completely empty—the sky has color, and maybe even some texture—but more or less, there is not much going on there, so it is fair to refer to that area of the picture as being *empty* (or *negative*) *space*. In fact, I think it is fair to say that *any* area of an image that doesn't have a lot of visual mass can be characterized as being "empty" space. The point I am trying to get across is that space doesn't have to be completely empty. The image to the right illustrates this distinction between mass and space. The cacti on the right have visual mass, whereas the empty area on the left has virtually none.

I understand that these three ways of thinking of space might be somewhat confusing. I'll be discussing space in all three ways in this chapter. Don't worry, this will all become more clear as we continue to explore these concepts in greater detail.



Every part of the image is made up of either space or visual mass. "Tonto Sunset" by George Stocking (Tonto National Forest, Arizona).

As you can probably gather from the graphic on the preceding page, space itself can be used as a compositional element. Perhaps more to the point, empty space can be useful in balancing a composition. Before I tell you how, let me diverge for a moment into the world of science in the hope that an analogy might help us understand the importance of space in artistic composition. I'm by no means a scientist, and I'm sure my grasp of this topic is tenuous at best, but here it goes. Physicists now believe that in addition to all the familiar mass of the Universe (galaxies, stars, planets, comets, etc., which all create gravity), what was previously thought of as "empty space" is actually teeming with energy and activity—all sorts of mind-bending stuff such as dark energy, Higgs fields, and quantum fluctuations yielding spontaneous and short-lived virtual particles. The result is that gravity isn't the only tune setting the tempo of the cosmic dance—"empty" space itself produces a powerful cadence, and the Universe shuffles its feet to the beat.

Okay, I may be getting the science all wrong. And, of course, none of this may even be true—as of the time of this writing, experimental verification of these concepts is still in its infancy. The point about composition that I am trying to get across from this analogy, however, is that *even empty space has energy*. Visual mass—resulting from visual elements and shapes within the picture frame—is composition's gravity: simply put, visual mass attracts the eye. This, of course, is the topic of much of this book. Empty space in a composition—basically, any space in the photo which is devoid of visual elements—is composition's "dark energy," and can itself be used as a compositional element which interacts with other elements of the scene. In a sense, empty visual

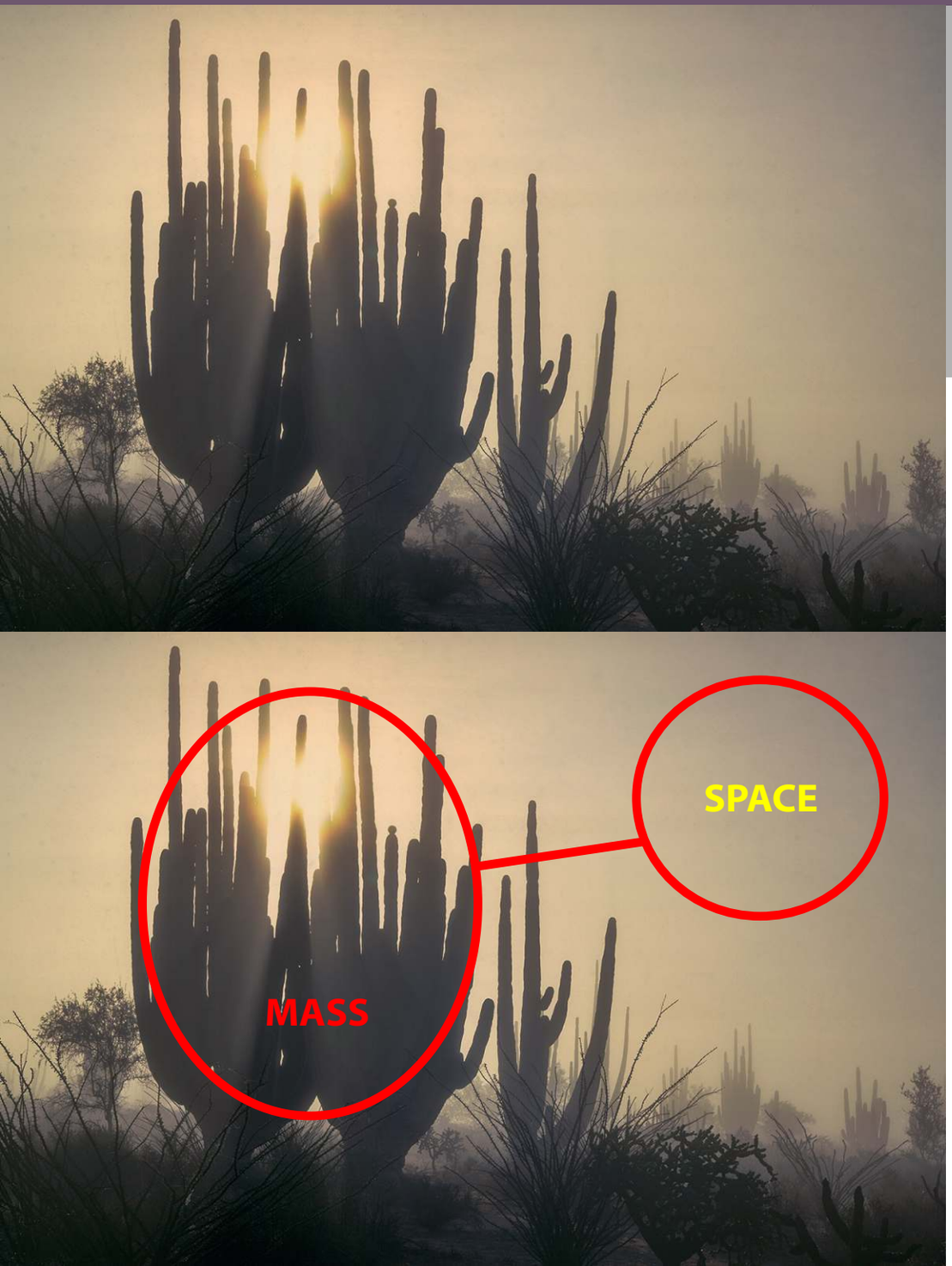
Even empty space has the power to visually attract or repel. "Dusty Conclusion" by George Stocking (Sonoran National Monument, Arizona).

space has its own visual mass which can attract the eye and influence the balance of a composition, just as empty physical space creates energy that influences the structure of the Universe.

Dynamic balance is a way of simultaneously creating both energy and harmony in your photos—too much balance, and your compositions don't create any visual interest; too much energy, and chaos ensues. As I previously noted, dynamic balance cannot be achieved with just one element; rather, dynamic balance is created by the interaction of two or more elements. Those elements, however, don't have to be objects—*space can be used as a visual element*.

Think of a lone subject, let's say the owl to the right. If the owl is all alone in the photo and put in the middle of the image (*top right*), then there is no visual tension or energy—there is nothing but balance. The result is a rather static and uninteresting composition. Place the owl off center (*bottom right*), however, and the result is a visual relationship between the owl and the

Off-center placement creates a visual relationship between the owl and the empty space. "Snowy Owl" by Ian Plant (Quebec, Canada).



The image to the left effectively and cleverly balances visual mass with empty space. With all of the visual mass bunched up on the left, the composition called for plenty of empty space on the right to balance the image. "Pardon my Kardon 2" by George Stocking (Bahia Kino, Sonora, Mexico).

empty space on the opposite side of the image. This creates visual tension, and the "dynamic" part of dynamic balance is restored.

The image to the left is a great example of using space to balance visual mass. Notice that most of the visual mass of the scene is bunched up together on the left—the grove of cacti and the rising sun. Empty space on the right balances the scene and prevents the eye from being trapped by the strong visual elements on the left.

All of this is leading up to an important key to mastering composition. But first, a riddle: what do Bach, Van Gogh's ear, and great photographic composition all have in common?

Counterpoint is a concept which originates from the musical arts, and was made especially famous by the likes of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. *Wikipedia* defines counterpoint as "the writing of musical lines that sound very different and move independently from each other but sound harmonious when played simultaneously." The term originates from the Latin *punctus contra punctum,* meaning "point against point."

Thinking about artistic composition in terms of counterpoint is rather useful. The idea is the same as it is with music, except visual elements substitute for musical notes. In this sense, "visual counterpoint" occurs when one element of a composition is set up in contrast or interaction with another. This contrast can be in terms of shape, luminosity, clarity, color, or relative positioning. Counterpoint, in its most visually powerful form, is a way of positioning elements within the image frame, relying on the spatial relationship between visual elements to create compositional structure and interest.

By now, you've actually already seen a few examples of visual counterpoint in this book, especially in the preceding sections discussing using space to balance mass. Essentially, the two concepts are related and similar: they both relate to the harmonious spacing of disparate visual elements. In other words, both are essential to the idea of dynamic balance. As I mentioned in the beginning of this book, many composition techniques are not distinct at all, but rather different ways of looking at the same thing.

Portrait of Johann Sebastian Bach by Elias Haussmann (1746). Bach was an early master of musical counterpoint—the harmonious use of two independent themes—a concept which we will apply to art composition, substituting visual elements for musical notes.

Source: Wikipedia Commons

Arguably, the most famous use of counterpoint in Western art is Van Gogh's *The Starry Night*. The painting depicts the view outside his sanitarium room window in Saint-Remy in southern France at night. By the way, for those of you who don't know the story, Van Gogh flipped out one day and threatened his friend Paul Gauguin (another famous artist) with a knife. Instead of

Source: Wikipedia Commons

"The Starry Night" by Vincent van Gogh (1889). The dark cypress tree on the left and the moon on the right are in a counterpoint relationship. The juxtaposition of these two dominant visual elements creates energy, whereas their relative placement creates balance. (Above right) Van Gogh painted a self-portrait shortly after cutting off his right ear. Apparently, little slowed him down—he created two thousand paintings, drawings, and sketches in his life.

running Gauguin through, Van Gogh turned the knife on himself, cutting off his own earlobe. Afterward, he allegedly presented the ear to a prostitute at a nearby brothel. Good stuff.

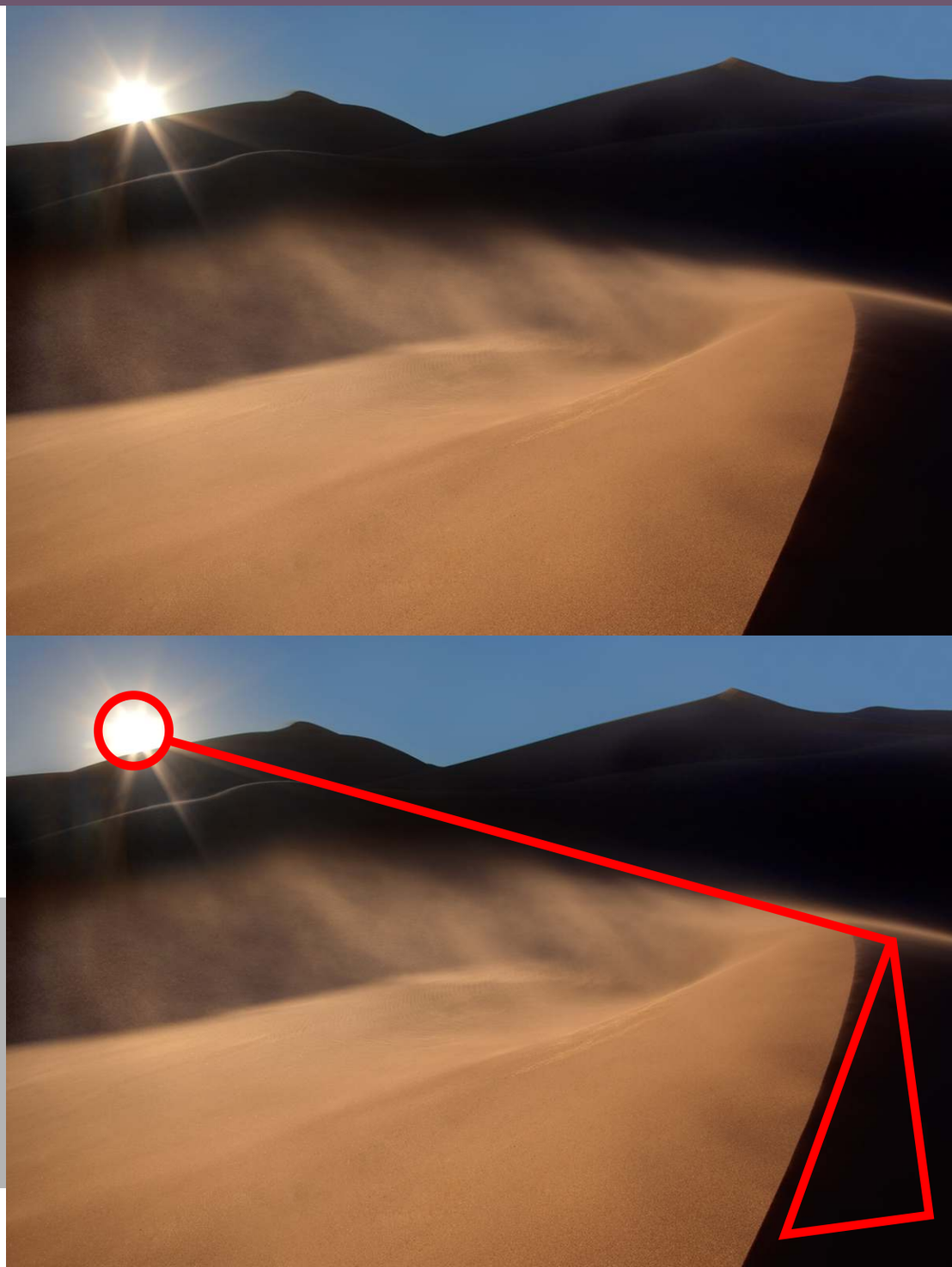
Anyway, back to the *The Starry Night*. Van Gogh knew the view was worthy of a painting, but in terms of composition, something wasn't quite right. The moon on the right is a very dominant visual element, with plenty of visual mass—too much, in fact, to achieve dynamic balance. So Van Gogh added the gangly cypress tree on the left, even though there was no such tree in the real-world view that he saw.

Van Gogh was smart—he knew that he needed a counterpoint element to dynamically balance the visual mass of the moon. These two dominant elements (tree and moon) establish a visual relationship which gets

the viewer's eye moving between the two, pleasantly trapping the eye within the picture frame and holding interest over time. Van Gogh may have been crazy, but he was a great artist.

The image to the right is a graphic example of counterpoint used in nature photography. The sun to the left has a huge amount of visual mass—although it is a relatively small element of the composition, its brightness and overall "eye-catchiness" means it attracts attention immediately. In order to balance the composition, I included the large dark shadow in the lower right. The visual relationship between the two elements is reinforced by the line of blowing sand, which physically connects the sun and the shadowed dune.

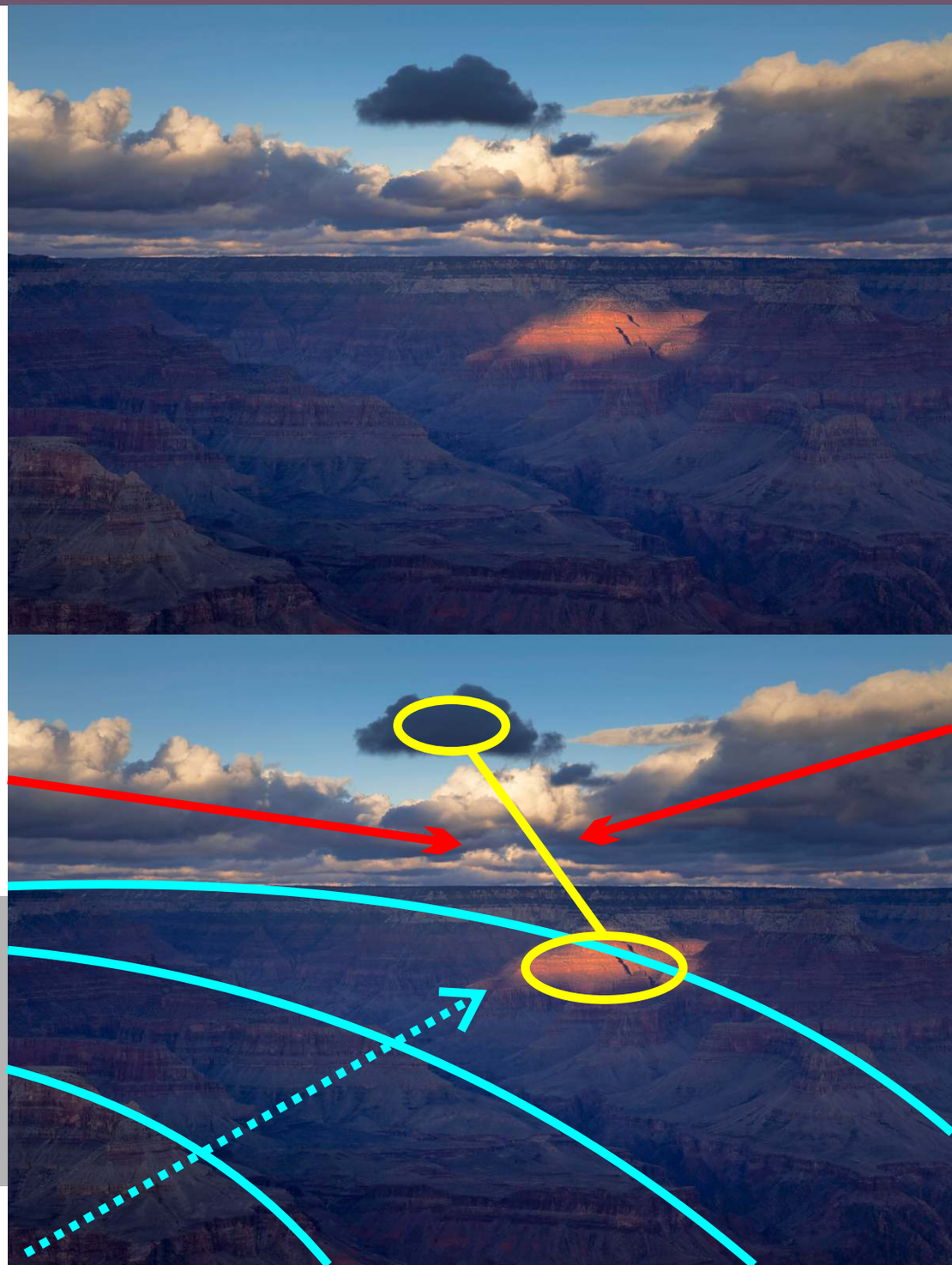
So far, all of these examples have been fairly simple, graphic, and obvious. One of my favorite uses of



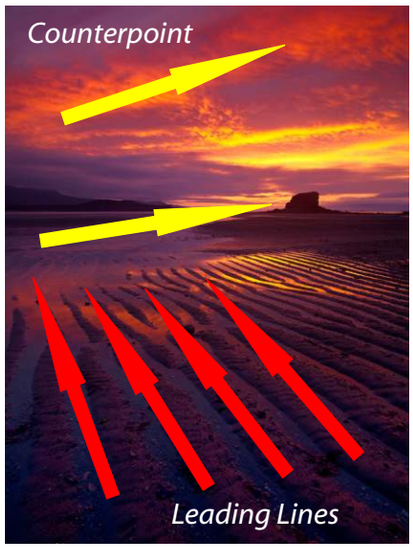
This image is a very graphic illustration of the concept of counterpoint. The sun has significant visual mass, requiring the use of the dark dune to the right as a counterpoint element. "Sun Star" by Ian Plant (Great Sand Dunes National Park, Colorado).

counterpoint in a nature photograph is considerably more subtle: George's Grand Canyon masterpiece to the right. The spotlit portion of canyon is dramatically counterpointed by the dark cloud above, which stands out because it is the only cloud in full shadow. While the visual relationship between these two elements is quite stark, it is the subtle progression of repeating canyon ridges and the strong lines created by the clouds to the left and right that help invite the eye into the scene, creating depth and reinforcing the visual attraction of the two counterpoint elements. And the best thing is, George didn't have to cut off his ear to make it happen!

Counterpoint is a principle that we will return to again and again. Like, for example, in the next section of this book.



In my opinion, this is one of the most brilliant images I have ever seen. The counterpoint relationship between the spotlit mountain and the shadowed cloud is a masterful stroke. "The End of Days" by George Stocking (Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona).



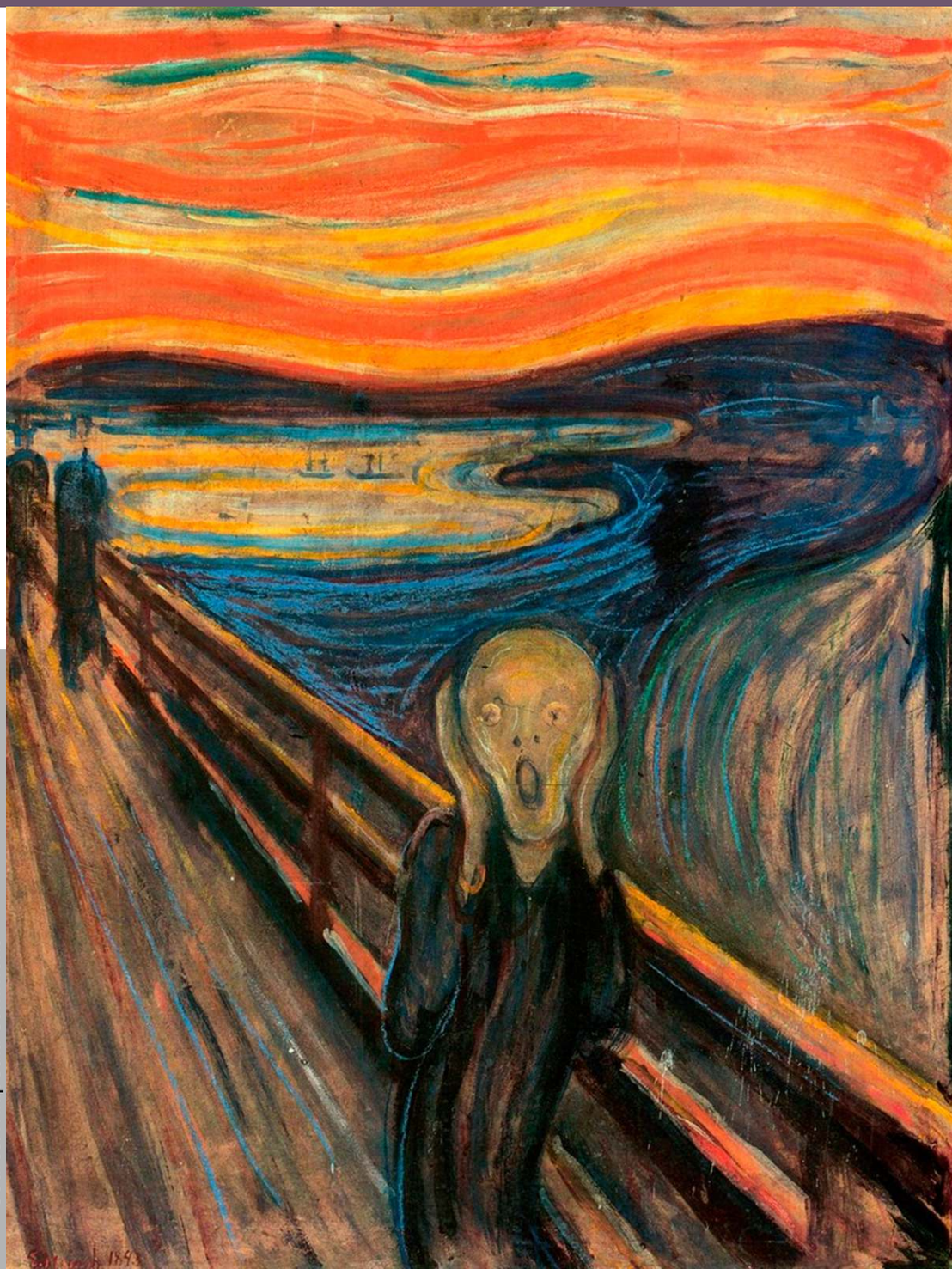
Photographers like to use leading elements, but one common mistake I often see is when the elements don't lead anywhere important. To be effective, leading elements should lead into the scene and point to important background elements. Leading elements that lead out of the picture frame can be confusing and ineffective—unless the elements are counterpointed in some way. The image to the right is a good example. All of the visual energy of the lines created by the rippled sand in the foreground moves to the left. If this energy were undisturbed, it would lead the viewer's eye out of the picture frame. The use of counterpoint elements—the clouds and wedge of hill, which both direct the eye to the right—helps balance

Leading lines that point out of the image are bad unless you can successfully use counterpoint to lead the eye back into the image. "Hallowed Bay" by George Stocking (Hallo Bay, Alaska).

the composition, and tame the energy of the leading lines in the foreground. Without the counterpoint lines, the composition would have been off balance, and would not have been successful.

One of the most iconic and famous paintings of all time, Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, uses this technique. The lines created by the dock would lead the viewer's eye straight out of the picture if it were not for the countervailing lines to the right, which balance the composition. The visual tension created by this technique is exciting and powerful, but goes unnoticed by most because of the obvious attraction of the scream-

Perhaps leading lines and counterpoint overwhelmed the obviously frazzled subject of this painting, but they didn't faze master Norwegian painter Edvard Munch. A version of this painting (Munch painted four) sold for more than $100 million. "The Scream," Edvard Munch (1893).



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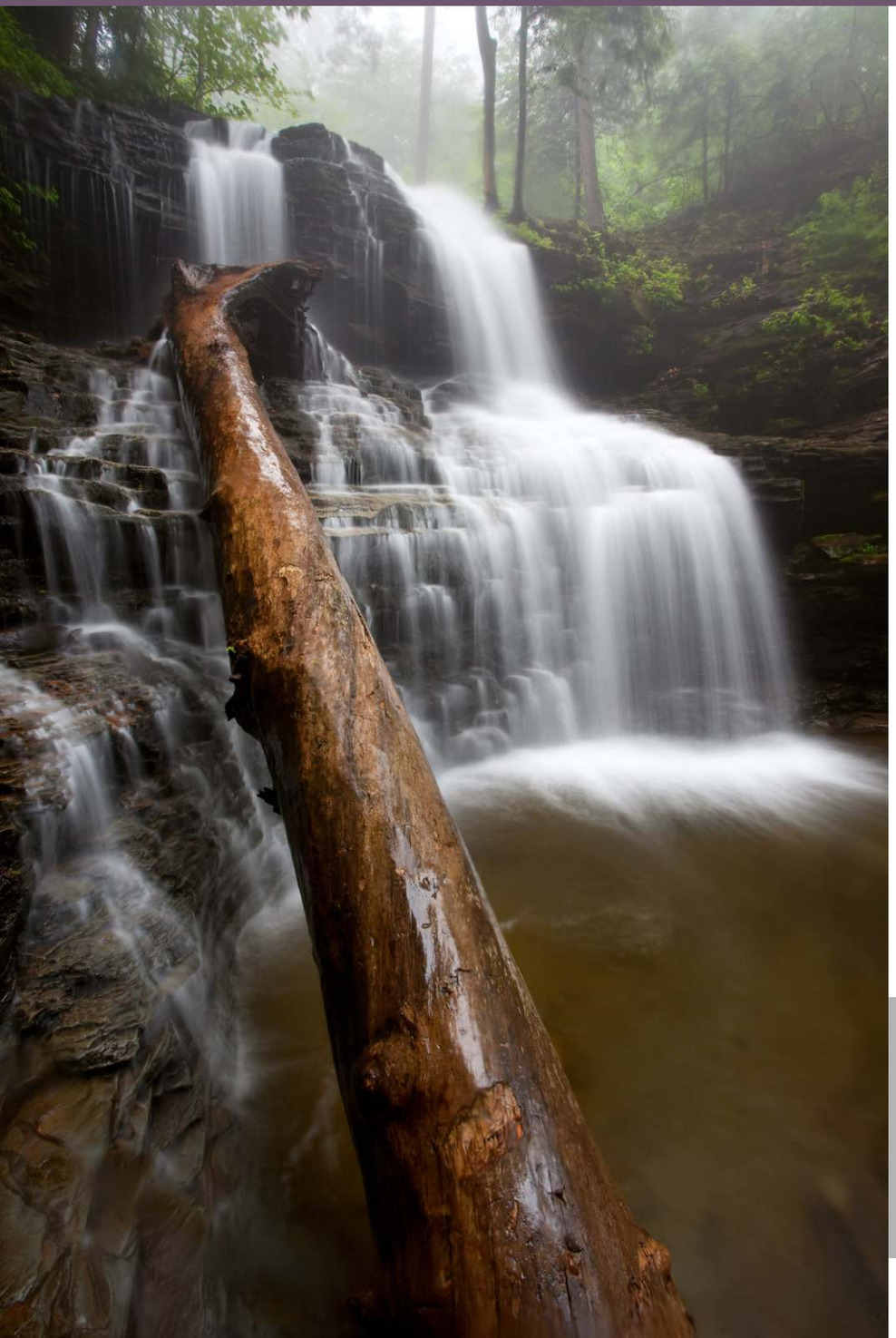


ing man. Instead, this powerful technique has been pushed to the background, creating a secondary layer of compositional interest and structure.

This waterfall image also successfully uses a leading line, even though the line points out of the picture frame. The visual mass created by the prominent fallen log is counterbalanced by the waterfall on the right, which essentially creates a line that repeats the shape of the log. Thus, although the log pushes the eye to the top left of the picture frame, the waterfall competes for attention and keeps the eye from leaving the image.

The leading line created by the fallen log wants to propel the eye out of the image, but the repeating line created by the waterfall draws the eye back. "Shawnee Falls" by Ian Plant (Ricketts Glen State Park, Pennsylvania).

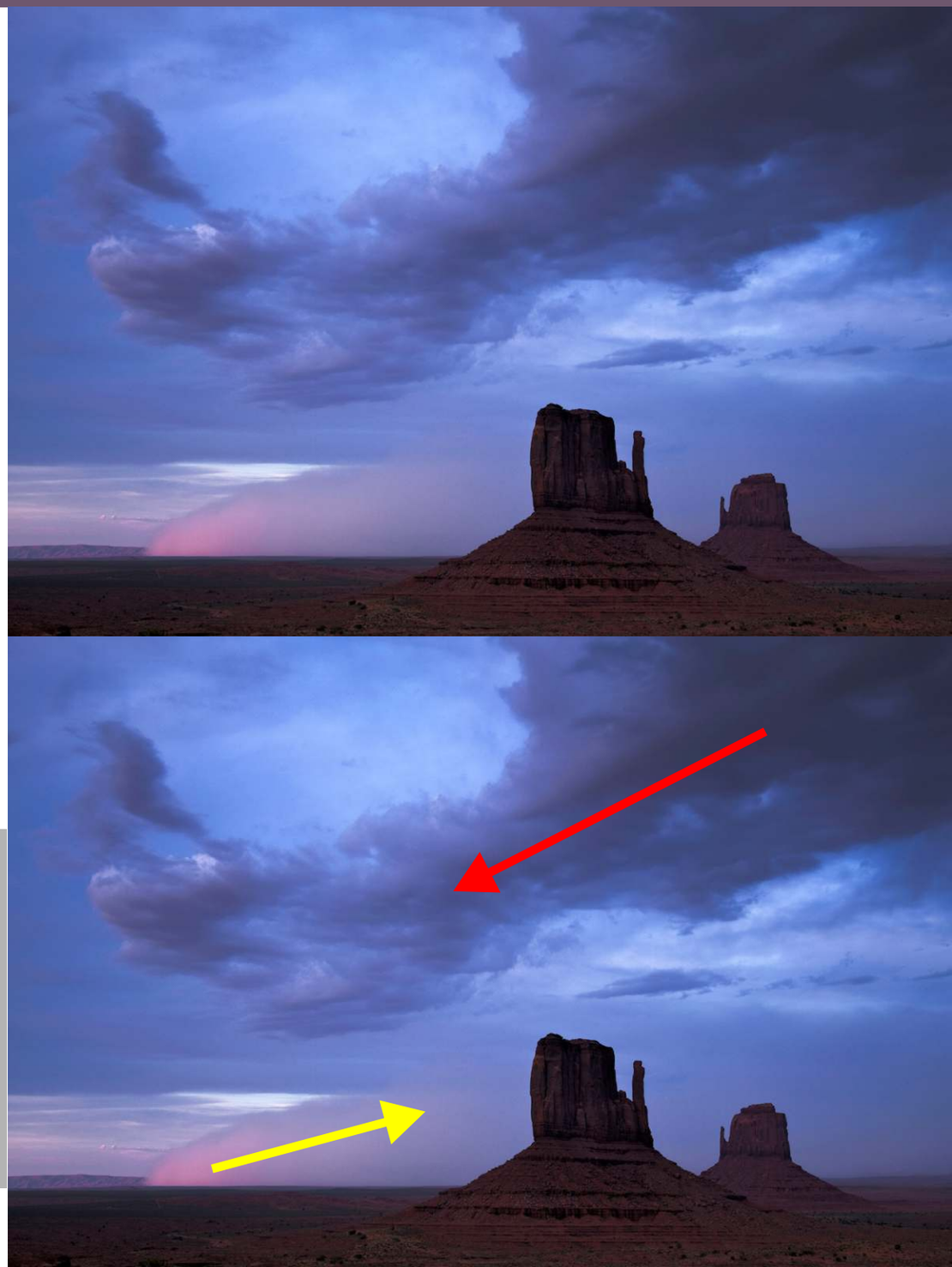
It is often said that "opposites attract." Personally, I've found the opposite to be true—although there might be some initial excitement created by the friction of opposition, over time opposites repel. What might not be good for a long-term relationship, however, is great for photographers seeking to create powerful and energetic compositions. In fact, this idea is probably the most important concept in this book, and it is a theme that has emerged over and over. "Opposing forces" describes and ties together the concepts of counterpoint, zigzag shapes, diagonal lines, and a whole host of other related techniques. Go back and read those sections again, and you will see the common thread. As we have seen over and over, opposing elements, used correctly, can create significant energy within the image frame.

The image to the right is a perfect example: The palm trees form a series of diagonal lines at opposing angles. The interaction of these opposing lines creates visual tension, forcing the eye back and forth, but at the same time creates harmony, resulting in dynamic balance.

This image has it all—diminishing scale, shape repetition, and diverging diagonal lines. I can't tear my eyes away! "Palm Tuesday" by George Stocking (Kauai, Hawaii).

The sunset image to the right is another example. The large and ominous cloud coming in from the upper right corner pushes the eye into the scene with considerable power. The smaller plume of dust rising from the desert floor, highlighted pink with the last light of sunset, pushes the eye in the opposite direction. The two opposing forces create a visual tug-of-war, the end result being that the viewer's attention is held within the image frame.

