20,000 Years of Struggling with Visual Composition

Enduring challenge of translating what we see, experience, and imagine into compelling visuals that capture attention.

Dallas Camera Club – training classes

Hans-Christian Reinecker

Disclaimer:

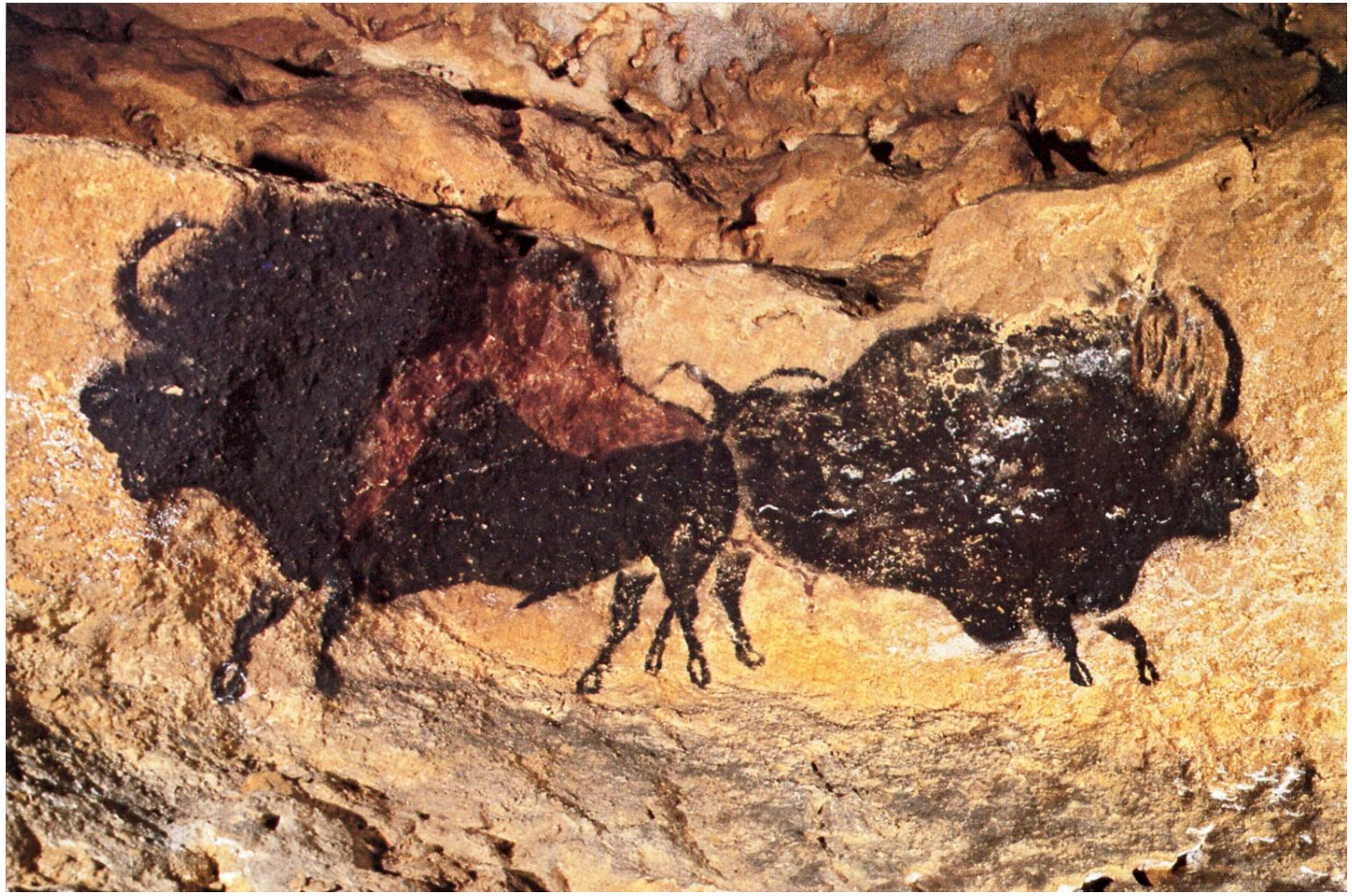
This presentation offers my personal perspective on the evolution of visual composition, focusing primarily on Western art and its connections to contemporary photography.

Other rich artistic traditions, particularly those of China, India, Japan, Africa and the Islamic world, have developed distinctive approaches to composition that deserve independent thoughtful consideration.

Importantly, it is not intended as a comprehensive art history, but rather as an invitation to observe, question, and reflect on how different approaches to visualizing the world can enrich your own photography.

1. Lascaux: Composition Before the Frame

Upper Paleolithic · Approximately 21,000 years ago · Lascaux, France



Panel of the Crossed Bison, Nave, Lascaux

What makes these two animals appear to move, even though the image is completely static?

Composition Begins with Recognizing Relationships Between Forms





Bold shapes with differentiated contours:
Subtle tonal boundaries separate overlapping animal silhouettes.

Size difference and overlapping shapes:
Size and occlusion establishes depth, while opposing body directions create dynamic tension.

