

Booklet #21: The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs

COMPOSITION AND VISUAL DESIGN

by

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PREFACE

The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs (NVACC) is an informal organization started in 1997 by Joseph Miller with the assistance of Dave Carter* and Ed Funk. Our purpose is to promote communication and cooperation among camera clubs. We accomplish this by (a) publishing a monthly calendar of the member clubs' activities; (b) conducting training seminars for photographic judges; (c) maintaining a registry of trained judges who serve the clubs' monthly competitions and critiques; and (d) maintaining a directory of speakers who have been recommended by the various clubs. You can learn more about NVACC by going to our web site at www.NVACC.org.

This booklet is one of a series that was developed by NVACC during the period 1998-2008 to capture the considerable expertise of the many accomplished photographers in Northern Virginia and share it with others. Over recent years, we have seen significant change in the photographic art form and very rapid technical advance in both the media of photography (film and digital) and the tools (cameras, lenses, computers, and software). For that reason, the detail of some of these booklets may seem "dated", although the ideas and techniques presented transcend "progress" and the digital-film divide. Watch the NVACC web for new booklets as well as revisions that incorporate new technology and ideas into the existing ones.

Originally, our booklets were made available through member clubs for a small fee that covered the cost of reproduction. Now, however, the booklets are available on www.NVACC.com where individuals may download one machine-readable copy and one print copy per page for personal, noncommercial use only. Written permission from NVACC is required for any other use.

If you would like to know more about NVACC or have questions or suggestions concerning our booklets or services, please feel free to contact us at JoeMiller@NVACC.org.

* Dave Carter, the creator of this booklet and a founding father of NVACC has passed but his photographic skill and artistic vision live on in the technique of all photographers who were fortunate enough to work with him.



Composition and Visual Design

Over the years we have found that composition and visual design weaknesses are the principle reasons for images not winning in competition. While much emphasis today is given to the technical advances in photography, in our view not enough attention is given to the importance of good composition and visual design. In this booklet we will comment on some of the factors which the photographer should consider before taking a picture.

Throughout this booklet we will use the term "visual design" because we feel it is descriptive of what we wish to achieve when we communicate visually. The term visual design implies that we have control over what will be chosen and placed in the picture space. While composition means essentially the same thing as visual design, it brings to mind the suggestion of so-called "rules of composition." In general, rules should be avoided because they tend to limit our creativity and vision. If we obediently follow these "rules of composition" we often miss the strongest possible designs. Our mentor, Freeman Patterson, says: "The only rule to follow in photography is never process color film in chicken noodle soup."

To us, visual design suggests an active role by the photographer in organizing all the elements in the image. Our definition is: ***"Good visual design is expressive visual communication requiring the utmost care and precision in the choice and placement of everything in the picture space."***

Many modern cameras function very fast. Good visual design, however, requires time and concentration. The photographer should ask many questions before taking the picture. What will happen to the design of the picture if the camera is moved to the left, to the right, up a bit, or down a bit? What will happen if you zoom in, or zoom out? What changes occur in the picture space? What is gained? What is lost? The slightest movement of the camera will alter the design of the image because elements in the picture space change in relationship to each other. It takes time to achieve good visual design. In our view, the fastest way to become a better photographer is to slow down.

Photographers are visual communicators. We should ask ourselves what we are trying to communicate to the viewer. What is our message? What visual elements best convey that message?

Design Orientation

The main interest of many photographers is recording what the subject looks like — that is, pictures of readily identifiable things such as flowers, family, friends, landscapes, etc. Unfortunately, many photographers never progress to the point where they think about the impact of visual design in their photographs. Many professional photographers, e.g.,

photojournalists, are subject-oriented.

Some of our favorite pictures have no recognizable subject. They do have appealing design elements. Good abstracts are an example of design-oriented images. Indeed, an abstract may be destroyed if a subject were introduced. When we make pictures we think only of design; the subject is secondary. All pictures, whether they have a recognizable subject or not, should have good visual design.

Visual Design Elements

Our mentor, Freeman Patterson, identifies four basic building blocks of visual design. They are lines, shapes, texture, and perspective. The direction of lines effects the meaning of the picture. Horizontal lines suggest stability, vertical lines suggest power and strength, and oblique lines suggest movement, action, and tension. Shapes consist of circles and ovals, squares and rectangles, and triangles. Each shape affects the viewer's interpretation of the image. Texture and perspective, in reality, do not exist on a flat surface such as a picture. These are very important elements in a picture, and the photographer must create the illusion of texture and perspective on a two-dimensional surface.

Freeman Patterson also identifies four elements which are used to organize the building blocks. These are dominance, balance, proportion, and rhythm. The careful photographer must look for occasions where these elements can be a part of the design.

Examples of Visual Design

On the next several pages we have reproduced from colored slides black and white images which convey some principles of visual design. Color is too expensive to reproduce in this format. Indeed, from a design standpoint, there is some advantage to reproducing the pictures in black and white since color can be distracting.

Black and white reproduction makes it easier to see the geometry involved. The famous French photographer, Henry Cartier-Bresson, said: "Photography requires concentration, a discipline of mind, sensitivity, and a sense of geometry."