Remember to keep in mind the concept of visual mass when using opposing elements to create dynamic balance. If you have too much energy going one way and not enough going the other, the result can often be rather unbalanced. A series of smaller elements can be effectively balanced by one or two more dominant elements, and vice versa. Consider, for

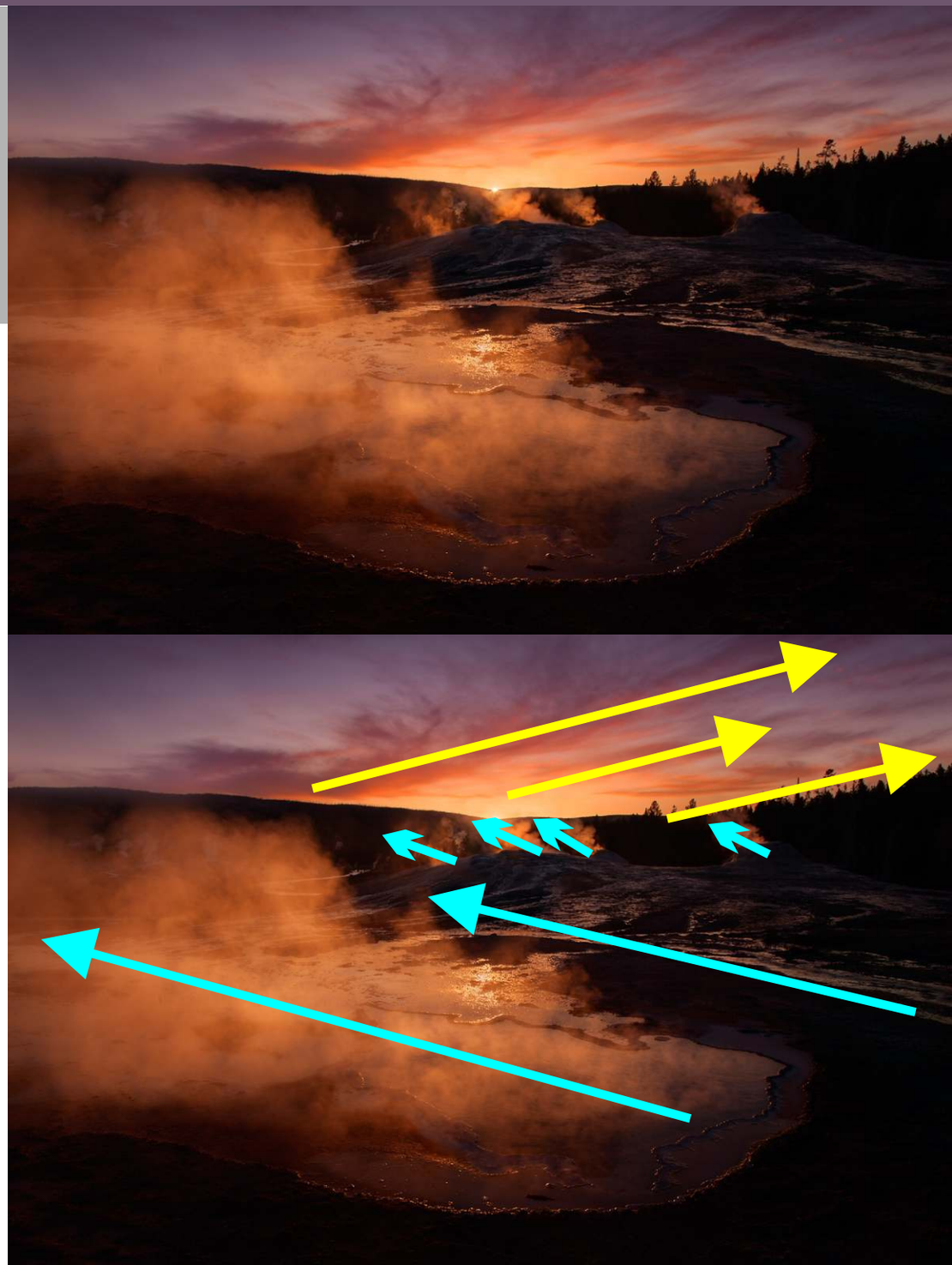


Opposing visual elements keep the eye focused within the picture frame, holding attention over time. The dominant visual energy created by the dark cloud pushes the eye left, whereas the dust cloud and the two mountain peaks help encourage the eye back to the right. "Dust Up in the Valley" by George Stocking (Monument Valley, Arizona).

A series of repeating left-leaning visual elements are balanced by a series of right-leaning elements. The use of opposing diagonals gets the eye moving back and forth. "The Cauldron" by Ian Plant (Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming).

example, the image to the right. There are a number of lines that lean from right to left, repeated over and over. They are offset by a smaller number of lines leaning from left to right, but these lines have sufficient visual mass to balance against the other lines. The dark mass of trees on the right and the brightly lit and colorful sunset cloud above both attract the eye and help balance the composition against the large number of opposing lines in the foreground.

The concept of opposing forces is important—so be prepared to hear some more about it!



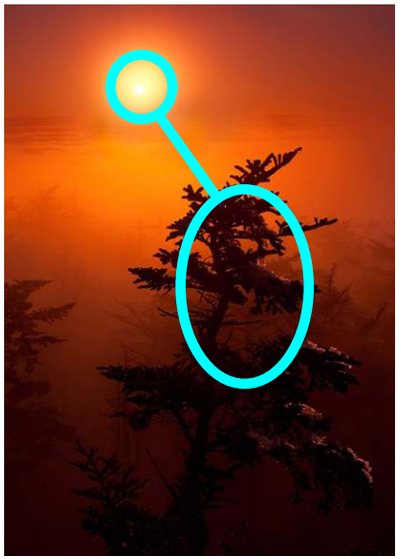
OPPOSING DIAGONALS

Okay, so you understand the concept of counterpoint, but when you have two counterpoint elements, where should you place them relative to each other within the image frame? The concept of *opposing diagonals* is a good way to think about the placement of counterpoint elements: by placing two eye-catching and important elements opposite each other, you can create an engaging composition which preserves dynamic balance. The reason I use the word "diagonal" is that more often than not, by placing the counterpoint elements opposite each other diagonally (as opposed to horizontally or vertically), a more energetic composition is the result.

The image to the right illustrates this concept. The opposing diagonal elements—the water cascading over the large triangular rock in the lower right and the bright area of sunset light on a distant hillside in the upper left—are placed opposite each other in a way that balances the scene without rendering it

Dynamic balance is achieved by placing counterpoint elements in an opposing diagonal relationship. "Vernal Impulse" by Ian Plant (Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee).

static. Often, it is best to have the abstract "line" connecting the two counterpoint elements pass through the center of the image—either along the vertical axis or the horizontal axis or, as is the case with the stream image, both. If both of your counterpoint elements are bunched up on the same side of the image, imbalance may be the result.

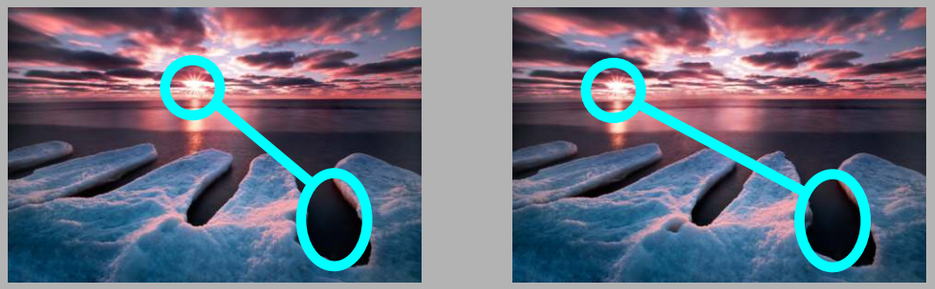


The image to the right is another example of the use of opposing diagonals. The sun acts as the counterpoint element to the dark tree. By placing these two elements opposite each other diagonally, the result is far more balanced and energetic than if the sun had instead been placed above the tree.

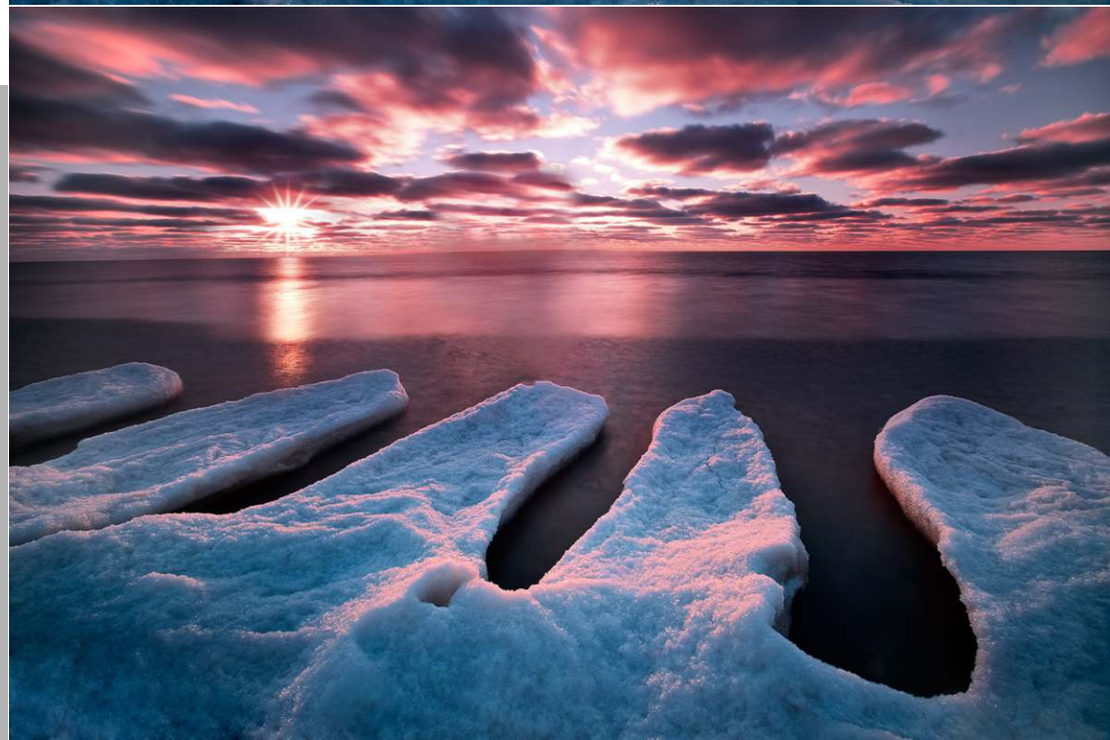
When working with opposing diagonals, it is important to get the relative spacing of each element right. Although

I can't say it enough: opposition is the key to successful image making! "Finding Zen" by Ian Plant (Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee/North Carolina).

the two elements don't need to be evenly spaced from the center of the image, you want to avoid any gross imbalance of spacing. For example, with the image to the top right, the two counterpoint elements—the sun and the large dark space between the ice on the right—are in an imbalanced relationship. The sun is too close to the center of the image, whereas the dark space is very close to the lower right corner. With the help of a little bit of Photoshop magic, I have "coaxed" the sun farther to the left of the image, creating a much more balanced composition. The result, to my eyes at least, is much more pleasing than the original. Too bad the sun was setting in the wrong place when I took this photo!



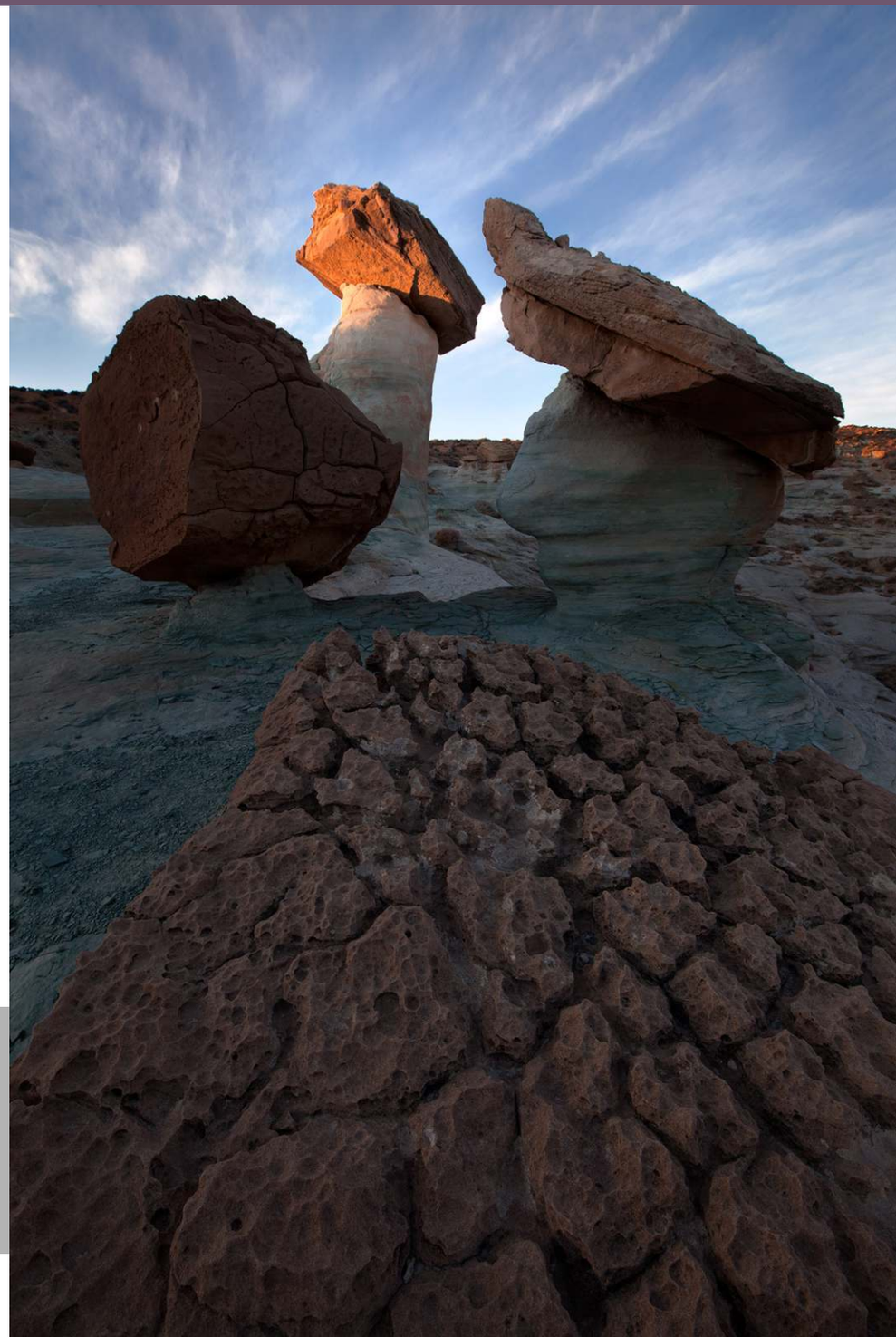
Left: The image is unbalanced by the placement of the sun close to the center. Right: By moving the sun farther to the left, the opposing diagonal is more strongly revealed. "Winter's Grip" by Ian Plant (Lake Michigan, Michigan).



AVOID THE "UNCANNY VALLEY"

The "uncanny valley" is a notion I have borrowed from the field of robotics and 3-D computer animation, which holds that when human replicas look and act almost, but not perfectly, like actual human beings, it causes a negative response among observers. Make a computer-animated movie character look *mostly* real, and people will think it looks weird, and the movie gets trapped in the uncanny valley. Scale back the realism a bit and make the giant green ogre look more cartoonish, and people will think it's cute.

The principle of the uncanny valley applies with equal force to composition. Sometimes, the elements of a scene don't align in a perfect way; one element or another is just a little bit off, or is somehow jarring to the senses. Forcing a composition in such circumstances can land you deep in the valley. The best way to climb out is to try to reposition, or to look for something else. For example, try as I might, I simply could not find a pleasing alignment of elements for the scene to the right. In order to get the sunlit hoodoo within the gap between the two smaller formations, I was forced



No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't find the right balance between elements, leaving me deep in the "uncanny valley." "Almost There" by Ian Plant (Stud Horse Point, Arizona).

into a position that placed the foreground rock slightly off center, creating too much visual weight on the right. Furthermore, the shape of the round boulder on the left is a bit at odds with the other shapes in the scene. Overall, the composition almost works, but not quite—leaving me deep in the uncanny valley.

Composition is all about trying to find a harmonious relationship between elements in a scene. When all of the elements align the right way, the result can be powerful and compelling. One misplaced element, however, can distract from the overall composition and disquiet the viewer. Spatial imbalance is almost always the prime contributor to the uncanny valley.

Let's take a critical look at the photo to the right. It's not a bad shot, but everything in this photo is bunched up on the left—all of the prominent yellow flowers are on the left, and

With this image to the right, too much visual energy is bunched up on the left. Although I think it is still a very nice photograph, it feels slightly unbalanced to me. A counterpoint cloud in the upper right-hand corner would have been nice! "Tetonic Jumble" by George Stocking (Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming).

so are the biggest mountains. What this photograph needs is something on the right side of the image to balance the scene. Without spatial balance, the result is an uncanny image that—ever so slightly—jars the senses.

While space can be used in a composition to balance visual mass, as with any compositional element, too much space, or poorly placed space, can unbalance a composition or otherwise reduce its effectiveness. A common example of how space is sometimes misused in photography is with featureless skies. Further compounding the problem is the fact that empty visual space usually isn't really empty—for example, even featureless skies have color and typically a hint of texture. A blank white sky can be distracting for a variety of reasons, its relative brightness being arguably the most significant.

The image on the left provides a good example of space overpowering visual mass. Empty space dominates a good portion of this image and draws the eye more powerfully than the main subject matter. One solution is to recompose using the Rule of Thirds, by placing the horizon line in the upper third of the image. Another solution, the one used in the image to the right, was to wait for something to fill the space. A passing cloud fills the void and creates a shape that complements and visually interacts with the spiral petroglyph below. Visual balance is restored, albeit with energy and compositional power.

The image to the left has a lot of visual mass at the bottom, but nothing but empty space on top. By waiting for a passing cloud, balance is restored. "Circles" by George Stocking (Saguaro National Park, Arizona).

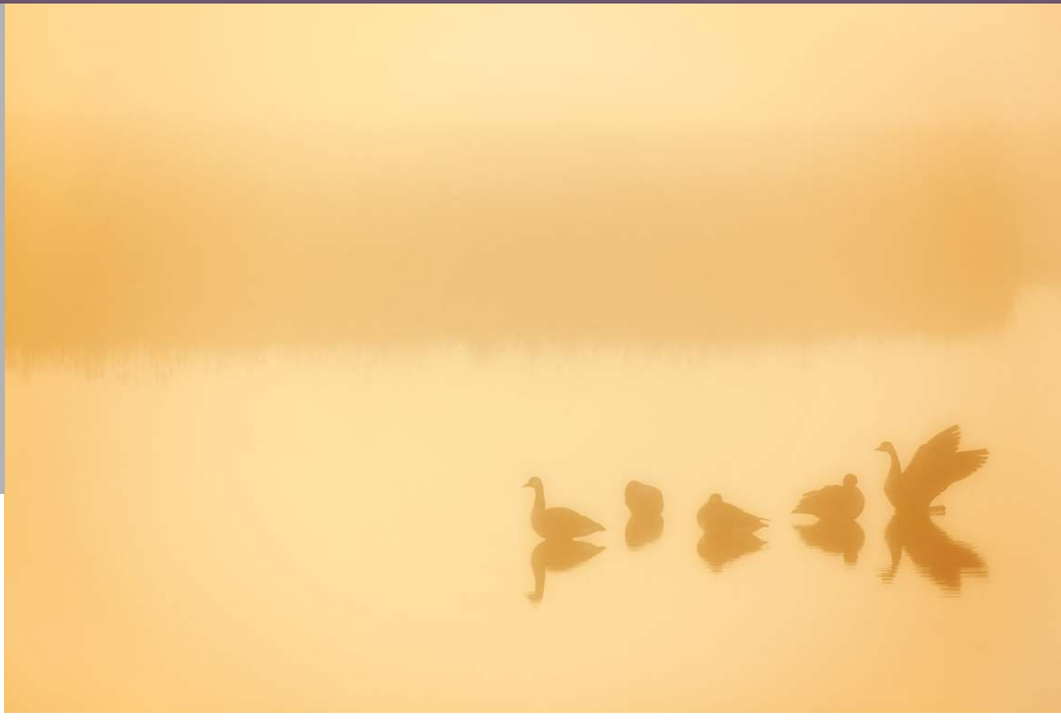
WATCH YOUR SPACING

As I mentioned previously, the concept of "space" as I define it in this chapter is somewhat broad, and will be used to explain a number of related concepts. At its most basic level, space refers to the positioning of visual elements within the picture frame. I'm going fairly deep discussing the various theories and techniques for creating a dynamic yet harmonious positioning of elements, but for this section, let's just focus on the spacing of elements within the scene.

First and foremost, it is important to make sure that elements aren't unduly "bunched up" together. In essence, you want to ensure (to the extent possible) that most important elements have some space between them. Giving important elements some "breathing room" or "elbow room"—or whatever you want to call it—is an important first step into understanding how to use spatial arrangements to create powerful compositions. Also, remember the previous lesson about visual mass: merging elements can become one visual mass if they are not sufficiently distinct from one another.

An even spacing of elements, however, can sometimes lead to static, boring compositions. Try to incorporate some variation in the amount of spacing you have between objects. This adds visual interest and helps keep the composition dynamic. Of course, there are times when an even spacing of elements is appropriate. Remember, as I say so often in this book, there are no

For the image above, most of the important elements of the scene, such as the distant mountain peak and the most prominent and interesting saguaro cacti, have a bit of "breathing room" around them. George moved around with his camera until he found a position that allowed for a pleasing arrangement of elements, optimizing space around each object in the scene. "Standing Watch" by George Stocking (Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Arizona).



For this image of geese rousing in a dawn mist, an even spacing of the birds worked best. I walked around to find the best camera position to ensure proper spacing. The symmetry is broken by their off-center placement, and the different poses each bird strikes, helping to create additional visual interest. "Foggy Morning" by Ian Plant (Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, Maryland).

hard rules, rather only a set of guiding principles and artistic theories. If even spacing works better than staggered spacing for a given scene, then use even spacing.

Not only should you try to achieve a pleasing spacing and arrangement of visual elements within the picture frame, but you should also think of the frame itself. Often, an element that is pushed to the edge of the frame can be distracting. Choose carefully which elements you wish to intersect with the image edge and which you do not.

Of course, there are times when achieving spacing between elements is not possible or even desired; you may have noticed that some compositional structures that we have discussed in previous sections of this book actually rely on the intersection, or merger, of elements. For example, using overlap to create depth actually requires a certain amount of "bunching up." Even when intentionally merging elements, think about the abstract shapes and visual masses created by the overlap. Try to ensure that these shapes have an appropriate relative positioning, even if they ultimately touch each other.

The bottom line is simple: think critically about the spacing of elements in your composition, rather than simply letting chance dictate the visual arrangement.

Chess grandmasters know that control of the center of the board is vital to achieving victory, although the pieces in the center might not be the ones that ultimately trap the king. Often, a master chess player will use flanking attacks to maneuver into position for final victory, but it is command of the vital center that allows this to happen.

If you learn only one thing from this book, learn to ignore those who fear and misunderstand the center of the image frame. Many who rigidly apply the Rule of Thirds cross themselves and make hissing noises whenever they see a photograph with a centered composition, acting as if they have just been accosted by blood-sucking vampires. Please, don't let such over-the-top displays influence your understanding of composition.

Instead, think like a chess grandmaster: the oft-ignored center now becomes a point of vital interest in your compositions. Just as in chess, you must carefully orchestrate the movement of off-center "flanking" pieces—in this case, compositional elements—with activity in the center. By creating off-center compositional interest, you can not only successfully place elements of strong importance in the center, but what's more, make compelling compositions rich with dynamic balance and visual flow. Remember, the great photographer succeeds at breaking the rules where others do not—just as the great chess grandmasters overwhelm their opponents with the unexpected.

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A chess grandmaster seeks to boldly seize the center, and so should you when it comes to composition. Embrace the center and all it has to offer, and greatness will follow!

Centered compositions are just another tool to add to your toolkit of artistic expression. But as the next few pages should demonstrate, centered compositions can be a powerful technique to have at your disposal. At the

very least, it should become abundantly clear that to master composition, you need to move well beyond the Rule of Thirds.

For example, the image to the right unabashedly violates the Rule of Thirds. Water flowing through an eroded sandstone fissure divides the image frame in half, running straight through the middle of the photograph. Careful use of off-center elements, such as the autumn leaves and colorful reflections on the wet rocks, helps pull the eye away from the strong centered element, creating visual interest. By getting the viewer's eye engaged in this visual tension, their attention is held over time.

The bottom line is this: an element can be successfully centered *so long as there are other elements in the picture to draw attention away from the primary element*. The center by itself does not prevent the creation of dynamic balance; rather, it is the lack of visual elements elsewhere that creates the problem. If you

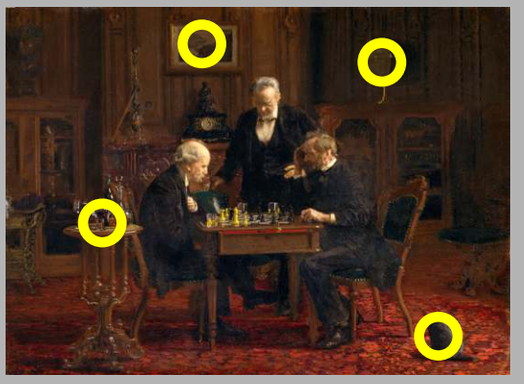
This image clearly breaks the Rule of Thirds by sending the most prominent visual element straight up the middle—yet it works! "The Crack" by Ian Plant (Zion National Park, Utah).

“By creating off-center compositional interest, you can not only successfully place elements of strong importance in the center, but what's more, make compelling compositions rich with dynamic balance and visual flow. Remember, the great photographer succeeds at breaking the rules where others do not.”

have other visual elements, then you can create a visual relationship between the primary centered element and the secondary uncentered elements. Proper selection and placement of off-center elements, however, is vital. You'll need to bring to bear all of the techniques discussed in previous chapters, as well as some new techniques I will discuss here.

So don't be afraid of the center. When you first started out as a photographer, you were taught to avoid the center for good reason. You've grown as an artist since then, so you're ready to tackle the center again. In the words of the Jedi master Yoda, “you must unlearn what you have learned” about centered compositions. Even if you don't believe me, how can you argue with Yoda?

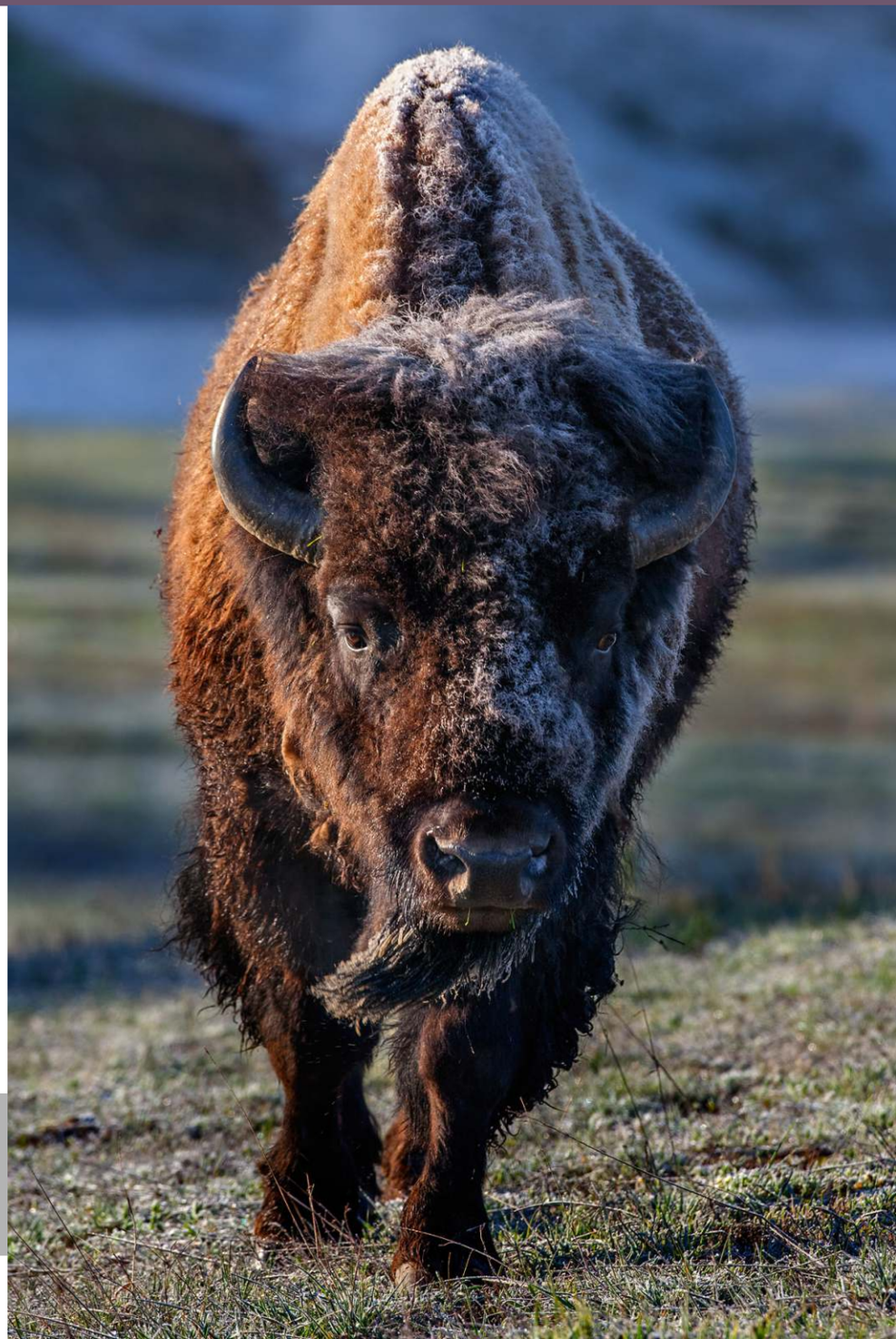
Source: Wikipedia Commons



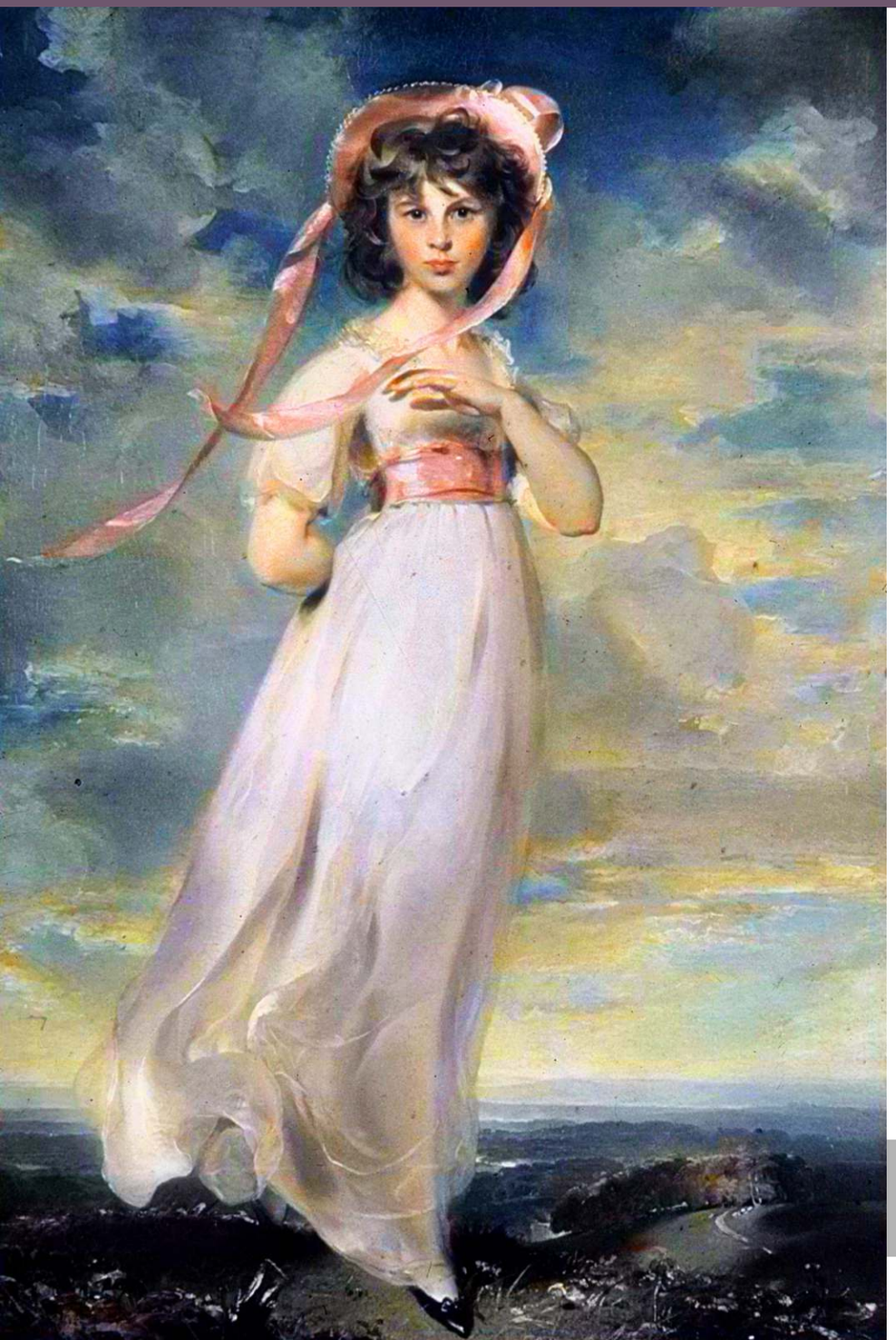
In Thomas Eakins's painting “The Chess Players” (1876), a dynamic composition results despite having the main subjects—the chess game and the three players—centered within the picture frame. Eakins created visual interest away from the center by the inclusion of secondary elements, such as the picture hanging on the wall, the globe, the wineglasses, and even a cat.

I bet when you look at the photo to the right, you see a bison right smack-dab in the middle of the image frame. Well, you're wrong. Remember one of the first lessons of this book, that you should always think abstractly about visual elements?

Okay, now that you have your abstract thinking cap on, what do you see? Not a bison, but instead a collection of shapes and lines: the curves formed by each horn, the abstract line that starts with the bottom right leg and continues up to the top of the hump, even the jaunty swirl of the bison's windswept frosted beard. All of these abstract visual shapes, working together, actually create visual interest *away* from the center of the image frame. And let's not forget all of the lines formed by background elements, such as the contour of the hill in the lower third of the image, the shadows in the middle, and



"The Frosted King" by Ian Plant (Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming).



the line of the river in the top third. But it's that curve of the beard that is visually most important: it encourages the eye away from the center, creating a visual counterpoint to the centered head.

