

What Makes a Strong Image

Composition & the Wow! Factor

Kanata Seniors' Centre Camera Club

May 3, 2024

What Makes a Strong Image

- Technical
- Organizational (Composition)
- Emotional (Wow! Factor)

What Makes a Strong Image

- ~~Technical~~
 - Organizational (Composition)
 - Emotional (Wow! Factor)
-
- Warning – Lots of Images
 - Well known photographers
 - My Images

What Makes a Strong Image?

Composition

Part 1

Introduction to Composition

Composition / Organizing Image Content

1. Arrangement of the elements in an image
2. Working with the space in a composition
 - Negative Space
3. Dealing with distractions

Rules of Composition

- Following “Rules of Composition”
 - Does not necessarily work to create a strong image
 - Need to understand what will and will not work for a particular scene
- Strong composition does not follow a “cookbook” or formulaistic approach

Composition

- Balance
 - Symmetry / Asymmetry
 - Space for subject to look into or move into
 - Framing – headroom, etc.
- Leading lines
- Format Orientation
- Colour Harmonies
- Repeating Patterns
- Avoid mergers
- Fill the frame
- Simplify
- What attracts the eye?
- Selective focus

- Post-processing
 - Lead the viewer through the image

Merger

- To be avoided because it is distracting!



Balance

- Visual weight
 - Heavy areas towards the bottom of the image
 - Work with symmetry or asymmetry
 - Give the subject space to move into or look into
 - Don't crowd the subject into the image

Balance



Balance



Balance



Balance



Leading Lines

- Straight or curved lines
 - lead the viewer towards the subject

Leading Lines



Leading Lines



Leading Lines – “S-Curve”



Repeating Patterns



Colour Harmonies (color.adobe.com)

Adobe Color

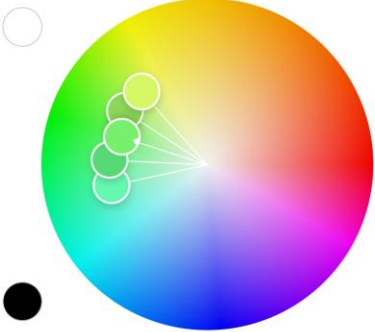
CREATE EXPLORE TRENDS LIBRARIES

Color Wheel Extract Theme Extract Gradient Accessibility Tools **New**

Apply Color Harmony ⓘ
Rule

- Analogous
- Monochromatic
- Triad
- Complementary
- Split Complementary
- Double Split Complementary
- Square
- Compound
- Shades
- Custom

Color harmony ⓘ
Adjusting color rules can ensure your colors have a harmonic balance, based on the color you set as the base.



A B C D E

	#66F8B1	#59D976	#77F06E	#8ED959	#D6F866
R	102	89	119	142	214
G	248	217	240	217	248
B	177	118	110	89	102
⚙️	97	85	94	85	97

Color Mode
RGB

Generate stunning palettes with Adobe's Color Wheel

Use the Color Wheel to create harmonious colors that make a palette. Choose your base color, then select from a variety of color harmonies like analogous, triadic, complementary, and more to create beautiful designs.

Save

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Adobe

Colour Harmonies

Example of analogous color harmony

- These colours are next to each other on the colour wheel
- Tend to be “soothing”



Color Wheel Extract Theme **Extract Gradient** Accessibility Tools New

Replace Image



Save to **Your Library**

Name **color theme_Bright Field ...**

Tags

Enter or Select from below

Blue Bright

Cool Beach

Ocean

Publish to Color

Save

Extract using Color Mood

- Colorful
- Bright
- Muted
- Deep
- Dark
- None



#294F2

#3D6AF2

#579AF2

#9BF2EA

#9BF2C1

Brooks Jensen – Lensworks magazine

"Look at the photographs, look at them carefully. Let the composition and the subject matter determine the aspect ratio. That's the ultimate authority. Not the camera manufacturer. Not the film manufacturer."

Format / Orientation

- Rotate your camera when you shoot
 - Wide subjects often work better in horizontal / landscape orientation
 - Tall subjects often work better in vertical / portrait orientation
- Panoramas work well in 16:9, 2:1 to 3:1 ratios
- Square is an indeterminate orientation
 - can be effective
- “Respecting the camera’s sensor aspect ratio”
 - Puts an unnecessary constraint on the composition

Format / Orientation

- Standard frame sizes for prints
 - 5"x7", 8"x10", 11" x 14" and 16" x 20"
 - You can save money if you frame your image in a standard rather than a custom frame
 - Sensor size, paper size and frame sizes do not align!
- There is NO reason to stick to the camera's format
 - Unless you want to
 - Especially for images that are displayed on a screen

Format - panoramatic



Format - Portrait



Format



Fill the Frame - Before



Fill the Frame – After

If your image isn't good enough, you're not close enough.