Simplified distant legs:
Reduced anatomical detail in farther limbs reinforces spatial separation and depth.

Reserve technique (negative space):
Unpainted gaps distinguish overlapping anatomical elements and improve visual clarity.

Twenty-one thousand years ago, artists were already solving problems that photographers still face today:

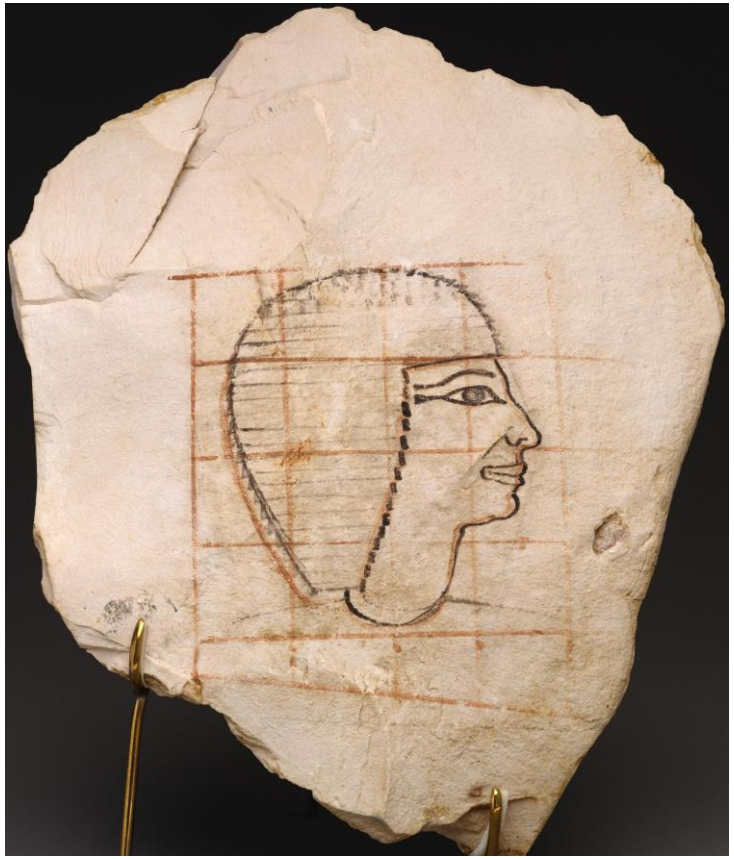
Separating overlapping subjects, suggesting depth, organizing movement, and using the surrounding space.

2. Ancient Civilizations:
Composition Through Hierarchy, Rhythm, and Narrative

Ancient Egypt to Roman Times: 1350 BCE to 400 CE



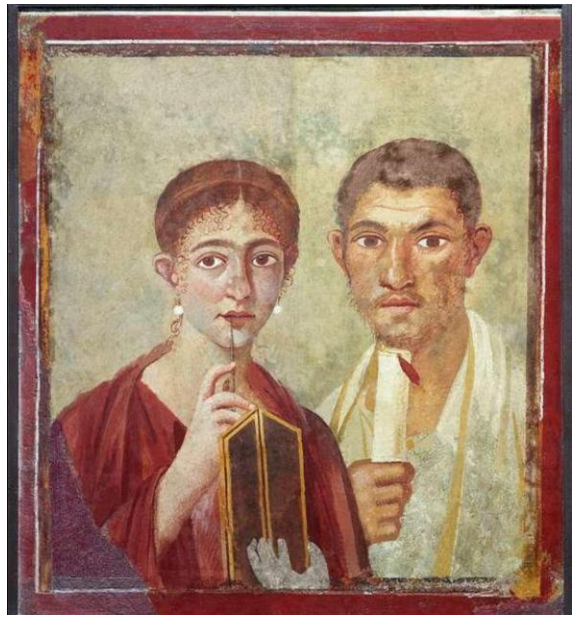
Tomb-chapel of Nebamun, 1350 BCE, Thebes, Egypt.



c. 1473–1458 BCE
Gridded practice sketch of Senenmut

Does visual importance have to correspond to physical reality?

Composition Establishes Visual Order through Hierarchy, Symmetry, and Repetition



Terentius Neo and His Wife - 55–79 CE, Pompeii



Boy Eutyches
100–150 CE,
Roman Egypt

Geometric organization:
Fixed vertical and horizontal axes create symmetry and order.
Architecture, formal portraits, and minimalism.

Hierarchical scale:
Size and placement establish visual importance.
Environmental portraits, advertising, and editorial photography.

Standardized proportions:
Canonical grids and repeated poses create consistency.
Fashion, commercial, and typological photography.

Rhythmic repetition:
Repeated figures, gestures, and contours create rhythm and continuity.
Crowds, processions, architecture, and group photography.

Flattened spatial relationships:
Composite viewpoints, overlapping silhouettes, and limited perspective compress space.
Street, abstract, and telephoto photography.