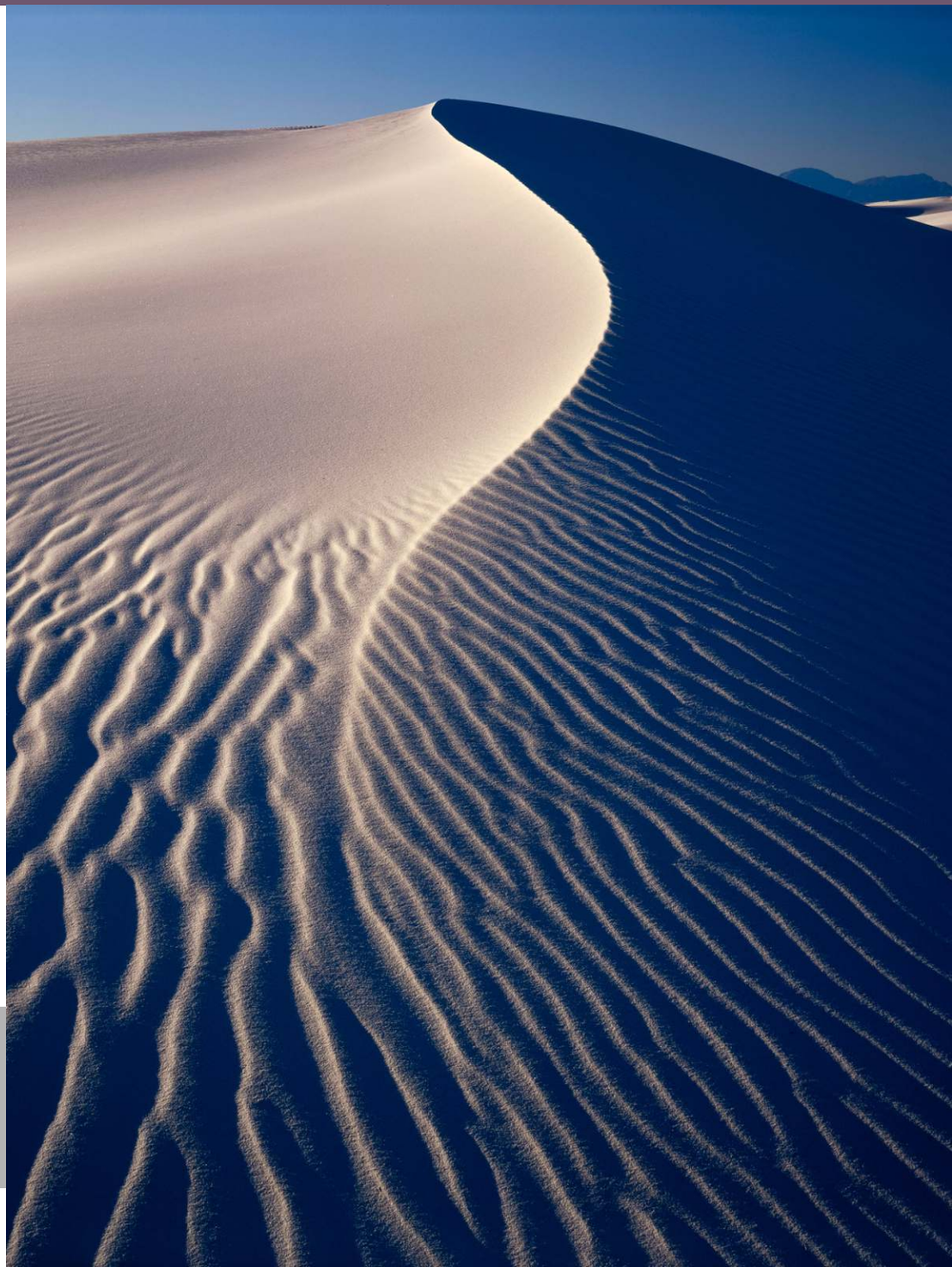
Similar techniques are used by portrait painters to mitigate the compositional dullness that can too often arise from putting the main subject in the center. For example, the diaphanous portrait to the left using a series of curving shapes to help create visual energy away from the center of the image, similar to the effect of the bison image (although the girl in the portrait is far more elegant than the grumpy bull). Even the abstract lines created by her arms help get the eye moving away from the center, creating energy and movement in the portrait. Notice also the masterful use of space on the right to help balance the scene and create a counterpoint to the girl's head. What's particularly compelling about this paint-

"Sarah Barrett Moulton (Pinkie)" by Thomas Lawrence (1794).

ing, however, is the fact that although the girl is standing exactly in the middle of the image frame, her pose and windblown dress displace most of the visual mass off-center to the left.

George's shot of a sand dune to the right is a great illustration of this principle applied to landscape photography. Here, the sinuous curve of the dune is the subject of the photo, and it is centered within the image frame. A curve, however, by its very nature creates energy, as its zigzagging shape gets the eye moving left and right, away from the center. The result is a centered subject that is also dynamic.

The lesson of this is simple: even a centered subject may not really be centered. When you think of your subject not as a complete whole but rather as a collection of individual shapes, you realize that your compositional options are greatly increased. Through the clever use of abstraction and deconstruction, you can find a way to turn your static centered subject into something engaging and lively.



This centralized dune sweeps back and forth, keeping it from being static. "The Inland Sea" by George Stocking (White Sands National Monument, New Mexico).

Counterpoint can be very effective at creating advanced and complex compositions that seem to break all the rules. One of the most important uses of counterpoint is in creating dynamic compositions even when a primary subject is centered, using an off-center counterpoint element to create visual interest, attracting the eye away from the center. Once you've mastered this technique, you'll soon forget that you even bothered to learn the Rule of Thirds.

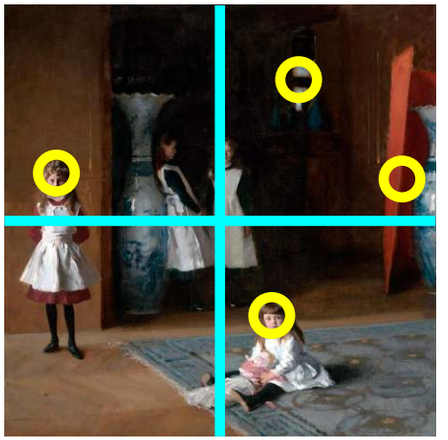
The painting to the right is a very good example of this concept. Although I'm not sure I consider this to be one of Van Gogh's best, it does demonstrate the strength of his artistic vision and his willingness to take chances. Van Gogh placed the sun right smack-dab in the middle of the painting (in terms of left to right). The little path in the foreground is also more or less centrally placed. The jaunty farmer on the right, however, is what brings the composition together and keeps it from being static. The sun and the farmer establish a counterpoint relationship, giving the painting life, energy, and above all, dynamic balance. The eye is instantly drawn to the visual space occupied by the two elements, whereas other elements (such as the farmhouse in the distance) provide further incentive to get the eye moving.

Source: Wikipedia Commons

A visual counterpoint relationship arises between the centered sun and the walking farmer. The path acts as another counterpoint element. "The Sower" by Vincent van Gogh (1888).

Source: Wikipedia Commons

This is one of the boldest masterpieces of composition of all time. Sargent had no fear when it came to his art! "The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit" by John Singer Sargent (1882).



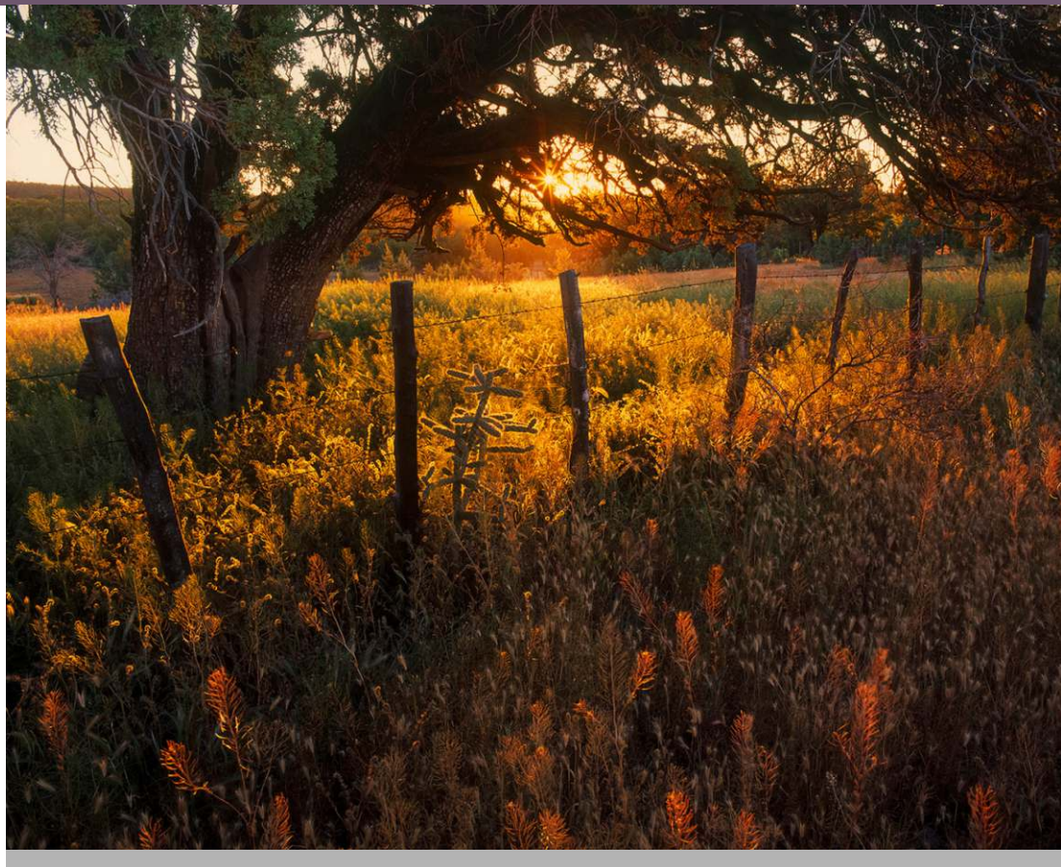
The painting to the left was made by one of the best artists to ever apply paint to canvas: John Singer Sargent. I've always been fascinated by the sheer subtlety, elegance, and brilliance of Sargent's paintings. In my opinion, if you really want to learn composition, study Sargent's work—a lot. He's a master at dynamic balance.

This painting ably demonstrates why you should never be afraid of placing elements in the center of the image, as long as you keep counterpoint in mind. In this painting, Sargent placed one of the girls right in the middle of the picture frame—a virtual no-no for Rule of Thirds advocates. Look how richly Sargent built compositional interest around the center of the picture space. He used several strong counterpoint elements to accomplish this, including the girl in red to the left, the younger girl in the foreground, the window in the upper right, and even the orange screen and giant blue vase on the right edge of the picture frame. The result is a painting that forces the eye to bounce back and forth—I've been looking at

this painting on and off for years, and even after all of this time, I still find it hard to tear my eyes away.

Strong counterpoint elements certainly help when you are trying to attract attention away from a centered subject, but by no means are necessary to do so. George's image of an old fence at sunrise paints a much different picture (so to speak). The brightly lit field behind the central fence post rather strongly draws the eye to the middle of the picture frame, as illustrated by the blue circle above.

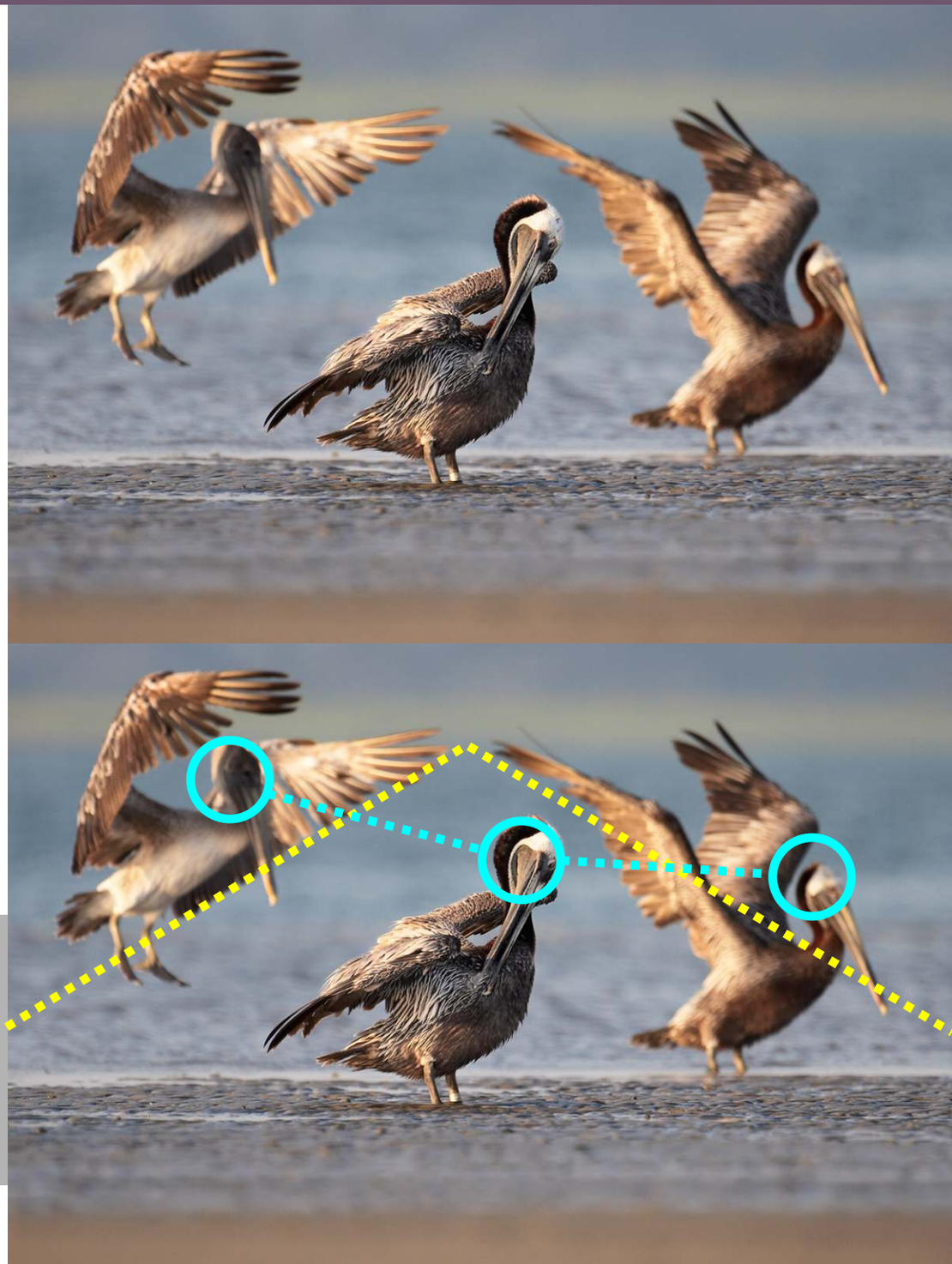
Rather than using bold counterpoint elements to create off-center visual interest, George instead used a number of subtler counterpoints, including the small star burst created by the sun poking through the tree branches above the old fence, a few strategically placed sunlit flowers in the foreground, the curve of the tree's branches arching overhead, the slightly askew fence post on the right, and even the visual progression and vanishing point created by the fence itself leading slightly diagonally from lower left to upper right. Basically, all of the techniques we have discussed so far in this book are beginning to come together. I suspect at this point you are beginning to understand that



Despite a centering of primary elements, this image is dynamic and well-balanced. Off-center visual elements help keep the eye moving and engaged. "Tonto Fenceline" by George Stocking (Tonto National Forest, Arizona).

each composition tool has more than one use. For example, the diminishing scale of the fence is used to create a vanishing point, not to lead the eye into the center of the image frame, but rather to lead the eye away from it.

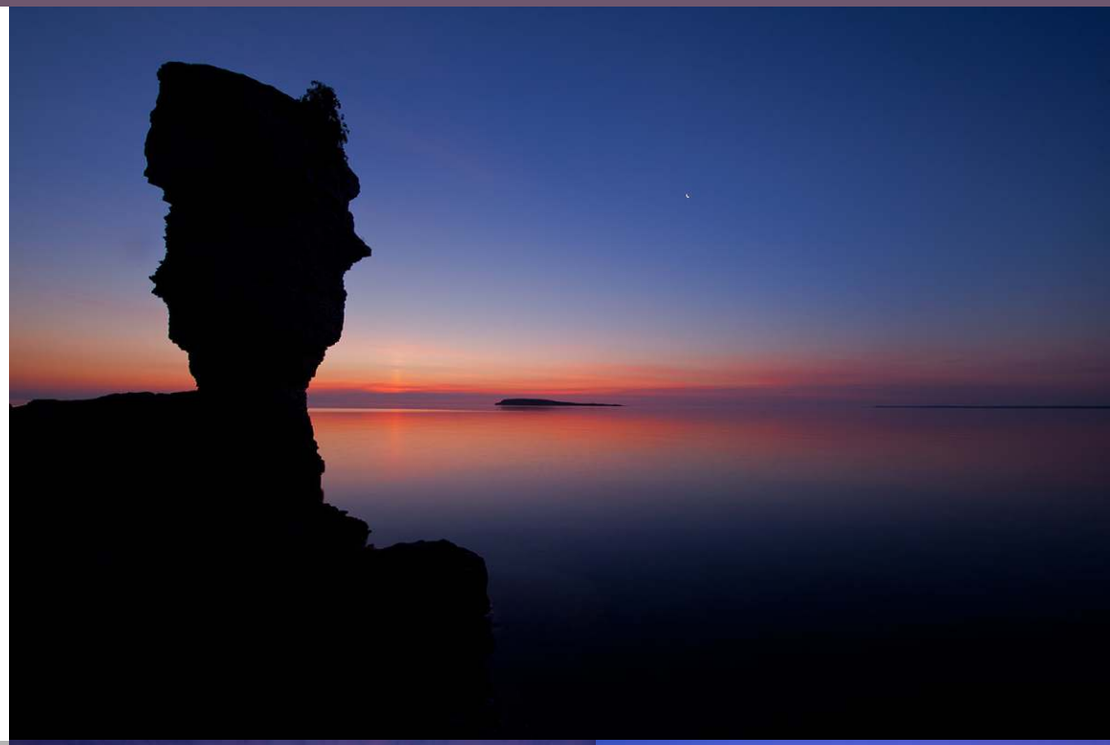
Arguably, some techniques aren't different at all, but rather merely different ways of thinking about the same effect. This is demonstrated by the image of brown pelicans to the right. Here, the two landing pelicans are used to frame the one in the middle of the image. They also act as counterpoint elements, helping draw visual interest away from the dominant center. Finally, the shape of the outstretched wings forms an abstract triangle, which also creates an implied vanishing point. All of these different techniques act together to create a dynamic yet harmonious composition.

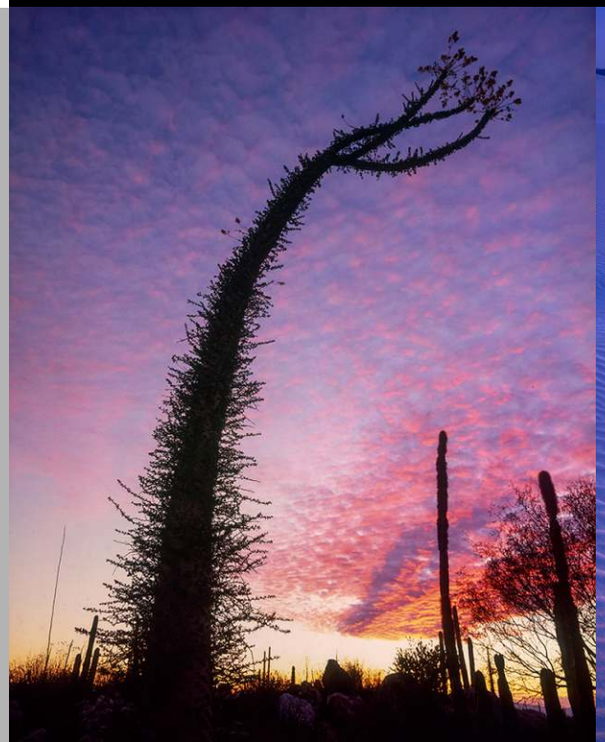


Despite the obvious centering of the pelican, I think it is fair to say that this image isn't static at all. The off-center pelicans provide significant counterpoint interest. "Pelican Transfiguration" by Ian Plant (Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge, Virginia).

WHERE TO PUT THE HORIZON?

As you can probably already guess from the discussion in this chapter, where to put the horizon in a photo is a matter of much debate. The Rule of Thirds says put the horizon in the top or lower third of the picture, but as we can see from the preceding section, sometimes putting the horizon in the middle works well too. Sometimes, pushing the horizon closer to the top or the bottom of the image frame than called for by the Rule of Thirds works best. And sometimes, placing the horizon just above or below the horizon works well. Clearly, there is no hard-and-fast rule concerning placement of the horizon within the image frame.





Here we see several different approaches to placement of the horizon. Top: the horizon is placed in the center of the image for optimum balance of visual elements. "Big Flowerpot and Crescent Moon" by Ian Plant (Fathom Five National Marine Park, Lake Huron, Ontario, Canada). Bottom left: the horizon is placed low to focus attention on the curving shape. "Boojumality" by George Stocking (Baja, Mexico). Bottom right: the horizon is placed almost at the top of the image frame to exclude a featureless sky. "Twilight" by George Stocking (White Sands National Monument, New Mexico).

For the image to the right, the horizon line is rendered indistinct by morning fog, making its placement in the image frame less critical than the placement of other visual elements. "Appalachian Spring" by Ian Plant (Shenandoah National Park, Virginia).

It will depend, in large part, on what is happening in the sky. If the sky is blank, consider putting the horizon closer to the top of the image frame. If the sky has interesting and colorful clouds, consider giving it more prominence. If shapes in the sky relate well to shapes in the foreground, a more even split between the two elements may be in order. My suggestion is to experiment with several different options, trying multiple variations until you find a preferred composition.

Remember, however, that the horizon line is a rather significant line, and it can visually divide a picture and block the viewer's progression through the image. This is an especially important consideration when the horizon is particularly distinct, but if the horizon is broken up or otherwise rendered indistinct by trees, clouds, or other elements, then the tendency of the horizon line to visually divide the picture space is lessened somewhat, as is the case with the image to the right, where the horizon line is rendered indistinct by fog.

The bottom line is this: you should worry more about the relationship of shapes, colors, and space within your picture frame than the ultimate placement of the horizon. These considerations will primarily dictate the placement and spacing of elements within your composition. Placement of the horizon line is an important, albeit secondary, concern.

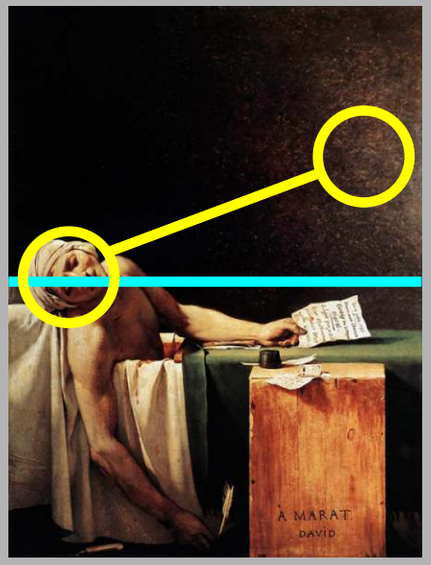
Of course, many photographers seem to think that putting the horizon in the center of the image frame is a bad idea. Too bad for them, because they are missing out on the sometimes glorious 50/50 split.

Nothing thumbs its nose at the Rule of Thirds quite as much as the 50/50 split composition. What I'm talking about here are compositions that are divided, either horizontally or vertically (or both), in half by an obvious line or split in visual mass. The image to the right is a perfect example: the composition is divided in half by the tops of the brightly colored autumn trees. This division is made more intense by the color contrast; the top half of the image is cool, whereas the bottom half is warm.

Rule of Thirds devotees typically disapprove of 50/50 splits, arguing that the result is too static and balanced. With most 50/50 splits, the division creates a heavy line going through the middle of the image, which can act to block visual progress from bottom to top or left to right. Under the right circumstances, however, 50/50 splits can clearly be very effective.

The line of bright aspen trees divides this image into two distinct halves. Nonetheless, George managed to keep the image interesting and dynamic. Although there is often a strong aversion among photographers against making 50/50 split images, clearly, they can be very effective when handled correctly. "Autumn Storm" by George Stocking (Gunnison National Forest, Colorado).

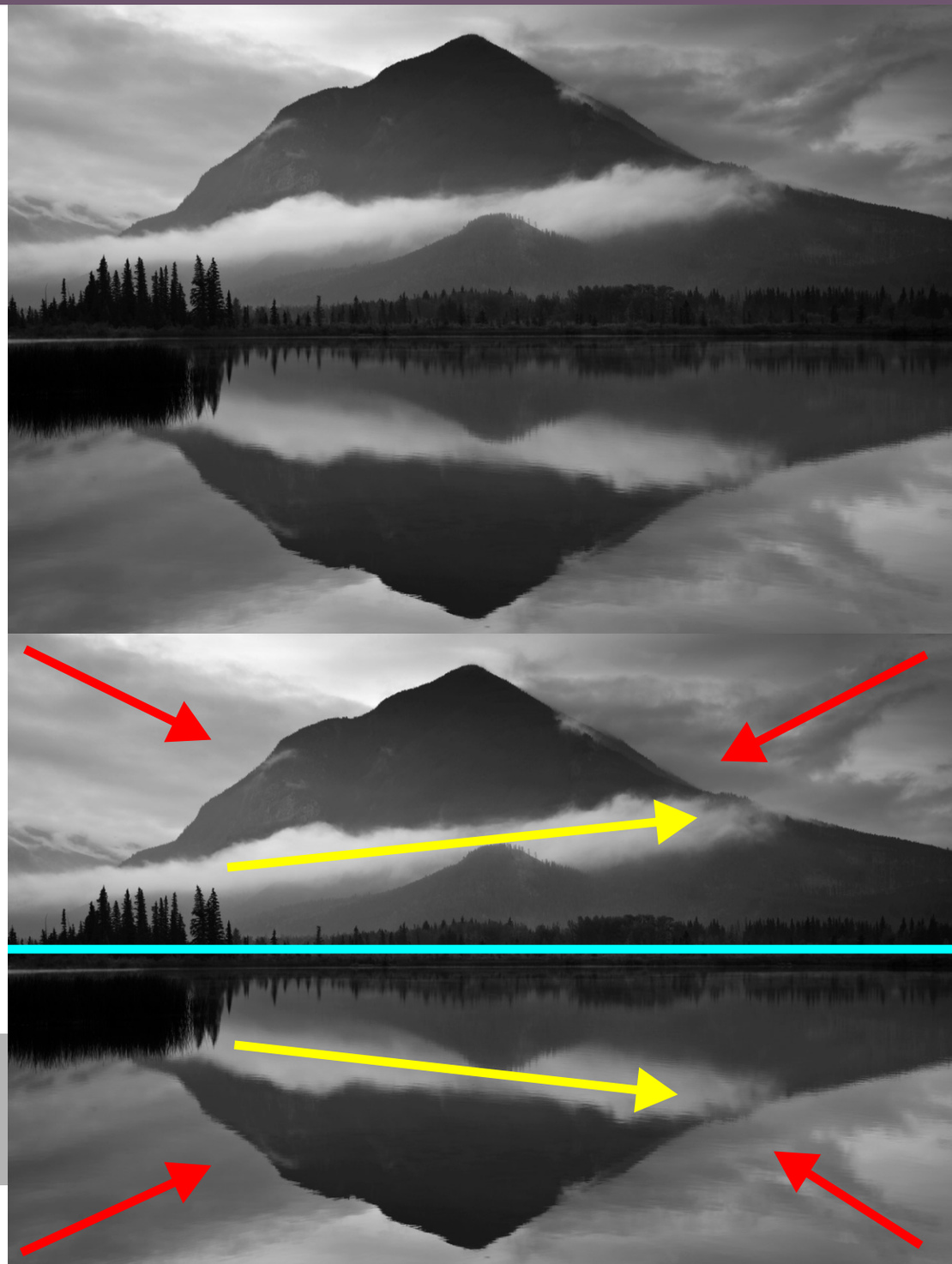
One of my favorite 50/50 splits in painting is *The Death of Marat* by Jacques-Louis David (1793), shown at the right. As you can see, the bottom half of the painting is dominated by visual mass, whereas the top half by empty space. Despite the 50/50 split, the painting is incredibly powerful. The strong imbalance of visual mass in the painting creates a powerful visual impact, yet nonetheless, the overall effect seems effortless and balanced. Note how the artist used the slightly lit area on the wall to the right as a visual counterpoint to Marat's head, one of several techniques used to create dynamic balance in the painting. It is a fabulous piece, worthy of close study.



"The Death of Marat" by Jacques-Louis David (1793). One of many compositional techniques used in this painting is the creation of a visual counterpoint between Marat's head and the bright spot on the wall to the right. The use of copious amounts of empty space is also particularly bold and effective.

Source: Wikipedia Commons

In nature, 50/50 splits occur most commonly as a subject reflected in water. Equal treatment of both the subject and its reflection can work very well. Even with a perfectly symmetrical composition, remember the concept of dynamic balance. The symmetrical treatment of elements certainly brings balance to the composition, so you need to include visual elements that will create energy and tension. Remember, your image may be symmetrical from top to bottom or right to left, but there are few instances in nature where an image will be both. That means you have one axis that is not symmetrical. For example, the image to the right of a mountain reflected in water exhibits significant energy from left to right. The dark mass of trees on the left visually anchors the image, providing a logical starting point for the eye's journey. The bright white cloud takes the eye from left to right, and the divergence of the cloud and its reflection creates visual tension, adding interest. Notice also the diagonal clouds originating from the upper left and right corners; along with their reflection in the water, these form diagonal lines leading the eye into the center of the image frame.



"A Melancholic Gasp" by George Stocking (Vermilion Lakes, Banff National Park, Canada).

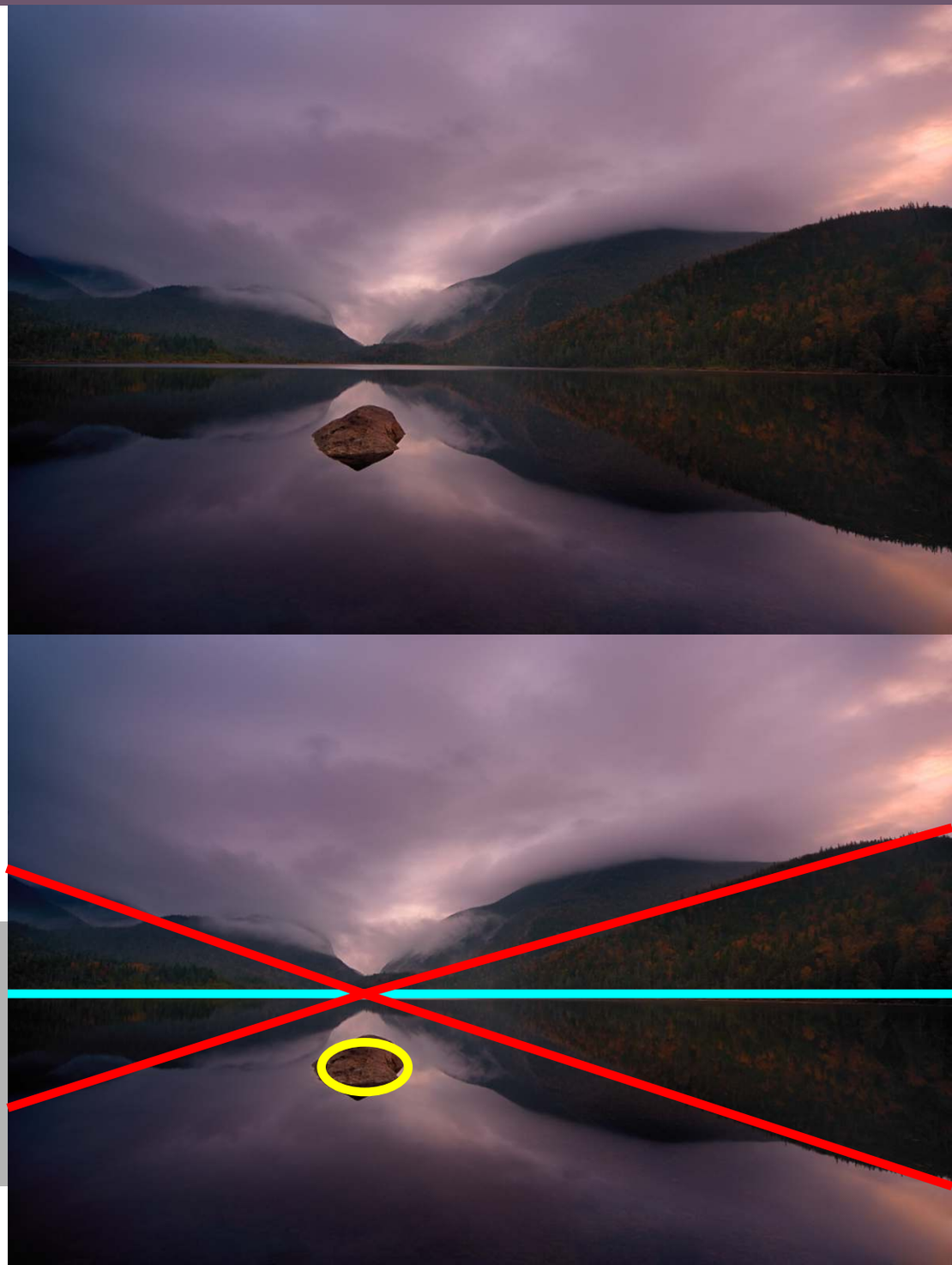
George effectively splits this image both horizontally and vertically, quite a feat! "Whitebarked Pine" by George Stocking (Crater Lake National Park, Oregon).

One of my favorite images of George's happens to be the one to the left. Not only did George divide the image frame horizontally, he also did so vertically—quite a bold move, in my opinion. George kept the image from being statically balanced by incorporating a series of energetic curves emanating from the center of the image. All of this helps keep the eye moving through the image frame, exploring everything despite the very obvious linear divisions of the photograph.

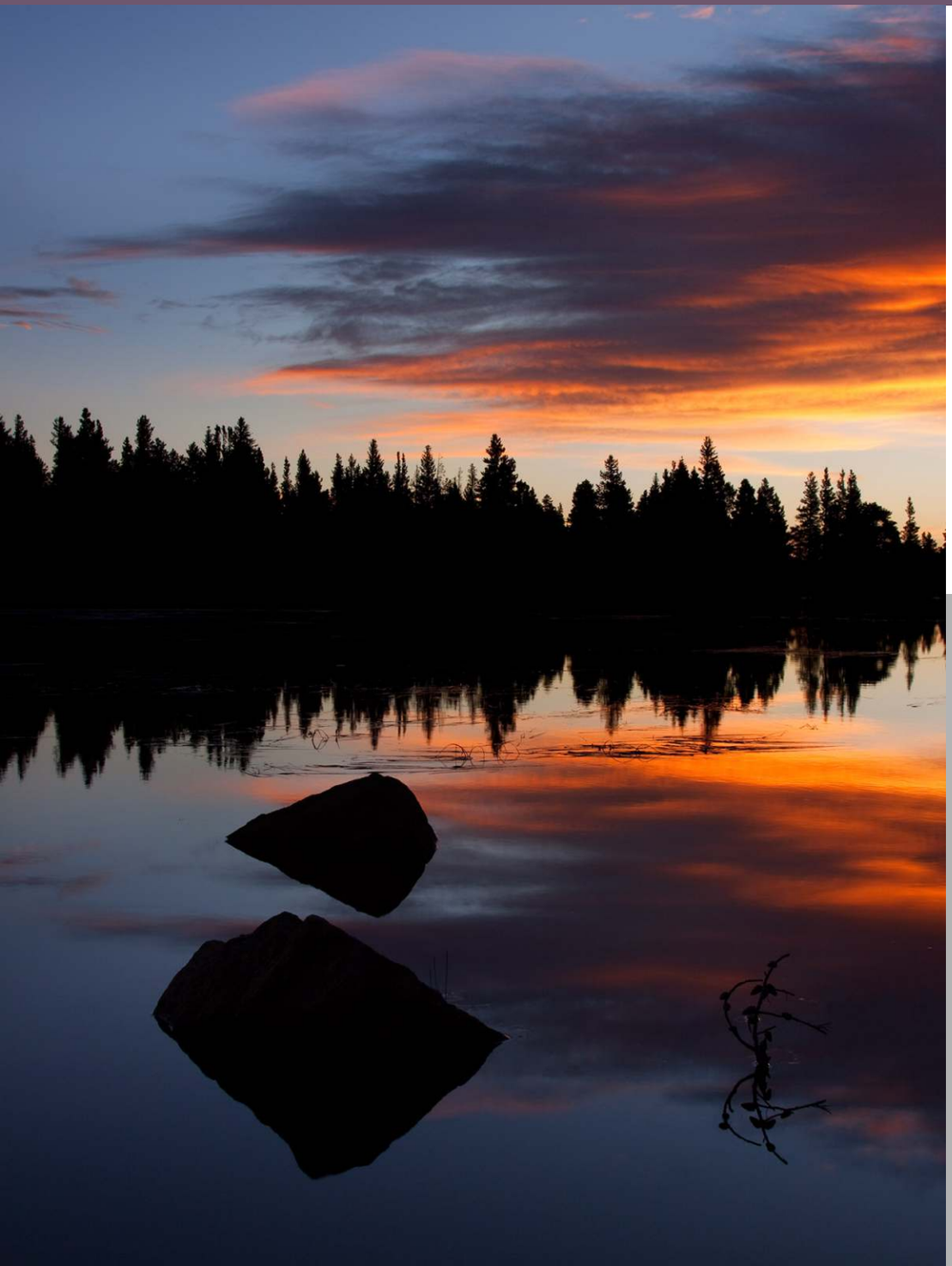
When working with symmetrical compositions, keep in mind this simple but effective tool: look for ways to break up the symmetry. Any element that diverges from the symmetrical pattern will automatically become a strong focal point for the viewer, immediately attracting attention and therefore helping to create energy. It is thus very important to place that element carefully within the image frame, utilizing other principles discussed in this book as necessary. In principle, this concept of breaking symmetry is not different from the concept of creating off-center compositional interest for an otherwise centered subject. The idea behind both principles is to transform an otherwise static subject into something more dynamic and eye-catching. George used this technique to great effect in the image to the left.

