Composition

- How the elements of image are framed and arranged.

- Over the years, artists have developed techniques ("rules") to appeal to human perception.

- Augmented by modern research.

- "Rules" can provide a starting place to strengthen the structure of an image.

- Think of these not as "rules," but as guidelines. Don't become a slave to them.

- The best composition is the one that works.

Focus on Composition

- Balance

- Framing and cropping

- Some of the guidelines

- Leading the eye

Visual Balance

- Striving for visual balance where elements feel comfortable within frame.

- Center of interest balanced with other elements.

- Or achieve desired tension.

Visual Balance

Visual Balance

Visual Balance

Framing
First decision you make
Based on subject and image format

- Horizontal – tranquility, depth

- Vertical – strength, action, height

- Square – uniform, symmetry, hard to use

- Panorama – relaxed and peaceful

Framing
Horizontal or Vertical

Framing - Horizontal

Framing - Vertical

Square

Panorama

Horizontal framing
on steroids

Cropping

- Refine framing with the crop

- Crop to accentuate image

     Okay to work to standardized mat or paper

- Focus attention on the subject

- Correct alignment and distortion

- Remove competing elements and distractions
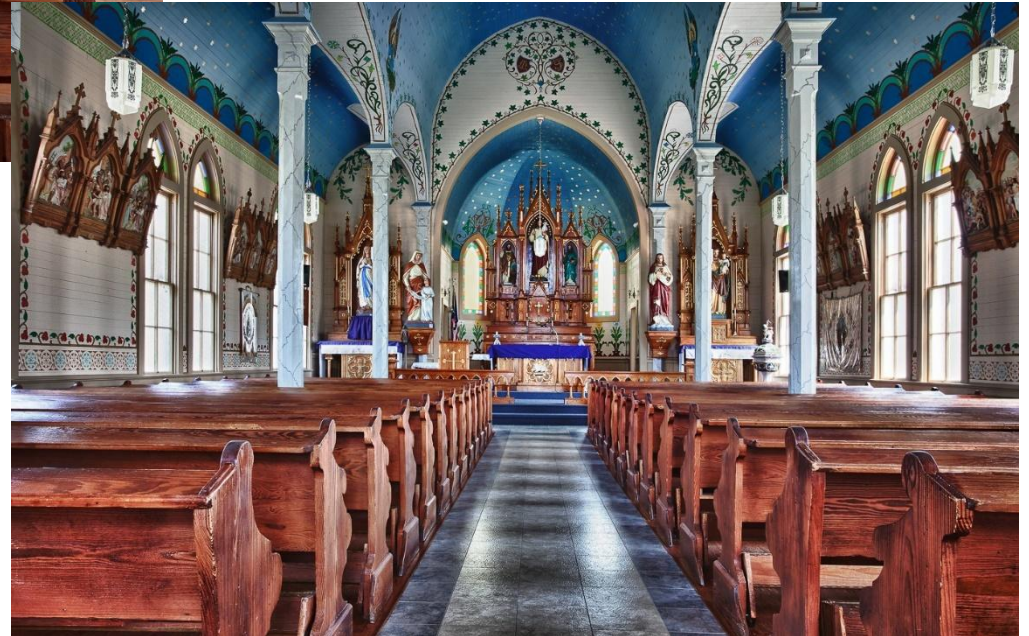
Cropping
To Improve Framing

Cropping
To Remove Distractions

Cropping
Straighten Image Within Frame

Some Time Tested Guidelines ("Rules")

- Fill the frame
- Keep it simple
- Rule of thirds, golden mean, sweet spot, power point…
- Foreground, middle-ground, background
- Lines- horizon, leading, direction, straight, curved, implied
- Perspective – vanishing point
- Remove distractions and competing elements
- Blur the foreground or background to separate

- Watch the edges
- Odd numbers
- Repetition
- Textures and patterns
- Frame within a frame
- Space to move or look into
- Camera angle or vantage point
- Control perspective and distortion
- Negative space
- Burning background and edges

Fill the Frame

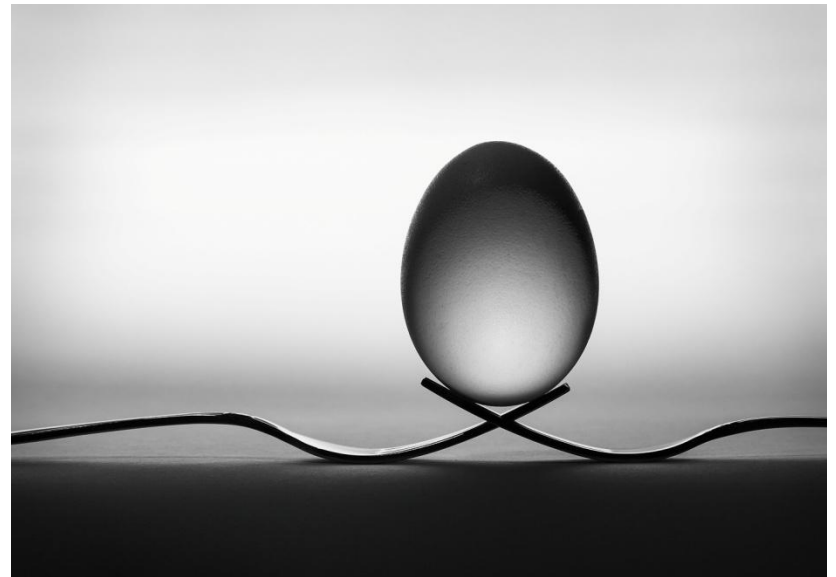# Fill the Frame

Keep It Simple
Focus attention and remove distractions

Keep It Simple
But, Not Too Simple

Not so simple that it won't hold viewer's attention. Not so complex that viewer gives up.