These black and white images have been scanned into a computer from color slides and reproduced on an ordinary copy machine which does not produce a full range of photographic tones. We apologize for the loss of subtlety, quality, and detail in the reproductions.



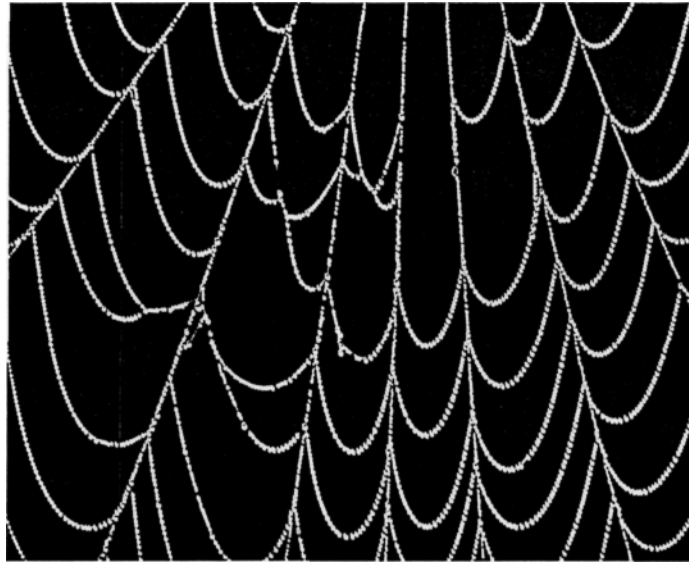
Sand Ripples

Design is the most important consideration in a picture. This image would be completely different if it had a subject. Many images, particularly abstracts, need no subject; in fact, a subject would rob this image of its simplicity. There is a sense of rhythm in the ripples of sand. Rhythm consists of repeated elements which draw increased attention to those elements. The light tones and the dark tones are uniformly dispersed throughout the picture space. Since the sky would not contribute to the picture, it was not included. There is a feeling of linear perspective as the ripples converge into the background. A picture does not have to rely on color to be effective. Many images succeed because they have muted or monochrome colors.



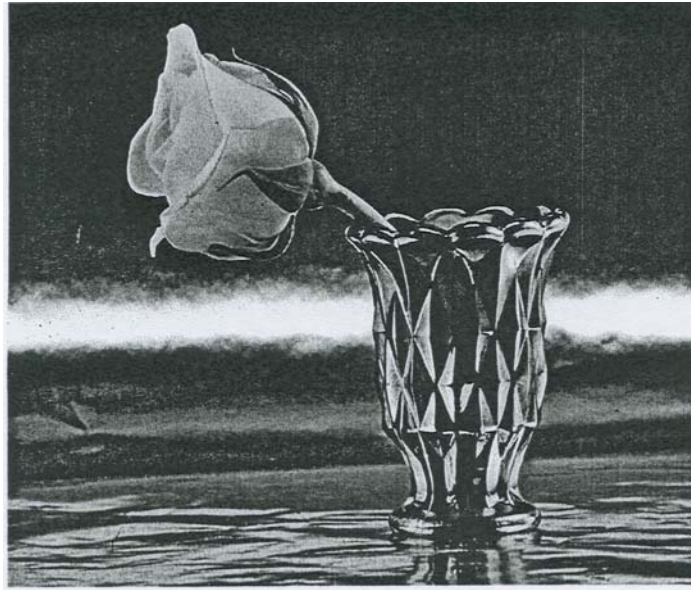
Snow Scene in Iowa

There is a lot of subtlety in this image. Within the light areas, consisting of white buildings and snow, there are many tones. Although the lamp assumes only a small part of the picture space, its bright tone is balanced by all the other light tones. It is very important that the lamp is isolated against a dark sky. The dark sky and foreground balance each other. Rhythm also plays an important role. The shadows under the steps on the far right hand building somewhat parallel the shadow of the lamp post. There is also rhythm created by the repeated shapes of the buildings. The variation in tones helps provide a sense of depth. The fence and grasses provide detail in the foreground that adds to the sense of perspective (depth). The point of light at the extreme left is cut off by the edge of the frame so that it does not lead the eye out of the picture space. Careful attention was paid to lining up the verticals parallel to the edges of the frame.



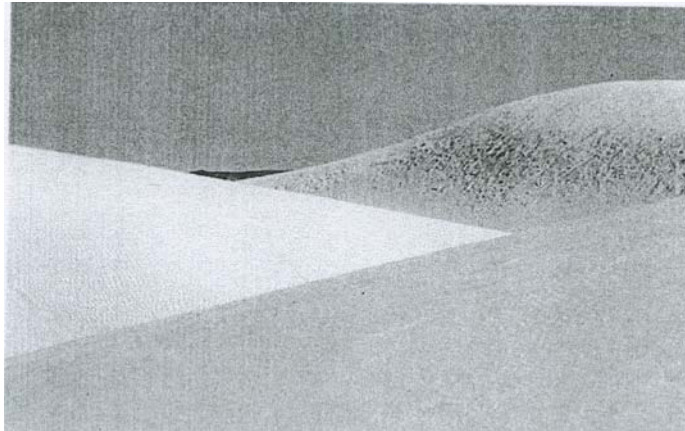
Moisture-laden Spider Web

The light tones of the lines are spread uniformly throughout the picture space. There is a rhythm to the oblique lines moving upward, as well as the curved lines which slow down the movement of the eye so that we are more aware of the individual droplets of dew. This is another example of an image that does not need a subject. Imagine how different this picture would be if the spider were included. Do you think the picture would be improved if the spider were included? If so, where would you place the spider? Would this change the balance of the image?