Here's another example of breaking symmetry to the right. The symmetry of this image is broken in two ways: first, by placing the horizon line slightly below the halfway mark in the image, and second, by the single boulder in the water, which becomes an obvious visual focal point. I composed the image so that the boulder fell within the space created by the reflection of the mountains, thus enhancing its prominence in the scene. The reflection acts as a frame as well as a vanishing point, helping create depth and drive the eye to the boulder. Other elements of the image, including the sloping shapes of the mountains, also help point the eye to this spot.

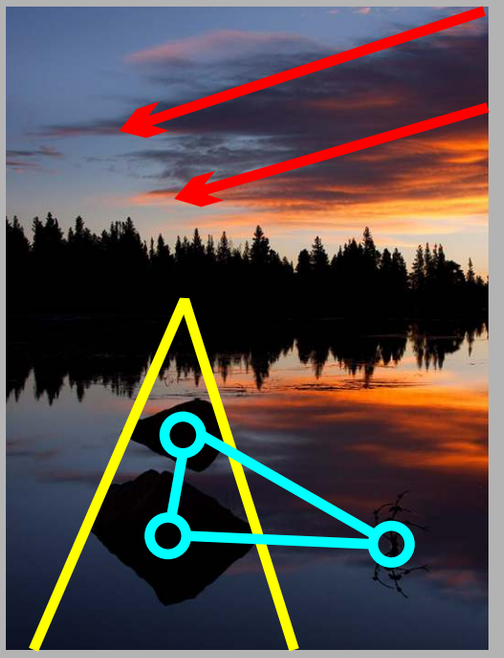
As demonstrated by this photograph, when working with reflections, elements in the water (such as boulders) can be very useful in breaking symmetry and adding additional visual interest, depth, and perspective to your compositions. One last example should help reinforce the point, and then we can



Breaking the (near) symmetry of this image helps create additional compositional interest, keeping the image from being static. "Quiet Morning" by Ian Plant (Adirondack State Park, New York).



move on. For the image to the left, the two boulders in the water create diminishing scale, as well as a visual progression of elements from foreground to middle-ground. Furthermore, the reduction in scale of the boulders creates two abstract lines that, when connected, form a vanishing point. A visual relationship is formed between the two boulders and the dead stick to the right, creating an abstract triangle that helps anchor the composition. Finally, the cloud in the sky acts as a leading element, pushing the eye into the middle-ground of the image.



This composition demonstrates how breaking symmetry can be very effective. All of these elements work together to help create visual energy in this otherwise symmetrically balanced image. "Mirror Image" by Ian Plant (Rocky Mountains National Park, Colorado).

"INTO THE WEST AWAY"

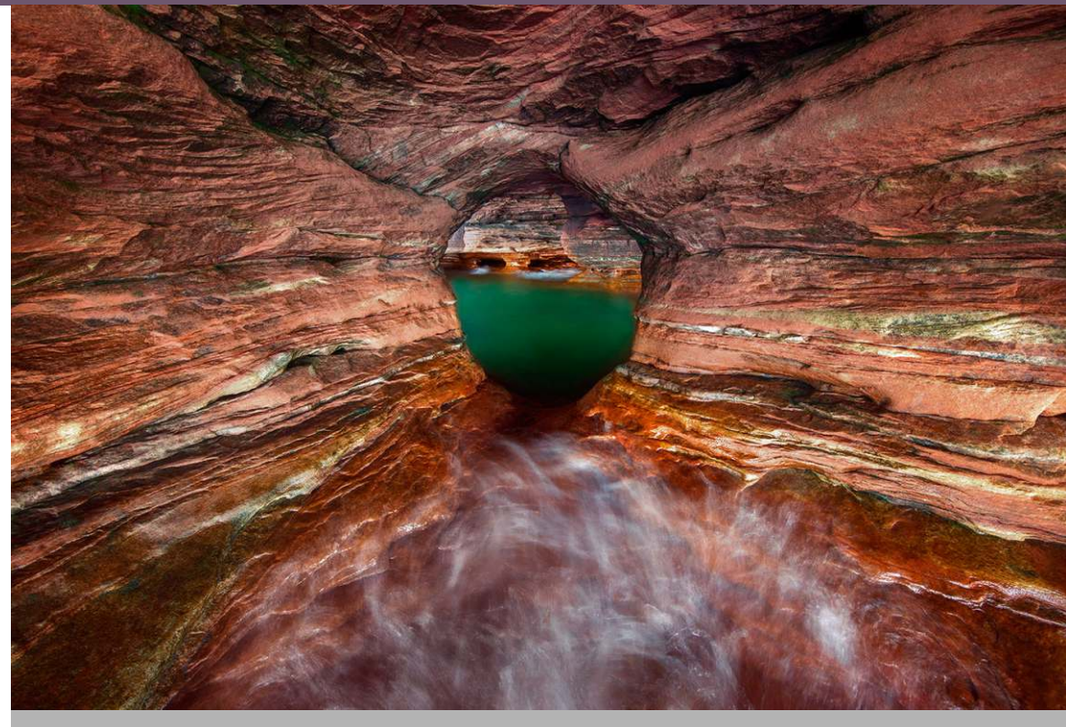
The title for this image is inspired by a poem by Alfred Edward Housman: "Ensanguining the skies, How heavily it dies, Into the west away; Past touch and sight and sound, Not further to be found, How hopeless under ground, Falls the remorseful day." Although I choose a vertical 50/50 split for this composition, elements on both sides of the canyon are not mirror reflections, but rather have their own unique character and shape. The element that helps get the eye moving the most, however, is the reflection of the sky in the water. Its curving shape helps break the symmetry, ever so slightly—the curve zigs the eye left and right as it leads deeper into the scene. The curve of the reflection is repeated by the curves in the canyon walls, helping to encourage the eye to travel to multiple parts of the composition. Finally, the curve is continued by the sinuous course of the canyon in the top part of the scene, helping bring the eye from foreground to background.

"Into the West Away" by Ian Plant (Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, Arizona).

When I was a wee lad, I used to fill my pocket full of quarters and head to the video arcade. There, most of my hard-earned newspaper delivery route money got pumped into a game called *Tempest*. While playing, I was transformed into a space-faring adventurer, firing laser beams from my ship at a horde of alien invaders emanating from another dimension. As much as I love my current line of work, I must admit that adding "Space Hero" to my *curriculum vitae* would be pretty awesome.

One of the things I loved about *Tempest* was its visual framework: it was a shoot 'em up "tube shooter" with a three-dimensional perspective. You controlled a spaceship on the outside edge of a vaguely rounded geometric shape, spinning around from tube to tube. All of the tube lines converged at the center of the screen—creating one-point perspective and a vanishing point from where alien enemies appeared. When you destroyed all of the enemies on the level, your ship traveled along its tube into the center of the vortex, re-emerging in the next level.

We've previously discussed vanishing point and one-point perspective, and so far, I've only hinted at their full potential for creating powerful compositions. Now that we've talked about how to effectively use the center of the image frame, we can tie the loose threads together. I should warn you, however—this technique is bold and not for the faint of heart. It can be the visual equivalent of driving a Mack truck into your viewer's eye sockets. The "visual vortex," as I like to call it, powerfully uses leading



A "visual vortex" effect is created when all lines lead to the center—leading lines, diminishing scale, and one-point perspective all come together to aggressively lead the eye into the image frame. "The Devil's Eye" by Ian Plant (Lake Superior, Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, Wisconsin).

The key to the visual vortex is to find a way to push all visual interest into the center of the picture. "Visual Flow" by Ian Plant (Antelope Canyon, Arizona).

lines, diminishing scale, one-point perspective, and vanishing point to draw the eye into the center of the image frame. It is a no-holds-barred approach, designed to capture your viewers' attentions and not let go. It takes no prisoner and gives no quarter.

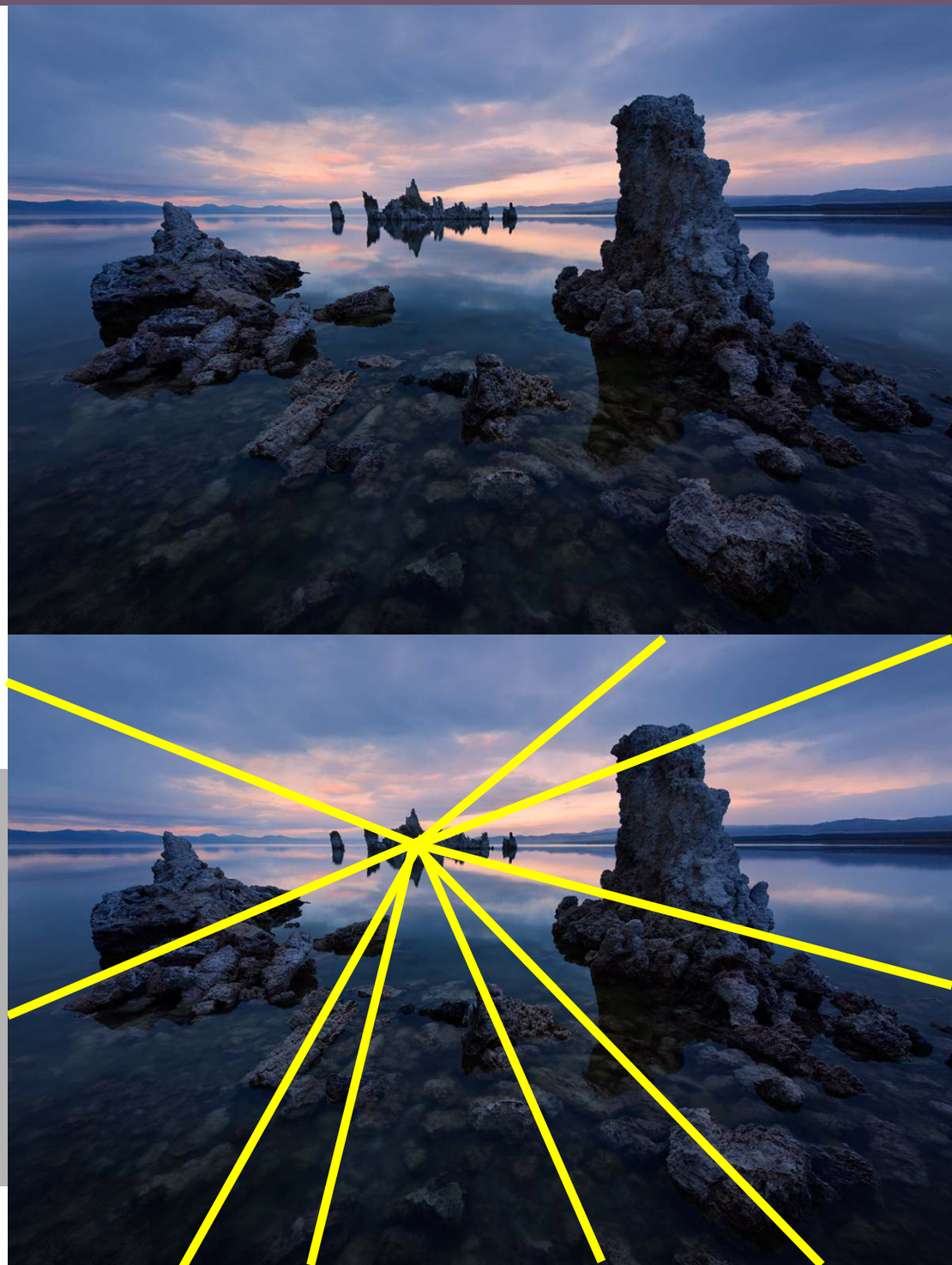
It is powerful stuff, and probably best used only sparingly, lest it become trite and clichéd. In fact, it is a technique which George and I rarely use—and when we do, we try to use it with some subtlety, rather than with its usual boldness. But what does it mean to use this effect "boldly" versus "subtly"?

When using this technique boldly, one looks for leading lines, such as the striations in the rock in the sea cave image on the previous page or in the slot canyon image to the left. The lines leave no doubt as to the photographer's intention, and all visual attention is focused in the same place. The eye is drawn to the vanishing point with nothing else left to do. This effect can be very powerful, but focusing all visual attention on the same place seems at odds with my overall advice in this book, which is to get the eye moving through multiple points of interest. This is why, in my opinion at least, visual vortex images can have great initial impact, but might not hold interest over the long run.

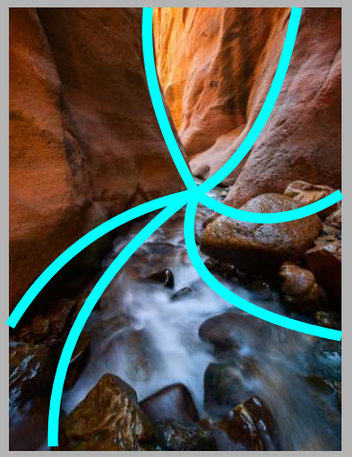
Using the visual vortex technique *subtly*, on the other hand, finds a way to diffuse some of the visual energy rushing into the vanishing point in the center of the image. This can be accomplished primarily in two ways. One, instead of using obvious lines, try using abstract lines in their place: this creates the visual vortex effect, but with much less power. Two, use the techniques discussed in this book to create areas of visual interest

away from the vanishing point, thus getting the viewer's eye moving back and forth within the image and preserving long-term interest in the composition.

The image to the right primarily uses the first technique, with a little dash of the second. Instead of using obvious lines (there are a few weak lines in the clouds but little else), I relied on the relative placement of visual elements to create implied abstract lines, all of which lead to a vanishing point located on the distant tufa rock formation. This creates the visual vortex effect, without beating people over the head with it. Because I used abstract lines instead of actual lines, the broken formations in the foreground act as counterpoints to the



A "subtle" visual vortex effect is created by the interaction of the distant centered tufa formation and other elements of the scene. If you draw lines from the tufa through the other formations, pieces of fallen tufa in the water, and the few faint lines in the clouds, you get a one-point perspective effect. I call the effect "subtle" because no obvious lines are used; rather, the relative positioning of objects creates abstract lines. "Tufa Twilight" by Ian Plant (Mono Lake, California).



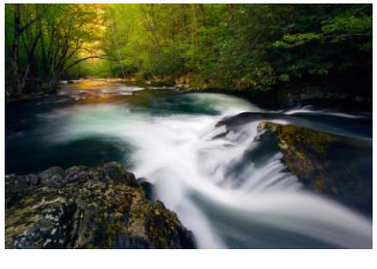
The visual vortex effect can be bold—or it can be used subtly to entice the eye, rather than command it. Here, I used a series of curves instead of lines, creating a "softer" effect. Notice how this style creates the radial shape discussed in Chapter Two? "Kanarra Canyon" by Ian Plant (Utah).

culmination of visual energy on the distant formation—all of the lines converge at this point, attracting the eye, whereas each foreground formation encourages the eye back. The result is visual tension between the foreground formations and the background formation, getting the eye moving back and forth and holding interest over time.

The visual vortex can be a fun and powerful compositional device. My preference, of course, is to use it subtly rather than aggressively, aiming to build interest in the composition over time rather than just creating a short-lived initial "wow" factor.

1. The Rule of Thirds is a useful guide to positioning elements within the picture frame: The Rule of Thirds is a simple fix, but one that does have some merit. Use it as a guide when positioning elements within the scene, especially the horizon. Place important elements at the intersection of two lines.

2. Balance multiple elements around the center axis of the image: Remember how powerful diagonal lines can be? Achieve the same effect by positioning two important visual elements in an opposing diagonal relationship, with the abstract line between the two elements passing through or near the center of the image.



3. Visual opposition is the key to dynamic compositions: Opposing elements create energy in a composition. Look for lines or shapes which tilt or point in opposite directions. A balanced arrangement of these elements can be powerful.

4. Use off-center elements to make centered compositions work effectively: The key to making centered compositions work is to include significant visual elements which are positioned away from the center, forcing the eye to move throughout the image frame.

5. The "visual vortex" style of composition uses leading lines and one-point perspective to capture the eye: When you have diagonal lines traveling from the image edges and corners into the center of the composition, an eye-catching vanishing point emerges, inexorably leading the viewer deep into the scene. This creates a commanding visual effect, one to be used judiciously!

“The beautiful is in nature . . . Once it is found it belongs to art.” —Gustave Courbet

“Rio de Las Vueltas” by Ian Plant (Los Glaciares National Park, Argentina).

CHAPTER FIVE
STILLNESS IN THE MIDST OF CHAOS

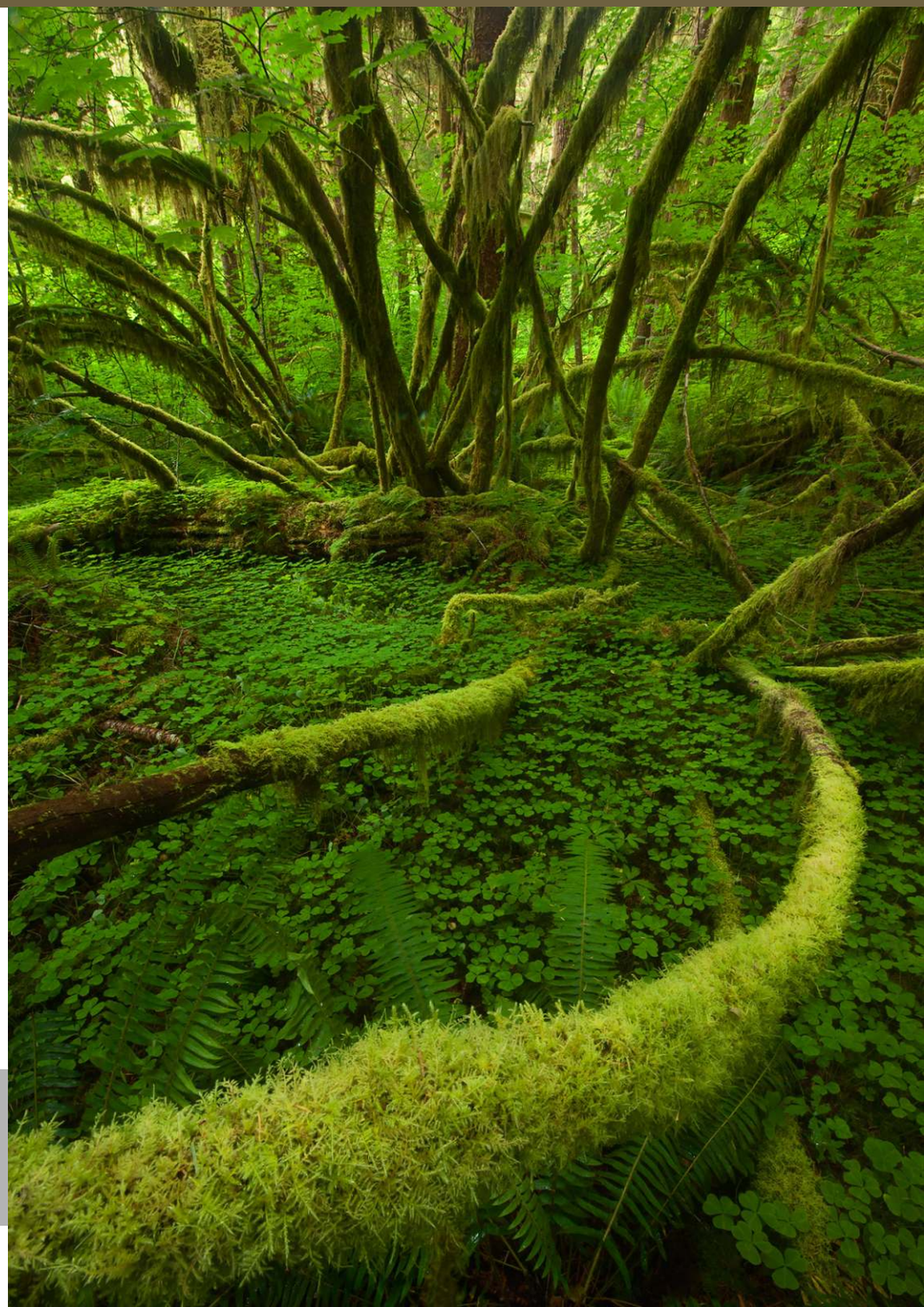
"Art is the triumph over chaos."—John Cheever

"Chaos is the score upon which reality is written."—Henry Miller

"Art is the achievement of stillness in the midst of chaos."—Saul Bellow

All of these "rules" of composition are well and good, but photographers face a challenge that painters do not. A painter starts with a blank canvas and has the prerogative to add only those elements that will support the overall composition. A photographer, however, must start with the real world. As we all know, the real world can be a messy, sloppy, chaotic place. We can control to some extent the elements within a scene through selective framing and lens choice, but in the end, we are left with the world as it is.

The challenge, then, is to find a way to tame the chaos. We must find a way to make elements of a given scene work together. We must calm the storm and create order. But how is this best accomplished? Before we venture into

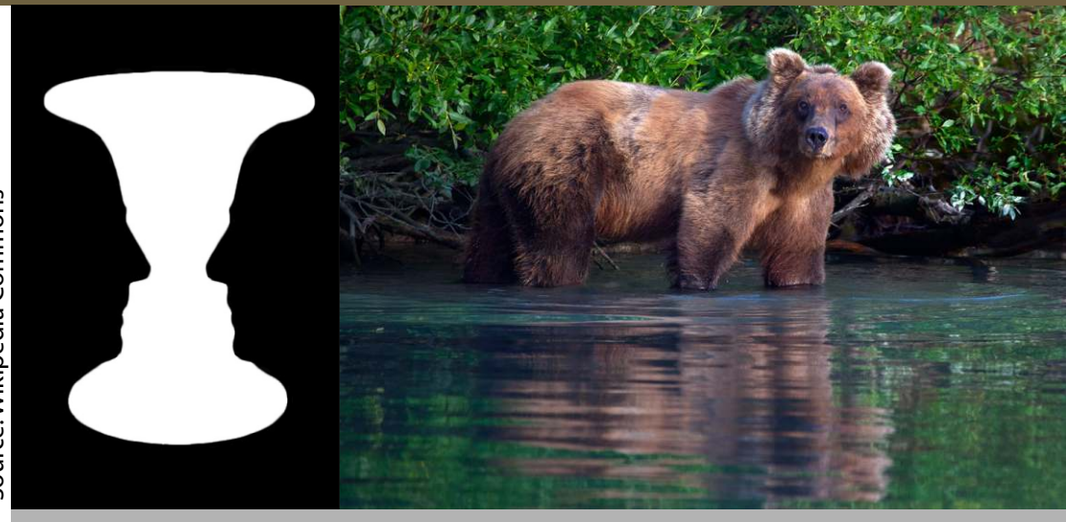


"Calming Chaos" by Ian Plant (Olympic National Park, Washington).

strategies for untangling the thicket that is our chaotic visual world, I bet you'll be interested to know that human beings have already evolved complex strategies for making sense out of all the disorder. For that, we need to turn once again to Gestalt principles.

One cornerstone of Gestalt theory is known as *figure versus ground,* which holds that people tend to perceive elements as either *figures* (distinct elements upon which we focus our attention) or *ground* (the background or landscape on which the figures rest). Our tendency to distinguish between figure and ground probably evolved to allow us to separate visual information that is useful from that which is not—for example, it allows us to perceive the hungry bear stalking us from the bushy shoreline. Figure versus ground illustrates our perceptual tendency to visually separate objects based on one or more elements of contrast, such as size, color, dark versus light, and shape. This principle gives us some useful insight into the way people perceive objects, and how we can use this to our advantage artistically to create order from a complex world.

To demonstrate how this works, let's turn to the famous Rubin vase illustration pictured in the upper right. This image illustrates the concept of figure and ground at its most basic level. If you focus on the white part of the image, you see a vase, whereas when you focus on the black, you see two faces. Whenever you see the vase, the white becomes the figure (forefront) and the black faces recede to the ground (background), and vice versa whenever you see the faces. According to Gestalt psychological theory, while your brain can switch between the two,



Source: Wikipedia Commons

Left: The famous Rubin vase diagram illustrates the concept of figure versus ground in action. When you focus on the faces, the vase shape becomes the background, and vice versa. Right: We are able to visually separate the bear from the background because it has a different size, shape, color, and brightness relative to background elements—and let's not forget that hungry look in its eyes! "Stalking in the Shallows" by Ian Plant (Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, Alaska).

Few places are as chaotic as the lush Sonoran Desert scene in the photograph to the left. When confronted with such abundant chaos, how does the photographer separate identifiable figures from the background and create a sense of order? I'll discuss several helpful techniques in this chapter. "Kofa Spring" by Ian Plant (Kofa National Wildlife Refuge, Arizona).

it is impossible to simultaneously perceive both figures and hold them in your mind. You can probably already guess how this would have been useful to early humans: when trying to concentrate on the hungry bear, it would be counterproductive (and possibly life-threatening) to be constantly distracted by every fluttering leaf in the background. Likewise, when you are creating a photographic composition, you want your viewer focused on the important stuff in the scene, and not distracted by unimportant elements.

Of course, the Rubin vase and the hungry bear are both very simple examples of this principle. Things get trickier when confronted with complex scenes such as the photograph of the Sonoran Desert to the left. Our world can be an incredibly chaotic place, but luckily, we have several techniques at our disposal for calming the chaos and establishing a sense of compositional order. These techniques are summarized on the following page, and discussed throughout this chapter.

I want to note at the outset that the answer is *not* to make every composition as simple as possible, although simplicity is a strategy that can and should be employed from time to time. I know too many photographers who always look for the simplest composition possible. The ability to master complex scenes is the hallmark of composition excellence and is something for which all photographers should strive.

Simplification: Reducing a chaotic scene to a few primary elements.

Bold Shapes: Use prominent shapes to create structure.

Eye-Catching Color: Use color and light to emphasize important parts of the scene.

Anomalies: A break in a pattern instantly attracts attention.

Shadows and Shading: Shadows and areas of contrast can help reduce disorder.

Visual Grouping: Contiguous areas of visual mass appear to merge into shape groups.

Repetition: Repeating shapes can create order and energy.

Halos: A dash of bright color behind a primary element helps draw attention to what is important.

Visual Anchors and Traps: A strong element that draws or traps the eye.

Convergence: Elements that visually appear to converge draw the eye.

SIMPLIFICATION

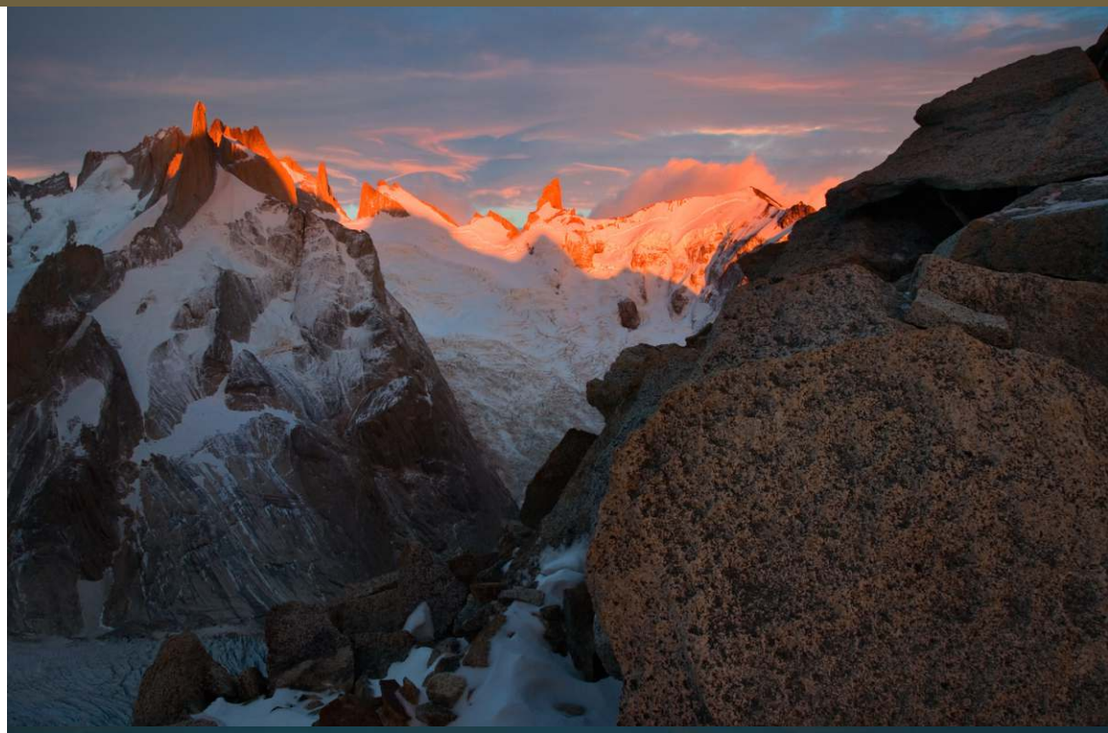
An important strategy is to simply do the following: simplify and reduce things to their essence. Most beginners have trouble keeping extraneous and distracting elements out of the image frame. Many advanced shooters struggle too, trying to get too fancy and complicated. As Ansel Adams once famously said, "There is nothing worse than a sharp image of a fuzzy concept." Taking his advice to heart is an easy and effective way to improve your compositions.

By keeping it simple, and including only those elements necessary to get your point across, your images can have greater impact on viewers. Telephoto zoom lenses are particularly effective for simplification, allowing you to easily isolate a discreet element of the scene. When telephoto isolation isn't possible, choosing simple subjects is always an option. "Keeping it simple" often means paring a

The image to the right demonstrates the principle of simplification: only a handful of elements were included in the composition, with the focus on the single glowing orange curve of sandstone. "Inner Glow" by Ian Plant (Navajo Tribal Park, Arizona).

subject down to only a handful of elements, sometimes as few as one or two.

The two images to the right demonstrate the difference between complexity and simplification. The first image, at top, shows a wide-angle version of the scene, incorporating foreground elements and other parts of the landscape. The second image, at bottom, represents a telephoto view of the same scene (although taken later during sunrise). The "simplified" version excludes everything but the jagged mountain peak, the cloud behind it, and the shadow below. Both views approach the same subject in different ways, with different results.



Top right: A wide-angle view juxtaposes foreground elements with the jagged mountains in the background. "Paso del Quadrado" by Ian Plant (Los Glaciares National Park, Argentina). Bottom right: By zooming in using a telephoto lens, I was able to exclude all elements from the scene and focus attention on one dominant theme. Personally, I prefer the wider view myself! "Cerro Gran Gendarme" by Ian Plant (Los Glaciares National Park, Argentina).

George resisted the temptation to get too simplified here—instead of only including the flowers, he included some of the surrounding foliage as well. The result is more sophisticated than a simple composition would have been. "Sneezeweed Cascade" by George Stocking (Gunnison National Forest, Colorado).

> *"There is nothing worse than a sharp image of a fuzzy concept." —Ansel Adams*

I know some photographers who take this concept of simplification and make it the cornerstone of their shooting philosophy, under the principle that "simplicity is the ultimate sophistication." Personally, I don't buy into this notion; in my opinion, *sophistication* is the ultimate sophistication. While always looking for simple compositions is certainly a strategy that you can adopt, I believe that many "simplification" techniques are available to help you create compelling compositions even with chaotic scenes.

While complex compositions are extremely difficult to master, they are all the more rewarding as a result—and, frankly, the whole point of this book. In this chapter, I will explore various ways for simplifying even the most chaotic scenes, allowing you to utilize this principle of "simplification" without always resorting to paring down a scene to one or two elements. Your goal is to use these techniques to create advanced and sophisticated compositions, ones that engage the eye on multiple levels yet still have an obvious and coherent theme.

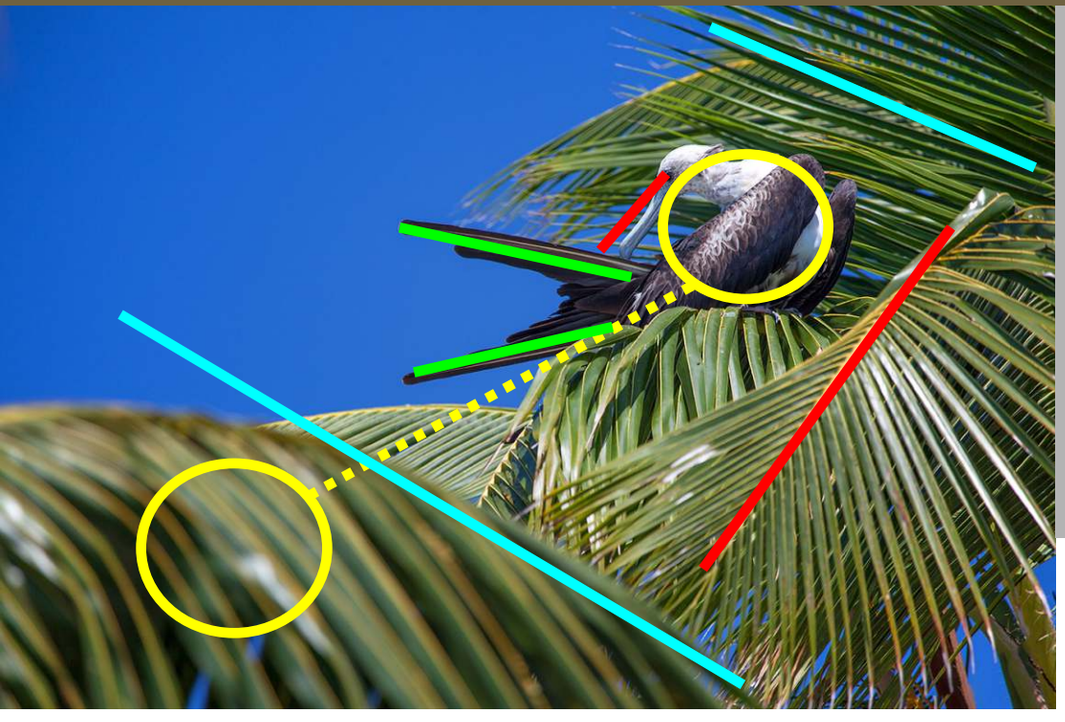
But first, let's talk a bit about a concept near and dear to politicians, magicians, and artists alike: distraction.

You've heard me say this over and over: there is great compositional power in getting the viewer's eye moving back and forth within the image frame. For some reason, however, a lot of photographers are taught to avoid any visual "distraction" that might attract the eye away from the main subject. This enduring composition myth has some troubling implications.

I think it is fair to say that this "distraction" rule, at its core, actually makes sense. Visual elements that are out of place can unbalance a composition, and sometimes really annoying elements (such as unduly bright "hot spots," for example) can in fact distract from the overall composition. The problem, I think, is with the extreme to which this rule gets applied. Too often, photographers think that *anything* that takes attention away from the main subject is a bad thing. Often, this couldn't be farthest from the truth.

For example, with the image to the right, I bet many devotees of the distraction rule would claim that the out-of-focus branch in the lower left distracts attention from the frigatebird in the upper right. I couldn't agree more, but my conclusion is much different—this "distraction" is at the very core of this composition. The branch and the bird enter into a counterpoint relationship, one that gets the eye moving back and forth. When looking at the bird, one cannot help but be attracted to the branch; when looking at the branch, one cannot help but be attracted to the bird. This visual tug-of-war keeps the eye engaged and extends viewer interest in the

Whereas some might find the out-of-focus branch in the lower left as "distracting" from the bird, I instead see a powerful counterpoint relationship that keeps the viewer's eye visually engaged, forcing it to move back and forth. "Victorious Frigatebird" by Ian Plant (Gladden Spit and Silk Cayes Marine Reserve, Belize).