Robert Capa



Simplify – Original Image



Simplify – Crop



Simplify – Local Desaturation



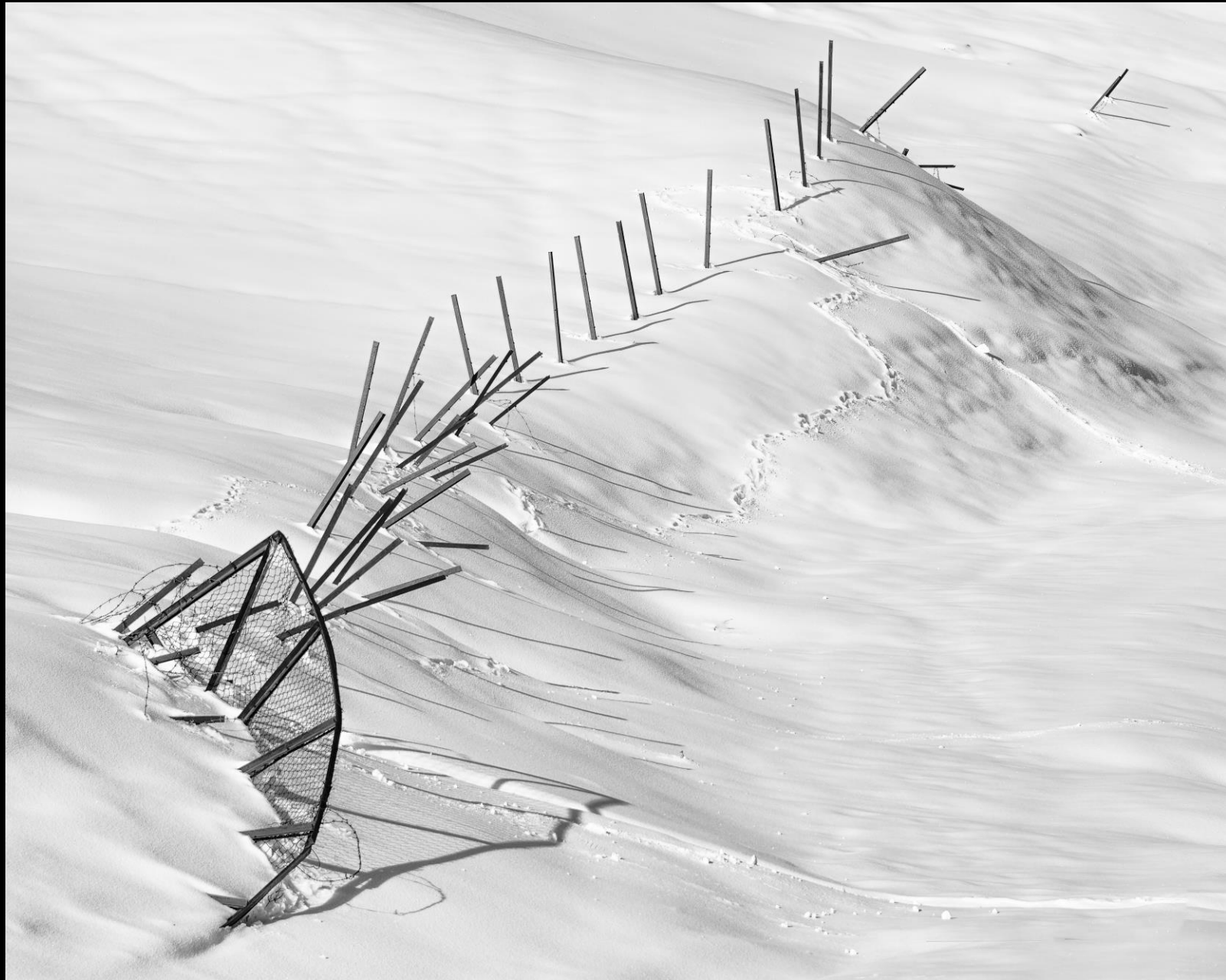
Simplify – B&W



Negative space

- What is negative space?
 - Is empty, bland, or otherwise uninteresting space
 - Used to complement busier areas
 - Provides a space for the eyes to “rest”
- Is a key element in Minimalism
 - Negative space can exceed 50% of the image





Distractions

- Draw viewer attention away from key elements of the image
 - Sensor noise
 - Sensor dust
 - Out of focus areas can be distracting
 - Especially if they are in front of the subject
 - Areas of extreme brightness can be distracting
 - Areas of high contrast can be distracting
 - Areas of saturated colours can be distracting
 - Desaturate areas of the shot, as needed.
 - Sky – eliminate or reduce impact

Distractions

- Elements that are close to or extend past the edge of the image can be distracting
- Elements that compete with the main subject can be distracting
 - “More than one main subject”

Edward Burtynsky

- Often does not include the sky



Learning to see distracting elements in an image

- Look away and then remember the first thing that you see
 - If it is not contributing to the image, why is it there?
 - Tripod can very helpful at capture
- In post-processing
 - May need to step away from the image for a few minutes or longer (days, even weeks) to catch any issues



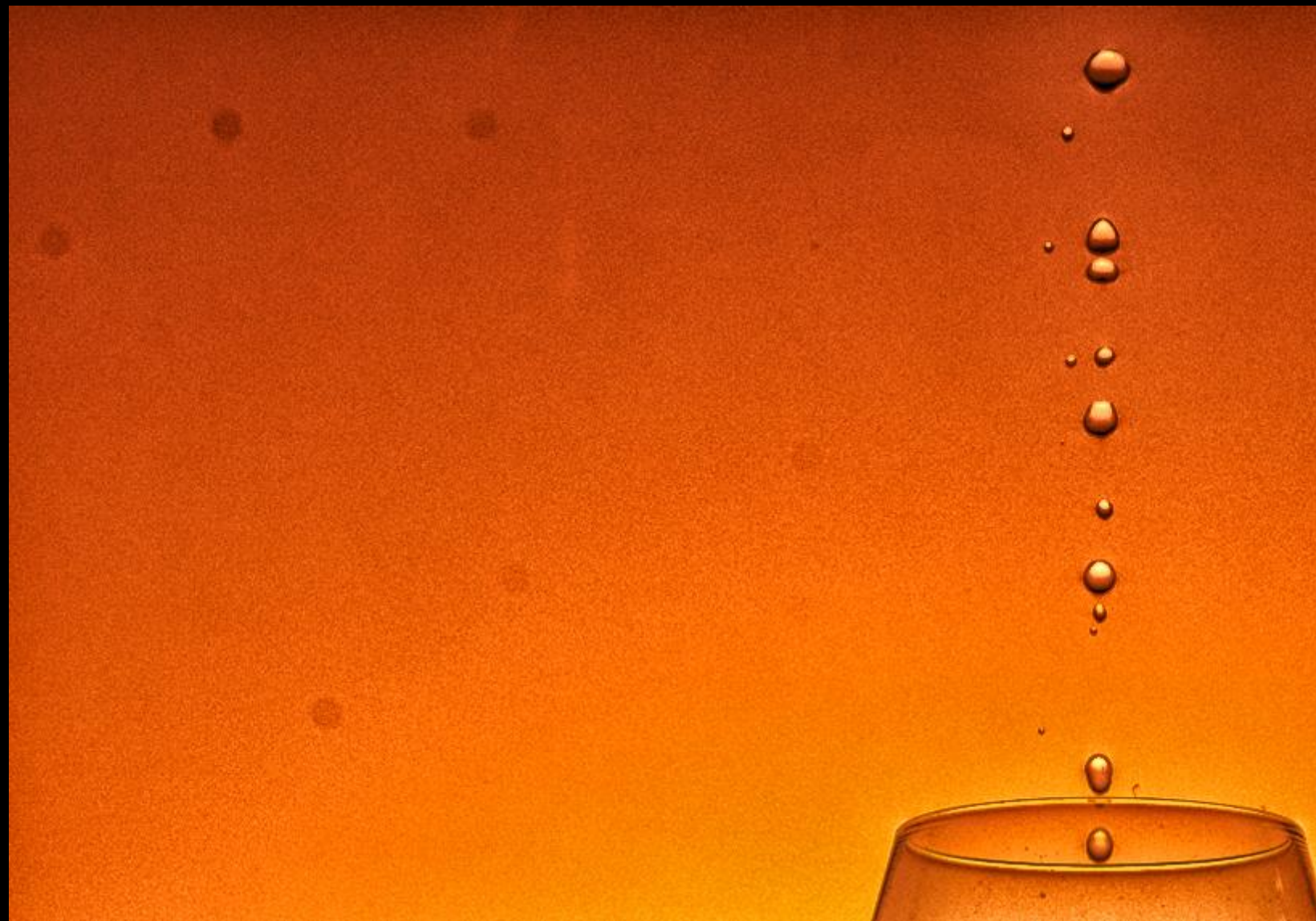




Sensor dust



Sensor dust
(enhanced)



Reduce / eliminate distractions

- Good framing and camera setup during capture
- Post Processing
 - Cropping
 - Cloning / Healing
 - Content Aware functions
 - Dodging & Burning
 - AI Functionality
 - Generative tools not allowed in CAPA competitions

Composition

Part 2

For Accomplished Photographers

Composition – My Personal Journey – 1st Stage

(Novice)

- My images are not very good.
- I must learn the “Rules of Composition” to achieve stronger results.