Move Subject Off Center
Rule of thirds, golden mean,
sweet spot, power point…

- Dynamic

- Provides sense of balance

- Symmetry can be static

Rule of Thirds

Rule of Thirds

Foreground, Middle-ground, Background

Adds depth
Key construct in landscape photography

Lines and Shapes Invoke Feeling

- Horizontal – peacefulness, tranquility
- Vertical – power, strength
- Diagonal – dynamic, movement, excitement
- Random – conflicting, chaotic
- Curves – softness, femininity
- C-curves – leads the eye, flowing
- S-curve – flowing
- Spiral – natural, draws inward
- Zig zag- dramatic, active
- Rays – brilliance, sunsets, sunrises, fireworks,
- Leading lines - go to the main subject

- Circles – continuity, closure
- Semi-circle – arches, rainbows, pleasing
- Oval – feminine
- Cross – pulls elements together
- Triangle – stability, strength
- Rectangle – varying proportions
- Square – ridged, difficult to use

Lines

- Horizontal – horizon, baseline, restful, smooth
- Horizon Line – dominant graphic element, divides the frame
- Vertical – strength, height
- Diagonal – dynamic, active, leads eye
- Leading Lines – provides path for eye to follow. Entry into and exit out of image
- Curved – movement, flowing, gentle, carries the eye
- Implied Lines – two points form a line

Horizon Line

- Rule of thirds – often used, generally safe

- Low – emphasizes sky, expansive

- High – emphasizes foreground, heaviness

- Centered – can be static

- Generally want horizon level

Horizon Line – Level

Horizon Line – Rule of Thirds

Horizon Line
Low Emphasizes Sky

Horizon Line
High Emphasizes Foreground
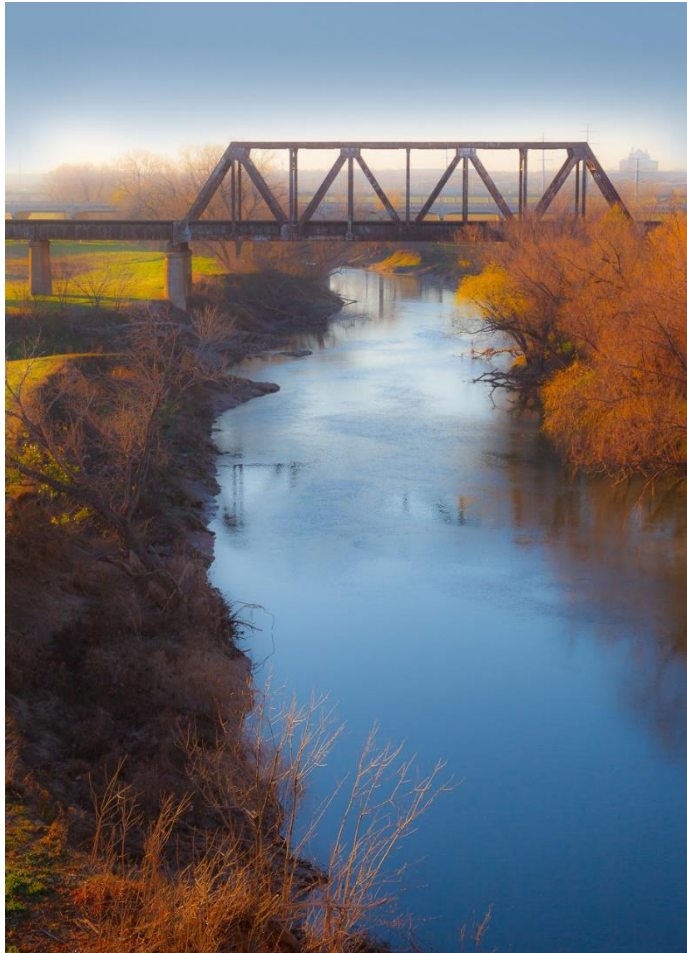
Leading Lines

