



PICTURE PERFECT PRACTICE

*A Self-Training Guide to Mastering the Challenges
of Taking World-Class Photographs*

ROBERTO VALENZUELA

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Roberto Valenzuela

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DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this book to my beautiful mother, who worked day and night to feed us and put a roof over our heads when life dealt us a bad hand. Without her, I wouldn't be here to write this book.

To my wife and best friend, Kim, your amazing love and constant support are the greatest gifts I have. For every moment I spend with you, I thank God for putting you in my life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book was quite the adventure to write. I wrote it in the midst of the busiest wedding season of my life while also teaching workshops and seminars around the world. I dedicated so much time to this book that I owe my wife, Kim, my gratitude for not making me sleep on the couch. Kim has been a pillar in my life, the fuel that keeps me going, and the motivation to keep pushing myself. She has also been the subject of hundreds of my practice sessions throughout my career. The list of how blessed I am to be married to her could go on for 500 pages, so to keep things simple, I want to thank Kim for her patience, unwavering support, and unconditional love. I love you so much, sweetie!

I also want to thank my family, starting with my Mutti, my big bro Antonio, my older sister Blanca, my younger sister Susana, my brother-in-law Kent, my nephews Ethan and Caleb, and my niece Elliana. You guys mean everything to me. I treasure every moment we spend together, and I feel so blessed to call you my family.

I want to send a special thanks to my mother-in-law Christina for reading and editing every single chapter in this book. Thank you for fixing my bad grammar and for making the book read beautifully. This was truly a team effort; I would write and she would fix all my mistakes. Thank you so much, Christina!

My father-in-law Peter has been supporting my endeavors, no matter how crazy they may be. He has always been there providing me with the tools I needed to learn whatever it is I was learning at that time. Thank you Peter!

I want to say that I owe a lot of my success to my friends at Rangefinder (WPPI). Arlene, George, Bill, and Susan gave me the opportunity to launch my international photography teaching career. They believed in me and I will never forget what they did for me. I am forever grateful to them.

The first time I really got to know my good friend Skip Cohen and his wife Sheila will be a night I will never forget. Skip has been an invaluable friend and mentor to me. It is so nice to know that I can count on someone with experience as vast as that of Skip's. No one knows this photographic industry better than him. I am honored to call him a true friend and thank him for writing the foreword to this book.

A big thanks to the best executive editor on the planet, Ted Waitt, for giving me the opportunity to write this book. Also, thank you to the whole team at Peachpit who worked so hard to make this into a beautiful book and get it in your hands.

Last but not least, I want to thank all the beautiful brides and awesome grooms that have allowed me to be a part of their lives by documenting the beginning of their new families. I take my responsibility as your wedding photographer seriously, which is why I constantly try to better myself week after week to record your wedding day the best way I can every time. Thank you for trusting me with your wedding!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



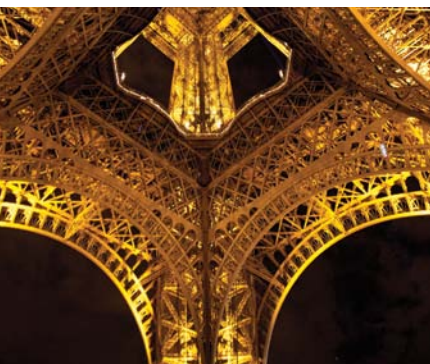
Roberto Valenzuela is a wedding and fine art photographer based in Beverly Hills, CA. His academic background is in economics and marketing. However, it was his 10 years as a concert classical guitarist that has given him a unique outlook on how to master photography, having used the same practice techniques to master his musical instrument.

Roberto Valenzuela is a multiple international award-winning photographer and three-time international first place winner. He serves as a photography judge for the 16x20 WPPI (Wedding and Portrait Photographers International), PPA (Professional Photographers of America), European photography competitions, and the WPPI International wedding album competition in Las Vegas, NV.

Roberto's private photography workshops and speaking engagements are held worldwide. His goal is to encourage and inspire professional photographers to practice their craft when not on the job, as any artist must in order to perform at an exceptional level. He is an active teacher and platform speaker at WPPI and has served as the keynote speaker at other international photography conventions.

He was named one of the top wedding photographers in the world by Junebug Weddings (one of the largest wedding resource websites in America).