Composition – My Personal Journey – 2nd Stage

(Experienced Photographer)

- I have studied and applied the “Rules of Composition”.
 - My images have improved
 - Not to the extent I would like.

- They look like everyone else’s...

Composition – My Personal Journey – 3rd Stage

(Advanced Photographer)

1. Let me study works of the “Masters” and understand how to create a well composed image
2. Strong composition cannot be accomplished by relying on the “Rules of Composition”
 - They will hold you back
3. One must inherently recognize a strong composition when framing the image

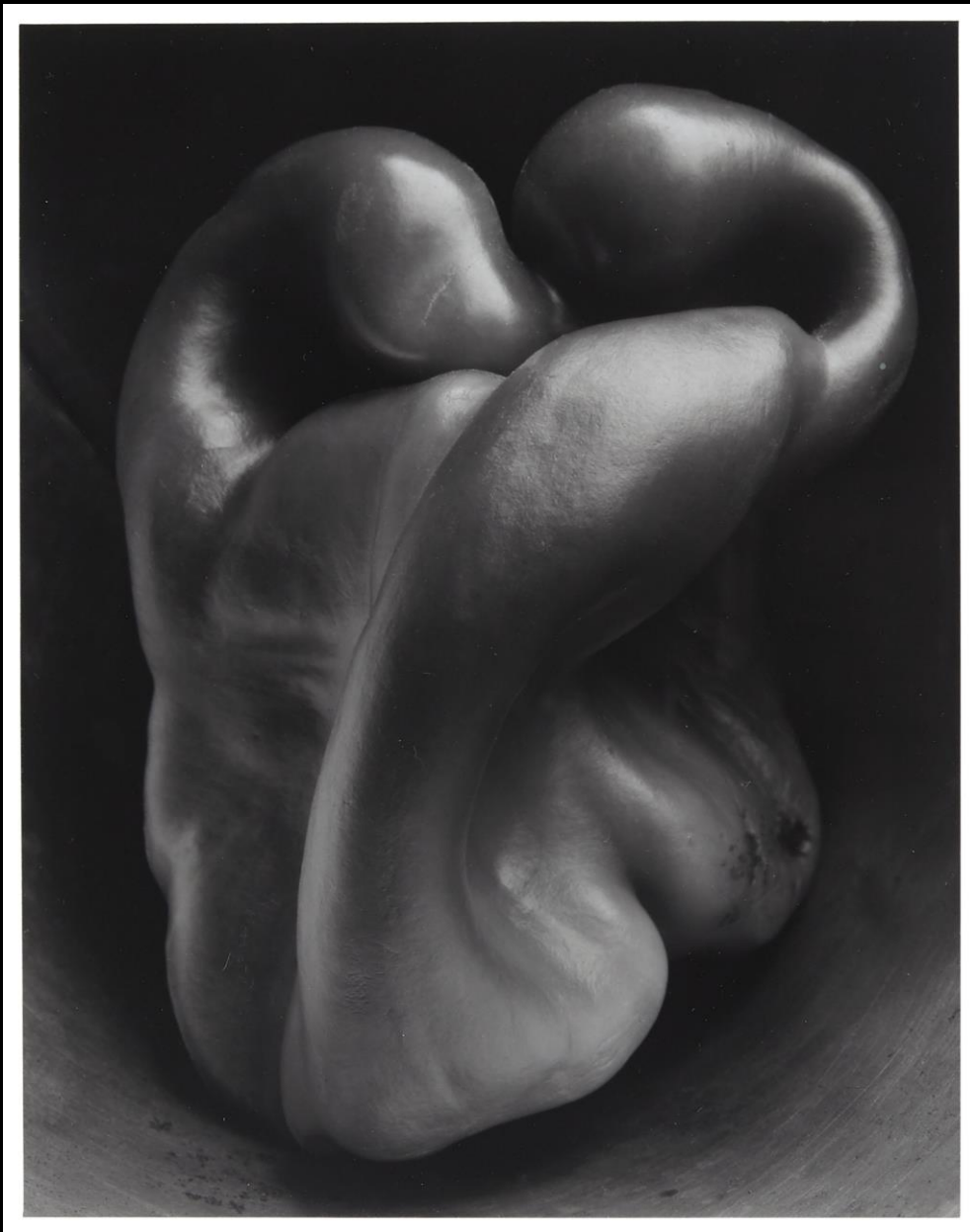
What do the Masters tell us?



Clearing Winter Storm – Ansel Adams

Ansel Adams

- *“There are no rules for good photographs, there are only good photographs.”*
- *“There is nothing worse than a sharp image of a fuzzy concept.”*



Pepper #30 – Edward Weston

Edward Weston

“Now to consult the rules of composition before making a picture is a little like consulting the law of gravitation before going for a walk”

“Rules of composition are deduced from the work of strong masters and used by weak imitators to produce... nothing.”

“When subject matter is forced to fit into preconceived patterns, there can be no freshness of vision. Following rules of composition can only lead to a tedious repetition of pictorial clichés.”



**Coal miner returning home from the pit
1937 – Bill Brandt**

Bill Brandt

“Photography has no rules, it is not a sport. It is the result which counts, no matter how it is achieved.”



Pamplona, Spain 1956 – Ernst Haas

Ernst Haas

"My theory of composition? Simple: do not release the shutter until everything in the viewfinder feels just right."



Broken Bow Arch, Willow Gulch – Bruce Barnbaum

Bruce Barnbaum - *The Art of Photography*

“Rules are foolish, arbitrary, mindless things that raise you quickly to a level of acceptable mediocrity, then prevent you from progressing further.”

Conclusions

- Highly respected, expert photographers state that Rules of Composition are not useful
- Strong composition cannot be achieved through a “cookbook” approach
 - Too many variables at play