- Leads viewer into image and to the subject

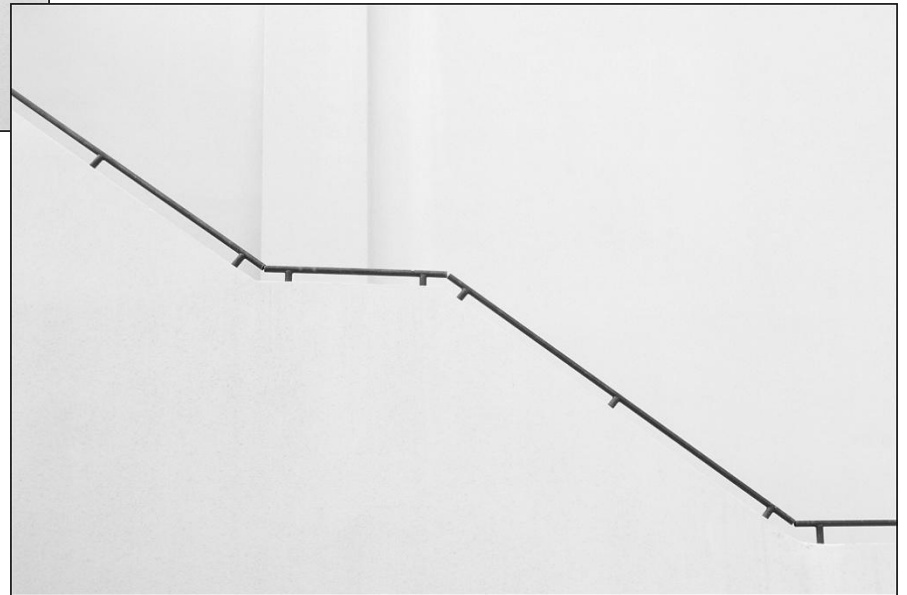- Upward diagonal – harmonious

- Downward diagonal – compulsive

Lines - Diagonal
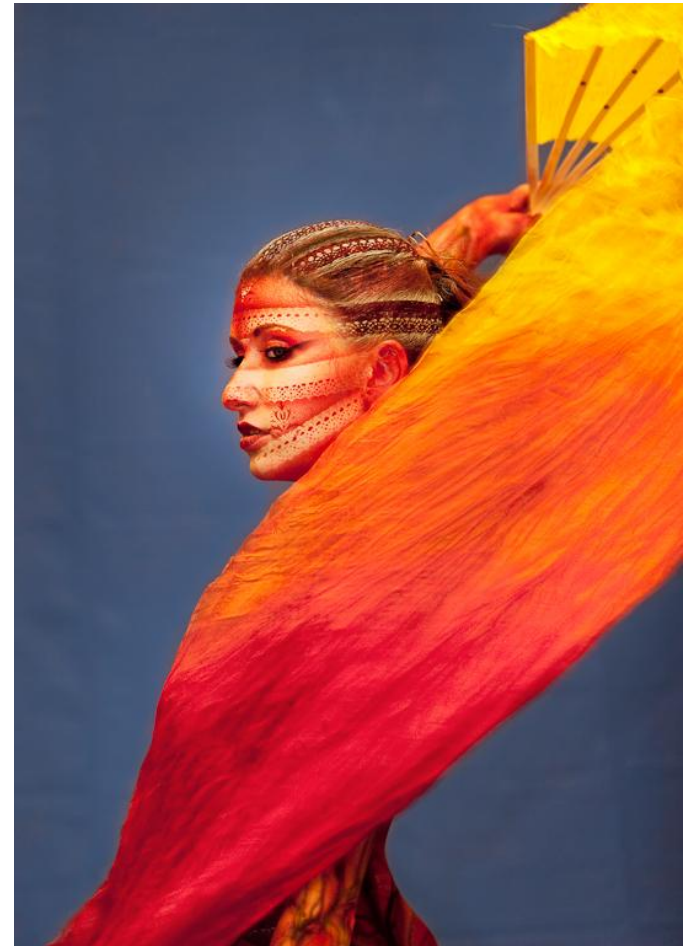
Lines – Diagonal Orientation
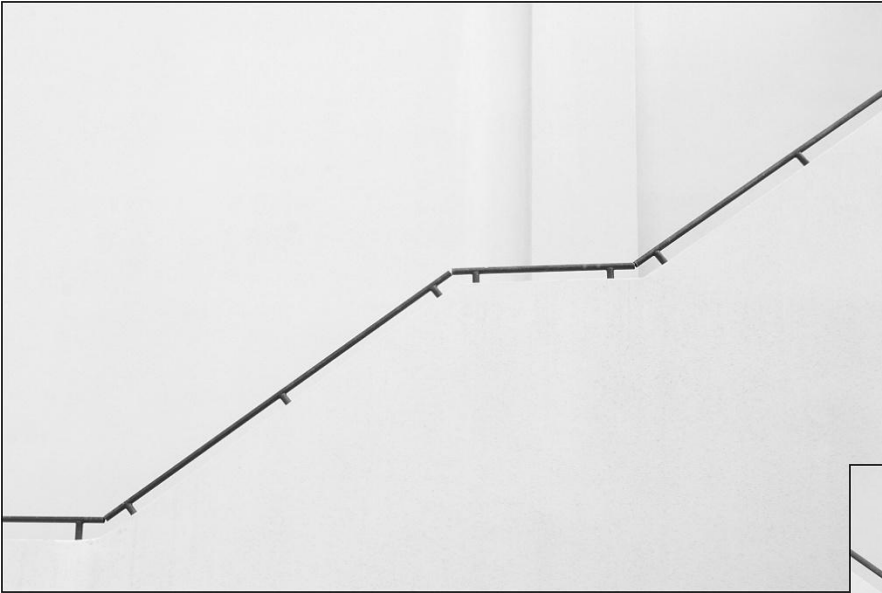
Upward - harmonious

