

COMPOSITION

AC-11



COMPOSITION

Photographic composition is simply the selection and arrangement of subjects within the picture area.

Some arrangements are made by placing figures or objects in certain positions. Others are made by choosing a point of view. You may move your camera a few inches or a few feet and change the composition decidedly. Some “chance shots” may turn out to have good composition, but most good pictures are created. How do you create a picture? First, you learn the rules for good composition given in this pamphlet. After you learn these rules, you’ll realize that pictures with good composition take careful planning, and sometimes patient waiting. But it’s not as hard as it may sound. You’ll find that the rules of composition will become part of your thinking when you are looking for pictures, and soon they will become second nature to you.

HAVE A STRONG CENTER OF INTEREST

Avoid putting your center of interest in the center of your picture. If the main subject is smack in the middle of the picture, it looks static and uninteresting. For pleasing composition, place your center of interest according to the “rule of thirds”: divide your picture area into thirds, both vertically and horizontally; then place your center of interest at one of the four places where the lines intersect.

Have one strong center of interest. You may want to include a secondary subject, but make sure that it doesn’t detract from your main subject.



Divide your picture area into thirds, both vertically and horizontally. Place your center of interest at one of the four places where the lines intersect. Placing the subjects according to the “rule of thirds” and having them look into the picture created a good center of interest for the pattern of the curving seats in this amphitheater.



The fisherman in the background helps to balance this composition. The photographer has placed the subjects according to the “rule of thirds,” and he has created a feeling of depth by having the subjects at different distances from the camera.

KNOW THE ANGLES

When you find a subject, don't just walk up to it and snap the shutter. Walk around the subject and look at it from all angles; then select the best angle to shoot from. Shooting from a low angle provides an uncluttered sky background outdoors. However, in bad weather you'll want to shoot from a high angle and keep the sky out of the picture. Overcast skies look bleak and unappealing in pictures.

Consider the horizon line. Never cut your picture in half by having the horizon in the middle of the picture. You can have the horizon low to accent spaciousness — especially nice if you have some white, fluffy clouds against a blue sky — or high to suggest closeness.

MOVE IN CLOSE

Some amateur photographers look through the viewfinder and start backing away from the subject. This is not only bad from a safety point of view, but it can also be bad for composition! When you look through your viewfinder, move toward your subject until you have eliminated everything that does not add to your picture. Even though you can crop your picture later if you plan to enlarge it, it's always better to crop carefully when you take the picture.

Take close-ups to convey a feeling of intimacy, and long shots for airiness and depth.

USE LEADING LINES

Lines should lead into, not out of, the picture. A leading line can be almost anything, such as a road or a shadow. The road will always be there; it's just a matter of choosing the right angle to make it lead into the picture. A shadow, however, is an ever-changing thing. There may be only one time in the day when it is just right. So if possible, be patient and wait for the good composition.



Framing a scene by including a tree or branch in the picture helps create a feeling of depth and leads your eye toward the main subject. This snow-covered branch stands out against the clear sky and helps tell the story of winter.



A commonplace farm building becomes the subject of a charming composition — chiefly through a careful choice of viewpoint. Notice how the leading lines of the road and fence guide your eye toward the main subject.

WATCH THE BACKGROUND

The background can make or break a picture. It can add to the composition and help set the “mood” of a picture, but it can also be very distracting if it is cluttered. Before you snap the shutter, stop for a minute and look at the background. Is there a telephone pole “growing” out of your subject’s head? Beware of an uncovered trellis or the side of a shingled house when you take informal portraits or groups, because prominent horizontal or vertical lines always detract from your subject. Foliage makes a better background. A blue sky is an excellent background, particularly in color pictures. Remember, look beyond your subject because your camera will!

ADD INTEREST TO YOUR SCENIC SHOTS

In scenic shots, it is often a help rather than a hindrance to include people who may be in the field of view. They should, however, look at the scene—not at the camera—and they should be at least 25 feet from the camera. For color pictures, have your “foreground figures” wear colorful clothing, preferably red or yellow, to add color and interest.

Frame your scenics with an interesting foreground, such as a tree or a branch. Watch the depth of field so that both the foreground and the scene will be in focus. It is very distracting to have an out-of-focus foreground.

To repeat, composition is simply the selection and arrangement of objects within the picture area. If you follow the suggestions given here, your own experience will teach you a great deal about this subject. When you look through the viewfinder, have the whole picture in mind.



Notice the position of the main subject and think of the “rule of thirds.” The windmill is light, so it attracts your attention; the water helps lead your eye from the edge of the picture to the main subject.



The small figure in the foreground emphasizes the grandeur of Old Faithful geyser.



Snow pictures are ineffective if they have large, empty expanses of glaring white. By making this picture at the right time of day, the photographer succeeded in capturing prominent shadows which contribute much to the composition.



Composition can often be improved by masking or cropping the negative, and then enlarging. As originally taken, this picture is a good record. From a pictorial standpoint, however, it includes too much, and the road leads your eye out of the picture. Cover up all except the area outlined in white and see how much better the picture becomes.

Consumer Markets Division

EASTMAN KODAK COMPANY • ROCHESTER, N. Y. 14650

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KODAK Pamphlet No. AC-11

4-68 Minor Revision
75-L-RPP-BE
Printed in the United States of America