Composition

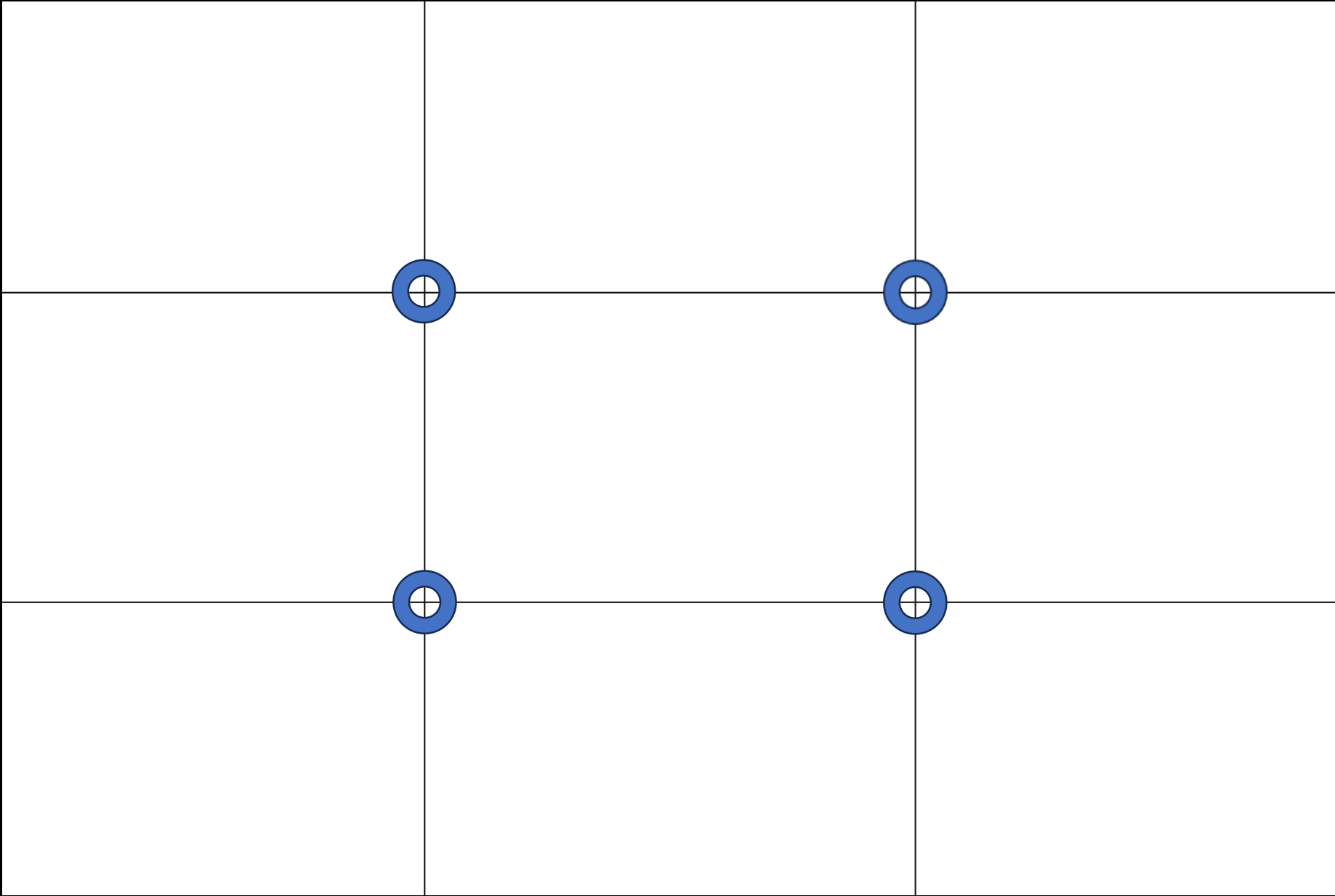
Part 3

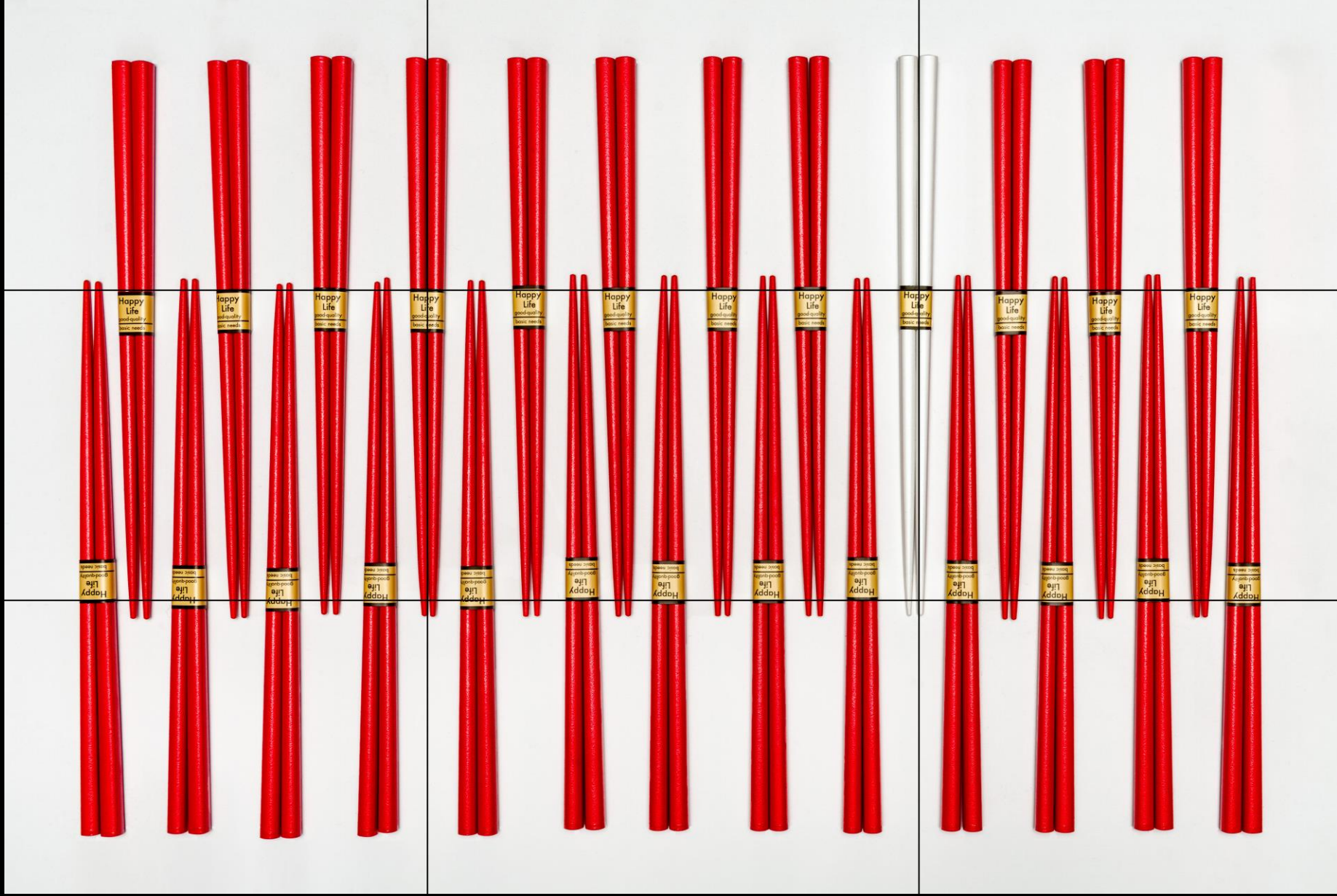
Debunking some Rules of Composition

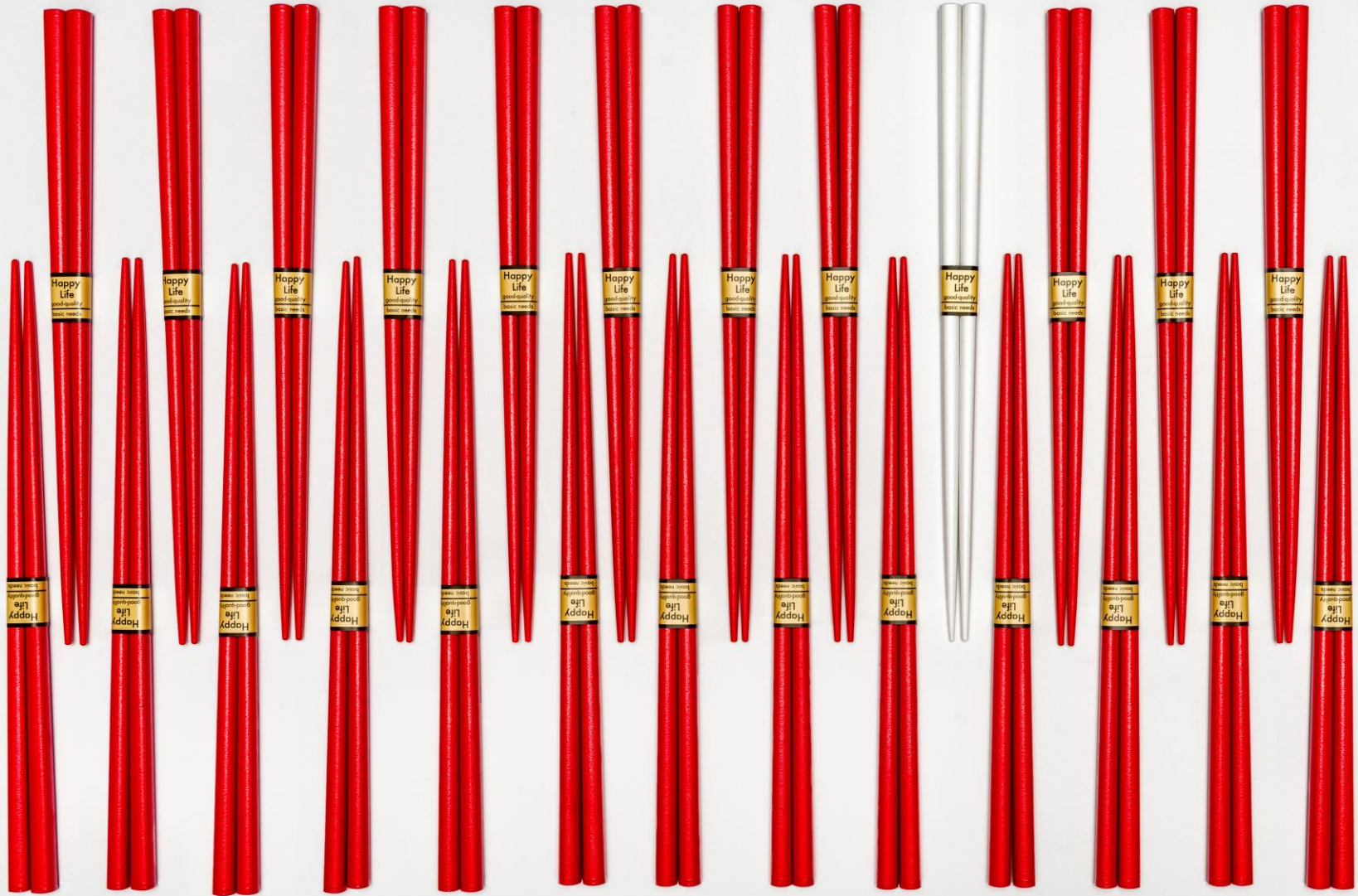
Rules of Composition

- Rule of Thirds
- Rule of Odds
- Image flow from left to right
- Don't centre your subject

Rule of Thirds







Harry Turner – Former Corporate Photographer

National Research Council of Canada / Instructor - Algonquin College, Ottawa

The Rule of Thirds has been frustrating fine artists since 1797 when a mediocre landscape artist named John Thomas Smith misinterpreted a reference by Sir Joshua Reynolds that in a work with areas of light and dark it is best that one dominate. The rule of thirds has become myth and a crutch since.*

* In 1845, in his book *Chromatics*, George Field notes that Sir Joshua Reynolds gives the ratio 2:1 as a rule for the proportion of warm to cold colors in a painting, and attributes to Smith the expansion of that rule to all proportions in painting

Rule of thirds

- Probably the most commonly used compositional technique
 - Not used by the strong photographers and painters
 - University of Jena, 2013 study *
- Golden Ratio, Golden Spiral, etc. are other similar approaches to composition
 - Have the similar issues are Rule of Thirds

* https://www.uniklinikum-jena.de/anatomie1_media/Inhalte/AmirshahiARTP2014.pdf

University of Jena Study - Conclusion

- In summary, our findings suggest that the rule of thirds might not be as important for the evaluation of the visual quality in photographs and artworks as previously assumed (see Introduction). Evidently, not following this rule does not necessarily result in images of low visual quality. We can only speculate why the rule of thirds plays such an important role in textbooks on photography and art. Perhaps, like the golden section, the rule of thirds mirrors the desire of artists and photographers to comprehend rules of artistic composition. Therefore, it might have become a normative aspect of creating artworks rather than a qualitative one. The rule of thirds may also help beginners to endow the products of their creativity with a particular visual structure under conscious control. Eventually, as artists gain intuitive expertise in artistic composition, they may drop the rule, which might be the reason why we did not find it in high-quality photographs and artworks.

Rule of Thirds

- The basis for this “rule” is questionable
- The rule doesn't seem to work
 - Not used by strong photographer and painters
- **Why do people still use it?**