Downward - compulsive

Curves

Perspective – Vanishing Point

Perspective – Vanishing Point

Other Considerations

Even Numbers

Even numbers are symmetric and formal

Regularity not found in nature

Odd Numbers

Nature tends to be irregular

Adds interest

One surrounded by others is comforting

Odd Numbers

Repetition

Objects

Forms
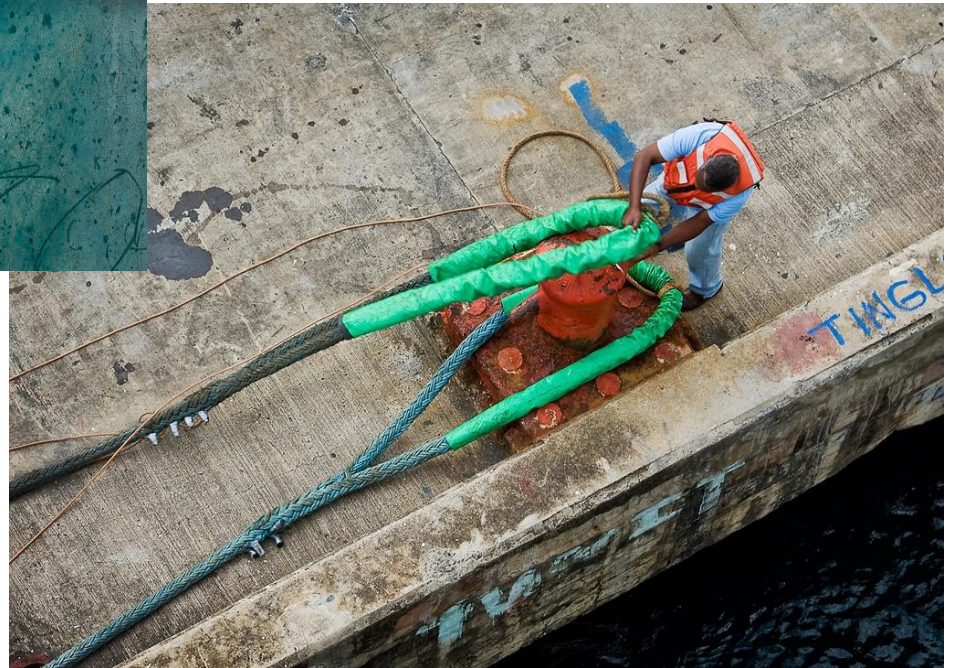
Textures and Patterns
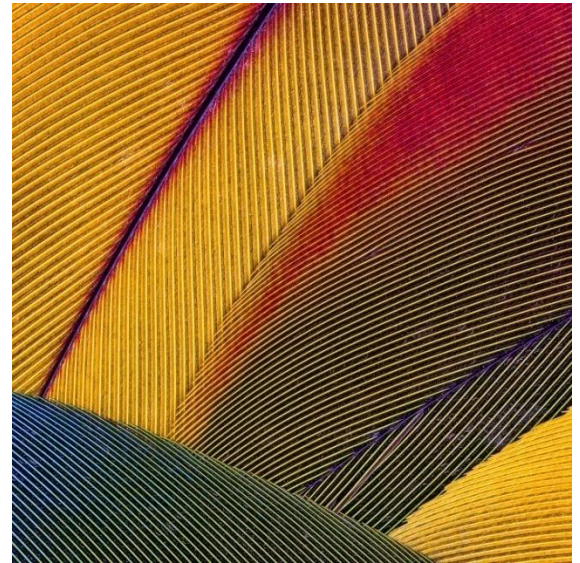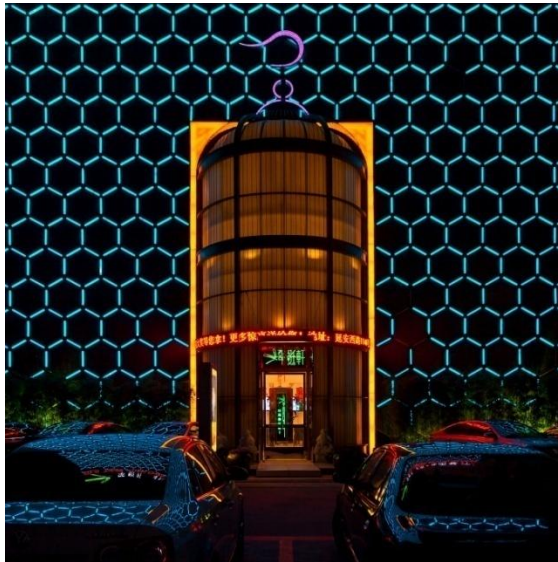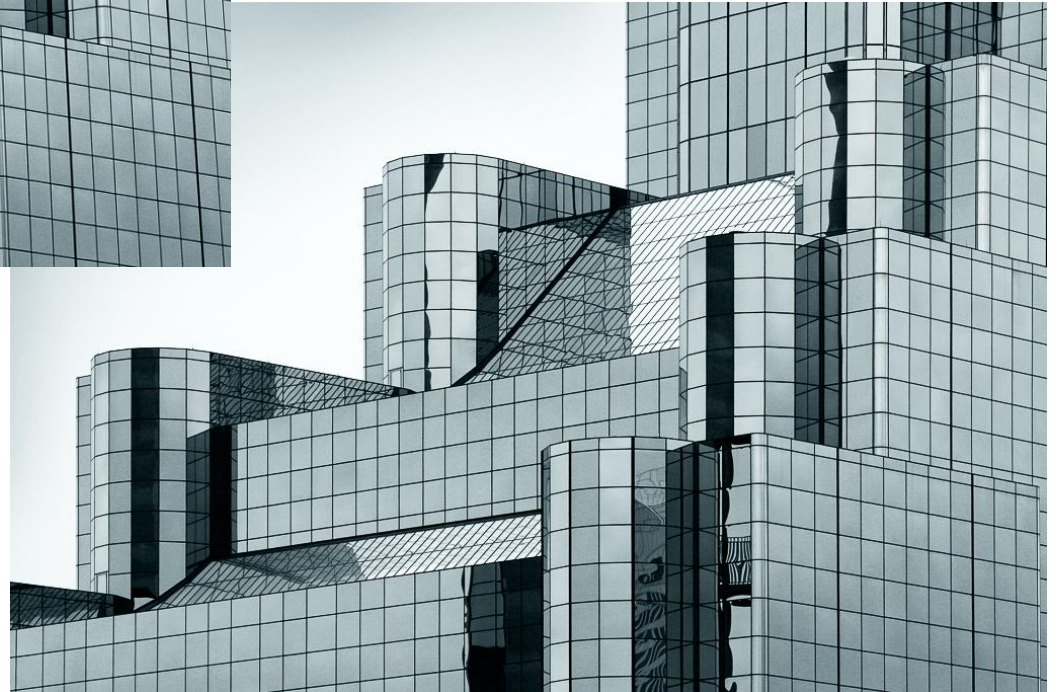
Frame Within a Frame