Hierarchy, Rhythm, and Order

3. Medieval Art to Giotto: Composition Through Gesture and Emotion

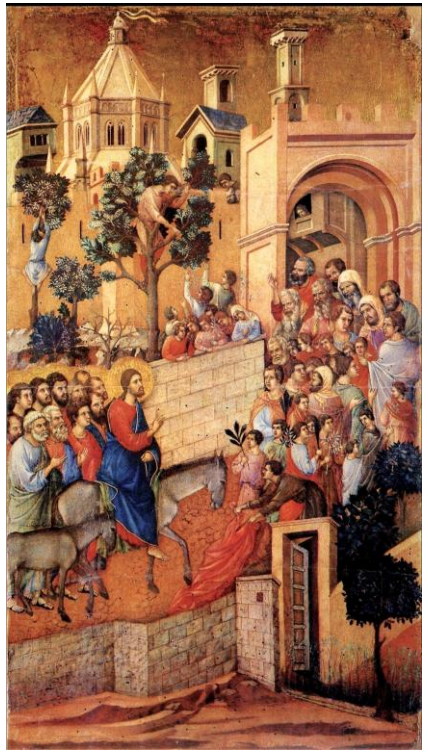


Lamentation (The Mourning of Christ) -Giotto di Bondone c. 1267–1337

Why does your eye go to Christ at the lower left, rather than to the center of the painting?

Composition Direct the Viewer Toward an Emotional Center





Entry into Jerusalem
Duccio di Buoninsegna (c. 1255–1319)

Directional lines:
The descending diagonal of the rocky slope directs attention toward Christ.

Gestural convergence:
Faces, hands, and body positions lead the eye toward the emotional center.

Asymmetrical balance:
Unequally distributed figures create a dynamic composition.

Spatial layering:
Overlapping figures establish foreground, middle ground, and depth.

Emotional hierarchy:
The focal point is established through relationships and expressions rather than central placement.

Narrative, Space, and Human Emotion

4. Renaissance: The Construction of Pictorial Space



The School of Athens, 1509–1511. Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino) (1483–1520)

Does accurate perspective automatically create an effective composition?

The Coordination of Figures Within the Composition





The Last Supper Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519)

Perspective directs attention:
Architectural lines converge near the central figures - comparable to using streets or interiors to guide the eye.

Viewpoint structures the image:
The eye level establishes our relationship to the scene - camera position serves the same purpose.

Balance accommodates variety:
The central axis anchors unequal groups without requiring identical arrangements on either side.

Groups create visual order:
Clusters of figures form distinct units - useful when composing crowds or layered street scenes.

Space establishes hierarchy:
Open areas distinguish key figures.

Balance, harmony, stability



HC Reinecker - Humanity in Harmony, 2013

5. Baroque: The Emotional Power of Tension and Relief



Peter Paul Rubens — *The Lion Hunt*, c. 1621

Why does an asymmetrical, apparently unstable picture sometimes feel perfectly balanced?

Balance is Created by Opposing Forces Instead of Stable Symmetry



Competing diagonals create tension.
Rubens builds complicated interlocking diagonals.
Spears, inclined bodies, and rearing horses pull in different directions.
Their intersections concentrate the struggle within the frame.

A rotating structure holds the action together.
Curving bodies and turning heads circulate attention around the central encounter.

Overlap compresses space.
Hunters, horses, and lions partially obscure one another.
This density makes the confrontation feel immediate.

Unequal masses counterbalance one another.
The bright, elevated horse is offset by darker bodies and animals below and beside it.

Balance emerges through opposing visual forces.

Composition with Opposing Forces Create Dynamic Images



The Calling of Saint Matthew, 1599–1600
Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio

Caravaggio uses light and gesture to create directional relationships.



The Night Watch, 1642
Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn

Rembrandt creates a group portrait in which movement and selective illumination distribute attention unequally.

Tension, movement, contrast, and relief

6. Goya: Composition as Confrontation



The Third of May 1808 (1814) -Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes (1746–1828)

Can composition express an ethical judgment before the viewer understands the narrative?

Composition becomes an Instrument of Public Commentary



Opposing groups reveal unequal forces.
The soldiers form a compact, repeated formation; the condemned appear as exposed individuals. Their arrangement makes the imbalance of power visible.

Light makes vulnerability the visual center.
The lantern illuminates the condemned, especially the central man's white shirt, concentrating attention on his exposure.

Directional lines create confrontation.
Rifles and leaning soldiers drive the eye toward the central man.
His raised arms oppose that movement, creating a collision between threat and response.

Depth connects successive moments.
Foreground bodies, the man awaiting the volley, and the queue behind him suggest what has happened, what is happening, and what comes next.

Enclosure removes visual escape.
The rising ground and dense firing squad confine the condemned.

Composition can make the viewer confront an event by controlling proximity, visibility, and the balance of power within the frame.



The Dog (c. 1819–1823)



Ravages *of War*, c. 1810–1820



The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters, 1799

Relevance to photography:
Immediate impact
Opposing groups, selective illumination, repeated forms, and foreground–background relationships can communicate power and vulnerability before the viewer recognizes individual details.

7. When Composition Became a Formula

Engraver John Thomas Smith (1766–1833), introduced the term ‘rule of thirds’ in his 1797 book Remarks on Rural Scenery.