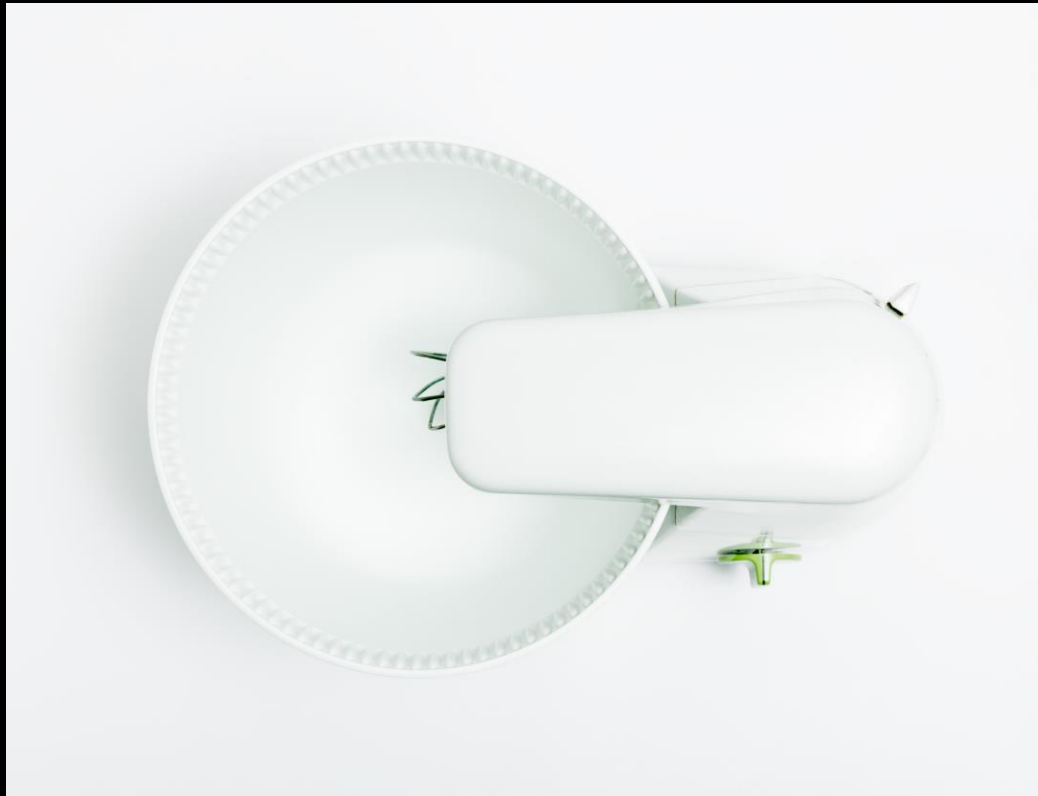
Rule of Odds

- Images work best if they have an odd number of elements
 - 1, 3, 5, etc.
 - Images with even number of elements don't work as well
- Fact:
 - Subjects that overlap or are in very close together act as a single visual element





Rule: Visual flow works better from left to right



??



Rule: Images should flow from left to right

- Assumption – we read from left to right
 - Images should flow that way too.
- But...
 - Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese
 - Right to left in vertical columns
 - Persian (including Urdu and Kashmiri), Arabic and Hebrew
 - Right to left in rows
 - Approximately **2.3 billion** people speak one of these languages
 - Out of ~ 8.1 billion
- There is no demonstratable correlation between the direction we read and how we look at images.

Languages read from Right to Left

11/ 凡 平

義とか云て何ても作者の意を述べた。其の語句も亦かまを聊かも技巧を加へず有の儘にだら／＼と半の海のやうに書くのが流行るさうだ。好い事が流行る。私も矢張り其て行く。
 題は「平凡」、書方は半の海。
 さあ是からが本文だが此處らて回を改めたが好からうと思ふ。

三

私地方生れた。戸籍を並べても仕方がないから唯其縣の某市として置く。其處で生れて其處で育つたのだ。
 子供の時分の事は最う大抵忘れて了つたが不思議なもので覚えてゐる事だと判然と昨日の事のやうに想はれる事もある。中には是ばかりは一生目の底に染付いて忘れられまいと思ふのは十の時死別れた祖母の面だ。
 今でも目を瞑ると直ぐ顯然と目の前に浮ぶ。面長の老人だか無論は寄つてゐたが縮つた口元で段鼻でなかく上品な面相だつたが眼が大きな眼で女には強過る程權が有つて古屋の！これが私の家の姓だ——古屋の隠居の眼といつたら随分評判の眼だつたさうだ。成程然ういへば何か氣に入らぬ事が有つて祖母が白眼でデロリと睨むと子供心にも何だか無氣味だつたやうな聲がまだ有る。

Japanese

10/ ←

סעיף א. כל בני אדם נולדו בני חורין ושווים בערכם ובזכויותיהם. כולם חוננו בתבונה ובמצפון, לפיכך חובה עליהם לנהוג איש ברעהו ברוח של אחוה.

סעיף ב. כל אדם זכאי לזכויות ולחרויות שנקבעו בהכרזש זו ללא הפליה כלשהיא מטעמי גזע, צבע, מין, לשון, דח, דעה פוליטית או דעה בבעיות אחרות, בגלל מוצא לאומי או חברתי, קנין, לידה או מעמד אחר. גדולה מזו, לא יופלה אדם על פי מעמדה המדיני, על פי סמכותה או על פי מעמדה הבינלאומי של המדינה או הארץ שאליה הוא שייך, דין שהארץ היא עצמאית, ובין שהיא נתונה לנאמנות, בין שהיא נטולת שלטון עצמי ובין שריבונותה מוגבלת כל הגבלה אחרת.

Hebrew

Don't Centre your Subject

- Says who?



Selective Focus works!

Conclusion:

- Strong composition is important in making a strong image
 - Rules of Composition help novice photographers
 - Hinder more advanced photographers
- Trust your Instincts!
 - A strong photographer “feels” a strong composition

Emotion

Creating a Strong Connection with the Viewer

The Wow! Factor

Emotion

- “Photography is all about light, composition and, most importantly, emotion.” —Larry Wilder

Emotion

- This is the most challenging aspect of photography
 - Something that most photographers never achieve consistently
- This is what catches the viewer's attention in the first place, keeps the viewer engaged and then returning to study the image time after time
- Even an image with technical and compositional issues can have strong emotional impact