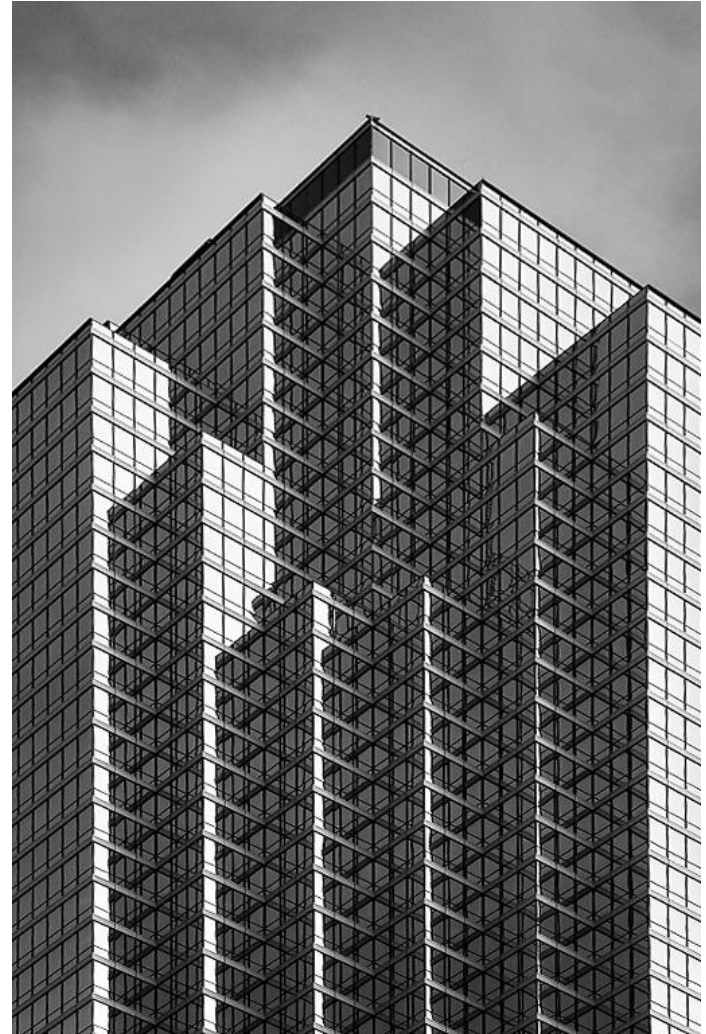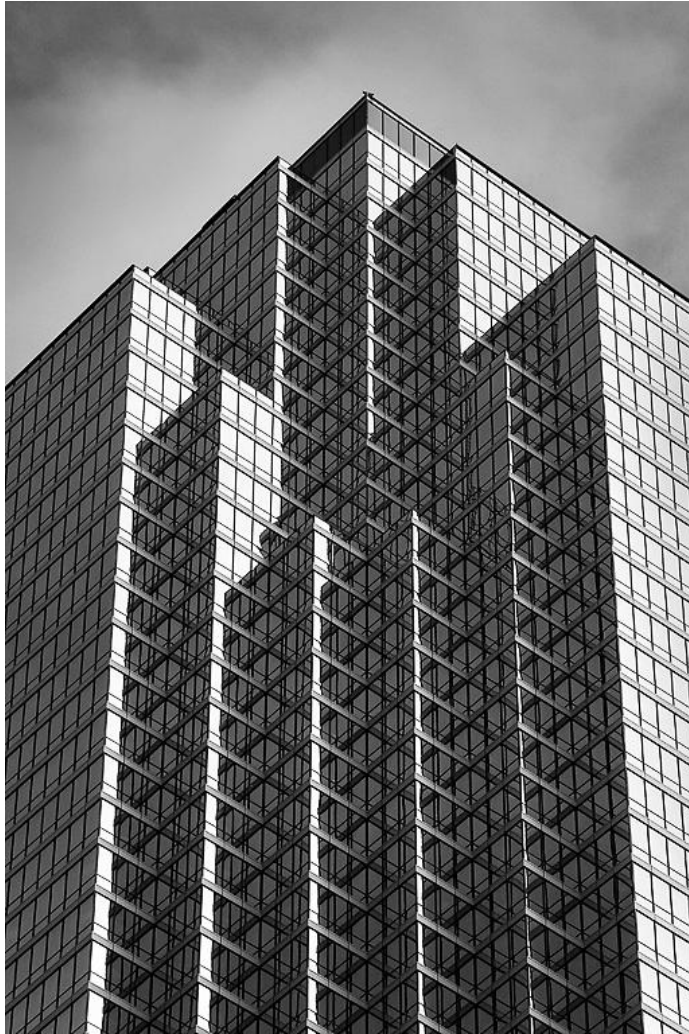# Space to Move Into

Space to Look Into

Camera Angle or Vantage Point

Control Perspective
Keystoning and Distortion

Control Perspective
Keystoning and Distortion

# Negative Space

Negative Space

Leading the Eye

- We use composition to direct and hold the viewer's attention
    - Enter frame naturally
    - Draw to center of interest
    - Provide paths to explore the entire image
    - Return to the center of interest
    - Hold eye within the frame

Entry and Exit

- Provide path to enter frame
  - Naturally enter frame from lower left

- Block eye from leaving the frame

Entry and Exit
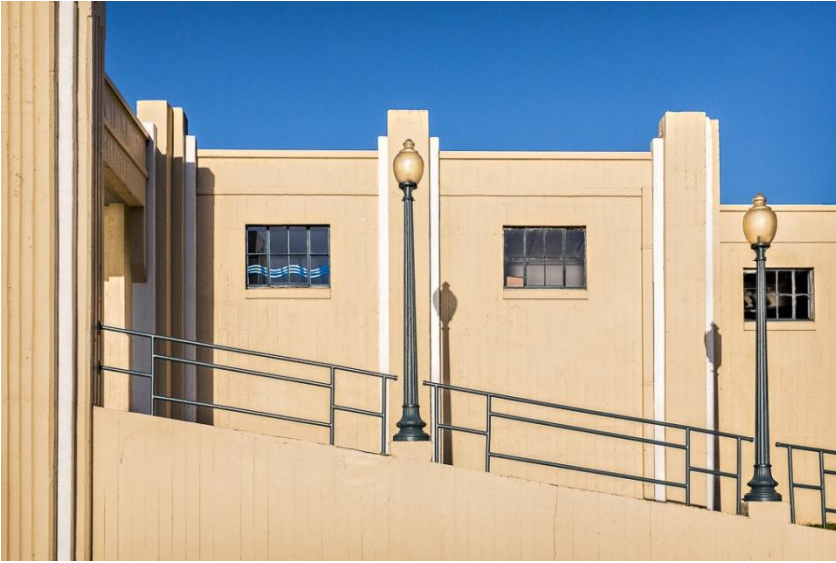
Blocked entry with easy exit