Based on ideas presented by the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds in his Discourses on Art.



If artists had created compelling compositions for thousands of years, why did we suddenly need a rule?

Turns Intuition into a Teachable Principle

The rule of thirds simplifies complex compositional relationships into a practical guideline that artists and photographers can easily understand and apply.



The Monk by the Sea (1808–1810)
Caspar David Friedrich

Unequal division:
Dividing a composition into approximately one-third and two-thirds creates visual variety.

Asymmetrical balance:
Unequal visual masses can produce harmony without symmetry.

Tonal distribution:
Light and shadow can be organized in unequal proportions to establish dominance.

Visual hierarchy:
One element or region should often dominate rather than compete equally with another.

Not the modern grid:
Smith's principle concerned proportional relationships, not the placement of subjects at four grid intersections.
(Complete Self-Instructing Library of Practical Photography, Vol. III, 1909).

The rule of thirds is a useful starting point for organizing visual proportions
- not alone a formula for creating compelling photographs.

8. Daumier: The Weight of Ordinary Life



Honoré Daumier - *The Third-Class Carriage*, c. 1862–1864

How does Daumier make ordinary passengers command our attention without dramatic action?

Composition Gives Significance Through Proximity and Intimate Grouping



Close framing makes the viewer a fellow passenger.
Foreground figures share our space, creating intimacy.

A broad foreground group gives the image weight.
Seated figures form a solid mass, conveying fatigue and endurance.

Repeated heads compress the background.
Crowded faces suggest shared conditions while retaining individuality.

Selective light establishes human importance.
Illuminated faces and clothing distinguish the foreground from the darker crowd.

Small gestures carry the relationships.
Enclosing arms, resting hands, and a lowered head express care, weariness, and introspection.

Close Framing, Layered faces, Bodily Weight, and Gestures Create Emotional Depth



Rue Transnonain, April 15, 1834

The illuminated body dominates the cramped room; overlapping victims and cropped forms reveal the event through its aftermath.



The Uprising, 1848

The raised arm breaks above a compressed crowd. A bright shirt and forceful gesture give collective movement a clear visual center.

Composition for psychological tension and emotional ambiguity

9. Modernism and Japanese Prints: Liberating the frame



Edgar Degas: Place de la Concorde c. 1875



Utagawa Hiroshige: Sudden Shower 1857



Katsushika Hokusai: Great Wave c. 1830–1832

Can what lies outside the frame be as important as what lies inside?

Composition can remain coherent while showing only a fragment of a larger world



Edgar Degas: Place de la Concorde c. 1875

The figures leave the center open.
The principal group occupies the right side, allowing the expanse of pavement to become a major compositional presence.

Cropping implies continuation.
The figure cut by the left edge and the interrupted foreground bodies suggest people moving through a world extending beyond the canvas.

Negative space separates individuals.
Gaps between figures make their different orientations readable; shared location does not become a unified group pose.

Divergent directions create passing movement.
Faces, bodies, and the dog point along different paths, suggesting a brief intersection of independent lives.

Apparent accidental convergence depends on precise placement.
Figures, intervals, and edge cuts balance one another, making a carefully organized image feel momentary.

The Frame Selects Part of an Expanding World



Utagawa Hiroshige: Sudden Shower 1857

The frame interrupts a larger world.
The bridge extends beyond both edges.

A diagonal replaces a central anchor.
The bridge creates movement; pedestrians add rhythm.

Open space creates balance.
The river contrasts with the dense foreground.

Depth also works as surface design.
Bridge, water, and shore form bands and wedges.

Rain unifies the composition.
Repeated diagonals connect figures, water, and sky.

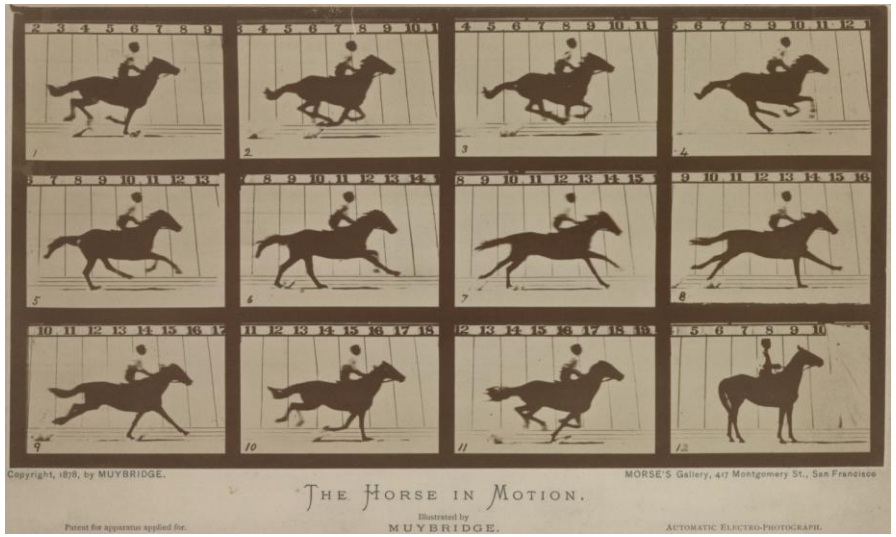
Asymmetry, cropping, and unstable balance