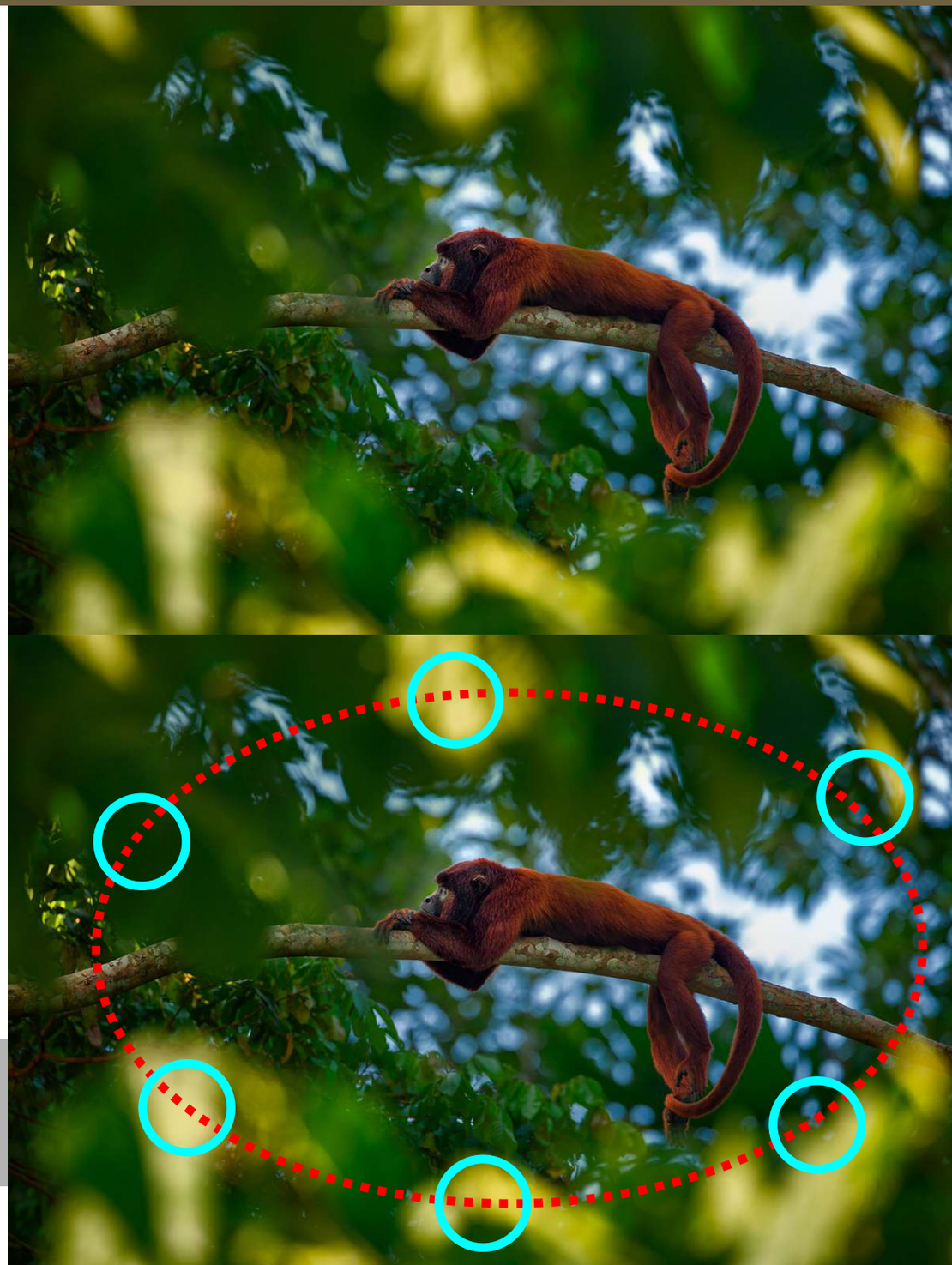
This image can be viewed as a series of repeating diverging diagonal lines, all which act to keep the eye moving throughout the picture frame. Without the foreground branch, the visual effect is less apparent—the branch repeats other lines in the composition, helping to establish dynamic balance. Furthermore, the branch acts as a counterpoint to the bird, creating a diagonal visual relationship between the two elements and encouraging the eye to move back and forth.

photo. The out-of-focus branch also acts as a "foreground" element, helping create depth and visual progression within the composition. Furthermore, it repeats other shapes in the composition, and it also helps establish a series of diverging diagonal lines.

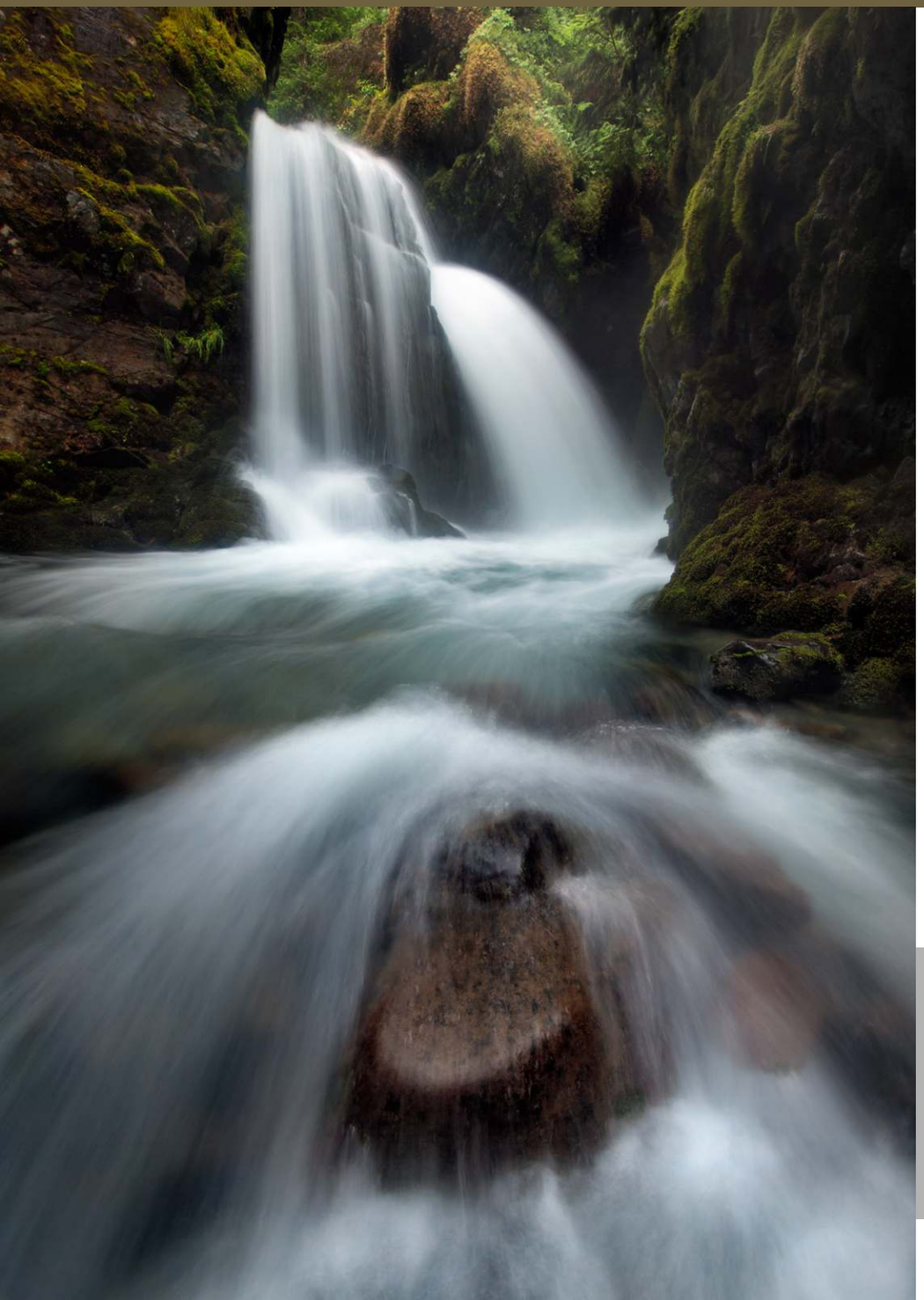
Of course, as with most things composition related, this is somewhat subjective and reasonable minds can disagree—one man's visual counterpoint is another's distraction. As a general matter, however, I think it would be wise to resist the temptation to visually simplify everything. While simplification has its place, if you do it all the time, you'll end up with compositions which might entice a viewer's interest initially, but will likely fail to hold interest over time. Remember, when the viewer's eye keeps bouncing back and forth between visual elements, they literally cannot tear themselves away—which is exactly the effect you are looking to achieve with your compositions!

"SUNSET SLUMBER"

Some might be tempted to say that the out-of-focus highlights surrounding this red howler monkey are distracting, drawing attention away from the main subject. Not me. Although they do draw attention away from the monkey, in my opinion this is a *good* thing. Here's why. First, the out-of-focus highlights create visual counterpoint, establishing a relationship between the monkey and other portions of the image space. This relationship gets the eye moving back and forth between the main subject and the counterpoint elements and moving throughout the image frame. Notice, however, how the eye always returns to the eye-catching monkey, leaving no doubt as to what is the primary subject. Second, the out-of-focus highlights create an abstract circle shape, which acts as a frame that further places visual emphasis on the monkey. Although the monkey's head is in the center of the image, I placed the monkey's body off-center to the right to create additional visual interest. This, and the curved line created by the branch, provide additional compositional structure.



"Sunset Slumber" by Ian Plant (Tambopata National Reserve, Peru).



When working with a chaotic scene, sometimes you can simplify the image by finding a single bold, eye-catching visual element that serves to automatically draw attention, keeping the viewer from lingering overlong on other more chaotic elements of the scene. As such, the eye-catching element acts as a *visual anchor*, providing an obvious reference point and a place for the viewer to start their visual journey. Other elements of the scene may attract the eye, but the visual anchor will always command attention. The best visual anchors actually serve to lead the eye deeper into the scene, and then attract the eye back to the anchor, staring the process over (and hopefully over) again. The effect is a composition that captivates the viewer, making it hard for them to tear their eyes away from the photograph. The foreground rock in the image to the left is a good example of a visual anchor: the rock immediately attracts the eye, but at the same time encourages the viewer to travel deeper into the scene.

Visual anchors provide a logical starting point for the eye to begin its journey, such as with the rock in the water here. The anchor also acts as a visual counterpoint to the waterfall in the background. "Virgin Creek" by Ian Plant (Chugach State Forest, Alaska).

Source: Wikipedia Commons

The couple in the lower right and the nearby boats in the harbor act as visual anchors, providing a logical entry point into the painting. "Starry Night over the Rhone" by Vincent van Gogh (1888).

One of my favorite examples of the use of a visual anchor in painting is Van Gogh's *Starry Night over the Rhone*. Can you spot the anchor? It is somewhat difficult because Van Gogh opted to be subtle about it, but the visual anchor is the dark couple in the lower right of the image. The eye is drawn to the couple, and from there encouraged to travel first to the boats in the water, and then deeper into the scene. After completing the visual journey, the eye is drawn to the couple again, starting the whole process over. Actually, it matters little if the visual anchor, or some other element, attracts the eye first. Here, even if your eye goes to the bright lights first, the couple eventually commands your attention. In this respect, a visual anchor can act much like a counterpoint element. The key thing is that the anchor should encourage the eye to travel deeper into the scene.

Be especially careful where you place your visual anchor. It should be spatially placed according to solid design principles, rather than haphazardly placed according to whim or chance. Remember, the visual anchor is the single most important element of your photograph, as it is the place where the viewer's eye is going to be drawn again and again. Also, remember that you can often use a counterpoint element in conjunction with a visual anchor.

Visual traps are similar to visual anchors except that they arguably attract the eye *too* much, holding it and not letting it visit other areas of the image. Whereas visual anchors start the eye's journey, visual traps stop the eye.

On the one hand, visual traps can be a very bad thing, acting as a virtual visual "black hole" that immediately sucks in the viewer's attention and doesn't let go. A "bad" visual trap can distract the viewer from other important

elements of the composition, and can limit the amount of engagement the viewer has with the image. Excessively large and dark or bright areas are examples of "bad" visual traps.

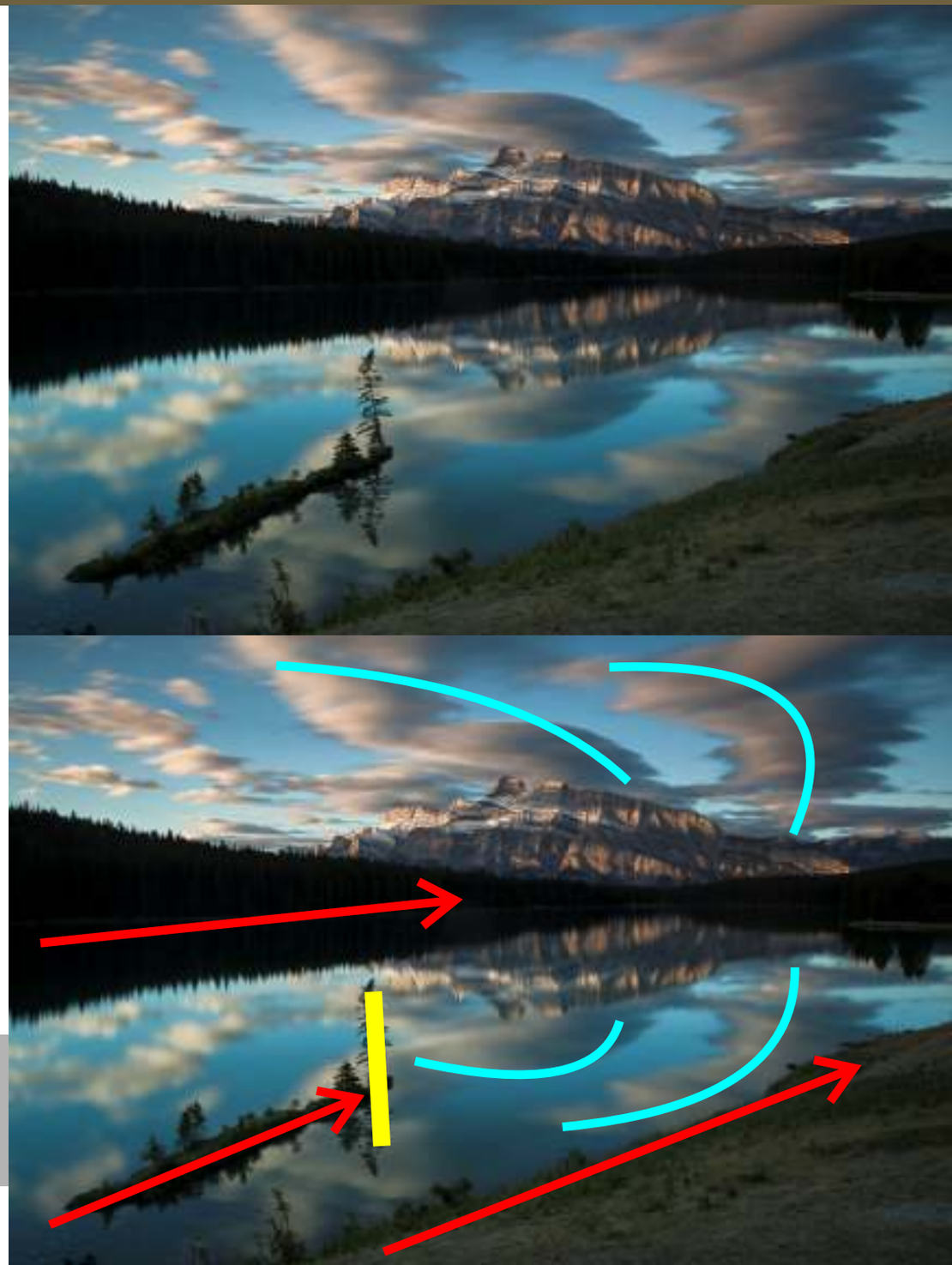
On the other hand, visual traps can be used to powerful compositional effect. For the image at the right, *all* of the energy in the photo moves from lower left to upper right. The result would be incredibly lopsided if nothing was there to hold the eye in the left-hand side of the image. The elliptical sand feature serves that very purpose. It forces the eye to stop and linger on the left-hand side before being carried along by the sheer force of right-moving leading lines. The visual trap keeps pulling the eye back, creating visual tension and dynamic balance.

Here, because the leading lines have so much power, a visual trap was necessary to prevent the eye from being propelled out of the image. "Admit One to the Vortex" by George Stocking (White Sands National Monument, New Mexico).

"SPIRIT OF THE ROCKIES"

This image has a lot of visual energy heading from left to right. Both the near and the distant shorelines help push the eye from left to right, as does the prominent line created by the island in the water (by the way, notice how effective these diagonal lines are at creating visual interest). The result might have been a bit lopsided, but George cleverly uses a visual trap to help diffuse the overwhelming right-moving visual energy. The small tree growing on the right side of the island creates a vertical line, which helps trap and hold the eye as it moves from left to right.

Radiating clouds above the mountain (and reflected in the water) create curves which help lead the eye through repetition. The clouds also serve as a counterpoint to the visual trap, helping to balance the composition and get the eye moving back and forth between the lower left and upper right portions of the scene. They also tend to push the eye back to the left, further balancing the composition and bringing the viewer back to the beginning of their visual journey—starting the process over again.



"Spirit of the Rockies" by George Stocking (Banff National Park, Canada).

Strong, graphic shapes attract and hold the viewer's eye. In a particularly chaotic scene, a single bold shape can act to unify the composition and reduce the clutter. The bold shape becomes the focus of the composition, drawing attention away from other, less ordered elements of the scene.

The image below clearly illustrates the use of a bold shape. There can be no doubt that the giant boulder screams for attention. Here, the bold shape has become the focus of the composition, with other shapes playing mere supporting roles.

There can be no mistaking the theme of this image: the bold shape of the rock boulder dominates the composition, focusing attention and simplifying the scene. "The King and His Court" by George Stocking (Chiricahua National Monument, Arizona).

Although the idea of using a bold shape is to draw attention away from more chaotic areas of the scene, care must still be taken when framing your composition. Unduly distracting elements can draw attention away from the bold shape, reducing its effectiveness at creating structure. Be careful to exclude overly bright and unattractive elements. With the image to the left, other shapes in the composition actually help focus attention on the bold shape, such as the lines formed by the clouds, which all push the eye toward the bolder.

Although a bold shape can be used as a dominant element of a composition (such as with the image to the left), it is not necessary to simplify your composition to focus only on the bold shape itself. Complex compositions can benefit from the use of bold shapes and their ability to create order. For example, with the

The bright bush to the far left acts as a bold shape, creating a visual anchor that simplifies the scene and distracts attention from more chaotic places. "Kolob Dreams" by Ian Plant (Zion National Park, Utah).

desert image above, I was confronted by a very complex scene. I explored the area for several hours, struggling to find something to cut through the chaos. Sunset came and went before I found what I was looking for: a single, bold, and dominant shape to bring much-needed order to my composition. The brightly colored desert bush in the lower left worked perfectly. Note that here, the bold shape also acts as a visual anchor. The bush creates a strong, curving shape which immediately attracts the eye and distracts the viewer from the chaotic jumble of visual elements throughout the rest of the scene.

Without the bold shape, the composition would have been confusing and muddled, and in any event, it would have likely been less interesting.

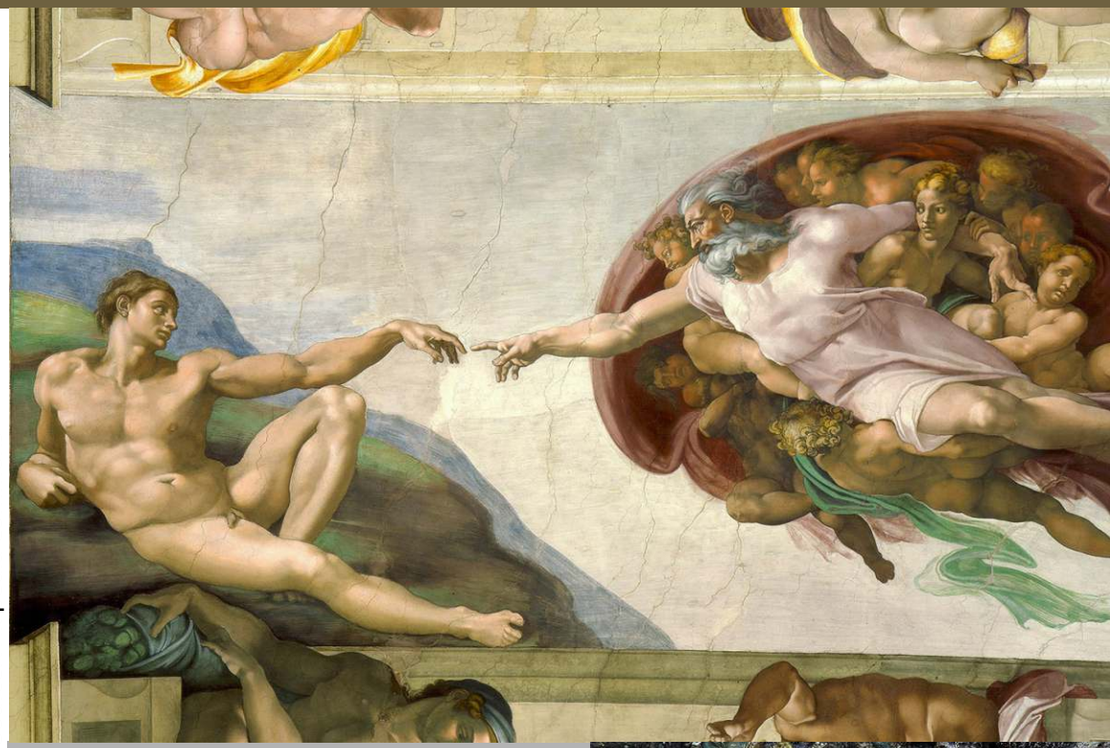
In order to emphasize and increase the relative size of the bold shape, I got close to the bush with a wide-angle lens. This made the shape loom larger than it looked to the eye, giving it prominence relative to some of the distracting elements in the foreground and middle-ground. By using wide-angle perspective to manipulate the relative size of visual masses in the composition, I was able to further emphasize the bold shape.

As demonstrated by the image on this page, the concepts of bold shapes and visual anchors substantially overlap. I often look for bold shapes to be my visual anchors, although not always. These concepts will come up again as we discuss more simplification techniques in this chapter.

Elements which physically appear to converge (or, more usefully, nearly converge) can be very useful for creating points of visual interest in compositions. The eye is automatically attracted to the area of convergence, creating a compositional "power point."

The most famous convergence in Western art has to be *The Creation of Adam* (top right), Michelangelo's masterpiece of masterpieces, part of the network of frescos he painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The eye is instantly drawn to the almost touching fingers of God and Adam. This painting remains to this day one of the most iconic pieces of art in the world, for good reason—Michelangelo was really good at what he did.

Although not nearly as important a piece of art (yet), my photograph titled *The Creation of Orange Starfish* (bottom right) uses the same technique, albeit with slightly less grandiose results. I did my best with what I had, but let's face it, starfish aren't quite as lofty a theme as the creation of humanity. By the way, I really found these starfish positioned exactly as they were. Anyone who has ever tried to pry a starfish off a rock knows that they are not easy to move into position for a photograph.

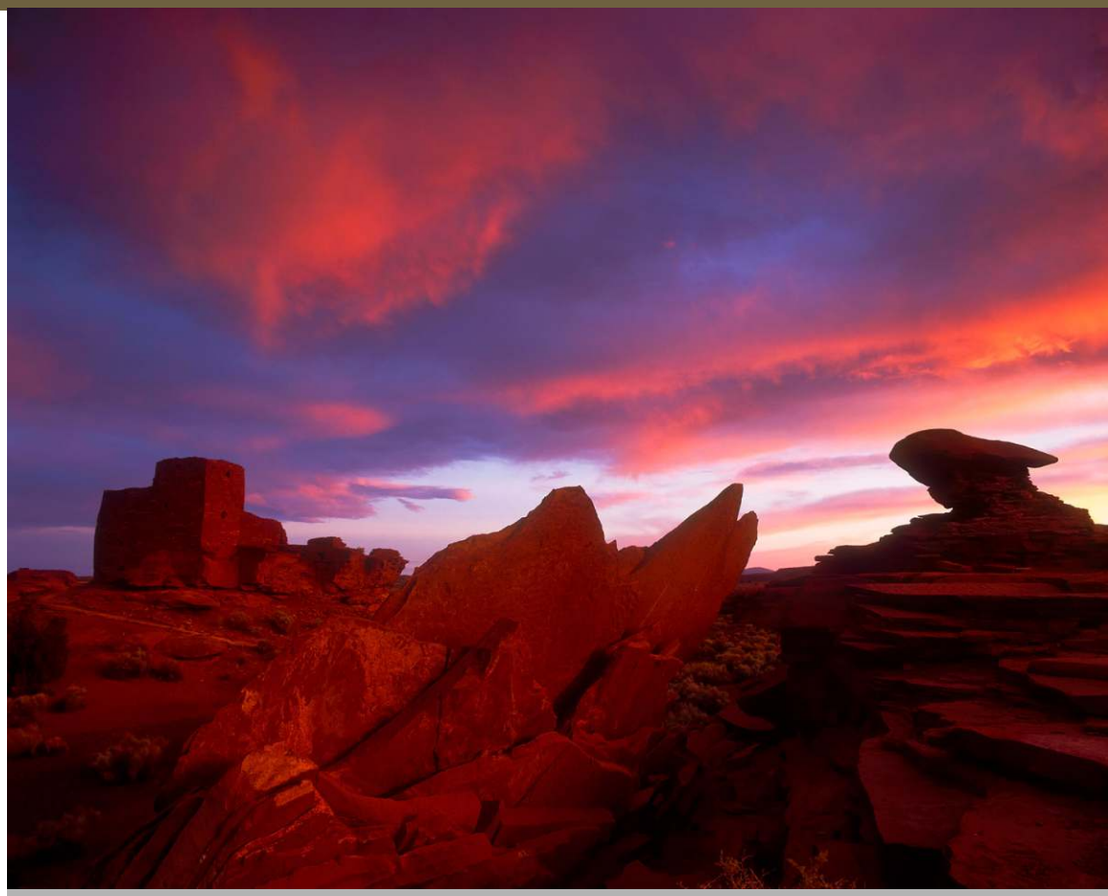


Source: Wikipedia Commons

Top: The convergence of elements instantly draws attention to the pointing fingers. "The Creation of Adam" by Michelangelo (1511). Right: My personal take on the Sistine Chapel's famous creation scene uses the same technique. "The Creation of Orange Starfish" by Ian Plant (Olympic National Park, Washington).

All joking aside, convergence is a very powerful tool for simplifying a composition and directing the viewer's eye to what's important in a scene. For example, in the image to the right, the first obvious area of convergence is between the ancient stone building on the left and the tendril of cloud right above it, descending from the sky. The interaction between these two elements instantly draws the eye. A more subtle convergence occurs between the two rocks on the right. Each triangle-shaped rock points to the other, creating a second visual convergence that acts as a counterpoint to the first convergence.

As can be seen from this image, clouds can be very useful to landscape photographers seeking to create convergence, although one might have to wait some time for the cloud to get into the correct position. Of course, even static elements of the landscape can converge, often requiring little more than some clever camera repositioning to establish the proper visual relationship between the two elements. Multiple convergences can be used to establish visual counterpoint. Care must be taken (using the concepts discussed elsewhere in this book) to ensure that the area of convergence has compositional power. Improper placement of convergences can lead to imbalanced or static compositions.



Two points of convergence act as visual counterpoints to one another, creating balance. "Wukoki Convergence" by George Stocking (Wupatki National Monument, Arizona).

Sometimes, a subtle convergence can unify a busy composition and create compositional structure. The image to the left is a good example of how even a "minor" convergence can create a powerful composition. The convergence of the tendril of cloud dropping toward the middle of the image frame and the saguaro cacti beneath it creates an eye-catching focal point for the rest of the scene. Notice how George framed the convergence with the saguaro on the left and the ocotillo bush on the right, thus giving the area of convergence even more prominence. The progression of cacti from foreground to background completes the composition, inviting the viewer to travel

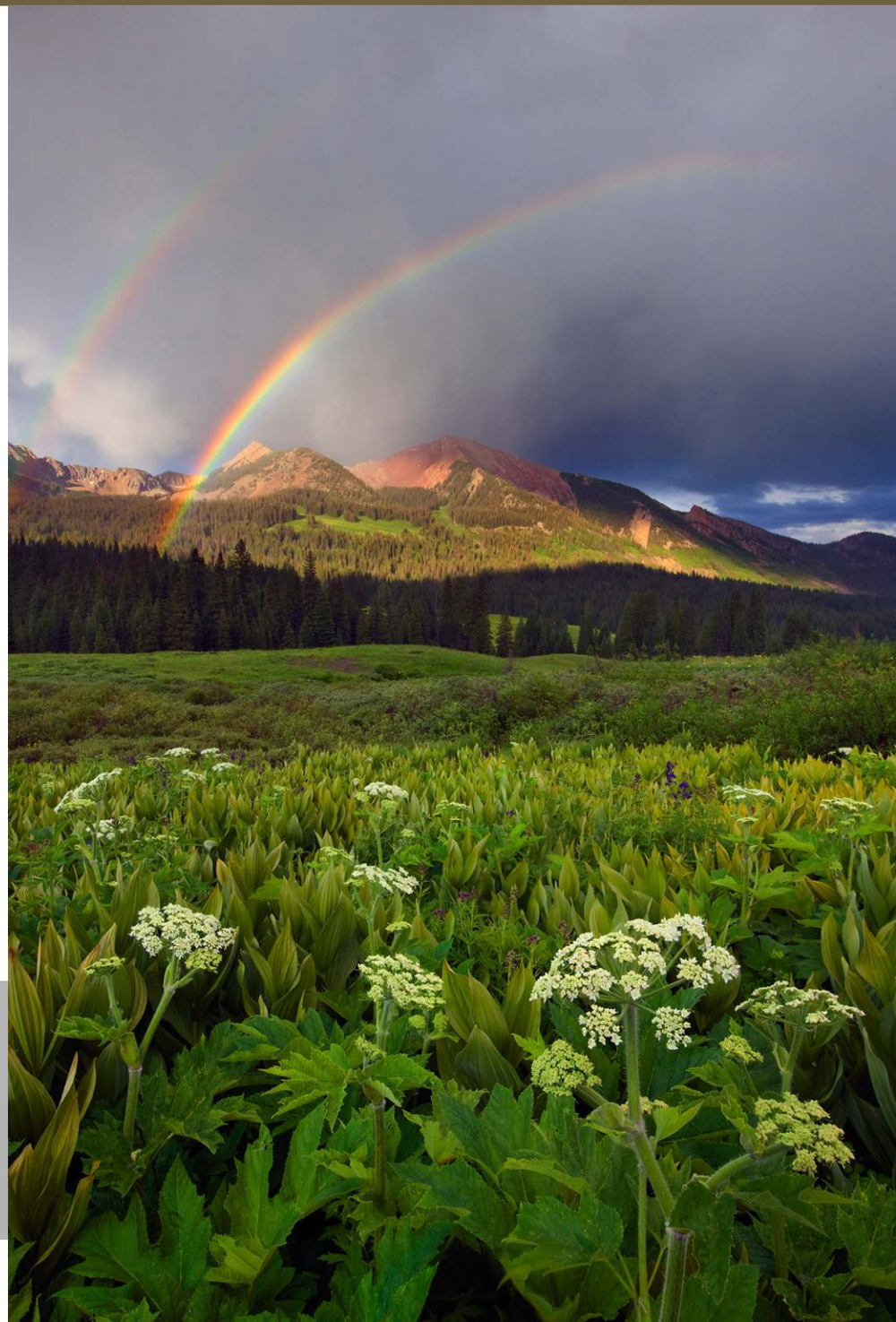
The convergence of two lines—the line formed by the storm cloud and the line formed by the cacti in the background—creates a compelling visual focal point. The eye is drawn there even though the converging elements are relatively small. "Volatile" by George Stocking (Superstition Wilderness, Arizona).

deeper into the scene. The spotlit cacti in the foreground acts as a counterpoint.

Convergences can also be used to create abstract shapes or perspective cues. For example, with the image to the right, the slight convergence of the foreground flowers on the left and right (they incline towards each other) creates abstract lines that, if taken to their conclusion, meet and form an abstract vanishing point (or triangle shape, if you prefer). This convergence helps lead the eye into the scene and establish depth.

Let's move on to our next simplification strategy: repetition ...repetition ...repetition ...

The slight inclination of the two foreground flowers, when followed to their natural conclusion, forms an abstract vanishing point. "Gothic Rainbow" by Ian Plant (Gunnison National Forest, Colorado).



Remember the discussion of dynamic balance in the preceding chapter? I discussed the need to balance energy with harmony. One way to achieve the second half of this equation is through the use of repetition. A repetition of shapes or forms can provide a coherent theme that ties the disparate elements of even a chaotic composition together.

Let's take this painting by Georges Seurat as our initial example. If there is one thing this painting has in abundance, it is energy. Mad crazy energy, to be precise. It is a virtual cacophony of bold colors and diverging elements. I suspect that Seurat was looking to capture the dizzying spectacle of the circus, and he certainly succeeded, almost to the point of inducing seizures. So with all of the energy in this painting, where is the balance?

It is through repetition of shapes and colors that Seurat was able to establish a coherent, harmonious theme in this otherwise tempestuous composition and create balance that tames all of the

Source: Wikipedia Commons

"The Circus" by Georges Seurat (1891).

energy in the painting. In particular, it is a repetition of the same curving shape over and over that brings this composition together, illustrated at left. If you study the painting carefully, you'll see that the shape is repeated quite a bit, sometimes bold, sometimes subtle, and that there are other shapes repeated as well, over and over. I've highlighted just a few of the most obvious repetitions, but you can literally spend hours discovering all of the secret gems hidden in this painting. Yeah, Seurat knew what he was doing.

So repetition can help create harmony and balance. But it can also help with the first part of the equation, with the creation of energy. As discussed in Chapter Two, people are naturally attracted to patterns, part of our ability and biological need to organize our chaotic world. When the eye explores a pattern, it tends to want to visit each and every repeated element. Repetition in art gets the viewer's eye moving, engaging interest and creating energy. Which, as we now know, is exactly what you want to accomplish as an artist.

Okay, so repetition can create both energy *and* harmony. That makes it a fairly potent compositional device. As the saying goes, however, with great power comes great responsibility. Repetition must be used carefully to ensure that you achieve both parts of the dynamic balance equation, and to prevent one from eclipsing the other. Let's take a look at a few examples. Turning from Georges Seurat to George Stocking, the image below is a fun example of shape repetition. George had one of his workshop

"Ambika's Wonder" by George Stocking (Big Bend National Park, Texas).

A chaotic scene is simplified using a series of repeating shapes. "Screw Auger Falls" by Ian Plant (Gulf Hagas Preserve, Maine).

assistants (Ambika from a *Friends of Arizona Highways* photo workshop) pose to mimic the shape of the rock formation. The shape repetition creates an unavoidable visual relationship between the rock and the woman, forcing the eye to bounce back and forth from the left to the right side of the image.

The waterfall image to the right also relies on shape repetition. In this case, there are two dominant shapes which are repeated: the horizontal curving shape of the arched tree, and the vertical curve of the waterfall. Both shape repetitions encourage the eye to travel through the photograph, creating dynamic energy—and they both help establish a harmonious pattern, creating balance. In all of these examples, the repetition of shapes helps create structure and order, visually simplifying otherwise chaotic scenes.