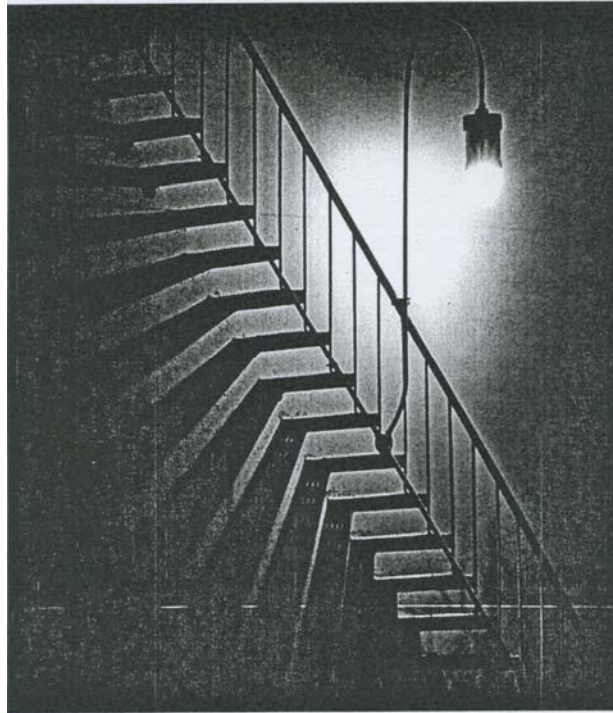
Rose in Vase

There are times when breaking the rules works. This is a good example. The white tone divides the picture space in the middle. It is critical that the spacing between the top of the rose and the top of the picture space is equal to the spacing between the bottom of the rose and the top of the white tone. The bottom of the vase has similar spacing between it and the lower edge of the frame. The space to the left of the rose and the space to the right of the vase are about the same. The light tones on the stem connect the rose with the vase. There is also a rhythm of horizontal bands of light. Negative space is important, particularly the upper dark area, which does not draw the eye away from the rose or the vase.



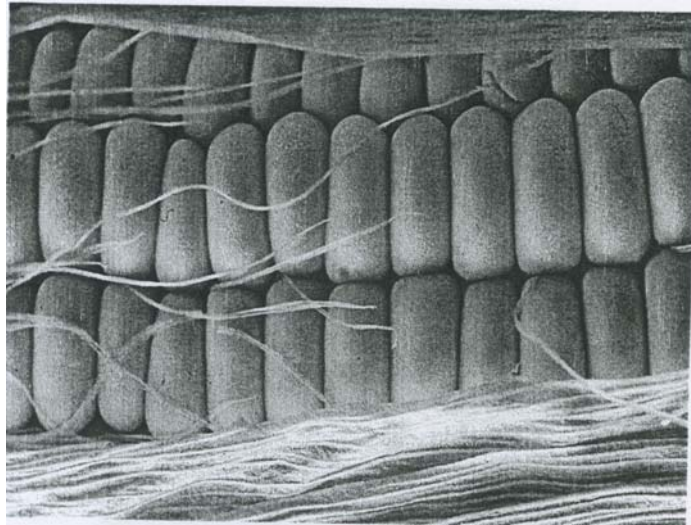
Triangles at White Sands

Several triangles are formed by different tones. There are two areas of dominance. One is the point of the white triangle on the right side in the middle of the picture space. The other is the small dark triangle at the horizon, pointing downward into the picture space. Each is somewhat equidistant from the edges of the picture frame. Because of its very different tone, the small dark triangle stands out, even though it occupies a small area of the picture space. There is a sense of texture created by side light. The point of the lower triangle on the left is cut off by the left edge of the frame which keeps the eye within the picture space. There is a reason to include sky in this picture as it provides a somewhat triangular shape and its own tone which balances with the other tones. It also helps to delineate some of the other triangles and contributes to a sense of depth.