10. Photography Breaks Away from Painting



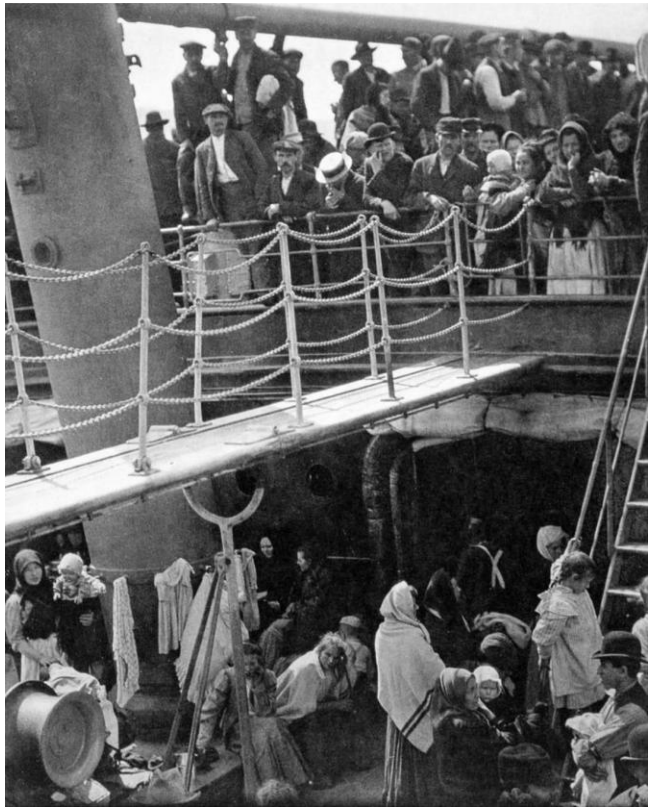
Henry Peach Robinson, Fading Away, 1858

Composition Becomes a Decision in Time



Eadweard Muybridge
The Horse in Motion, 1878

Muybridge demonstrated that photographic technology could reveal movements imperceptible to unaided observation.



Alfred Stieglitz, *The Steerage*, 1907

Real, complex scene could achieve pictorial coherence through diagonals, opposing shapes, and spatial layering.



Alexander Rodchenko, *Stairs*, 1930

Rodchenko made viewpoint a major expressive instrument, using extreme angles and geometrical organization.

Anticipation, unresolved action, and the decisive moment

Composition Depends on Where You Stand and When You Release the Shutter



Henri Cartier-Bresson
Behind the Gare Saint-Lazare, 1932

Cartier-Bresson brought spatial and temporal organization together with extraordinary precision.

Timing is everything. The airborne foot remains just above its reflection. That narrow gap creates suspension and anticipation.

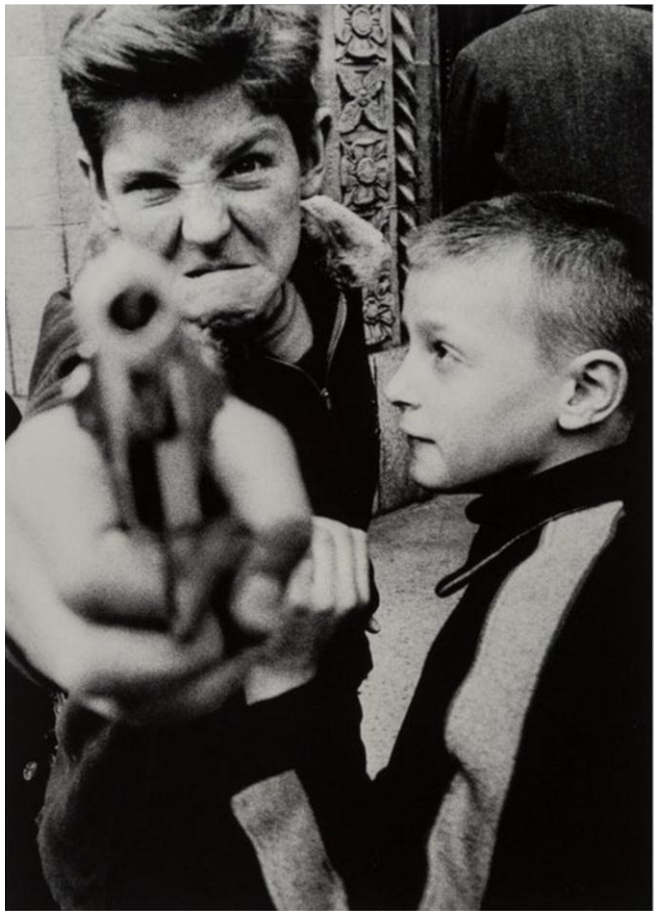
Reflection turns movement into a paired shape.
The figure and reflected silhouette form a temporary arrangement across the water's surface.