Path to enter with exit blocked
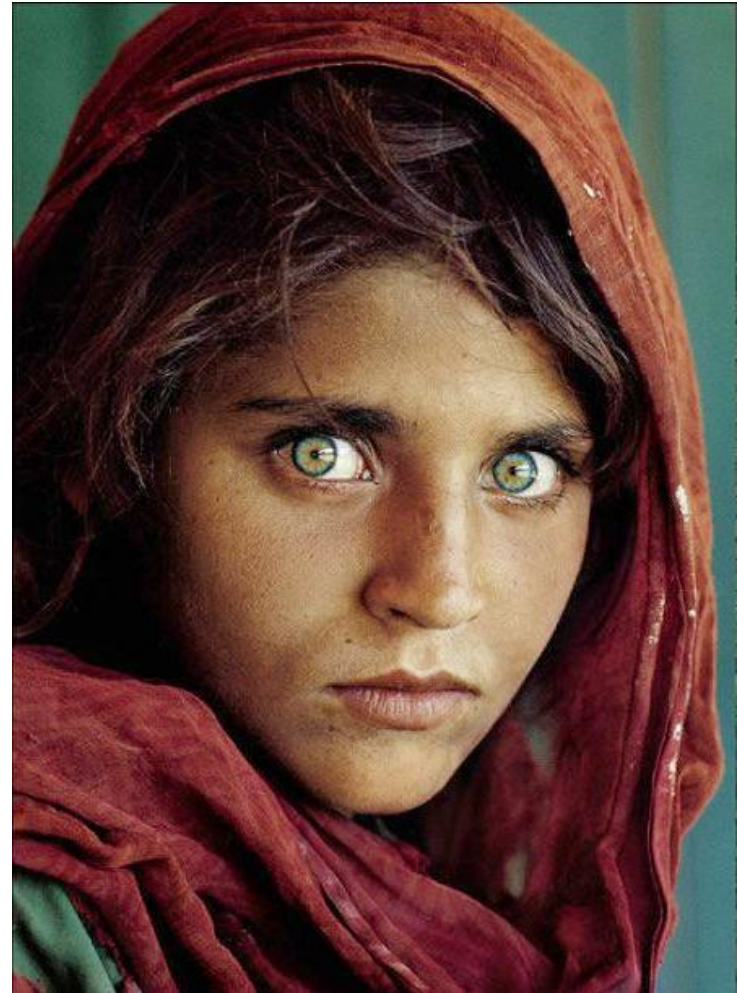
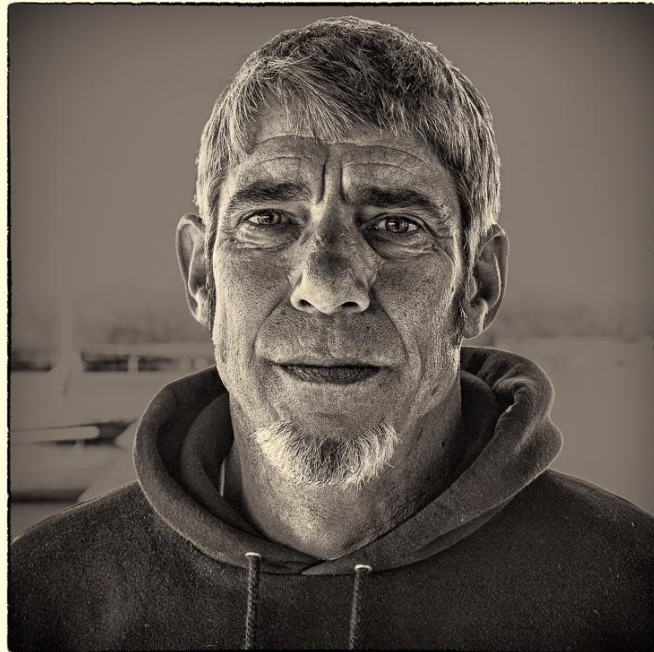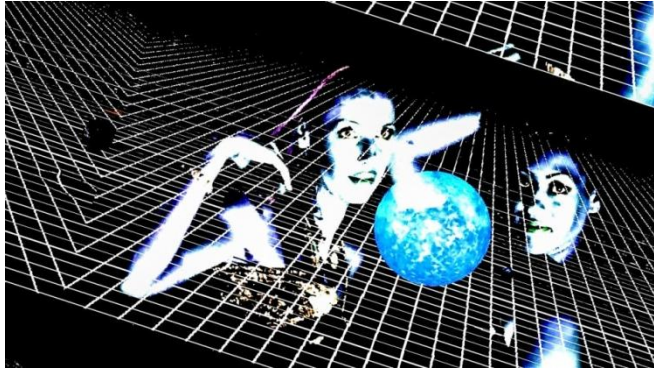# Entry and Exit

Easy Exit

Easy entry

Drawing Attention

- Attractors draw our attention to the subject *and to distractions*

- Subject based attractors
  - Human faces and eyes
  - Animal faces
  - Text
- Technique driven attractors
  - In focus
  - Bright
  - Colorful
  - High contrast
  - More detail
  - Lines and curves
- Attractors often used in combination

Faces

Eyes

Photos by
Steve Evens (upper left)
Steve McCurry (right)