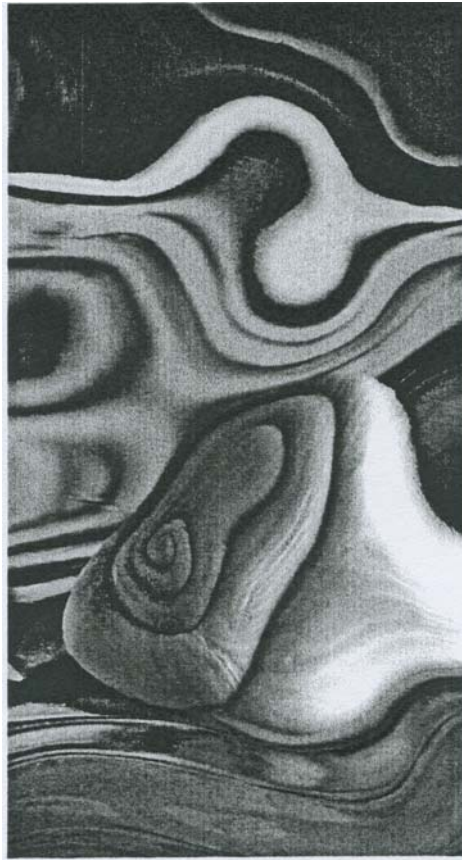
Storage Tank

The high contrast of the lamp, stairs, and shadows gives this picture a graphic quality. This quality, as well as the rhythm of the identical steps, draws the eye to the staircase. There is a triangle of light on the right cast by the lamp which is balanced by a dark triangle on the left. The proportion between the light and the dark becomes very important. Because the viewer's eye is drawn to light tones, it is necessary that the light tones do not dominate the picture. This dictates a larger dark area. The fading shadows to the left of the stairs lead the viewer's eye into the dark area.



Ear of Corn

This is an example of rhythm. There also is a sense of stacked rectangles aided by the dark tones between the kernels. The lines of light tone from the left lead the eye into the picture space. The light rectangle at the bottom provides a base. The repeated vertical ovals of the kernels provide rhythm and an interesting pattern. The lines of light tones at the base give a sense of flow that keeps the eye moving across the picture space. That accentuates the feeling of rhythm. Both vertical lines and horizontal lines give rhythm, providing an interesting counterpoint. This close-up shot allows us to isolate and include only those elements which contribute to the picture.



Imagination

Abstracts are an excellent way to learn visual design. Indeed, since sometimes there is no recognizable subject, design elements must dominate the picture. The mid tones at the bottom balance the dark tones on the top. The flowing lines throughout the image allow the viewer's imagination to be free and unrestrained. What do you think this is?



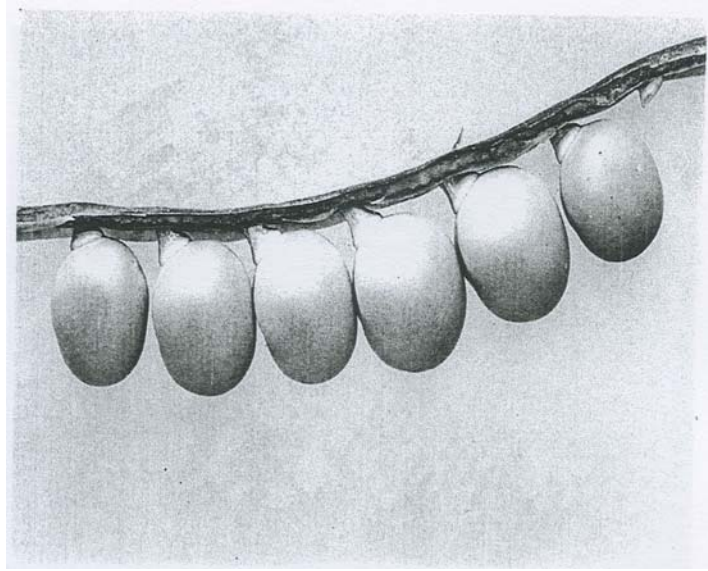
Santa Fe Museum

This is a study of the rhythm of oblique lines. There is a rhythm in the shadows in the lower right hand corner. The oblique line of the ladder parallels the oblique line of the edge of the tower and the front wall as it turns upward. The clouds are parallel to the dark line above the rafters. Would you consider this to be a balanced picture or not? Why?



Two Bottles in Black Light

The tall bottle on the left balances the round bottle on the right. The tops of the bottles imply an oblique line slanting downward from left to right. This forms a counterpoint to the oblique band of light in the background. The overlapping bottles clearly provide a sense of depth. Careful attention dictated equal space on the left and right between each bottle and the edge of the frame.