Robert Capa – D-Day Landings – Omaha Beach, Normandy, France. June 6, 1944

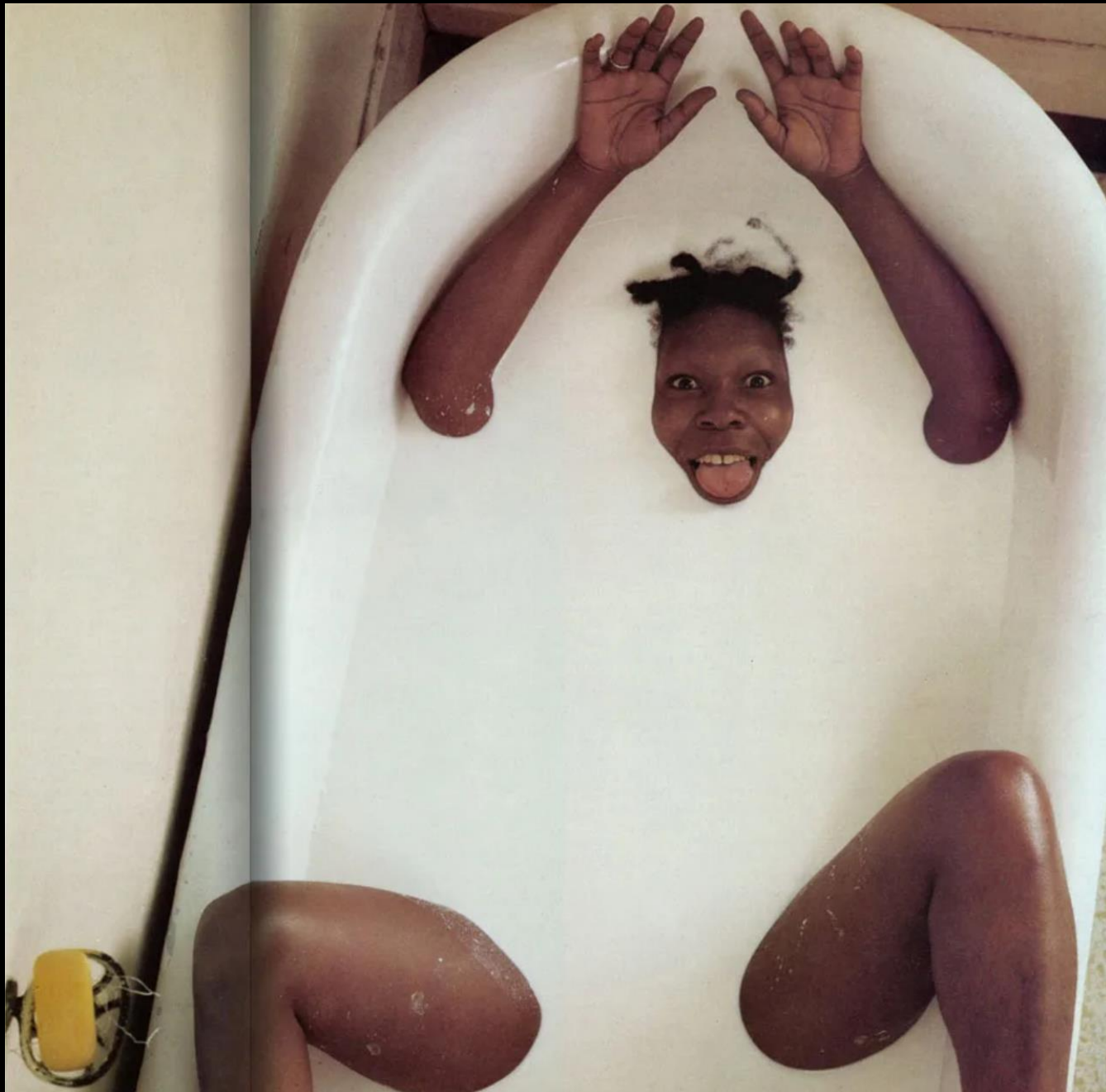


Hindenburg Disaster - May 6, 1937



Winston Churchill – December 30, 1941

Ottawa, Canada – Yousuf Karsh



Whoopi Goldberg
Berkeley, California, 1984

Annie Leibovitz

Vanity Fair – July 1984 issue



Vogue Cover – 1950
(Jean Patchett)

Irving Penn, New York

Mood

Definition: A distinctive emotional quality or character

- Does the image fire any emotional triggers?
 - The answer should be “yes”!
 - The trigger should be “universal”, not just personal
- Types of emotions
 - Joy
 - Sadness
 - Anxiety
 - Fear, etc.











Impact

Definition: The force exerted by an idea, concept, technology, or ideology

- Made you look!
 - Catches the viewer's attention and draws them to the image
 - Keeps them coming back to re-examine the image











Subject

Definition: An object, scene, incident, etc., chosen by an artist for representation, or as represented in art

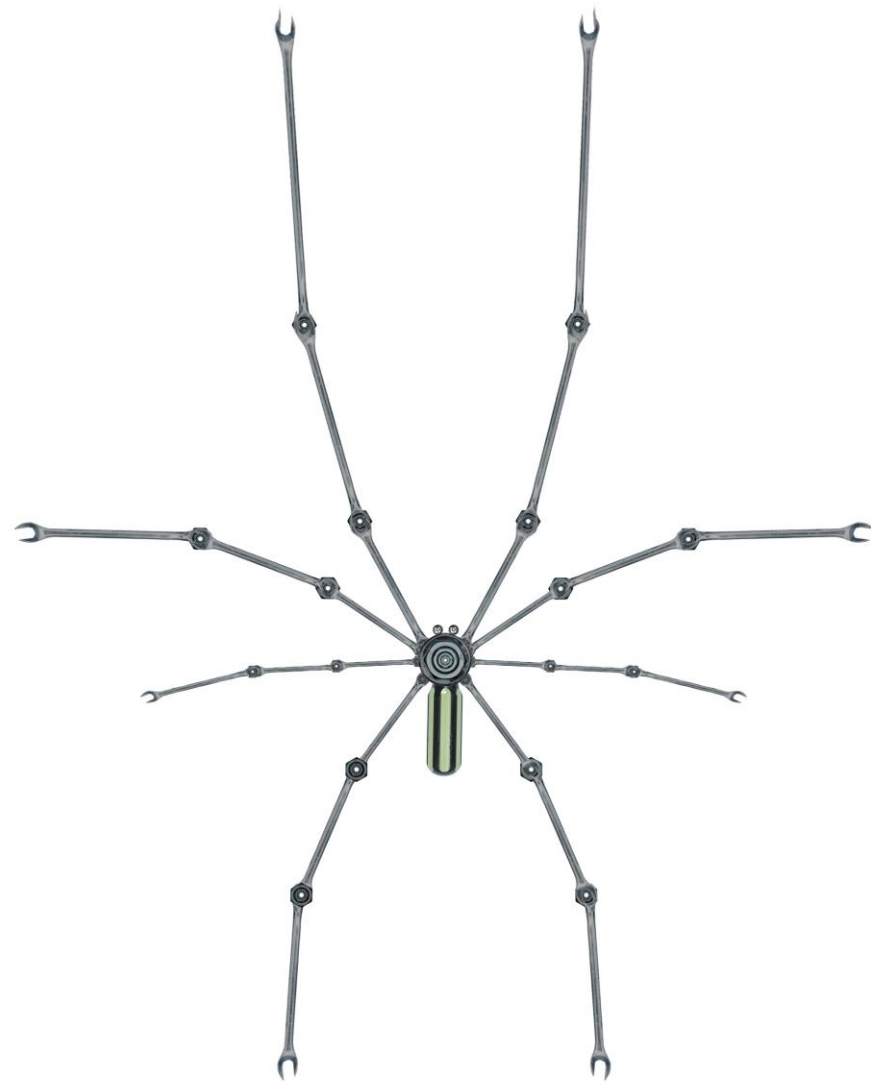
- A subject that is unusual or compelling to look at
 - An unusual or unique way of presenting the subject
 - Extreme closeup or unusual perspective
 - A familiar object that is somehow different