Okay, so shape repetition and patterns can help establish compositional order. So what happens when you break a pattern?

The anomalous broken branch draws the eye, and focuses the viewer's attention, serving as a visual counterpoint to the larger yucca on the left. "Bad Moon Rising" by George Stocking (White Sands National Monument, New Mexico).

Although it may be true that the human eye is naturally attracted to patterns, it is probably even more true that the eye is attracted to a *break* in the pattern. We seek visual order, so it stands to reason that when disorder is noticed, the eye focuses on it immediately. As a result, breaking a pattern by introducing a diverging element can be very effective.

Anomalies are just that—elements that diverge or that are in some way in conflict with other elements in the scene. Anomalies establish a visual anchor for the composition, drawing the eye to the area of conflict. Anomalies work best when a single element diverges from a pattern of other elements—this makes the diverging element stand out significantly, thus instantly drawing attention and leading the viewer's eye.

The diverging element immediately becomes an eye-catching focal point, so great care must be taken to ensure that (1) the break is not so significant as to overwhelm the pattern, and therefore reintroduce too much chaos into the image, and (2) the diverging element is placed in a pleasing location within the image frame.

In the photo to the left, a number of yucca cacti spines on the left side of the picture stand completely erect, creating a pattern of repeating vertical lines. The foreground yucca to the right, however, is bent, and it becomes a very strong visual anchor—so strong, in fact, that only a few very strong elements can draw the eye away. The moon and the large yucca on the left have sufficient visual mass to compete with the bent yucca. Their arrangement was carefully chosen to dynamically balance the composition.

The concept of breaking the pattern is closely related to the concepts of divergence and opposing forces discussed in Chapter Four. The idea is the same—all involve the artistic use of visual opposition—but here, the idea is to create a noticeable focal point to draw the eye to a specific place within the composition.

The image to the left is a simple example of this concept of breaking the pattern. The pattern formed by the repeating ripples of sand is broken by the lone rock in the upper left. The eye immediately is drawn to the diverging element, making it the most important part of the image, visually speaking. Accordingly, I placed the rock off-center to create the most visual interest, using the Rule of Thirds as a rough guide for my composition. Yes, even I use the Rule of Thirds on occasion, albeit somewhat sparingly!

A pattern is formed by sunlit ripples in sand. The lone pebble breaks the pattern and immediately attracts the eye. I was careful to place the pebble in an area of the image frame that would ensure a pleasing and dynamic composition. "Rippled Sand" by Ian Plant (Chesapeake Bay, Maryland).

To the left are several more examples of pattern images that use diverging elements. The first (top left) shows a pattern formed by terns on a log in the water. The pattern is broken by the gull at the end. Although the gull is of roughly the same shape as the terns, it differs in terms of size and coloring, and thus visually stands out from the rest. The second image (top right) shows the juxtaposition of multiple patterns that diverge from one another. The eye is immediately drawn to areas of the photograph where the leaves crisscross one another. The result forms an abstract zigzag shape which leads the eye through the entire composition. In the final image (bottom), the repeating vertical lines are interrupted by the horizontal orange band, which visually divides the image and becomes the dominant focal point.

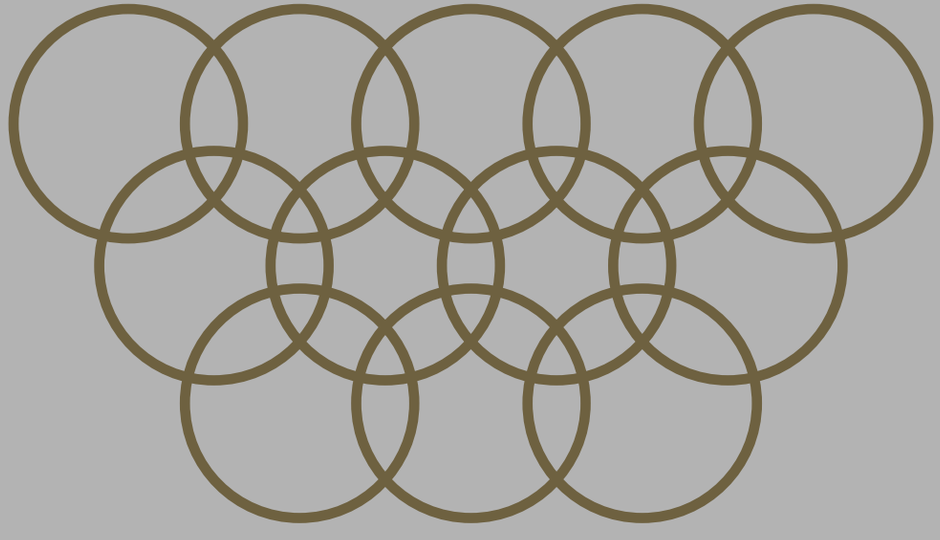
Essentially, anomalies help create visual division. Sometimes, however, you want to unite rather than divide. Which brings us next to visual groupings!

Upper left: "High Tide" by Ian Plant (Chesapeake Bay, Maryland). Upper right: "False Hellebore" by Ian Plant (Monongahela National Forest, West Virginia). Bottom: "Geothermal Patterns" by Ian Plant (Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming).

Another way to approach the concept of visual simplification using shapes is to think in terms of visual mass. Remember the Gestalt principles from Chapter Two? One that I didn't talk about then is known as the *Law of Prägnanz* (sometimes referred to as the *Law of Simplification*), which holds that people tend to interpret ambiguous or complex forms as something far more simple and complete than they actually are. Combine that with the Gestalt theory of proximity (that elements in close proximity tend to be viewed as a unit), and you have a solid recipe for simplifying an otherwise messy and chaotic scene.

A chaotic scene can be simplified and structured if you find elements that "aggregate" sufficient visual mass to form shapes that attract the eye. It's kind of like gravity pulling disparate elements together in space until highly ordered systems—planets, stars, solar systems, and galaxies—form. By looking for elements that interact to create visual mass, you can structure a scene enough to create a coherent composition.

The pattern to the right is a good example of the Law of Prägnanz in action. What do you see when you look at it? Most likely, you see a series of circle shapes, rather than something more complicated. Your brain looks for the simplest way to organize and categorize, reducing complex forms to simpler approximations, making it easier to make sense of things.



The "Law of Prägnanz" holds that people tend to interpret visual data in its simplest possible form. For example, we see the design above as a series of interlocking circles, rather than as more complex and complicated shapes.

Now, let's move from theory to practice (which, as is usually the case, is easier said than done). In the real world, we are often confronted with a dizzying array of

visual data and input. By looking for visual groupings of proximate elements, you can reduce a busy scene to something more manageable.

The image to the right is a good example of this. The scene is very chaotic indeed, with an array of shapes, colors, and textures. As demonstrated by the graphic to the right, however, a number of these chaotic elements coalesce sufficiently to form distinct visual masses, such as the converging radiating lines of the cacti, the trunk on the left, and the boulders in front. These aggregate visual masses simplify the scene, helping to calm the busy landscape and create compositional structure.

When viewing this extremely chaotic scene, several obvious visual groupings come to mind. George was savvy enough to recognize that the eye would tend to simplify and impose order on these elements. "Autumn Embrace" by George Stocking (Chiricahua Mountains, Arizona).

An "abstract" bold shape emerges from the complex interacting of hundreds of smaller shapes. Here, a triangle shape is perceived rather than a more complex collection of lines formed by the branches of the tree. This creates a single visual mass, which has become the central focus of this composition. "Emergent Growth" by Ian Plant (Acadia National Park, Maine).

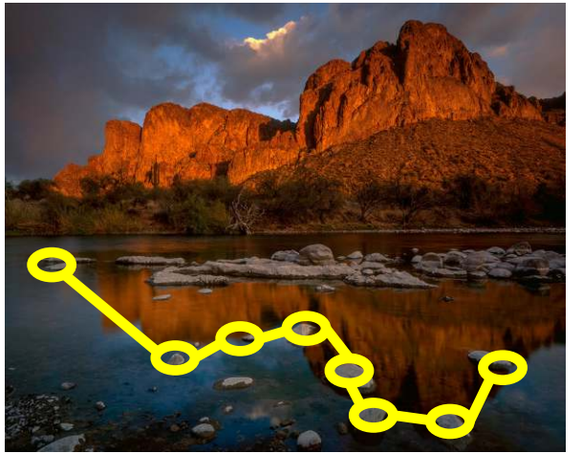
Think of the process this way: an arrangement of multiple elements, when viewed up close, may seem random, but when viewed from a distance, come together to form a general, overall shape. A simple example of this concept is a pine tree—if one were to look at individual branches, one would perceive a jumbled mess; but when stepping back and looking at the relationship of all of the tree's branches at once, one perceives an ordered and structured triangle shape. Subtle shapes can arise from the relationship of many types of elements, such as rocks, trees, and bushes.

The image to the right is a good example. The haphazard jumble of elements of this exposed alpine environment is greatly simplified by using the abstract triangle shape formed by this tree as the basis of the composition. Although made up of hundreds of branches and thousands of pine needles, viewed from far enough away, our brains tend to want to impose a simpler shape. We can use this perception trait to our advantage to create coherent compositions. Here, the shape that arises from the Law of Prägnanz is a bold shape which focuses the viewer's attention away from more chaotic aspects of the scene. The emerging shape and the color contrast allows the tree to stand apart from the background, gaining visual prominence.

"SALT RIVER REFLECTIONS"

This image easily illustrates why I think George is a master at photographic composition. He employs clever and subtle touches in his photographs. Sometimes I think he is too subtle, as many of the techniques he uses often go unnoticed during the first few viewings—but once you notice them, you appreciate his depth as an artist all the more.

The image to the right, taken in the Tonto National Forest of Arizona, seems to be a fairly straightforward 50/50 split reflection image. He uses some rocks in the water to break up the symmetry and to establish additional visual interest. So here's the clever part: Notice how he carefully positioned his camera so that the rocks trace the outline of the reflected sandstone mountain? Can't see it? Maybe the diagram to the left will help. It is somewhat abstract, after all, but once you see it, you will never look at this image the same way again. It's a small touch, to be sure, and probably is less likely to trigger a response than the bold colors and stormy mood in this photo. As it turns out, however, it is the little things that matter most, and in the long run, they surprise viewers and hold interest over the long term.



"Salt River Reflections" by George Stocking (Tonto National Forest, Arizona).

Bold colors can draw the eye, and if used creatively, this can help you impose compositional structure upon a chaotic scene. White and black are very eye-catching, as are certain colors such as red and yellow. In essence, the eye-catching color is used as a visual anchor, attracting attention and reducing distractions. As such, great care must be taken when positioning eye-catching color in the image frame.

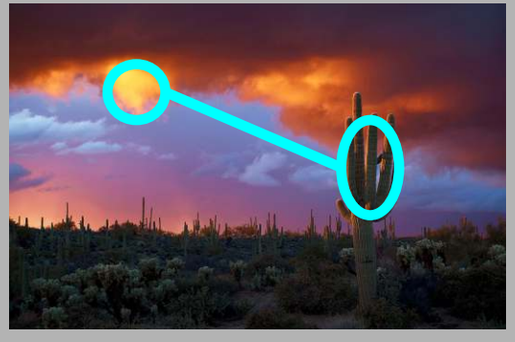
Let us consider for a moment this famous painting by Francisco Goya, *The Third of May 1808* (1814). There are many complex and sophisticated compositional elements at work here, but one clearly stands out to the viewer, automatically demanding attention: the man in the white shirt. He becomes an obvious focal point, instantly drawing the viewer's eye. Goya's placement of the man off-center, balanced by the dark visual mass of soldiers on the right, creates a dynamic and unforgettable composition.

This same principle can easily be applied to photography. Many objects are white or bright, including the sun and the moon, certain flowers, sand, clouds, and bright portions of the sky. Other elements can have relative brightness—for example, a distant mountain illuminated by a lone beam of sunlight will be brighter relative to the shadowed landscape around it. Care must be taken when deciding to include bright elements, as their ability to catch the eye can either make or break a composition. Painters have the luxury of easily modifying luminosity tones to fit their tastes and needs; photographers do not.

Source: Wikipedia Commons

The man in the white shirt immediately draws the viewer's attention, creating an eye-catching focal point. Francisco Goya, "The Third of May 1808" (1814).

The bright cloud becomes a visual counterpoint to the saguaro cacti. "Psychedelic Sunset" by George Stocking (Tonto National Forest, Arizona).



Once the decision has been made to include a bright element, care must be taken when placing that element within the picture frame. The many principles discussed in this book will assist you in this endeavor. As with the Goya painting, often it is best to use a bright element as a counterpoint element in contrast and balance with other elements of a photo. For example, with the image to the right, the bright cloud is used as a counterpoint to the saguaro cacti. The two are placed in an opposing diagonal relationship, creating dynamic balance.

The flip side of this discussion is that great care must be taken to remove or reduce distracting bright spots. For example, if photographing a waterfall or forest scene on a cloudy day, a polarizer filter should be used to remove glare on wet surfaces, and care must be taken to exclude to the extent possible distracting portions of sky poking through the forest canopy above.

Another way to think about eye-catching color is in terms of visual mass: a subject when brightly (or darkly) lit has more mass than when lit normally. The photographer can thus manipulate the visual mass of an object simply by waiting for the light to change (or changing it with artificial light).

Related to this concept of eye-catching color, we now move on to our next trick to focus the eye's attention on what's important, a trick which has had a long tradition in art around the world: the halo.

A halo is essentially a bright disc placed behind an important subject (although the disc shape is not important in and of itself, as halos are often represented using other shapes or even as radiating lines). The halo's most common use over the centuries has been in religious art, used to symbolize divine inspiration or powers. The halo also has been used to symbolize worldly power, such as in artistic representations of kings and emperors.

Beyond its obvious symbolic meaning, the halo has a very important compositional purpose: to draw attention to an important subject. Not only does the bright or bold coloration of the halo attract the eye,

Examples of halos in paintings: (Top left) A painting from the Mughal dynasty of India (ca. 1620) uses a halo behind the emperor to signify his power, creating a strong focal point. (Bottom left) Robert Campin's "Madonna and Child" (ca. 1440) uses a wicker basket behind the subject's head to draw attention and act as a frame. (Bottom right) "The Guitar Player" by Johannes Vermeer (1672) uses a picture frame as an abstract halo. (Top right) A self-portrait by Vincent van Gogh (1887) uses a subtle halo effect, with a vaguely circular wash of relatively bright color behind the artist's head.

Source: Wikipedia Commons

An example of a halo used in landscape photography: a bright portion of sky helps draw the eye to the background sea stack formation. "King Canute's Throne" by Ian Plant (Olympic National Park, Washington).

but the halo helps frame and focus attention to the subject. As a result, the halo has remained a mainstay in modern art, although in a less obvious form than in centuries past. Today, the halo is often portrayed as a brightening of the background area around the main subject, helping draw emphasis and attention to the subject. The halo effect is quite prominent in commercial art and advertising, website design, and other applications, and can even be seen in a number of cultural icons, including the Statue of Liberty (in the form of a radiating headset) and the United States one-dollar bill (behind the Masonic pyramid logo).

Halos can be very effective in photography as well. Typically, the halo effect is created by a bright cloud passing behind the main subject, or an area of relatively bright sky. Obviously, the photographer cannot conjure up this effect on

Left: A halo is used to draw attention to the bird's head. "Barn Swallow" by Ian Plant (Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, Maryland). Right: Drifting snow behind the lone tree on the right separates it from the background and gives it emphasis. "The Forbidden Kingdom" by Ian Plant (Los Glaciares National Park, Argentina).

command, but rather must be quick to seize the moment when the opportunity arises. A halo can also be created by placing the sun (or even the moon) behind a prominent subject. For the bird image (above left), I used a specular highlight in the background as a halo (with another highlight in the lower right used as a counterpoint element).

For the image to the right, conditions were horrible—the wind was blowing with gale force, and each gust brought a blast of snow, swirling in the air but never touching the ground. I choose my moment carefully, waiting for a particularly strong gust to carry backlit snow behind the tree on the right, framing it in near silhouette with a halo of white and separating it from the background. The halo gives the tree additional visual mass, making it an important part of the composition.

As a way of generalizing, halos create contrast between a subject and its background. As we will discuss in more detail in the next section, contrast is very important when seeking to differentiate figure versus ground.

"Find beauty not only in the thing itself but in the pattern of the shadows, the light and dark which that thing provides." —Junichiro Tanizaki

Texture, in many respects, is an odd concept to discuss in the context of two-dimensional art. Texture is associated with *feel*, rather than sight. One way to create order in a disordered scene, however, is to look for elements that essentially divide the scene, breaking it up into discrete, constituent parts. This creates the illusion of texture and three-dimensionality. *Contrast* helps create visual separation between elements, which is vitally important for rendering three-dimensional scenes in a two-dimensional artistic medium. Contrast can exist in terms of luminosity (dark versus light), size, color, texture, shape, implied motion, and many other metrics.

Shadows can be particularly effective at creating the appearance of depth in photographs. When we take a photograph, we transform our dynamic three-dimensional reality into something considerably flatter, rendering it as a two-dimensional representation. While our 3-D binocular vision may correctly perceive separation between objects at varying distances in the real world, in a two-dimensional photograph, many of those objects can seem to occupy the same physical space, appearing to merge together. The result can often be a confused, muddy composition which lacks the appearance of depth. While careful positioning may help one open up space between merging elements, selecting a camera position merely to optimize spacing between elements may not always be possible or desirable, and may detract from the overall composition. Another way to avoid merger is to use shadows to create apparent separation between

Shadows are used here to create compositional forms, adding texture to the image. "Sandsong" by Ian Plant (Great Sand Dunes National Park, Colorado).

Shadows and light help the cacti stand out from the background, serving to create depth. "The Transience of Light" by George Stocking (Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Arizona).

elements. Light and shadows help visually define objects and create compositional shapes, and can provide important perspective cues that help create depth in a photograph. Shadows, when used properly, can be effective at leading the viewer's eye deep into a photograph and can help bring an otherwise static and flat scene to life. Backlight and sidelight can be particularly effective at creating texture, as they illuminate only parts of the scene, creating strong contrast between areas of light and shadow. This is clearly demonstrated with the image to the left, which uses sidelight to separate objects from a dark background.

Artists have long known that the contrast between light and dark can be used to create expressive compositions. Renaissance painters called this *chiaroscuro* (a combination of two Italian words meaning light—*chiaro*—and dark—*oscuro*) to describe how the contrast between light and dark can create the illusion of depth, mass, and volume in two-dimensional artwork. Of course, whereas painters can create light and dark to suit their purposes with the stroke of a brush, photographers are at the mercy of real-world light and must make use of existing shadows cast by objects illuminated with natural light. The size, intensity, and angle of shadows are determined by time of day and weather. Often, changing lighting conditions may force the photographer to quickly reposition in order to adapt to changes in shadow structure.

Photographers can use shadows for a variety of compositional purposes:

Shadows can help create separation between elements. Without shadows, many scenes will appear indistinct

and uniform. Think of a sand dune: In full overhead sunlight, when fewer shadows are cast, the dune will appear uniform, whereas when the light is low and angled, features such as ripples and dune crests are strongly revealed. Accordingly, shadows can transform a uniform patch of sand into a series of separate and repeating shapes.

Here's another way to think about this: Shadows can transform an element with large visual mass into a collection of smaller elements—in effect, shadows break up visual mass. Too much shadow, on the other hand, can have the opposite effect; instead of breaking up visual mass, heavy shadows consolidate visual mass.

Shadows can be used to extend the main subject, or as the main subject itself. Sometimes a prominent shadow can be used as a compositional element, extending the main subject into other areas of the photograph, or creating a visual relationship between the subject and its shadow. For example, with the image to the right, the shadow becomes the main element of the composition, acting as a powerful leading line and adding a dash of humor.

George effectively used shadows to create this evocative composition. "Messin' at the Border" by George Stocking (Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Arizona).

Shadows can be effective at framing an area of emphasis. The use of shadows can help encourage the viewer's eye to travel to important areas of the photographs that are in the light.

Shadows can be used to simplify an otherwise messy composition. Shadows can actually help create order and compositional structure in an otherwise chaotic scene. This is especially useful when an important element is in the light and less important and distracting elements fall in shadow. Shadows help separate figures from the background. This is demonstrated by the image to the right. Here, George effectively used strong backlighting to reduce the chaos in the scene. Without the dark shadow and the fringe of light around each cacti, these visual elements would have receded into the background, losing their distinctiveness and disappearing into the visual jumble. The use of shadows juxtaposed against areas of light helps provide compositional order.

Related to shadows, shading refers to the use of a range of brightness or luminosity tones to create depth. The idea is simple: since a solid object exposed to light is brightest on the side facing the light source, luminosity contrast can be used in two-dimensional art to imply depth. As discussed in Chapter Three, color contrast (aerial perspective) can also imply depth.

Contrast and shadows help visually simplify this scene, creating order out of chaos. Distinct forms arise from the contrast between light and shadow. "Wonders of the Sonoran Desert" by George Stocking (Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Arizona).

Of course, shadows and shading aren't always necessary to create visual separation. Other forms of contrast, such as color contrast, can be used as well. The two images to

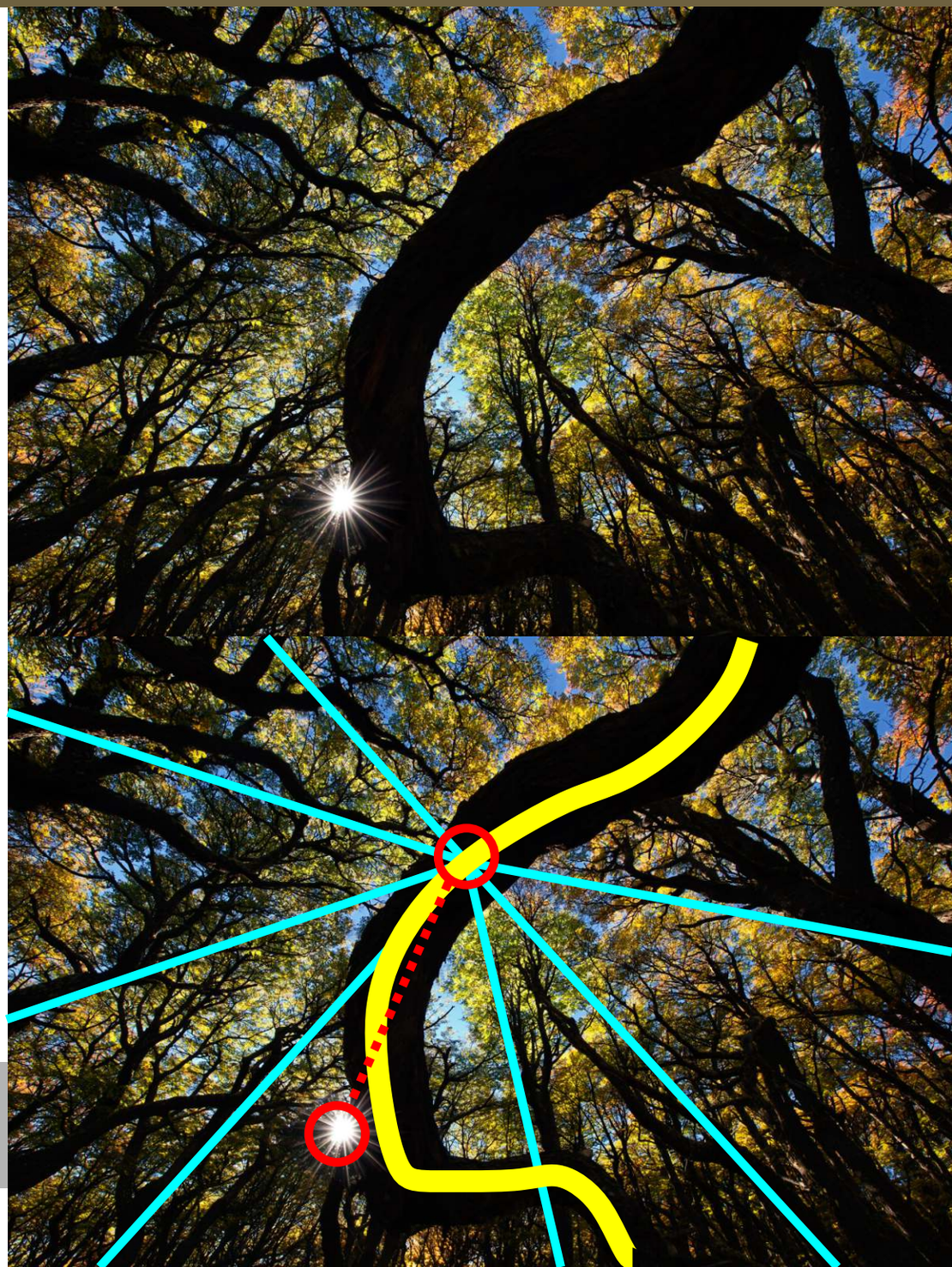
Top left: Color and luminosity contrast are used to separate visual elements. Three primary shapes emerge, including the large "blue" shape on the left, the inverse L shape formed by the dark red section of canyon on the right, and the triangle formed by the brighter yellow/pink area in the background. "Layers of Time" by Ian Plant (Navajo Nation, Arizona). Bottom left: With very little light striking the scene to form shadows, visual separation is achieved through contrast in colors—in this case, the various pastel hues of volcanic rock on the distant hillsides. "Artist's Palette" by Ian Plant (Death Valley National Park, California).

the left demonstrate color contrast used to separate visual elements. Without the contrast of colors, individual shapes and forms would be hard to distinguish from each other.

As demonstrated in this section, the effective use of contrast (including shadows, shading, and color juxtaposition) can help simplify a messy composition. It is perhaps the most powerful simplification tool out of the many discussed in this chapter.

"LENGA DANCE"

This chaotic forest of *lenga* trees in Patagonia required me to use many of the techniques discussed in this chapter. I struggled for an hour to find a composition which made sense, but was having no luck when I spied this overhanging dead branch. Getting close with a wide-angle lens and pointing up, I was able to use the silhouetted curving limb as a bold shape, helping to visually simplify an otherwise messy composition (yellow). Next, I decided to include the sun as a visual anchor, giving the eye a logical starting point for its journey. By placing the sun at the edge of the branch, I was able to tie the two elements together, further helping to simplify the scene. By tweaking my camera position, I was able to get all of the trees to converge in the middle around the bold shape of the branch—making sure that as few of them as possible actually appeared to visually merge with the branch (thus ensuring that it appeared as a separate visual mass). This creates a "visual vortex" effect, as all perspective lines tend to drive the eye toward a centered vanishing point (blue). By placing the sun away from this point, I was able to create additional visual interest through counterpoint (red).



"Lenga Dance" by Ian Plant (Los Glaciares National Park, Argentina).

1. Simplify chaotic scenes by reducing elements to the minimum number you need to make the composition work: Especially when still learning the basics of composition, this is a useful skill—exclude anything that does not add to (or detracts from) the overall composition.

2. Use contrast and shadows to separate objects from the background: When faced with a chaotic scene, sometimes waiting for the light to change can make all the difference. Shadows and color contrast can help separate objects from the background and reduce the chaos, helping important subjects to stand out.

3. Use visual anchors to simplify a scene: A well-placed eye-catching object can provide a logical starting point for the viewer's visual journey. Place a visual anchor in the lower part of the image to simplify a scene and provide compositional structure, encouraging the eye to travel into the scene.

4. Use eye-catching color and halos to focus attention on your key subject: Bold colors and bright areas immediately attract the eye. Place these near or behind a subject to emphasize its overall importance in the composition.

5. Patterns attract the eye, and breaks in the pattern lead the eye: Patterns can be very effective at creating structure and order. A single diverging element helps draw the eye to a particular place in the composition. Use these tools to create effective images.

“Art is not what you see, but what you make others see.” —Edgar Degas

“Ocotillo Gone Wild” by George Stocking (Kofa National Wildlife Refuge, Arizona).

CHAPTER SIX
DEEPENING THE MYSTERY

"We must not imitate the externals of nature with so much fidelity that the picture fails to evoke that wonderful teasing recurrence of emotion that marks the contemplation of a work of art."—John F. Carlson

"What has mood to do with it? You fight when the necessity arises—no matter the mood! Mood's a thing for cattle or making love."—Frank Herbert (Dune, 1965)

"The job of the artist is always to deepen the mystery."—Francis Bacon

Mood is arguably the most difficult aspect of composition to discuss in an objective, rational way. Mood is one of those ephemeral, subjective things, a kind of "you have it or you don't" element. This makes mastery of mood very difficult, and of course, very important to the success of a composition.

But let's pause for a moment to ponder the following question: what, exactly, do I mean by "mood"? Well, I am using the concept of mood as kind of a catchall of sorts. To me, "mood" encompasses anything that acts to strike an emotional chord with your viewers, forging a connection between them and your photograph. Of course, emotions are mercurial and fickle things, which is why mood is such a difficult subject to discuss. I'll do my best, however, to try to boil things down to a meaningfully objective level, with the caveat that trying to do so is perilous at best.

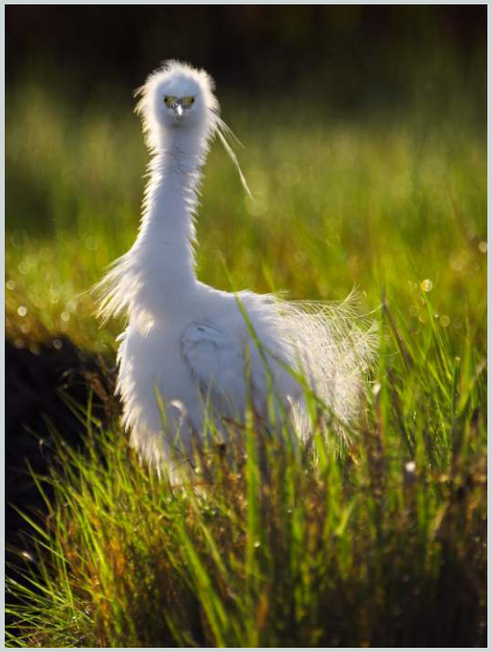
Mood provides that "je ne sais quoi" which elevates a composition to the next level. Although hard to define in an objective fashion, it is of vital importance to successful photography. "Aurora's Blush" by Ian Plant (Torres del Paine National Park, Chile).

Although arguably not an aspect of composition at all, it is clear that mood and composition work hand in hand.

Whereas composition, in its strictest definition, merely involves the relative positioning of visual elements, no one can deny that the purpose of this positioning is to trigger a response within the viewer, to engage them visually at the least. Think of mood as taking this to the next level, of pushing that visual response to an emotional level. It is, in a manner of speaking, the icing on the cake. We all know that cake doesn't quite taste complete without frosting—let's face it, frosting is darn tasty—so frankly, I cannot stress the importance of mood enough.

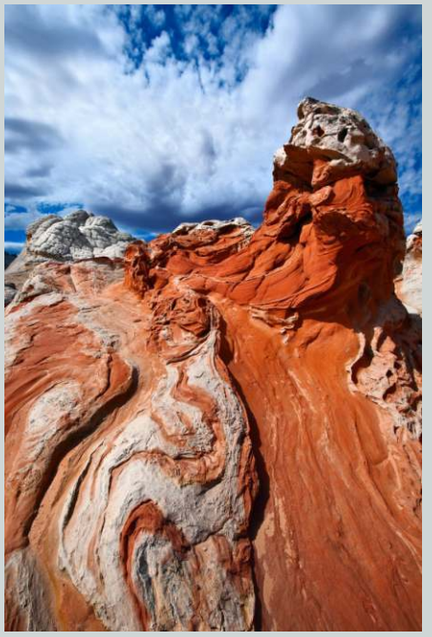
Many things can affect mood in photography (which I summarize in the handy diagram on the next page), although with a few important caveats. Please note that, as with many concepts already discussed in this book, these categories are by no means distinct, and there likely exists considerable overlap. As with many aspects of compositional theory, arguably some of these categories are merely different ways of thinking about the same thing.

Mood is hard to define and discuss—but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try anyways. "Desert Sanctuary" by George Stocking (Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, Arizona).



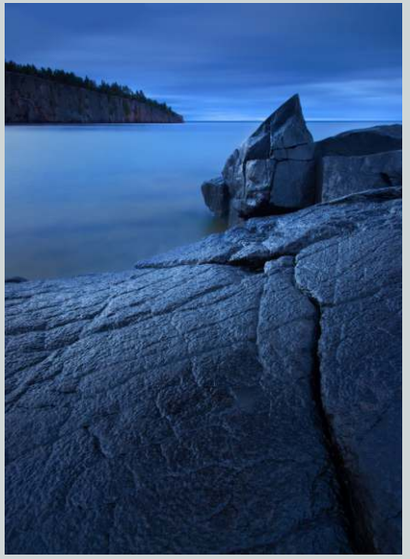
Invitations to Participate: Elements that invite a viewer into the scene, such as eye contact with wildlife subjects.

Subject Matter: Viewers forge emotional connections with subjects that are meaningful to them, or that inspire or awe them.



Energy & Motion: Photographs that capture a sense of vitality, energy, and motion are more likely to trigger an emotional response than those that are relatively static.

Light & Color: Both can have a profound impact on the emotional response a photograph triggers.

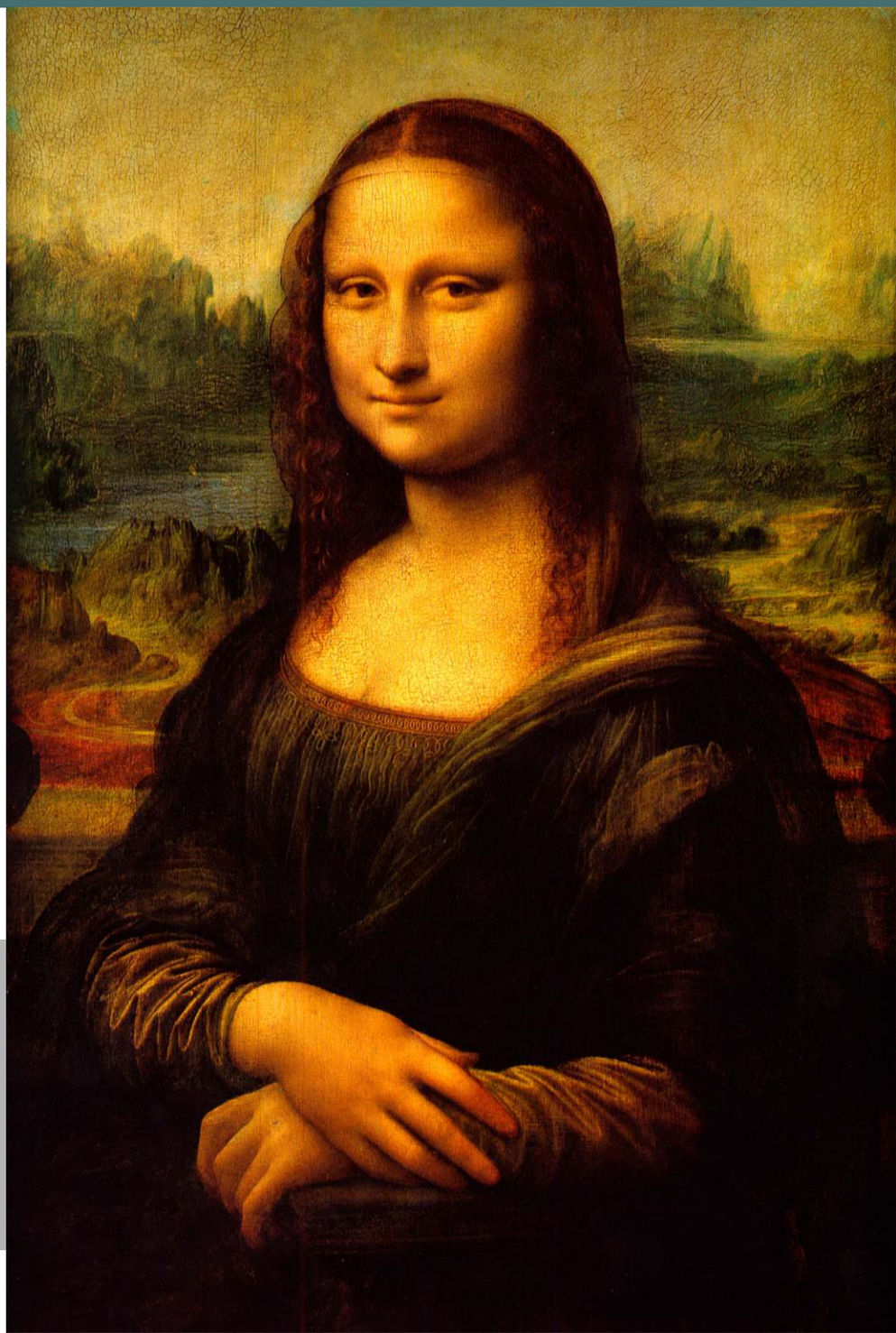


Moment: Capture the convergence of compositional elements in a pleasing way, as well as the moment when your subject does something that tells a story.