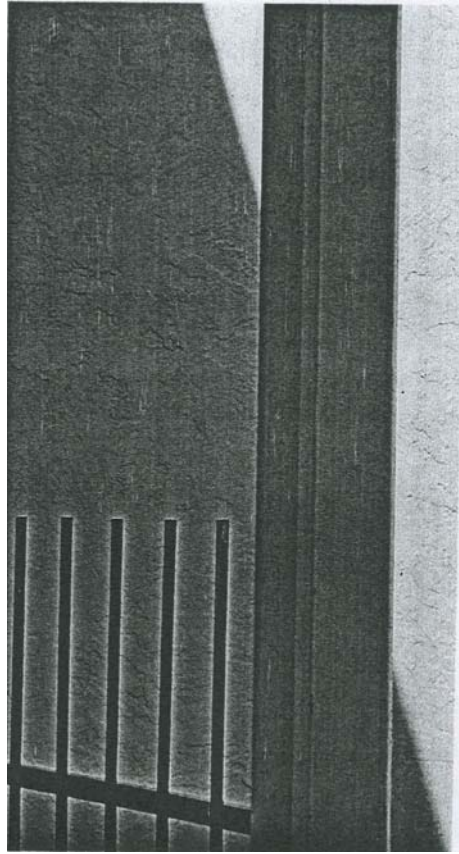
Summer Peas

This is an example of simplicity. Because of the simplicity, precise placement of the elements is critical. The pea on the left and the pea on the right have the same spacing between them and the edges of the picture frame. The dark tone of the stem runs the full distance from the left edge to the right edge. One gets the feeling that the peas could fall as if they were drops of water and room was left in the picture space for that to happen. In our experience, the circle is not found as often as the other shapes — that is, squares, rectangles and triangles. Yet the circle, particularly the perfect circle, commands great visual attention.



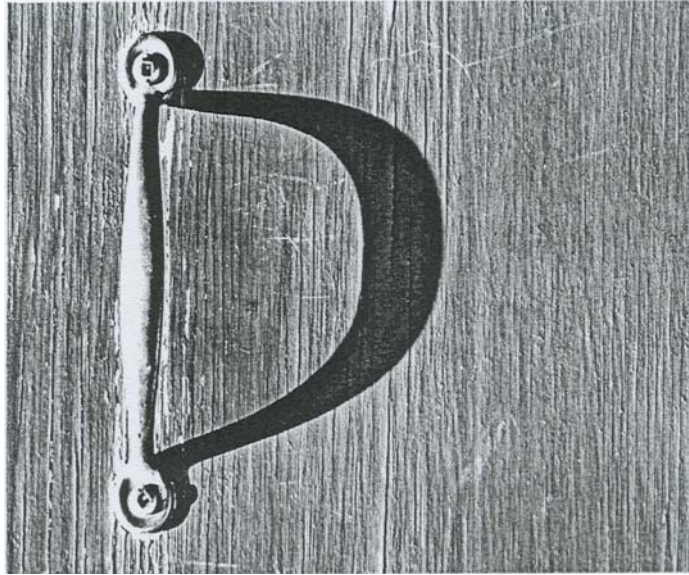
Mill in Fog

This is a study in perspective. The sharper texture of the rock in the foreground contrasts with relatively little texture in the background. Also, the rock in the foreground occupies more space than the two-story mill, suggesting the illusion of depth. The rock and the mill balance each other along an implied oblique line. It is important to have a little space to the left of the rock and to the right of the mill. The rock ledge in the middle almost bisects the picture, thereby contributing to the sense of foreground and background. The roof of the mill is a light tone which draws the eye into that area of the picture. Placement of the vertical line of the small waterfall in the lower left is balanced by the vertical tree trunks in the upper right hand area. The presence of fog adds enormously to this picture.



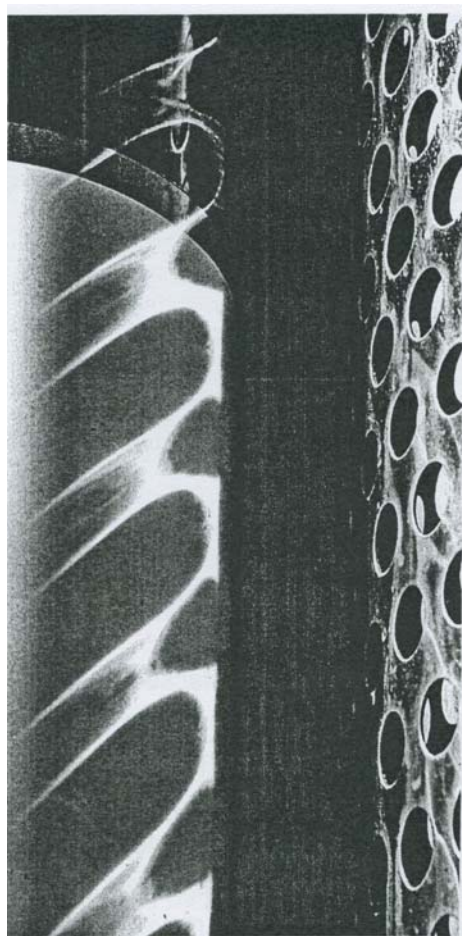
Wall and Shadows

This is a graphic picture of tones and strong shapes. The light triangle at the top pointing downward is balanced by the same size triangle at the bottom pointing upward. It is critical to align the dark tone of the post and the metal fence with the edges. Because of the visual attraction of light tones, it is important that the light tones occupy less space than the darker tones. Is this a balanced picture?



Door Handle

Shadows should be treated as an integral part of any design. This image was taken when shadows were long and getting longer. The shadow in this image would lengthen within a few minutes. Consequently, an unbalanced design was chosen to allow a space for the shadow to move. Thus, negative space is critical to the image. The image is simple and we should not overlook the importance of texture. The subject, the door handle and its shadow, have relatively little texture. As a consequence, they stand out from the textured background.