The background repeats the action.
A leaping figure on the poster echoes the man's movement.

Curves counterbalance the leap.
Curved metal strips in the foreground introduce arcs against the ladder, fence, and extended legs.

Stable structures make the instant readable.
The fence, ladder, and background establish a framework within which the moving figure briefly finds its position.

The Imperfect Frame Becomes Intentional



William Klein, Gun 1, New York, 1955



Lee Friedlander, New York City, 1963

Visual complexity and apparent imperfection became expressive compositional choices.

Color Becomes Structural, Not Decorative



William Eggleston, Memphis (Tricycle), c. 1969–1970

Color became an independent organizing force within photographic composition

11. Cinema : Composition Across Time







Battleship Potemkin, 1925 · Odessa Steps sequence Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein (1898–1948)

How does moving between the crowd, a threatened child, and an individual face change our experience of the event?

Eisenstein: The order of photographs changes their meaning







Images change meaning in sequence.
Each image shapes how we read the next.

Scale controls emphasis.
Wide views establish context; details focus attention.

Visual echoes connect separate photographs.
Repeated shapes, gestures, and directions connect images.

Contrasts create tension between images.
Stillness versus movement, order versus disorder.

Sequence controls revelation.
Delayed context builds anticipation.

Composition extends to movement across frames and creates emotional involvement.

12. Composition Extends Across Multiple Photographs



Robert Frank, Trolley—New Orleans, 1955

Frank developed meaning through selection and sequencing.

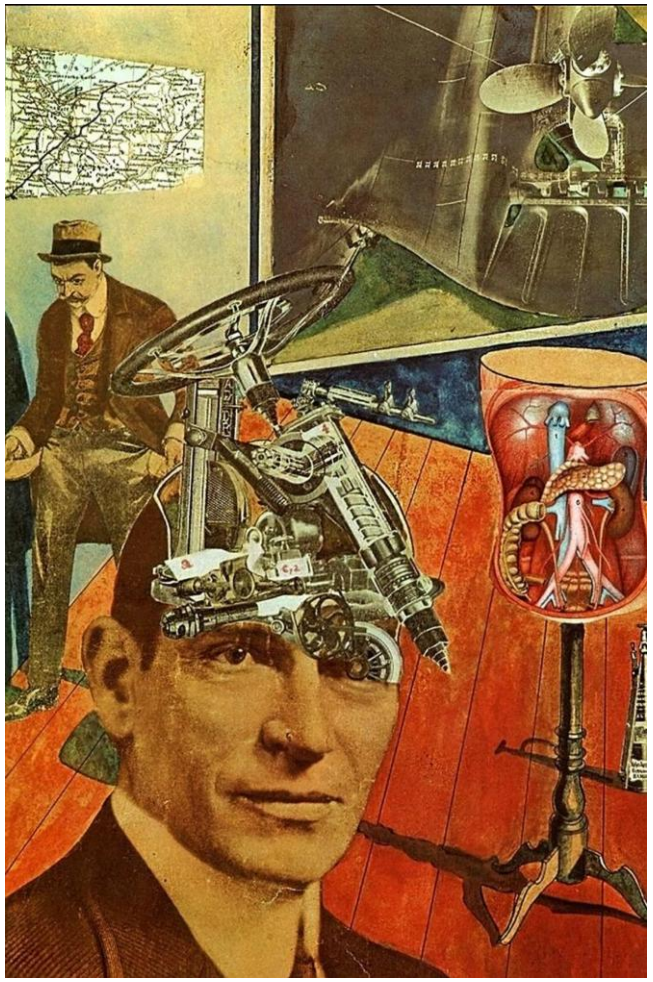


Bernd and Hilla Becher, Water tower typology

The Bechers organized related industrial structures into grids that emphasize formal similarities and differences.

Photobooks, exhibitions, triptychs, portfolios, digital galleries, competition judging.

13. Dada: When Composition Became Rebellion



Raoul Hausmann — Tatlin at Home (1920

Early Dada photomontage

Dada was a radical artistic movement that challenged traditional ideas of beauty, logic, artistic skill, and established social values after WW1.

Fragmentation
Images are broken apart and recombined, rejecting continuous pictorial space.