Imagination

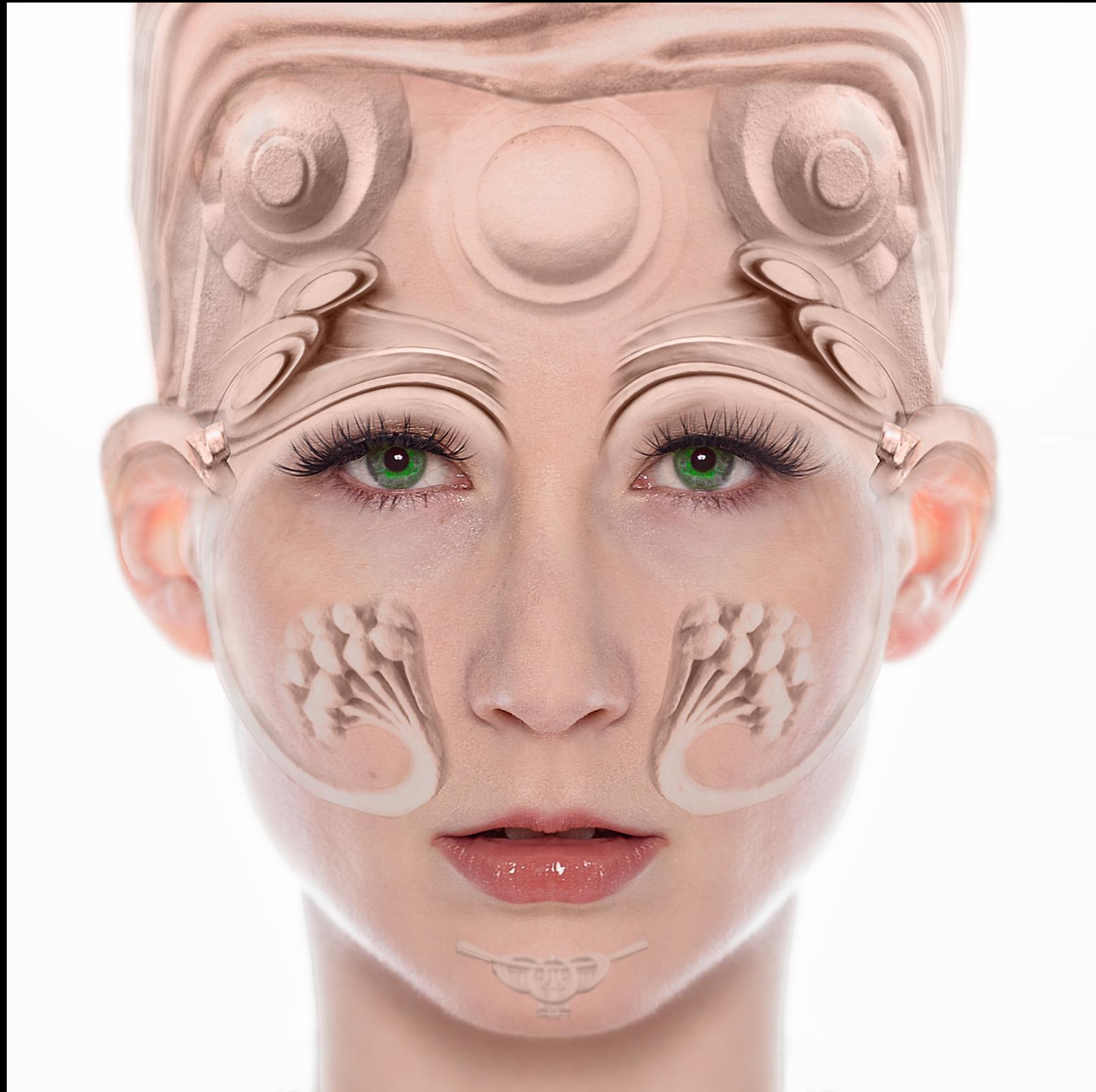
Definition: The action or process of forming such images or concepts

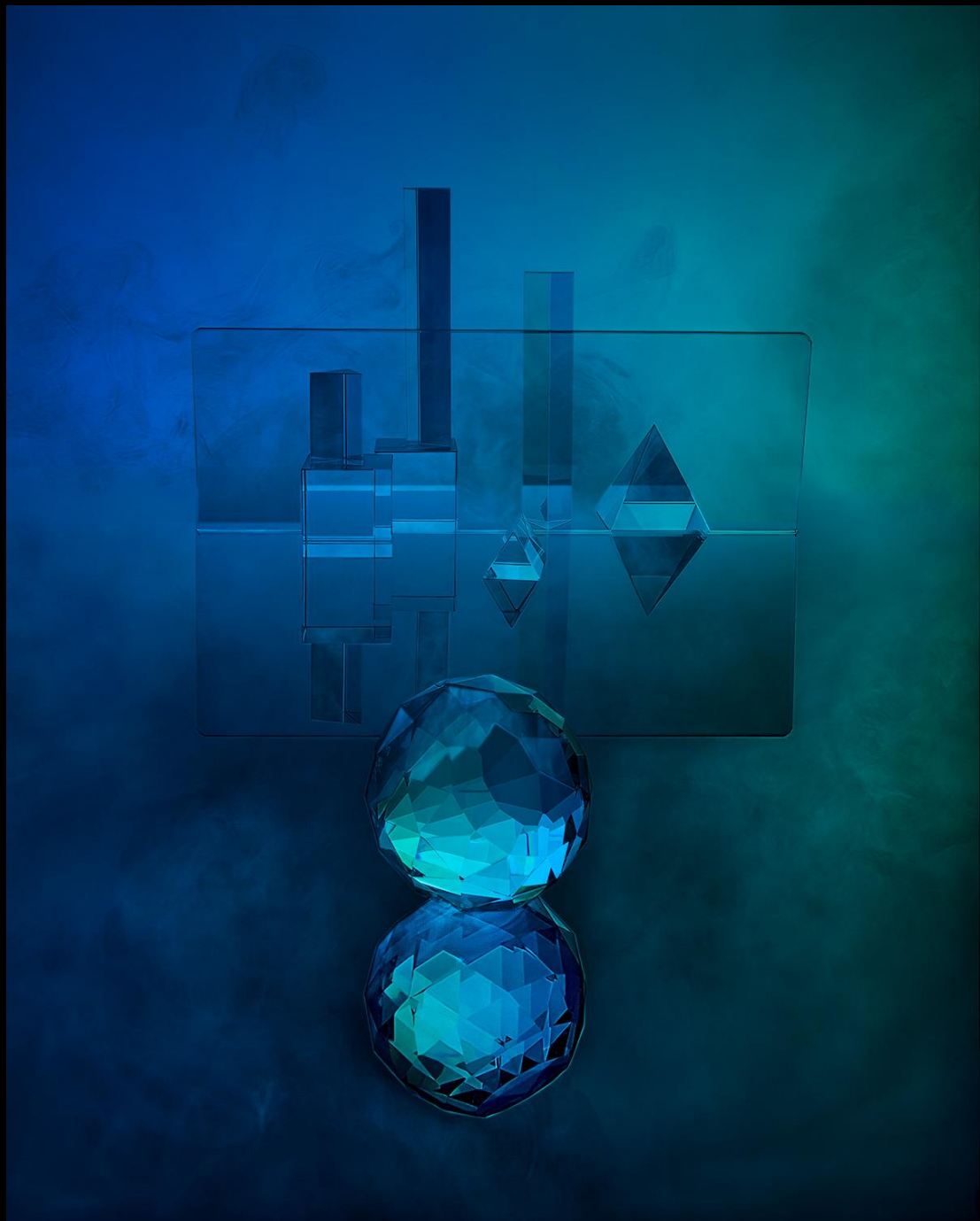
- Use of an approach that is innovative
 - Point of view, lighting, shooting position and other creative approaches
 - Most photos are taken with the photographer in a standing position
 - Try something else!
- Look at the subject in a different way
 - Get closer
 - Enhance in post











Conclusion

- Do things differently than other photographers
 - More of the same ≠ “Wow!”
- This is probably the most challenging aspect to master
 - Mastery requires hard work
 - Challenge yourself!
 - Mastery requires input from others

Questions or comments?