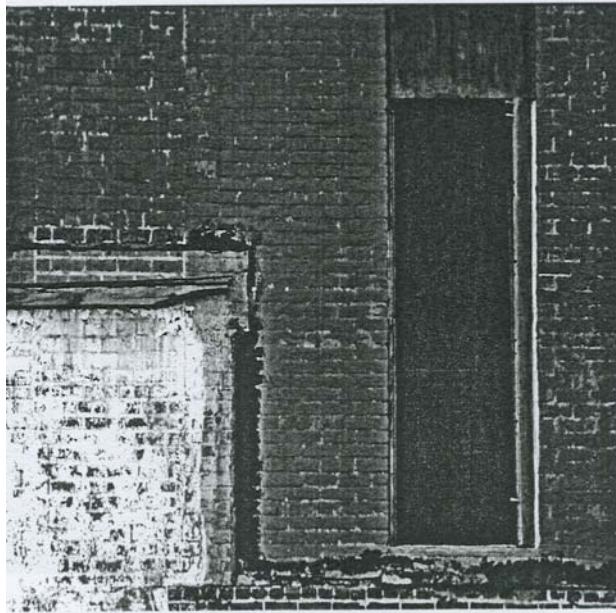
Truck Exhaust

These are three vertical rectangles, each very different. The eye is drawn to the pattern of light tones on the left and then to the repeated round openings on the right. The dark center rectangle provides a separation between the two lighter rectangles. Our imagination connects the oblique light lines on the left to the holes on the right.



Man in Canoe

This picture consists of three stacked rectangles and is deliberately unbalanced. In this image, the light tones in the water are given more area in the picture space to create a sense of depth. Clearly, the man in the canoe is the subject. If the canoe were placed in the center, the image would be more balanced. Since the canoe is obviously moving, it is placed where there is space to move. This results in an unbalanced image which suggests anticipation of the trip ahead. The small light tone behind the canoe leads the eye to the subject.



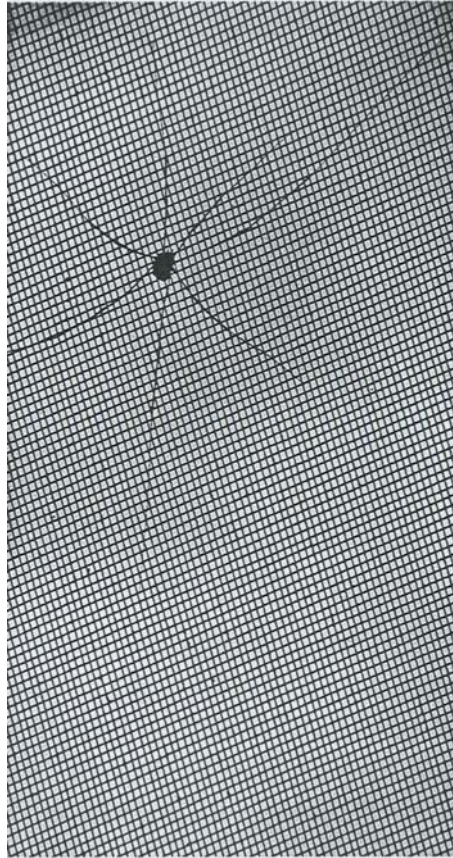
Baltimore Door

This is a study of graphic shapes and contrasting tones. The appeal of the image is due to its simplicity and careful spacing. The narrow, vertical light tone on the right helps balance the larger light tone on the lower left. The vertical light tone is emphasized by its placement near the larger, vertical dark tone of the doorway. It is important that the edge of the white, vertical tone, as well as the dark tone of the doorway, be parallel to the edge of the picture space. Every horizontal and every vertical line was lined up very carefully with the edges. Otherwise, it would appear that the photographer was careless.



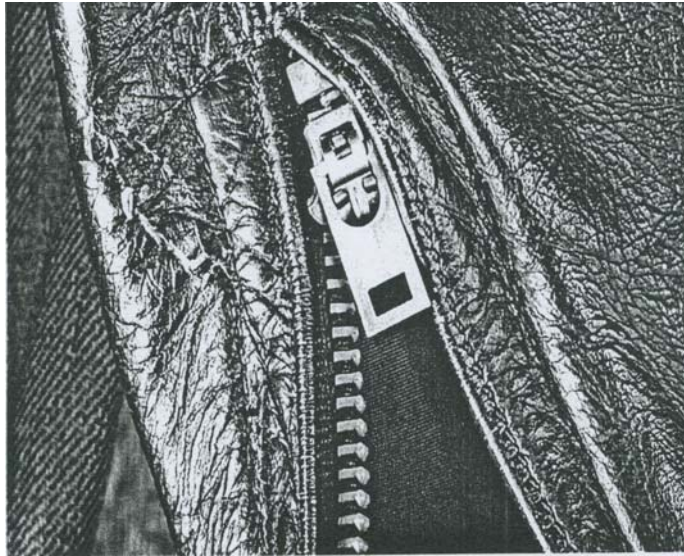
Broken Window Pane

The window pane, which looks somewhat like the top of a bottle, is out of a church window. This image is a study of repeating lines. The vertical, slightly oblique lines of the edges of the window pane parallel each other. There is a rhythm in the repeating lines of the grasses. The dark tone of the grasses on the far left provide visual balance to the light tones of the window pane. The shadows of the grasses are in a different direction from the silhouetted grasses and they also provide rhythm and much visual interest. It is important that the placement of the grasses show a clear separation from the shadows and from the edges of the window pane. This picture points out the need to eliminate any information that does not contribute.