Animals
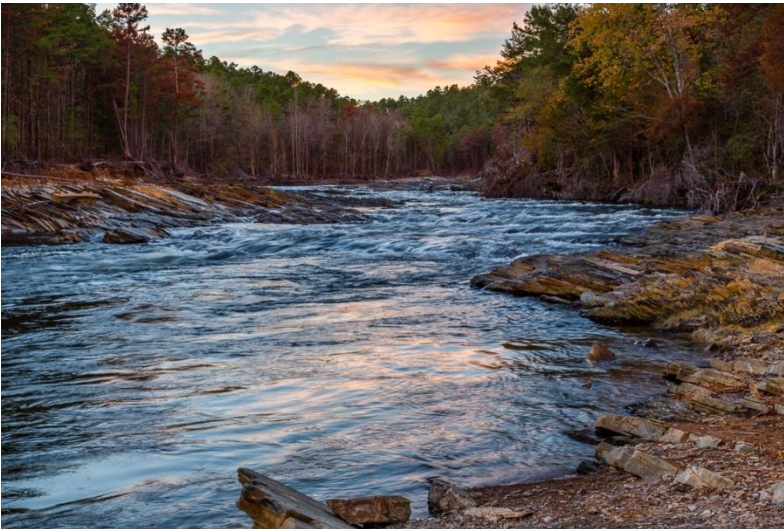
Text
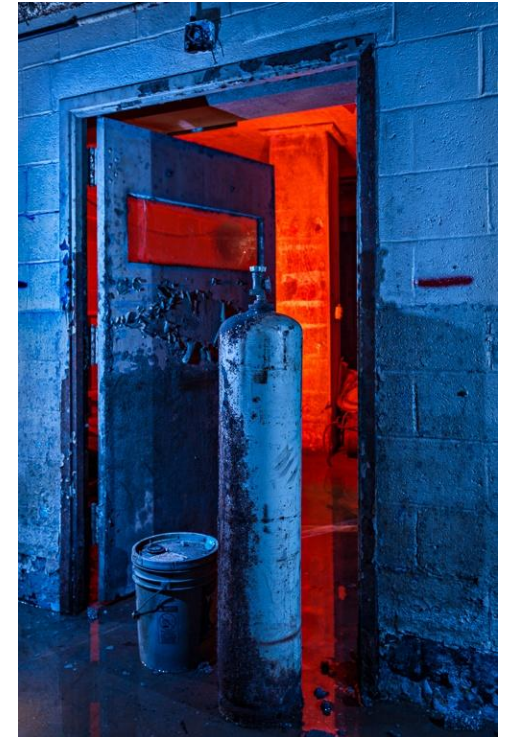
In Focus
DOF and …

Bright

Bright spots tend to draw attention while we tend to ignore dark areas.

Highlights enhance images.

Colorful

Warm tones read like bright spots when placed against a cool background
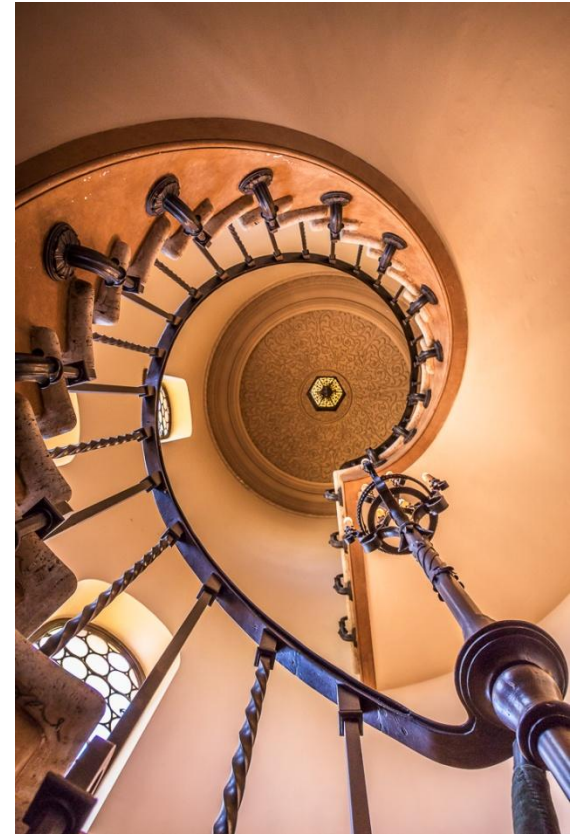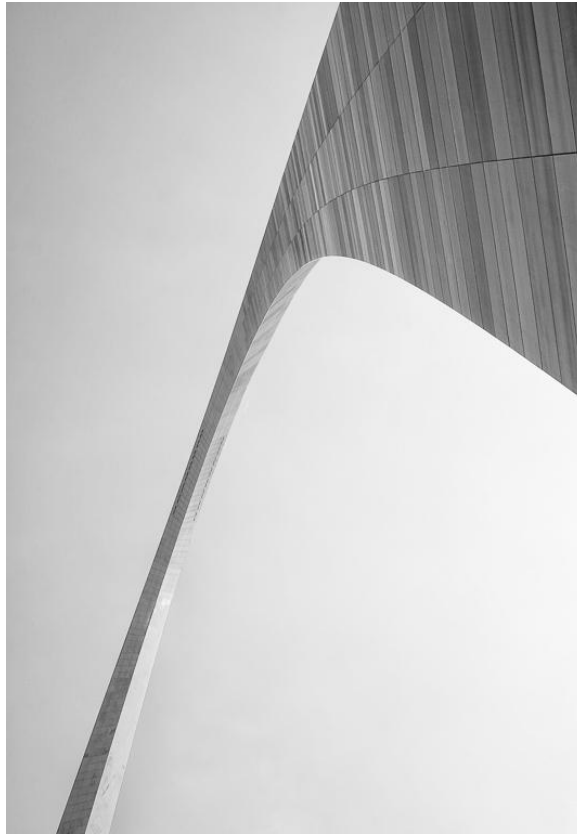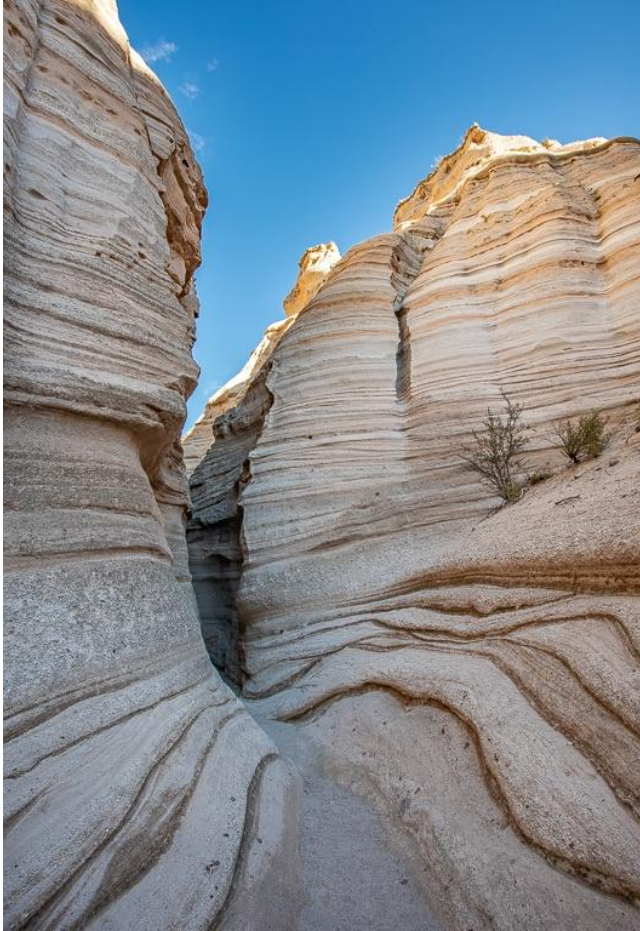
High Contrast