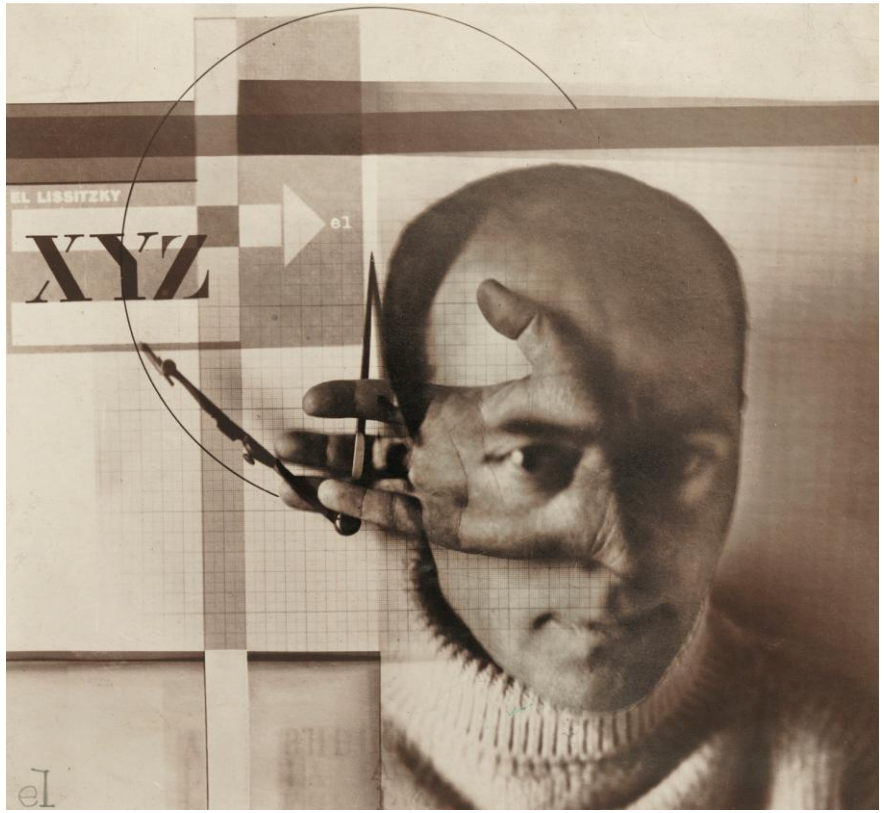
Radical juxtaposition
Unrelated photographic elements create unexpected visual and conceptual relationships.

Scale disruption
Figures, faces, and objects appear at contradictory sizes, undermining traditional perspective.

Competing focal points
Multiple visual centers create tension rather than a conventional hierarchy.

Typography as composition
Text, photographs, and graphic shapes become equally important pictorial elements.

14. Photocollage: Photography Becomes Material for Constructing an Idea



El Lissitzky - *The Constructor*, 1924:
A self-portrait combines face, hand, compass, and geometric structure.



Man Ray - Le Violon d'Ingres, 1924



Herbert Bayer - *Lonely Metropolitan*, 1932:
Eyes placed within hands transform recognizable photographic fragments into a psychologically charged image.

Must a photograph show what we see from one position at one instant?

15. Composition Becomes Independent of Recognizable Subject Matter

Abstract Art and Bauhaus: Color, geometry, contrast, and visual rhythm become the subjects themselves.



Wassily Kandinsky — Yellow-Red-Blue (1925)

Color as visual force
Contrasting colors create energy and visual hierarchy.

Geometric versus organic forms
Opposing shapes generate tension.

Asymmetrical balance
Unequal visual masses establish equilibrium.

Directional movement
Diagonals and curves create rhythm and guide the eye.

Spatial ambiguity
Overlap, transparency, and scale suggest depth without perspective.

16. Abstract Photography: When the Subject Becomes Form

Framing transforms a surface



Aaron Siskind - *Chicago 30*, 1949

Light becomes the subject



László Moholy-Nagy
Untitled, 1925–1928
Photogram

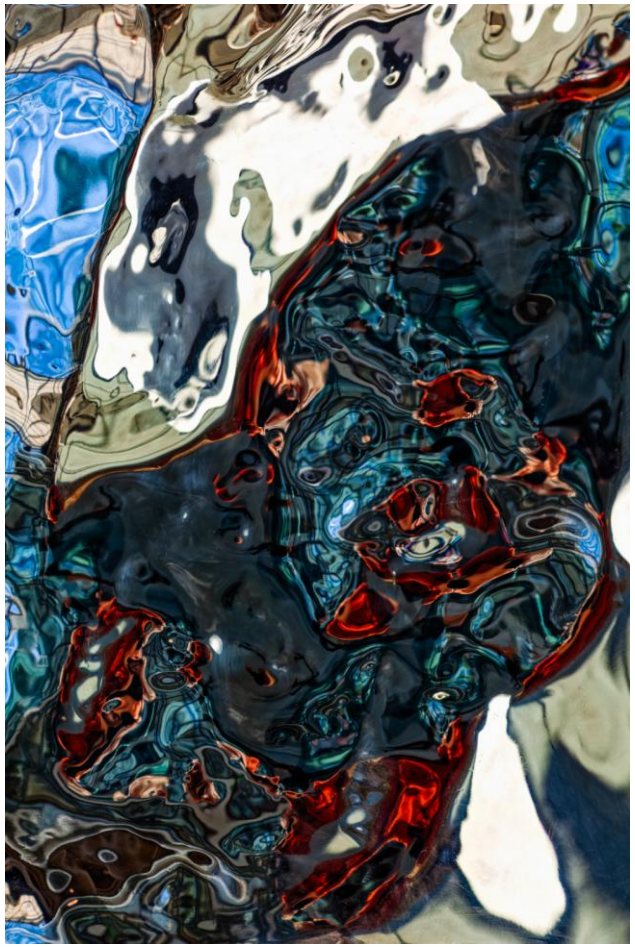
Color and flowing traces organize attention



Wolfgang Tillmans - *Freischwimmer 26*, 2003

What holds a photograph together when we cannot identify what it shows?