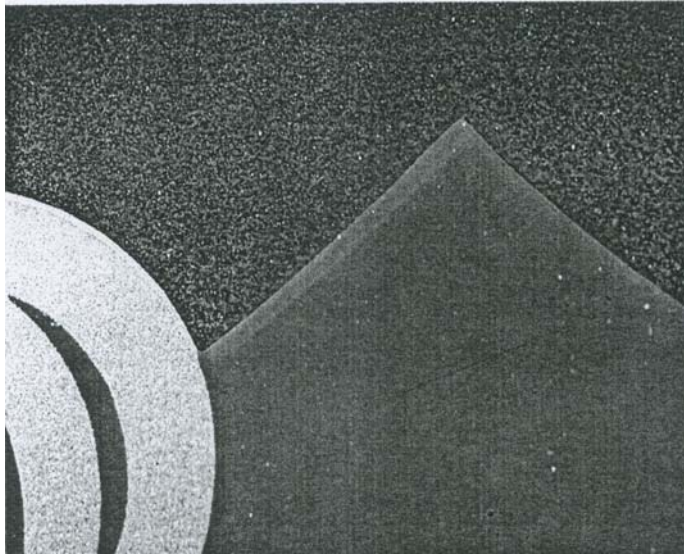
Daddy Longlegs on Screen

This image has a pattern of repeating oblique lines. The lines were purposely placed on the oblique because it was not possible to align the horizontal and vertical lines with the edges of the frame. Sometimes exaggerating oblique lines work. The picture is unbalanced because of the placement of the Daddy Longlegs. Attention was given to placing the tones uniformly throughout the picture space, particularly placing the dark triangles in the four corners.



Leather Jacket

This picture shows the importance of the illusion of texture. There are several triangles which direct the eye upward into the picture space. The light tone of the zipper commands attention as do the light tones of the jacket. Dark tones provide a triangle on the right which helps balance the triangles on the left. Most of the lines created by the highlights are oblique and are somewhat parallel to each other which provides a rhythm. The rhythm in the zipper is a leading line to the brightest highlight. Can you find the triangles and implied triangles in this image?



Freeman's Motorcycle

This is an example of the importance of careful spacing when there are only a few elements in the picture space. The light tones, particularly since they are circular, tend to draw the eye in their direction. But the triangle, pointing upward also has visual attraction. Which is more commanding? Where do you want to look? Would you call this a balanced picture? What effect do the darker tones have within the white circles in the lower left hand corner? The role of negative space surrounding the triangle pointing upward is crucial. It prevents the eye from going out of the picture and provides a balance to the base of the triangle.



Horse Jump

This is an image with a number of design elements. There are three stacked rectangles, the small base, the narrow but important horizontal dark tone, and the upper vertical rectangle with a circle having dark lines protruding somewhat like the spokes of a wheel. The repeated rhythm of the oblique lines created by saw marks adds information and texture to the image.

Learning Visual Design

- Consider visual design to be the most important aspect in your photography.
- Surround yourself with people who know, or at least are learning, visual design. These should be the best people you can find.
- Constantly talk about visual design. If you can't verbalize visual design, you don't understand it.
- Live visual design. Look constantly for things that would make a good image. Be

able to articulate why they would be good.

- Practice good visual design every time you take a picture, even if it is meant only to be a record shot. Take more pictures and practice some more. Getting the general idea is not enough.
- Analyze as many pictures as you can. Why do they work? Why don't they work?
- Read about visual design. The bibliography lists a number of recommended books.
- Attend workshops on visual design.

Tips for Good Visual Design

Over the years, photographers have formulated a series of statements about the design of pictures. These so-called traditional "rules of composition" tell us what we must do. It is all too easy to forget that rules are meant to be broken. Rigid rules tend to stifle creativity. As a result, we often fail to consider other ways of composing pictures which are both creative and powerful.

Traditional rules sometimes work, and sometimes they do not. What follows is a set of guidelines. Use them to suggest other things you might consider. We think they will make your images more creative, more varied, and most important, more pleasing to you and others.

- Always use principles of good visual design no matter what is the purpose of your photograph.
- Understanding good visual design is an invaluable aid to good seeing.
- All areas of the picture space must be given careful attention.
- Eyes scan pictures. Pictures should be designed to direct eye movements. Never assume the eye will fixate on one spot for more than a few seconds.
- Lines can be used to lead the eye to important areas of the picture space. Never lead the eye where you don't want it to go.
- Straight lines often move the eye rapidly from one place to another. They can facilitate a comparison of two or more elements in a picture if those elements are connected by straight lines.
- Curved lines slow down the eye, thereby facilitating a closer examination of elements placed close to that line.
- Horizontal lines convey the feeling of peace and stability.
- Vertical lines convey the feeling of strength or power.