Detail

Lines and Curves

Implied Lines

Leading Lines

- Are extra special
- Direct the viewer's eye deeper into the composition.
- Create visual engagement that encourages viewer to explore the image.
- Includes straight lines, curves or a progression of objects from foreground to background.

Leading Lines

Curves
Guide Viewer

Sculpting with Light

- Use light and dark to direct eye.
- Lighten element to draw attention and take viewer there.
- Main subject should generally be the brightest.
- Darken elements to deemphasize.
- Burn edges to keep eye within the image.
- Brain does not see gradients so can use soft edged brushes or gradients to adjust brightness.

Sculpting with Light

Sculpting with Light

Burning Edges
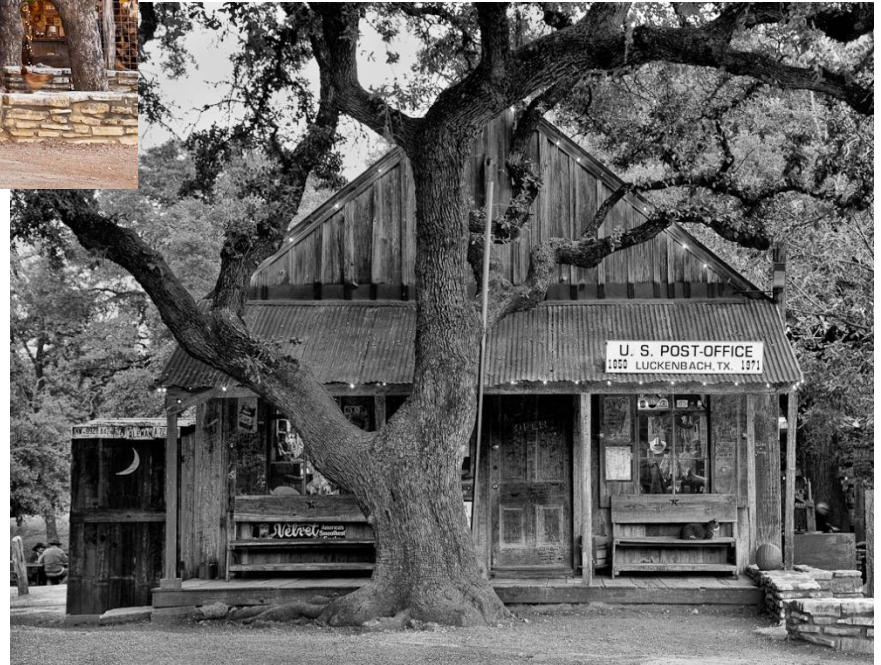## Focus Attention on Subject

Distractions
Unwanted Attractors!

- Attractors that pull the eye from the subject become distractions and cause visual confusion

- Remove or deemphasize distracting elements – bright spots, background, borders…

- Busy or competing elements – simplify, isolate, remove…

Distracting Elements
Remove

Busy with Competing Elements

Change Palette and Crop

Bright Spots

Bright Spots

Better

Blur the Background to Separate
Control DOF

Edges Are Special

- Our visual system is wired to see edges and objects with sharp contrast.

- We are drawn to features near edges and in corners.
  - Attractors
  - Mergers and near merges
  - Amputations

- Pay special attention to objects close to edges. These are emphasized, draw attention, create tension and imbalance.

- More apt to see edge problems in final image than in viewfinder – unless you look for them.

Mergers

Near Merge

Space to Breath

Merger

Amputations

Amputation

Better

Where to Crop?

Merger

Space to Breath

Purposeful Crop

Leading the Eye

- The eye is drawn to attractors – good and bad
- Use attractors to lead viewer
- Sculpt with light to draw attention or deemphasize
- Deemphasize or remove distractions
- Pay special attention to the edges

Parting Thoughts

- Composition is the selection and arrangement of [objects] within the picture format by using space most effectively.

- Beginners are often in search of a formula or recipe which can be counted on to make good images. This, of course, is a illusion!

- There are no rules for good composition, only guides and extremely flexible principles that may help us to see more sensitively instead of in a hit or miss manner. ...