Playing with Light, Reflections, Tonal Differences, Movement and Framing



HC Reinecker - Liquid Alchemy, 2019

Recognition can give way to attention.
When the subject is uncertain, viewers examine shapes, edges, and relationships more closely.

Texture can carry the composition.
Roughness, smoothness, and changes in density establish contrast and rhythm.

Scale becomes ambiguous.
Removing familiar references lets a small surface suggest a landscape or an immense space.

Color and tone create structure.
Their distribution can establish hierarchy and movement without a recognizable subject.

17. Graphic Design - Photography Becomes a Visual Statement



Barbara Kruger
Your Body Is a Battleground, 1989

Image–text integration
Photography and typography become a unified composition.

Visual confrontation
Direct gaze and bold lettering demand immediate attention.

Tonal opposition
Positive and negative facial images create tension and contrast.

Restricted color palette
Red, black, and white intensify graphic impact.

Visual hierarchy
Scale, contrast, and placement control what the viewer sees and reads first.

What makes separate pieces read as one coherent image?

Composition Depends on Organizing Visual Relationships



Paul Klee - *Highway and Byways*, 1929



David Hockney - *Pearblossom Hwy., 11–18th April 1986*

Both invite us to see the landscape as an arrangement of shapes, intervals, colors, and directions.

See shapes before objects
Use size and placement to organize the frame.

Connect and separate with color
Repetition unifies; contrast distinguishes.

Create rhythm
Repeat lines, textures, and shapes with variation.

Balance depth and surface
Combine perspective with strong graphic forms.

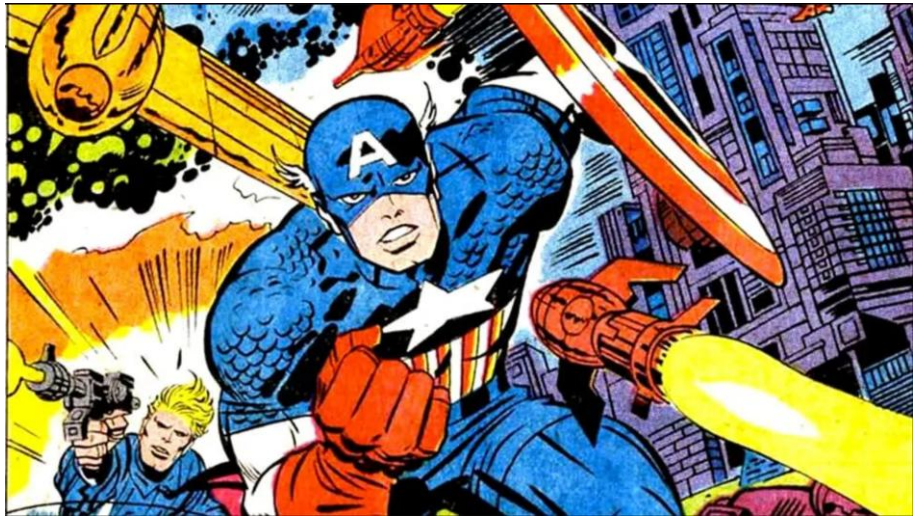
Direct attention
Use viewpoint, framing, and emphasis to guide the eye.

18. Composition in Visual Storytelling in Graphic Novels



The Incal

Moebius - space and anticipation: Expansive settings, unusual scale, isolated figures make movement feel suspended or imminent.



Captain America

Jack Kirby - impact and confrontation: Foreshortened bodies, opposing diagonals, and forms pressing against the edges thrust action toward the viewer.



Akira, issue 25

Katsuhiro Otomo - momentum through space: Precise perspective, changing viewpoints, and coordinated trajectories for complex action.

Composition as a tool to drive the action in story telling.

The Visual Energy of Storytelling - Every Image Needs to have Impact



Akira, Katsuhiro Otomo

Frame format changes the relationships.
Wide frames separate; narrow frames compress.

Energy comes from opposing visual forces.
Diagonals, gestures, and imbalance generate energy.

Space around a subject carries meaning.
Room ahead of a moving figure can suggest possibility; a nearby edge can Suggest obstruction or confinement

Light and dark organize the story's emphasis.
Tonal contrast emphasizes key figures and gestures.

A sequence alternates pressure and release.
Alternate action and stillness, tension and relief.

Use space to build anticipation, viewpoint to intensify force, and the surrounding geometry to give movement direction.

Look at Art in All its Diversity for Your Photography

Useful Reading

1. Framed Ink: Drawing and Composition for Visual Storytellers
Marcos Mateu-Mestre 2010

2. The Photographer's Eye: Definitive Edition
Michael Freeman 2025 definitive edition

3. Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism
David Summers 2003

4. Graphic Design: The New Basics
Ellen Lupton & Jennifer Cole Phillips Revised 2015

5. The Power of the Center: A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts
Rudolf Arnheim 1982, 20th-anniversary edition 2009