- Oblique lines convey the feeling of tension or change.
- Certain shapes, such as rectangles, including squares, triangles, and especially circles, command visual attention.
- The edges of the frame can be used to help form a geometric shape such as a rectangle, square or triangle.
- Rectangles, including squares, suggest stability.
- Triangles point the eye. Make sure triangles point to an important element in the picture space.
- Circles, especially perfect circles, have very strong visual attraction. All other things being equal, we are most likely attracted to circles over other shapes.
- Texture is a powerful element in a picture. The illusion of texture can best be suggested with side lighting.
- Think carefully about perspective. Do you want a sense of depth, or do you want the image to appear flat? To establish perspective, make sure that all of the possible depth cues work together. If you wish a flat appearance to the image, eliminate all the depth cues you can.
- One of the best ways to create a sense of depth in your pictures, and probably the least understood way, is to have detail in the foreground and relatively little detail in the background.
- Linear perspective creates a powerful sense of depth. When you can, let lines converge toward the background.
- If one object overlaps another in your picture, the one which is partially blocked from view is seen as more distant.
- When a series of objects that we know to be of the same size appear to be of different sizes in a picture, those that appear smaller are seen as being more distant. Telephone poles receding in the distance are a good example.
- The use of a vertical format often helps create a sense of depth.
- Too much color can be distracting, taking attention away from shapes and other critical features in the design of a photograph.
- Keep the color simple. Monochrome images can be powerful. When you have more than one color in an image, try to keep the number down to two or three.
- Color contrast or brightness contrast can be used to make a subject stand out from its background.

- Muted colors allow attention to be given to aspects of design where it belongs. Monochrome images do the same thing.
- Some colors, bright red in particular, tend to attract the eye. In color photography selection and placement of bright colors require careful thought by the photographer.
- Careful attention to the choice and placement of color and tone is critical to a successful image.
- Consider tone as one of the most important elements in a picture. Whether images are in black or white or color, the eye is drawn to lighter tones. Be particularly mindful of the visual attraction of light tones.
- Highlights may be distracting. If you can't get rid of them, spread them evenly throughout the picture space.
- Placement depends on consideration of balance (or imbalance, if desired). We rarely use power points to place a subject in a picture.
- Balance is not just a matter of placing something on the right to balance something on the left. Balance is much more complex than that. Balance involves two or more areas of visual importance in the picture space. Consider balance between top and bottom, left and right, among corners, and along oblique lines.
- A symmetrical picture is most often balanced.
- Unbalanced images produce a tension or feeling of change. If you want an unbalanced picture, make it unbalanced enough so it doesn't look like an accident.
- Think carefully about what proportion of the picture space you want each element to occupy.
- An element does not have to be big to be dominant, but it will have to be unique in some way, e.g., color, size, shape, or tone. Small unique things in the picture space often command attention.
- Rhythm is an effective way to relate two or more elements in the picture space.
- Keep the picture simple. Simplicity does not mean there are only a few elements in the picture, but that all the elements work together.
- Move in close and isolate when you can. This often provides a way to eliminate distracting elements, making the picture truly simple.
- The simpler the image, the more critical is the placement of the elements in the

picture space.

- The slightest change in camera position will affect the relationship between and among elements in the picture space, particularly in an image with a simple design.
- If your picture has a message or conveys a particular feeling, you can often make the picture more powerful by making sure that everything in the picture space contributes to that message or feeling.
- If we increase complexity in our images, the viewer may not understand what we wish to communicate.
- Watch the edges of the frame, especially if you cannot see 100% of the image in your viewfinder. Allow no unwanted elements to protrude into the picture space.
- Line up verticals (and horizontals) carefully with the edge of the frame. If you cannot line up verticals, try not to place them close to the edge.
- Corners command considerable visual attention.
- Wait for the appropriate light before you press the shutter button.
- Soft light is particularly useful for bringing out subtlety in color and texture. Subtle features of an image receive far too little attention from most photographers (and judges). Choose a film which makes it possible to capture subtleties. Some filters punch up the colors but reduce subtleties.
- Choose elements in the picture space with a range of light within the latitude of your film.
- The photographer is responsible for everything in the picture space. All parts of the picture space are important. None can be ignored.
- Negative space (space requiring less visual attention), is sometimes essential to support areas of visual importance.
- A sturdy tripod with a good head is an invaluable aid towards achieving good visual design. This gives the photographer time to analyze carefully all the elements in the picture space, including the edges, before taking the picture. We often say: "God intended photographers to have five legs."
- These tips suggest a multitude of questions you should ask yourself before you press the shutter button. Slow down and talk to yourself about visual design as you construct a picture.
- Because it takes time, visual design does not lead to instant gratification, but when done correctly, it leads to true gratification.
- Don't be satisfied with the first picture. A good picture evolves. The first view in

the viewfinder is like a first draft. It likely will have to be rewritten before the final product is achieved.

Pictures on pages 5,7,9,11,13,15,17,19,20,22,23,24,25 and 26 taken by Joseph Miller.
Pictures on pages 6,8,10,12,14,16,18 and 21 taken by Dave Carter.

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