What makes the *Mona Lisa* one of the great works of art? Is it the powerful composition? Maybe, but, there's nothing particularly powerful about da Vinci's choice of placement of visual elements. Is it the use of diminishing scale and atmospheric perspective? Well, these elements certainly are nice, but that hardly seems to be the reason why. What, exactly, is it?

The answer is simple: *the enigmatic smile*. What draws people to this painting time and time again is that subtle half curve formed on Lisa's lips. Is she smirking at a bad joke offered by the artist to lighten the mood? Or is she amused because someone is taking so much time to paint her portrait? Or is she merely bored? Who knows. It is the mystery of the smile, however, that engages viewers and pulls them into the scene.

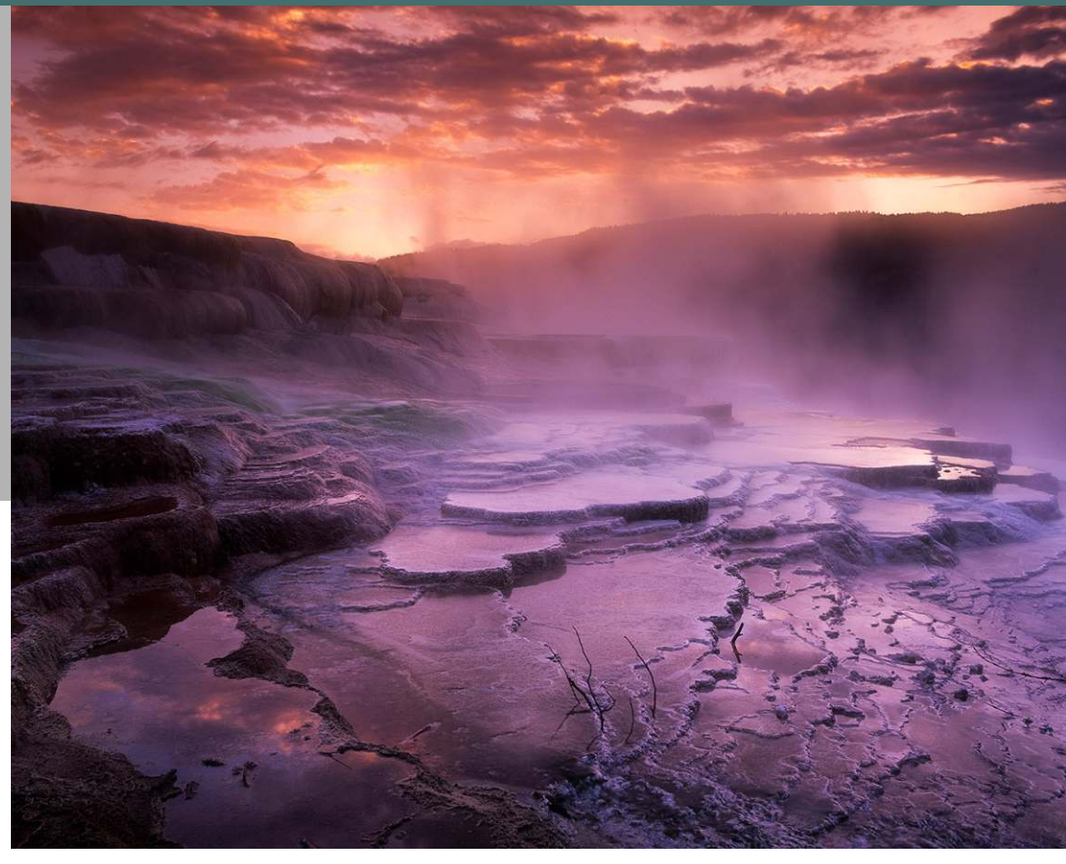
This example makes clear that choice of subject matter can matter—a lot, in fact. I think it is fair to say that viewers forge



Source: Wikipedia Commons

Da Vinci's masterpiece "The Mona Lisa" (ca. 1503-1505) has had lasting appeal through the ages, but is it because of a particularly brilliant composition? Arguably, it was Leonardo's choice of subject matter—the girl with the enigmatic smile—that connects with viewers much more so than anything else.

Choosing the right subject matter doesn't mean only choosing that which is beautiful, although it certainly doesn't hurt. Sometimes it means choosing a mundane subject that is transformed into something special by a rare convergence of light, moment, composition, and mood. "The Terrace" by George Stocking (Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming).



emotional connections with subjects that are meaningful to them, or that inspire or awe them. For example, you are more likely to get a positive reaction from a photograph of a majestic tiger than of a dirty rat. An image of lofty mountain peaks will likely cause viewers to catch their breath more so than an image of a twig sticking out of the mud.

Don't get me wrong: you *can* make beautiful and meaningful images of things like rats and twigs sticking out of the mud. Photographers like Henri Cartier-Bresson didn't walk around looking for gorgeous Italian supermodels to shoot; rather, he made a career finding something meaningful from the mundane, even the ugly. But part of the key to the success of his photos was that he found subjects that could evoke an emotional response, whether it be joy or awe, pity or sadness, even revulsion. Of course, don't underestimate the power of composition itself to forge an emotional connection with the viewer. Although subject matter is an important consideration, arguably even more important is carefully selecting visual elements and arranging them within the image space; done correctly, you can make even a lowly rat look beautiful!

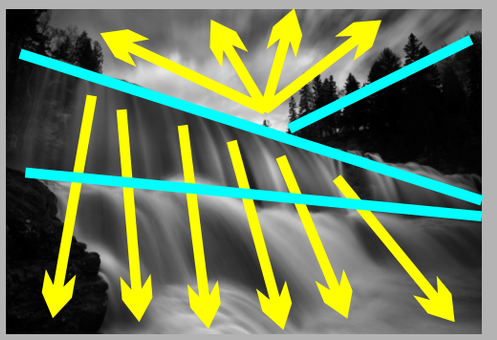
But for now, let's move on and discuss the oft-forgotten fourth dimension: *time*.

We perceive the world as being constantly in motion. When translating reality to a static two-dimensional photograph, the question is, how do we reincorporate the energy and dynamism of the real world into our images?

Composition is the answer. Composition itself can create energy and dynamism, using visual tension to create an abstract representation of movement and energy and engaging the viewer's interest. Alternatively, the literal capture of the motion of elements over time forms compositional structures and shapes that, in turn, create visual energy.

The use of long exposures and motion blur can be an important compositional tool for creating engaging photographs. One key difference between photography and painting is that a photograph is exposed for a definite and finite period of time. This has an impact on a photo's mood, energy, and composition. A photograph can either capture a discrete slice of reality, or it can record the passage of time. For example, the image below uses the literal capture of the movement over time of water and clouds to create abstract lines providing compositional structure, which in turn imparts a sense of energy as well. The passage of time (in this case several minutes) becomes an element of the composi-

The capture of motion over time creates compositional shapes which create energy and implied motion. The clouds streaking in the sky above create an upward radial movement, whereas the motion of the water creates energy that travels in the opposite direction. The diverging lines formed by the waterfall and the trees also create visual energy, keeping the eye moving. "Time's Passage" by Ian Plant (Gooseberry Falls State Park, Minnesota).

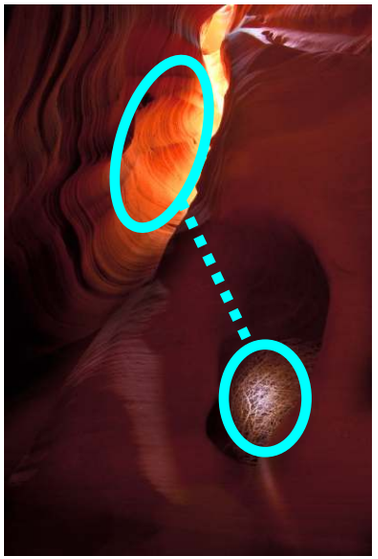


tion, forming shapes that would otherwise not have existed.

The image to the right uses abstract forms—a radiating pattern formed by the clouds and a vanishing point created by converging foreground elements—to create a sense of energy and movement. Although the shutter speed was very short, the result is powerfully dynamic, implying movement and motion where there in fact was none. The radiating clouds in particular seem to jump right off the page, heading straight for the viewer. I think it is fair to say that this image demonstrates how effective composition can be at creating energy and motion even with a static scene.

An implied sense of energy and motion is captured in this image, even though the short shutter speed has frozen a moment in time. This results from employing dynamic composition techniques. "Sandstone Storm" by Ian Plant (Vermilion Cliffs National Monument, Arizona).

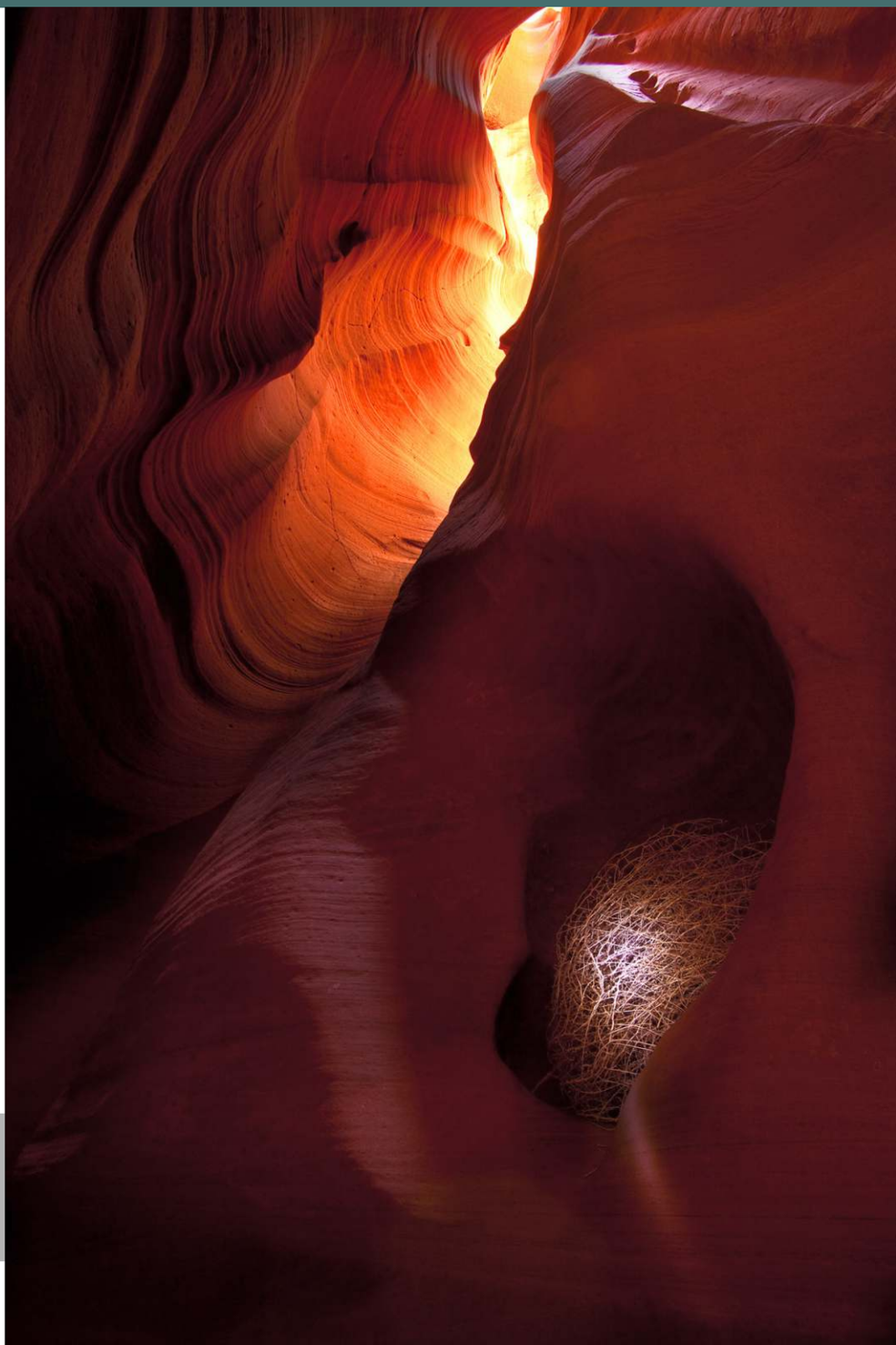
"TUMBLEWEED CONNECTION"



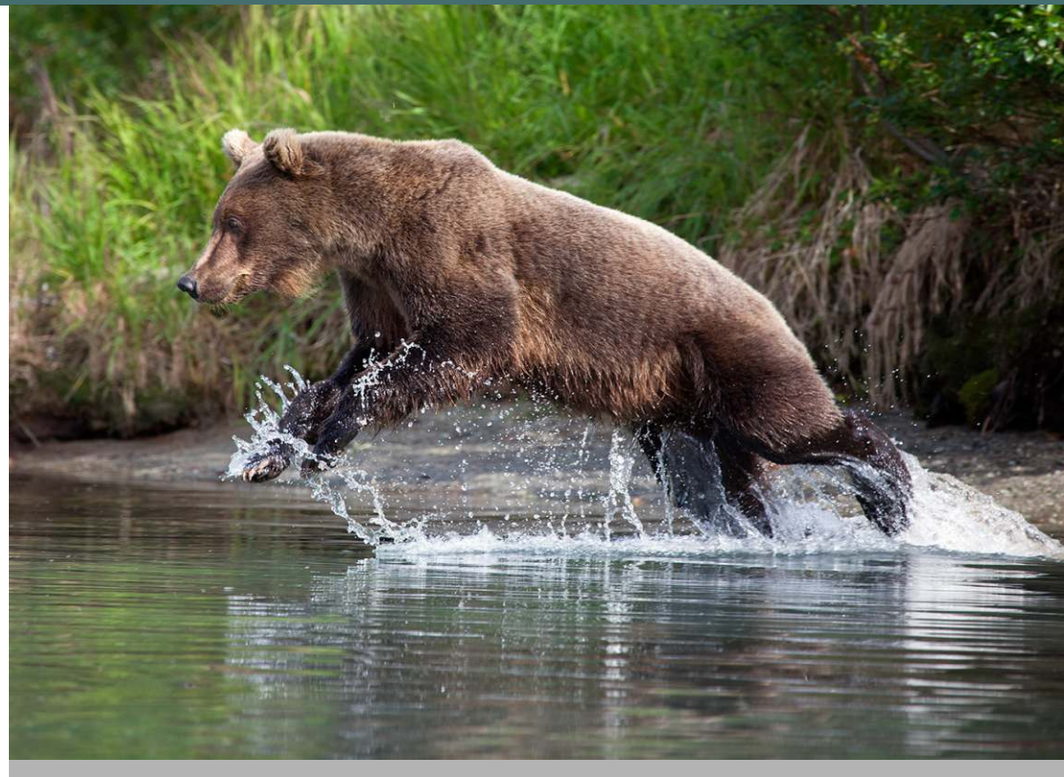
I was lucky enough to be present when George made this inspired photograph. In fact, he asked to borrow my headlamp. I didn't know why at the time, but when I saw the results, I realized I had missed something incredible.

The composition is a fairly straightforward example of visual counterpoint, formed by the relationship between the glowing canyon wall above and the flashlight-lit tumbleweed tucked into the sculpted sandstone pocket. Notice that George placed the two elements in an opposing diagonal relationship. Other than that, the composition is simple: George included only the two most important visual elements, excluding anything else that didn't fit into the overall design structure. The stroke of genius, in my opinion, is the fact that George lit the tumbleweed with my flashlight. As we know, bright white draws the eye, helping to give the tumbleweed more visual mass to balance against the bright canyon walls.

"Tumbleweed Connection" by George Stocking (Navajo Nation, Arizona).



Here's something to think about: when working with static two-dimensional art, how can one tell which direction something in the scene is moving? A photograph or a painting is essentially frozen, so the viewer can't really tell if an object is moving, and if so, which direction the object is traveling. For example, with the bear photograph to the right, how do we know that the bear was actually jumping? I could have merely taken a picture of an elaborate taxidermy display. Of course, our real-world experience, and perhaps a rudimentary understanding of physics, tells us that the bear simply cannot be suspended mid-air; it must be jumping. Also, based on the bear's pose, it seems clear that it is traveling up from right to left. I think this example illustrates, however, how difficult it can be to render motion in a static photograph.



The sheets of water coming from the bear tell us something about its direction of motion, acting like "speed lines" in cartoons. "Hop, Skip, and a Jump" by Ian Plant (Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, Alaska).

Actually, photographers and painters aren't the only ones who have faced this problem—another form of two-dimensional art, one that often gets dismissed (quite wrongly) by art snobs, has already come up with an ingenious solution. Although it may seem odd to draw lessons about composition from the Sunday comics, cartoon drawings have been using "motion lines" (sometimes called "speed lines") for decades, which are used to imply movement and direction. The leaping bear photo is a literal example of the use of motion lines in photography: the water falling off the bear creates lines, the final result being very similar to motion lines used in cartoon drawings. These lines imply movement and energy, as well as direction of motion from right to left. They tell us the bear is alive, moving, and very hungry!

When photographing moving subjects, however, we won't always have the luxury of having sheets of water to create motion lines to inform us of the direction of travel. And unlike cartoon artists, we can't simply add motion lines to make everything nice and obvious for viewers. Photographers must instead rely on more subtle cues to imply direction of motion.

Of course, most of the composition techniques I have discussed in this book are designed to get the viewer's eye moving, in an effort to create visual excitement, motion, and energy. Although these techniques can be used to create implied direction of motion, their use is typically somewhat more general: giving the overall composition energy, as opposed to implying a direction of motion for any one compositional element.

One way to create "motion lines" is to use long exposures to create motion blur, having an effect similar to motion lines. Motion-blurred elements, given enough time, will create shapes and lines. Typically, moving elements will reveal an implied direction of movement, creating compositional energy in that same direction. When shooting moving subjects, motion—and, more importantly, the direction of motion—become important factors that must be considered. For example, with the image to the right, the motion of clouds over time creates an inverted radial pattern. The implied direction of movement is towards the viewer. This implied motion helps create a sense of depth and energy in this photograph.

Motion lines created by a long exposure form a pattern of radiating lines. "The Convergence" by George Stocking (Kauai, Hawaii).

Remember to pay close attention to the placement of motion lines relative to other compositional elements, using the principles discussed in this book. For example, for the image to the top right of one of my workshop students, I used a long exposure to blur the motion of clouds in the background (I used flash to light my student and to freeze his portrait over the long exposure). The motion lines created by the blurring clouds imply diagonal motion from lower left to upper right. I balanced this visual energy using his line of sight, which creates an opposing diagonal line. Further compositional interest is created by his crossed arms, which repeat and reinforce the opposing diagonal pattern.

Other visual cues can imply a direction of motion. For example, with the image of the pelicans at bottom right, the line of sight of the birds and the fact that we know that birds fly *forward* and not *backward* imply a direction of motion from left to right.

Top right: Motion lines are balanced by the opposing diagonal of the man's line of sight. This pattern is reinforced by his crossed arms. Bottom right: Implied motion lines are created by the pelicans' flight path. Both images by Ian Plant (Chesapeake Bay, Maryland).

Source: Wikipedia Commons

"Rain, Steam, and Speed" by J. M. W. Turner (1844). Notice the strong opposing lines created by the edges of the bridge and the direction of motion of the oncoming train.

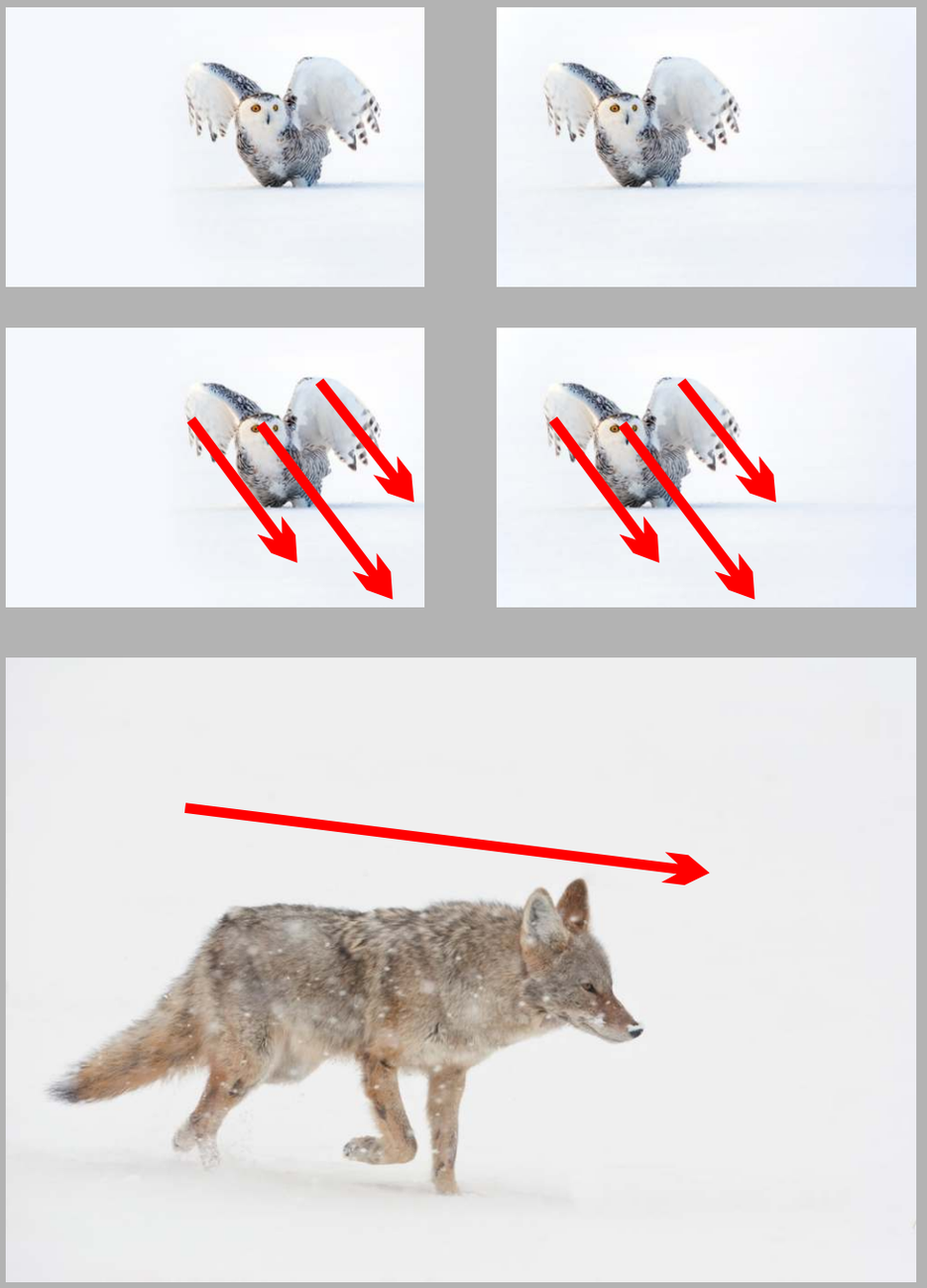
I'd like to conclude this discussion of implied direction of movement with what I consider to be one of the finest examples of these principles, *Rain, Steam, and Speed,* by J. M. W. Turner. With this painting, the strongest lines—the dark edges of the railway bridge—push from the lower right into the center of the image frame to form a vanishing point. This creates strong diagonal lines that propel the viewer's eye into the painting. The train crossing the bridge, barely visible through the haze of rain and steam, creates a strong counter line. It's hard to say exactly why the train creates such as strong motion line, but it seems to clearly (at least to me) push from the center of the image into the lower right corner. Maybe it's because we know that trains move forward, or maybe it is the strong line behind the engine formed by the train cars that pushes the eye toward the lower right. Either way, this creates visual tension between the direction the eye is forced by the vanishing point, and the countering force of the moving train. Notice how this also creates a huge amount of visual mass in the lower right-hand corner, but the effect does not appear at all imbalanced or forced—Turner balances the composition using a generous amount of luminous space everywhere else in the painting. Personally, I think this is brilliant, and in fact, if I had to pick one image to demonstrate the concept of dynamic balance, this might be the one I would use.

NEVER LOOK OUT

I've heard this "rule" of composition over and over, especially from wildlife photographers: never take a shot with the subject looking or moving out of the photo. Not unlike most rules, there's some logic behind this one, but a deeper look into the principles underlying this rule shows us that it can easily be broken.

The images of the snowy owl to the right are a good example of why this "rule" arose in the first place. The pose of the owl, the shape of its wings, and its line of sight all create abstract diagonal lines that lead from the owl diagonally to the right. In the first image, all of this energy gets bunched up on the right side of the image, with nowhere to go but out of the picture frame. In the second image, the placement of the owl on the left gives this energy some "breathing room"—the abstract lines push the eye *into* the picture, instead of *out*. Likewise, with the coyote image, the motion and eye direction of the animal create abstract lines, pushing the viewer's eye from left to right; by giving the coyote some space on the right, the lines point into the picture instead of out.

We've seen plenty of examples in this book, however, of lines pushing out of the image frame. These images have been successful because a careful balance of



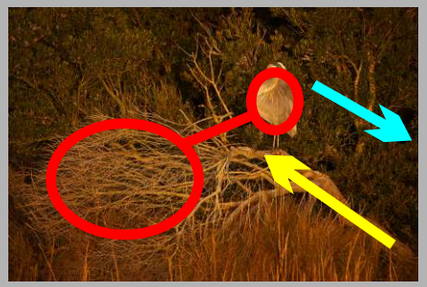
other compositional elements and the use of visual counterpoint keeps the eye from following the lines out of the picture. There's no reason why the same couldn't be true with wildlife and people. So long as proper dynamic balance is achieved, you can create successful—and powerful—compositions that have subjects looking or moving out rather than in.

Certainly, the great painters weren't afraid to create compositions with subjects looking out. We've seen a few examples already in this book (such as Vermeer's *Young Woman Playing a Guitar* in Chapter Two). We see a similar technique in his *Woman with a Lute* (right). Although the woman is gazing out of the picture frame, the line created by the lute takes the viewer's attention back into the image. The composition is further balanced by the large map hanging on the wall and the chair, which act as counterpoints to the left-moving energy created by the woman's line of sight.

If Vermeer could do it, then so can we. Basically, as with any compositional element, so long as you have a

Source: Wikipedia Commons

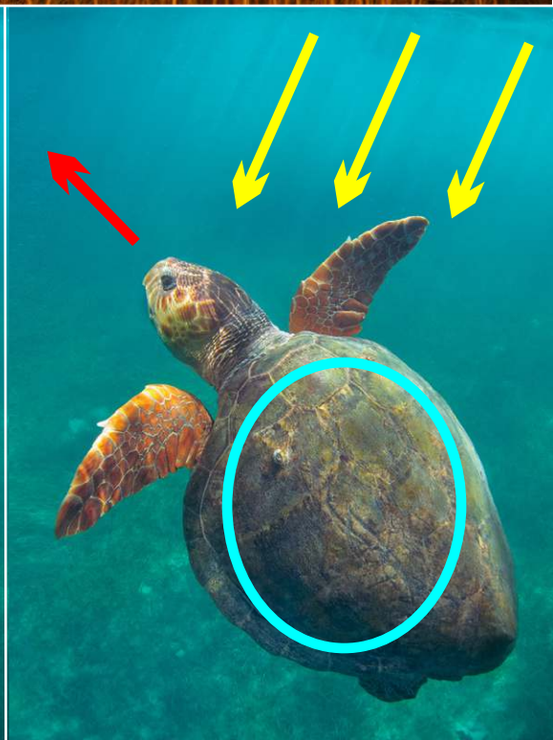
Even though the woman's line of sight tends to propel the viewer's eye out of the picture, other elements in the scene successfully balance the composition. "Woman with a Lute" by Johannes Vermeer (ca. 1662-1663).



In each photo, the line of sight is balanced by other lines and visual counterpoint elements. Top: "Ruffled" by Ian Plant (Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, Virginia). Bottom: "Liquid Suspension" by Ian Plant (Gladden Spit and Silk Cayes Marine Reserve, Belize).

proper balance of visual elements elsewhere, you can create successful compositions with subjects looking or moving out of the picture frame. Let's take a look at a few examples.

First, with the heron photo to the right, although the heron is gazing out of the image frame, the composition is balanced because of the counter line formed by the tree branch and the visual mass of the branches on the left. For the image of the sea turtle, the sunbeams coming through the water in the top right form a counterpoint to the line of sight of the turtle. The visual mass of the turtle's shell also helps to balance the composition and keep the viewer's attention from being directed outside the image frame.

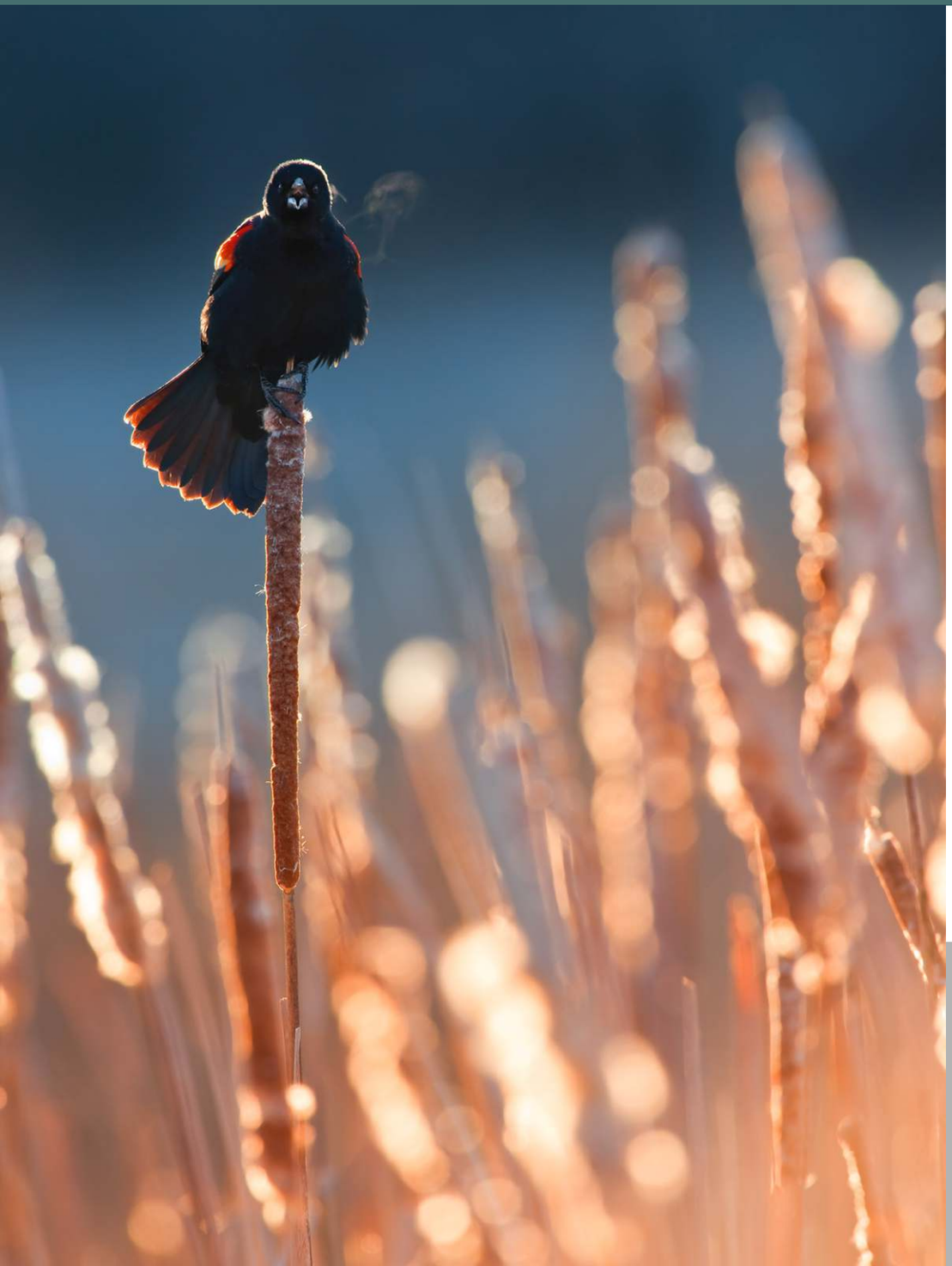


"Trifles make perfection, and perfection is no trifle."
—Michelangelo

The great master said it best himself. When it comes to art, I think it is fair to say that perfection is an important thing. Of course, it is best not to get *too* obsessed by perfection, as you can sometimes lose sight of the bigger picture by getting bogged down trying to coax some little detail into absolute perfection. While perfection might not be paramount, it is something you should nonetheless strive for at all times. When on the quest for perfection, you'll find that the details are what really matter, especially when it comes to artistic composition. The little things—the trifles—can make the difference between a good image and a great image. Sometimes, subtle details, such as a carefully chosen frame of rocks and a rising moon, can add extra interest to an image. I like to borrow a term from the video game industry and call these "Easter eggs," as they provide visual treats to viewers. The best Easter eggs aren't the ones that are spotted right away, but rather are only discovered after repeated viewings.

I'm not saying that you shouldn't make bold and compelling compositions. I'm just saying that you should pay attention to the little things, and give some thought to more than just the obvious elements in the scene. A good artist always seeks to add a layer of complexity to their compositions, hiding something deeper just below the surface, waiting to be discovered. The best compositions are coy, giving viewers only a hint of their full potential at first, revealing their hidden charms over time to the patient and the willing.

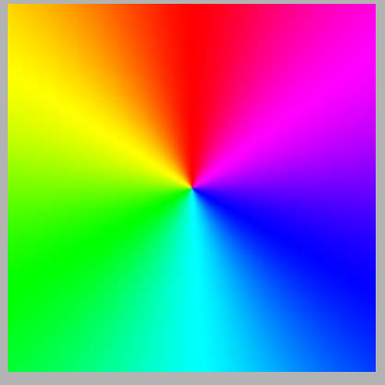
"A Question of Balance" by George Stocking (Big Bend National Park, Texas).



Although psychologists are quick to point out that the effect of color on human mood is often exaggerated, color nonetheless can have a profound impact on the emotional response a photograph triggers. For example, although red won't actually make your viewers want to start throwing chairs at people, color choice can be used to signal important things to your audience, and can therefore affect composition.

Take this image of a red-winged blackbird to the left. I made this photograph on a cold winter morning, and captured the moment when a breath of steam escaped the bird's beak. Moment, eye contact, and positioning of visual elements all are important here, but arguably, the color palette is the most important aspect of this composition. The warm colors of the sunlit cattails contrasted against the cooler tones of the shadowed area in the background create a powerful visual statement. But why?

I could talk about the leading diagonal lines, visual counterpoint, etc., but the color palette of this image clearly has a greater impact on the viewer than all of those things! "Blackbird Haiku" by Ian Plant (Huntley Meadows Park, Virginia).



A color wheel showing the relationship of complementary colors. The primary complements are red and cyan, yellow and blue, and green and magenta. More generally, colors are broadly perceived as "warm" or "cold."

