

## Composition – the Key to Pleasing Pictures

(The following are notes from a lecture by Vaughn Bateman delivered to the Club way back when. They are handed out periodically to the Club members).

### Three basic elements of a good picture:

1. **Subject Material** should be of strong universal interest. A successful picture should do one of the following with simplicity and impact:

- Tell a story
- Express feeling or mood
- Stimulate imagination
- Inform the viewer

2. **Technical Quality** of a picture includes (but is not limited to)

- Correct exposure
- Effective lighting
- Pleasing color harmony (or proper amounts of tones of blacks, whites, and gray tones in monochrome prints)
- Sharp image (soft focus or selective focus is acceptable if appropriate)
- Appropriate and pleasing presentation

3. **Composition** is the arrangement of parts to produce a harmonious whole; the subtle characteristics which make the entire picture pleasing to view; the delicate path which coaxes the eyes over the entire picture (composed of lines, masses, curves, highlights and shadows) until we sense that which the photographer attempted to express.

The eye is invariably captivated by a camera subject that encapsulates story content and communicates the picture taker's idea or feeling.

One way to accomplish some of the aforementioned items of composition is by careful cropping of print or slide. Of course it is best to compose while looking through the viewfinder while tripping the shutter.

The composition may also be improved by reversing the picture at time of printing or projection.

Guidelines, which contribute to Good Composition (see below). The more of the suggested guidelines you can incorporate in a picture the more pleasing you will find the results. You will encounter some situations where breaking a rule or guideline improves the picture. If this is the case, break the rule deliberately and with a definite purpose.

A judge's comments are intended to help the photographer do better the next time a similar situation is encountered. This should be considered as constructive rather than critical.

Along with serious picture photography for competition and exhibition, **let's also take "fun" pictures.**

**3. Composition Guidelines:** The following are a list of guidelines:

1. The center of interest should be placed on one of four "impact points", located in the intersection of imaginary divisions of thirds (horizontal and vertical).
2. A picture should be divided in thirds rather than halves.
3. A horizontal picture suggests repose, a vertical picture suggests tension.
4. A horizontal picture calls for a horizontal format, a vertical picture for a vertical format.
5. Vertical lines give a static feeling, while slanting or curved lines give a feeling of action.
6. Balance in a pictorial composition is the proper placement of unequal masses in the frame.
7. Lines should never lead from corner to corner.
8. Use a combination of several different lines (vertical, horizontal, angles, and curves) to add interest.
9. Roads, streams, and other strong lines should not end in the center of the picture.
10. "Lead in" lines should start, wherever possible, near the lower left portion of the picture, and lead the eye toward the right and upward.
11. Avoid excessively large dark or light areas. Eliminate all areas that are uninteresting or do not contribute to the picture.
12. Any large dark masses should be, if possible, on the right side of the picture, rather than the left, to stop the "eye travel" from leading out of the picture.
13. Live or moving subjects should "move into" the picture.
14. Avoid straight alignment of subjects.
15. Avoid a divided center of interest. If there is more than one subject, one should dominate, and the others give secondary support.
16. Avoid mergers of the edges of subjects, overlaps are okay.
17. Avoid mergers of two unrelated subjects, such as the top of a tree touching the horizon.
18. Avoid mergers of subjects with the edges of the picture.
19. Avoid mergers of the same or similar colors (or gray shades on monochrome pictures).
20. If a person is used in a scene, s/he should be placed to add to the total scene by forming the center of interest, rather than placed in the immediate foreground where they overpower or distract from the general effect of the scene.
21. Avoid busy backgrounds that compete with the subject for attention.
22. Avoid water as the base of the picture if possible. Try to include at least a small amount of dry land at the bottom for the viewer to "stand on".
23. Avoid lines that cut through the picture. Or across corners.
24. Avoid fences or rails that stretch across the foreground of a scene. Use some sort of break, such as an open gate to make it easy to enter the picture.
25. Give trees some ground to stand on.
26. Avoid tree branches coming out of the sides or top without any apparent support.
27. Avoid light traps, particularly at the edge of the picture.
28. Avoid signs, poles, wires, ropes etc. unless they are part of the story being told.
29. The vertical and horizontal lines of a building should be parallel with the edges of the picture unless a special effect is desired.
30. Avoid "amputations" of fingers, feet, heads, tails, etc.
31. Always square the picture so the horizontal will appear level. Water should never "run out of the picture".
32. All-over patterns usually make weak photographic subjects, unless some point stands out as a strong center of interest.
33. Give portraits comfortable head room, unless close cropping is desired.
34. It is best to have a base (preferably dark) on which the subject can rest.
35. Avoid a body of water such as a pond or lake being cut off by the side of a picture.
36. Do not include too much in a picture. Avoid cramming two or three separate pictures into one. Remember, simplicity strengthens composition and increases impact.
37. Whenever possible, build depth into a picture by including several receding subject planes. This gives the viewer an illusion of the third dimension, rather than a flat picture.