Let's start with a little bit of basic color theory. The graphic above illustrates what is typically known as a "color wheel," although I have presented it in square format instead. This diagram shows where colors appear relative to each other on the color scale. Colors opposite to each other are known as being "complementary," which essentially means that two colors are opposites, and when mixed in the proper proportion, they produce a neutral color (grey, white, or black). For example, the following common colors are complementary pairs: red and cyan, yellow and blue, and magenta and green.

Reds and yellows are typically perceived as "warm" and "exciting." Warm colors are more likely to attract attention: this is why important traffic and warning signs are usually one of these two colors (such as stop signs and warning labels). Warm colors can evoke feelings of warmth and comfort, or anger and aggression.

On the opposite side of the color wheel, blues and cyans are typically perceived as "cool" and can evoke feelings of calm or even sadness. Whereas warm colors provoke excitement, cool colors are thought to have the opposite effect, inducing a more peaceful and tranquil mood. For example, psychologists have found that people entering a blue room initially feel more at ease, although the effects are temporary.

Complementary colors can be very effective in visual art. When juxtaposed, complementary colors make each seem brighter and more vivid and can be used effectively to create powerful reactions. Most relevant to our discussion of use of color in composition, the juxtaposition of complementary colors can create visual counterpoint, which, as we know, gets the eye moving back and forth between two visual elements.

Think back to the blackbird image on the previous page: the contrast of warm and cool colors creates visual tension in the photo, inducing the viewer to study the image and linger. This tension reinforces the opposing diagonal visual relationship between the bird and the

cattails. The overall effect captures the viewer's eye, holding it over time.

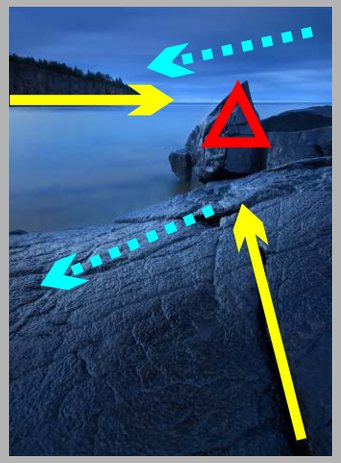
Color can be used to trigger more emotions than just excitement and calm. For example, with this image of an old waterman plying his trade (right), I chose a golden color palette (coaxed along by a warm white balance setting) to evoke a feeling of nostalgia and hope. Notice also how the transition from the relatively dark foreground to the brighter background helps encourage the eye from near to far—but more on that later. By the way, now that we're near the end of the book, can you tell which other compositional tools I have used in this photo? Hint: it has something to do with leading elements, repetition of shapes, vanishing point, and convergence.

On the other side of the color spectrum, of course, we have glorious blue—one of my favorite colors, actually, one that often gets lost in this day and age of automatic white bal-

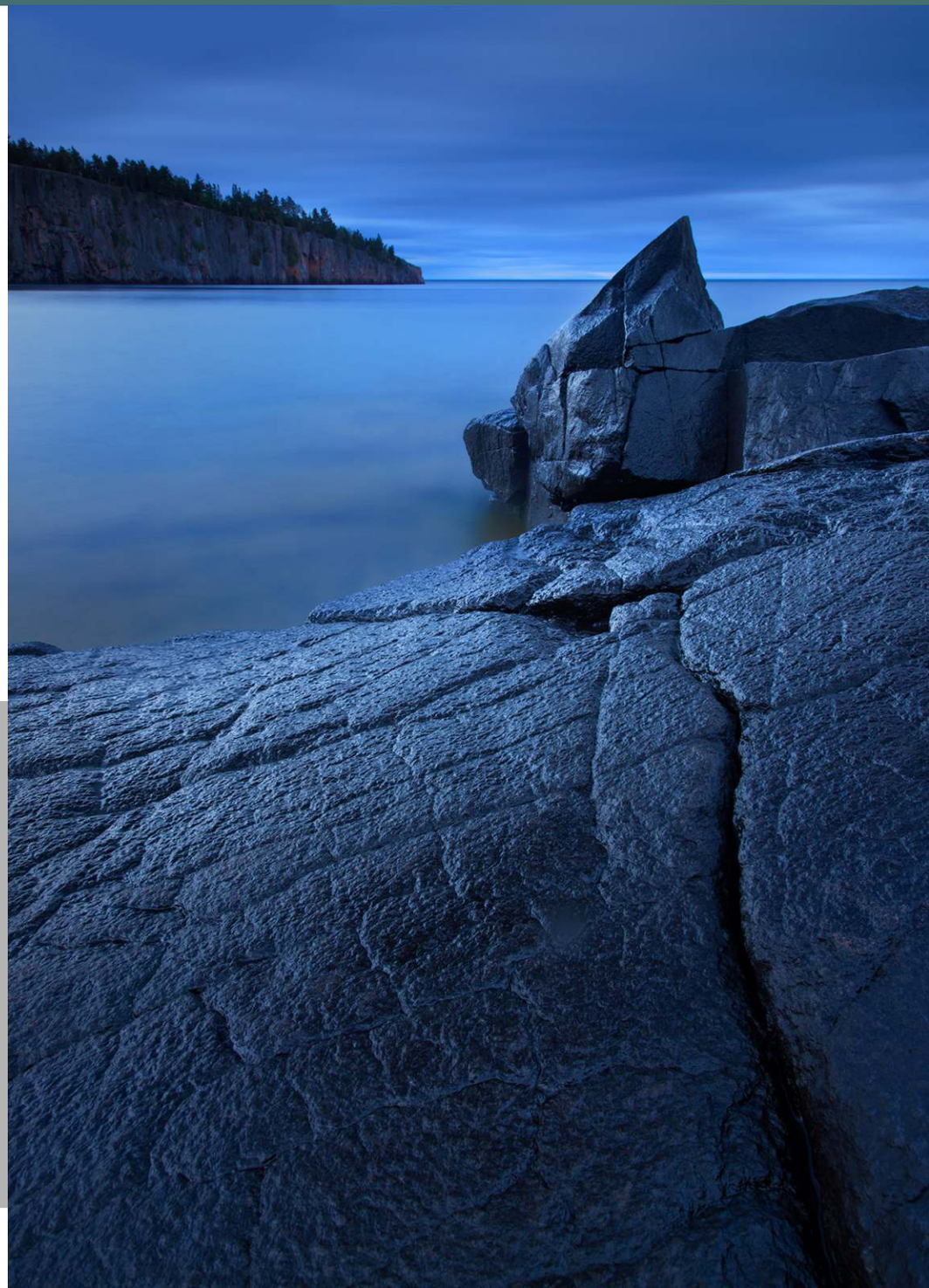
"Warm" colors can trigger all sorts of emotions. For this image, I was hoping to trigger a feeling of nostalgia with a golden color cast. The diminishing scale progression of waves in the foreground helps lead the eye into the scene. "Golden Days" by Ian Plant (Chesapeake Bay, Maryland).

ance. I chose a blue color palette for this moody twilight image of a sheltered bay on Lake Superior. The cool tones in the image are calm and soothing, creating a much different emotion than the image on the previous page. How color interacts with other compositional elements can have a profound impact on the way a photographed is interpreted.

Likewise, light can trigger an emotional response: photographs that are bright and luminous will likely trigger a more energetic and positive response, whereas dark photographs will appear to be moodier and will likely signal sadness to viewers. Light also has a more direct impact on composition. Remember atmospheric per-



The blue and dark tones of the image imply storminess, creating a brooding moodiness. The lines of the image all converge on the triangular rock—which easily becomes the dominant focal point—although several weaker lines help create some opposing energy. "Moody Blues" by Ian Plant (Lake Superior, Tettegouche State Park, Minnesota).



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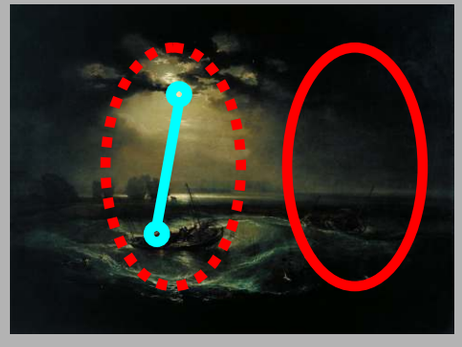


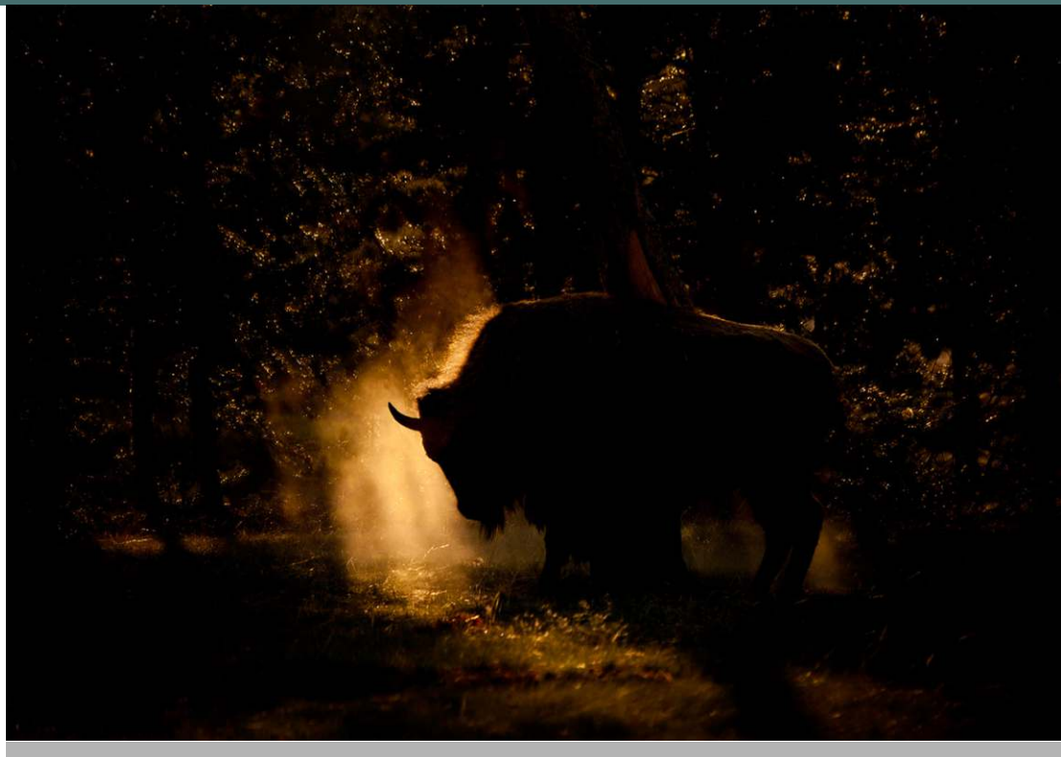
"Fisherman at Sea" by J. M. W. Turner (1796). Notice how Turner controls the eye using the contrast between light and shadow. Notice also the counterpoint between the sun and the lamp on the boat and how the dark space to the right balances the visual mass that is created by the luminous area on the left. The result is harmonious, dynamic, and brooding.

spective? As objects get farther away, they appear to be reduced in color, saturation, and clarity relative to near objects. This depth cue also provides a visual progression that encourages the eye to travel deeper into an image. By having a transition from dark tones in the foreground to light tones in the background, you encourage the viewer's eye to travel into the image.

The importance of light and color in art cannot be understated. There are myriad ways in which both can be used to lead the eye and create visual relationships between compositional elements. Light and color can also be used to define visual forms, and the interaction of dark and light, as well as warm and cool, can be very powerful and effective. Turning once again to one of the masters of mood in painting, let us briefly consider this masterpiece by J. M. W. Turner called *Fisherman at Sea* (1796). There can be no doubt as to the artist's intent here: clearly, he wished to convey a dismal sense of foreboding, of imminent doom at the hands of the violent storm. But then, there is a slender ray of hope, as the clouds briefly part to yield a view of calmer seas. Turner deftly uses shadow and light here, forcing the viewer's eye to go exactly where he wanted it to go. The subtle contrast between the faint warmth of the sunlit areas and the cool darkness everywhere else enhance the

mood and the composition. Notice also how he balances his composition, which is dominated by visual mass on the left, by using a copious amount of dark space on the right. There are a lot of subtle touches in this painting, and the composition is top-notch. By leaving most of the painting dark—almost pitch-black—Turner demonstrates his mastery of the medium and his unconventional boldness as a painter.

Although I can in no way claim to equal Turner's mastery, I too enjoy making images that seem to emerge from inky blackness, dripping with mood. For example, with this photo of a bison from Yellowstone National Park (right), I was attracted to the splash of backlit dust kicked up by the bison as it rubbed against a tree, trying to dislodge patches of its winter coat. I carefully chose an exposure that rendered most of the image in deep shadow, with just a fringe of light around the bison's head. I chose to place this area of light slightly off-center (not unlike with Turner's painting), as I felt that would best balance the various elements of the composition. The effect, although less masterful than with Turner's painting, is somewhat the same: the predominance of shadow implies a brooding menace, whereas the hint of light immediately draws the eye. With images like this, exposure and composition must be carefully thought out and put together.



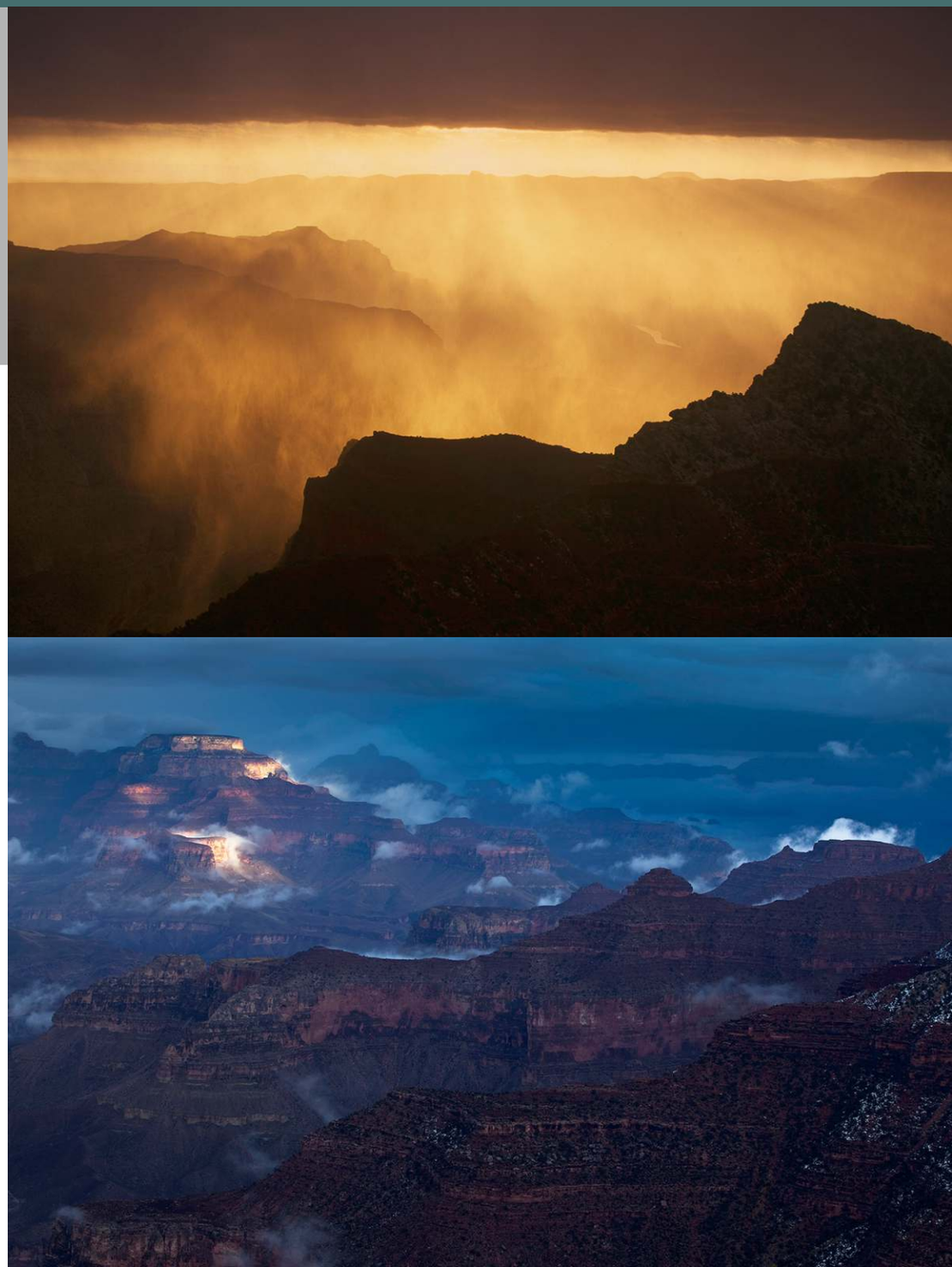
The overall darkness of this image pushes almost all visual energy into the center area that is backlit by the setting sun. There is just enough luminosity to allow some details to emerge in the shadowed areas, providing off-center visual interest. "Spirit of Light" by Ian Plant (Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming).

Let's take a look at two more images to demonstrate the effect of color and light on mood. Both images were taken at the same place along the Scottish coast, on the same evening (the compositions are slightly different

due to changes in the tide, but otherwise, the positioning for each is virtually the same). The top image is awash with the warm, bright, and bold colors of sunset, whereas the bottom image is darker and blue, taken on the edge of twilight. Both images, although otherwise largely the same, convey very different moods. Although several differences contribute to the different look of each photo—for example, the top image is a short exposure, whereas the bottom is long—there can be little doubt that color and luminosity both play a key role in differentiating the two photographs. The top image is more energetic and visually engaging, whereas the bottom image is more fluid and relaxed.

Same location, almost the same composition, but two very different moods. The warm image at the top has more energy, whereas the cooler image on the bottom is tranquil. Of course, shutter speed also impacts mood here: the shorter exposure for the top image is more dynamic, whereas the long exposure blur for the bottom image reinforces the peaceful mood created by the blue color palette. "Na Hearadh" (top) and "The Gloaming" (bottom) by Ian Plant (Isle of Harris, Scotland).

Once again, we see how color and light can have a dramatic impact on similar compositions. The bright golds at top create energy, whereas the dark blues at bottom are relatively more peaceful. "Golden Tempest" (top) and "The Dawn of Creation" (bottom) by George Stocking (Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona).



Let's turn to two final images to bring the point home. Once again, both images were taken at the same general location—in this case, the Grand Canyon—although the specific compositions are not identical (but similar enough for our purposes). In the top image, George took advantage of the stunning light: a golden sunrise and backlit fog rising from the canyon. The effect is immediate and eye-grabbing. The bright, warm luminosity is powerful and energetic. For the bottom image, cooler tones prevail, as well as a darker overall look with a more muted contrast range. The effect is more soothing, and somewhat primal in mood. Two very similar compositions, but because of the light and color, two very different results.

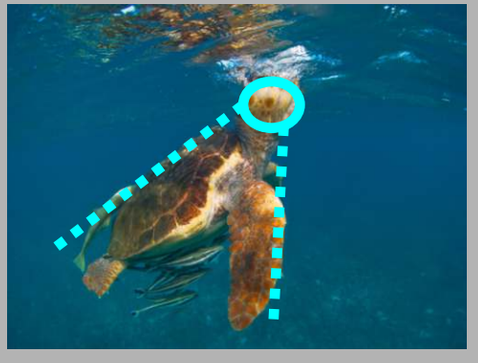
I like to think of photography as an exercise in finding "convergences": those moments when two or more elements come together in an interesting or artistically relevant way. Usually, such convergences are fleeting, leading Henri Cartier-Bresson to describe photography as capturing the "decisive moment" in which one is able to record an essential interaction of subjects at its peak. Ideally, the moment should reveal something about the character of your subject, or capture an instant when compositional power is at its fullest, filled with energy and possibility.

Arguably, painters rely on moment far less than photographers. It is photography's vicarious tether to reality that makes it unique as an art form from painting, and this is what makes the capture of the decisive moment so special.

For landscape photographers, the decisive moment can take many forms. A common convergence in nature results from clouds interacting in an interesting way with land forms. Look to juxtapose clouds with other relevant shapes in the scene. As light changes, sometimes interesting shapes and patterns are revealed. Wait for the moment when the interaction of shadow and light is at its peak. Many interesting convergences also happen when working with moving water; for example, when a particularly large wave crashes against a rocky shore (above), it reveals the full force and fury of nature.

Moment is critical to photography. Choose your moment carefully: it should reveal something special about your subject. "The Decisive Moment" by Ian Plant (Olympic National Park, Washington).

Of course, everyone knows the importance of moment when it comes to wildlife photography. The key is to pick a moment when the animal does something char-



Capturing the right moment is important, but that doesn't mean you should ignore composition. Getting both right is best! "Snorkeling" by Ian Plant (Gladden Spit and Silk Cayes Marine Reserve, Belize).

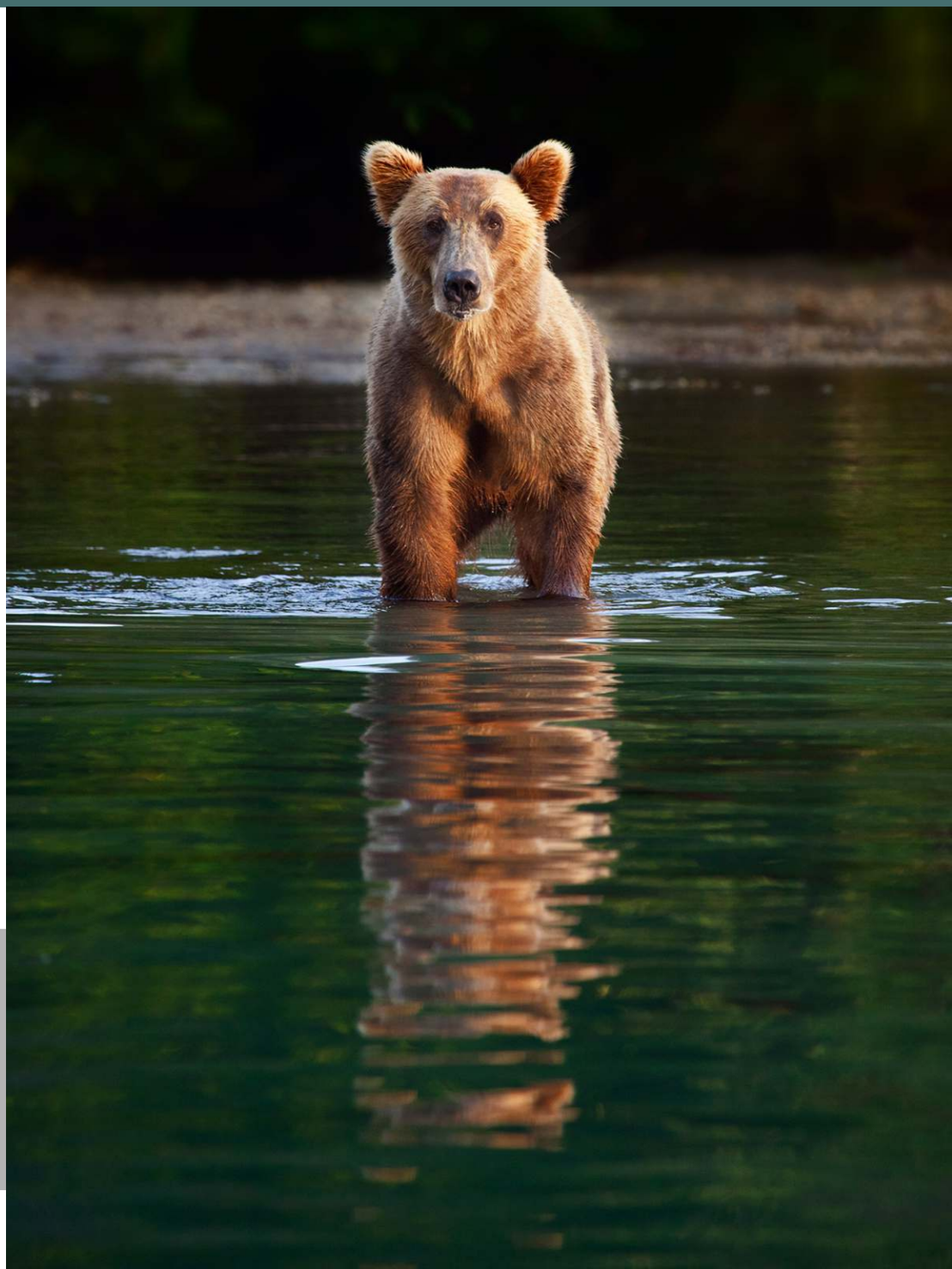
acteristic, allowing you to tell the animal's story (we'll talk about storytelling in more detail in the next section). For example, with the photo of the sea turtle above, I waited until the turtle broke the surface of the water for a gulp of air. The moment not only tells a story about how the animal lives, but it also presents the most pleasing convergence of compositional elements. Notice how the turtle forms a triangle shape, forming (as we now know) an abstract vanishing point, helping to focus attention on the turtle's head. I swear I was thinking about all these things when I triggered the shutter: at least that's my story, and I'm sticking to it! Okay, maybe not, but you will find in time that composition becomes intuitive—you'll start sensing the moment when compositional elements converge in a pleasing way, rather than deducing them through patient observation and logic.

Waiting for the decisive moment requires patience and dedication. Knowing something about your subject can help you optimize your chances of capturing powerful convergences. Not sure if you've captured the "essential" moment? Keep shooting!

A hungry bear stalks for prey in the shallows of a dark lake, looking for something to satisfy its appetite. A salmon breaks the surface, catching the bear's attention for a moment, but then the bear senses something larger, something more fulfilling. It quickly pivots, with a motion seemingly too fast and graceful for an animal so large, and suddenly, the full intensity of its ravenous eyes fall upon *you*—and you alone!

Of course, the bear's eyes aren't falling on you alone—they are also falling on the eyes of your viewers. Eye contact is a very simple and graphic way to forge an emotional bond between your viewers and the subject of your photograph—it offers viewers an *invitation to participate*, to feel as if they are part of the action, as if they were standing with you as you triggered the shutter. Now, perhaps, most viewers wouldn't want to participate with a half ton of furry hunger on the loose, but I think you get my point.

Eye contact forges a connection between your viewers and your subject. Anything that invites viewers to "participate," making them feel a part of the action, is great for establishing mood. "Standoff" by Ian Plant (Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, Alaska).



Invitations to participate are cues that help draw the viewer into the scene, emotionally as well as visually. Of course, many of the techniques we have discussed in this book are designed to do just that: draw the viewer into the scene. Adding that elusive emotional connection—a sense of being there— is the focus of this section.

Ansel Adams once famously said, "There are always two people in every picture: the photographer and the viewer." I think he was essentially saying that for each photo, there are two points of view: the point of view of the photographer, and the point of view of the viewer. But there is a third point of view that Ansel didn't refer to, and that is the point of view—the story being told—of the subject.

The very best photographs tell a story rather than just merely creating a record of a place or a moment. When there is a story behind the image, even a mysterious one (arguably, especially if there is a mysterious one), viewers engage on an emotional level. As previously mentioned, where would da Vinci's *The Mona Lisa* be without her enigmatic smile? The smile evokes a response, making people wonder about the story behind the smirk.

George's quirky image to the right is a good example. For some reason, whenever I look at this image, I see the saguaro trying to have a conversation with the tree on the left (which, of course, is not responding). There's something about the image that tells this story to me; I suspect it has something to do with the juxtaposition of repeating curving shapes which implies that the tree

This image tells a story: to me, a crazy old cactus trying to have a conversation with a bush. What story does it tell you? "Ancient Warrior" by George Stocking (San Tan Regional Park, Arizona).

and the saguaro, although very different, are somehow connected to each other.

The image to the left uses several techniques to invite the viewer into the scene. Eye contact, of course, is important to this photo, but the ruffled feathers of the egret also invite a mystery and tell a story to viewers. In fact, the egret had just dived into the water in an unsuccessful bid for a small fish and was shaking itself dry—but each viewer will see their own story. As you have probably figured out by now, "moment" (which we discussed in the previous section) and "storytelling" are very closely related.

When working with landscapes, the best way to tell a story is to establish a *sense of place*—to find something that is unique to the landscape you are photographing, something that tells its story. As with

Moment was essential to telling this egret's story. When I saw the bird shaking itself dry after an unsuccessful plunge for fish into a tidal pool, I knew I had something interesting in the works. When the egret paused and looked straight at me, it all came together. "Snowy Egret" by Ian Plant (Chesapeake Bay, Maryland).

All of the characteristics of the Scottish coast that captured my imagination—rolling green pastures, seaside cliffs, and boulders left behind by the glaciers—come together in this composition to provide a sense of place. "Eilean Leòdhais" by Ian Plant (Isle of Lewis, Scotland).

all invitations to participate, you are seeking to create a sense of vicariousness, so you need to look for visual cues that give viewers a feel for the moment or the place.

The introduction image for this chapter is a good example of a "sense of place" photograph. To me, the beauty of the remote Scottish coast lay in its rolling green pastures, stony cliffs rising above turbulent waters, and random glacial erratics deposited here and there. So I looked for a composition that included all three critical elements in order to paint a picture of this unique land. Since I was aiming to create a sense of place rather than a compelling "trophy image," I kept the composition intentionally simple to focus attention on the landscape's story.

This concept of "sense of place" is by no means easy or clear (frankly, few of the concepts in this chapter are). I think the best approach is to simply think of the following: What is it about my scene that I find inspiring or appealing? What seems unique to me? What can be found here that can't be found anywhere else? Which features of the scene tell its story best? Answering these questions is the first step, as they dictate which elements to include in the composition. Of course, arranging those elements is a critical and sometimes difficult next step.

But by now, you should be an expert!

1. Tell a story with the eyes: Eye direction is critical (for subjects with eyes, that is). Make eye contact with a subject to create an emotional connection with the viewer. The direction a subject is looking creates an implied line of sight, which can be used to lead the viewer into the scene.

2. Use color and luminosity to set a mood: Warm, bright colors create an energetic, inviting mood, whereas cool and dark colors create a more brooding and dramatic mood. Try shooting your compositions in different light and see how the resulting colors change the mood.

3. Wait for the decisive moment: Don't just show up and shoot. When you've found the perfect subject or composition, wait for the "decisive moment" that creates energy or reveals something important. Sometimes the decisive moment itself will reveal the perfect composition, so above all, stay flexible and be ready to shoot when the decisive moment is revealed!

4. Pick great subjects: I don't mean that you should only shoot subjects which are beautiful, majestic, or awe-inspiring, but try to find subjects which are meaningful (either in terms of composition, emotion, or both) and unique.

5. Use elements which show something unique about your subject: Try to tell your subject's story by including elements which reveal something unique. Ask yourself what makes your subject special and hone in on those elements. Use the composition skills learned in this book to properly place these elements within the image.

“Photography to me is catching a moment which is passing, and which is true.”
—Jacques-Henri Lartigue

“End of Days” by Ian Plant (Chesapeake Bay, Maryland).

AFTERWORD

“I take photographs with love, so I try to make them art objects. But I make them for myself first and foremost—that is important.”
—Jacques-Henri Lartigue

Now that you’re done with this book, here’s something to think about: **none of what I have said really matters.** Your creative expression is all that matters—and most important is what it matters to *you*.

The image to the right is one of my all-time personal favorites, although I suspect many people think it is weird. But do you know what? I don’t care. While it is important, on some level, to have one’s work accepted by others, you should never forget who your most important audience is—yourself.

Everyone sees the world in different ways. Some of us compose using “left brain” analytics, whereas others rely

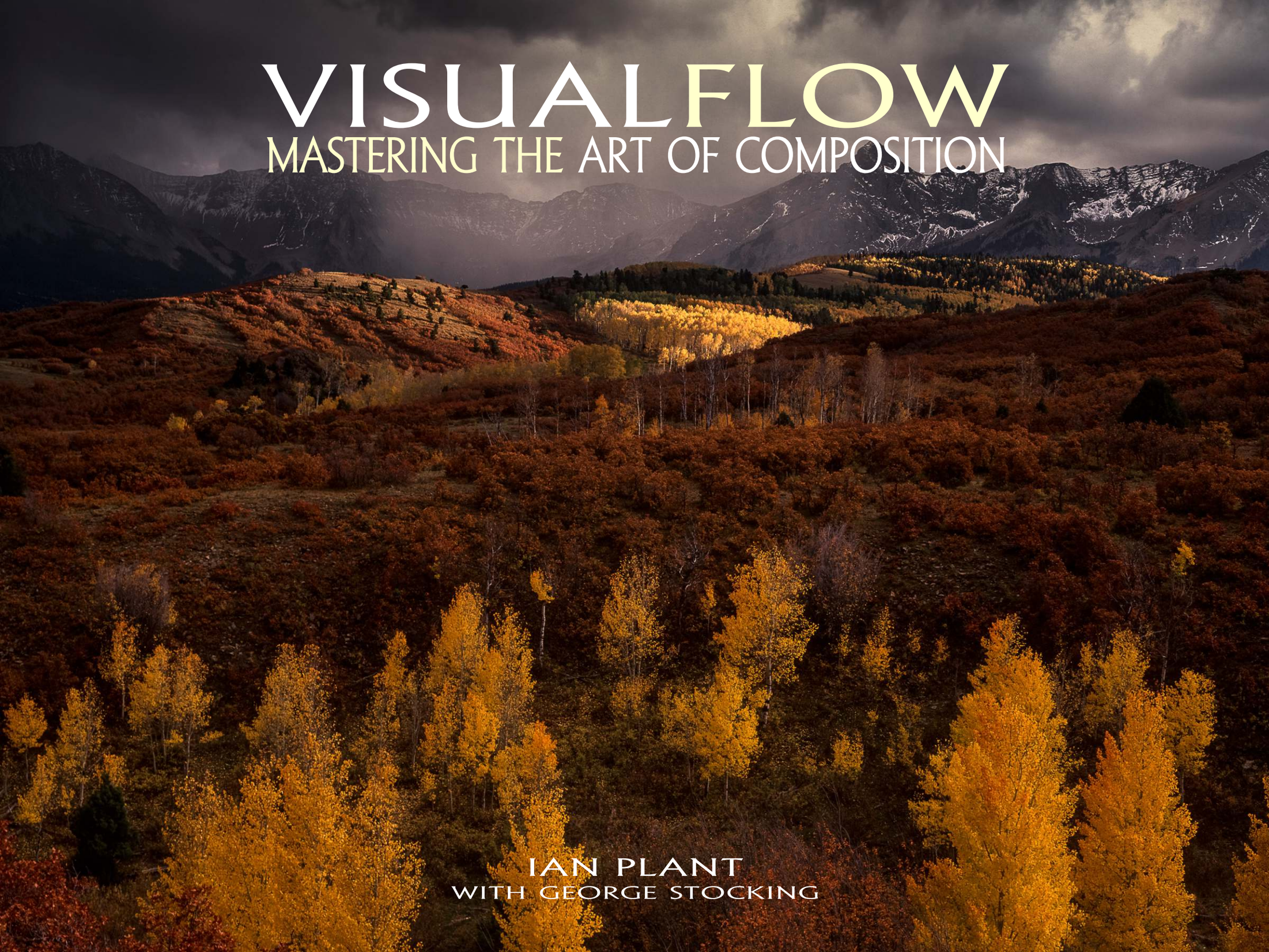
“Devil’s Twilight” by Ian Plant (Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Utah).

"The Snake River" by Ian Plant (Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming).

"Good compositions do not flow from the words, but rather the other way around."

more on "right brain" creative intuition. All approaches are valid and can lead to beautiful works of art. Although I think it is important to try to expand one's creative vision, always remember that your way of seeing the world is unique and intensely personal. In the end, you cannot allow anyone else's creative vision to superimpose upon your own. You must follow your own eyes and heart and find what speaks to you.

Good compositions do not flow from the words, but rather the other way around. Never forget that.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