Roberto will not turn down the opportunity to play a good table tennis match, and he flies his high-performance 3D remote control helicopters every Sunday afternoon. He can often be found at local bookstores looking for materials on something new that he wants to undertake.



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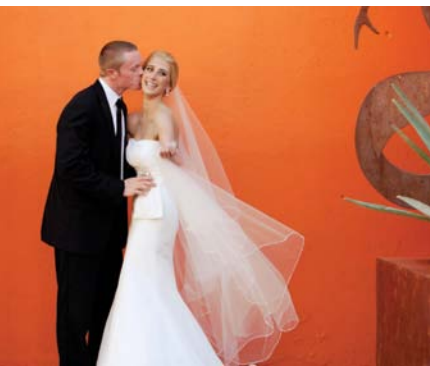
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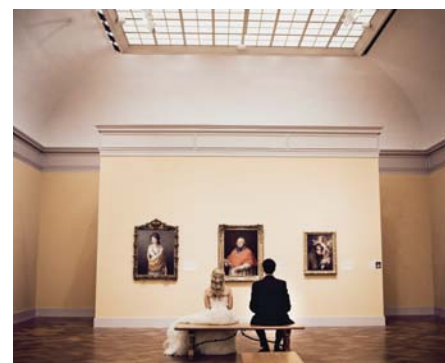
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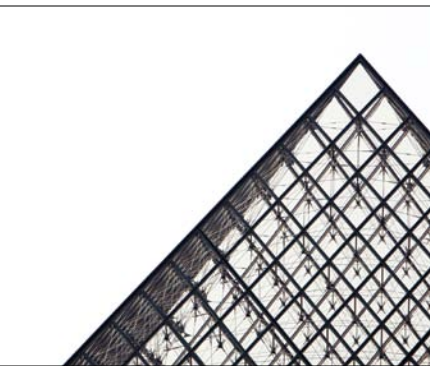
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FOREWORD

By Skip Cohen

The dictionary defines *foreword* as “a short introductory statement in a published work...” If I honestly stick to the definition of the word *short*, this is going to be very difficult to write!

So, let’s go with the “introductory statement” part, which is also a challenge. Do I introduce you to one of the finest photographers in the industry? Do I sound objective and not let on that I consider him an incredibly good friend? Even tougher, do I talk about his amazing ability to teach and help so many of us become better, more creative artists?

The reality is that he’s all of the above. When he asked me to write the foreword for his first book, it took me less than 10 seconds to answer, “Yes!” Lots of photographers have written books, but only a handful could create this level of genuine excitement for me. All you have to do is attend one of Roberto’s programs and you’ll understand.

This is no ordinary “how-to” photography book. This is about learning to train your eyes, your heart, and your mind. This is about developing such strong instincts that all the normal challenges in those photographic situations other photographers might struggle with simply become second nature for you.

Being an outstanding photographer covers the full range of what it takes to be a successful artist. Most important of all, it’s about accepting and understanding that without constant practice and working to develop your skill set, you can never create the ultimate image.

Imagine a person deciding they were a professional musician simply because they bought the finest trumpet on the market, but they never practiced. How many hours a day do you think Wynton Marsalis practices? Do you think there’s a single day that he doesn’t practice?

The analogy of a musician is so appropriate because a huge chapter of Roberto’s life includes being a classical guitarist. His philosophy as a photographer is no different, especially in his discipline and dedication. In fact, every word except for this foreword has been written by Roberto himself—no ghost writers, no assistants—just Roberto concentrating on the right choice of words to help you develop your true potential.

He was also an outstanding high school teacher, helping to teach his students that their only limitations were their own dreams. His innate ability to teach becomes so apparent in everything he writes and talks about in each workshop.

As you read the pages of this book, think of yourself on a journey. You’ll start by visiting ideas on how to see the photographic potential in each location you photograph. The next stop will take you to posing and learning to blend the location, lighting, and the overall scene with the appropriate pose in order to capture a unique feel with each image.

Next comes taking everything from those first two stops on the journey and blending them all together, giving every image the potential for a flawless, stress-free execution. The last stop is developing your own system so you can practice and improve. Remember, your goal on this journey is to be comfortable in every photographic situation.

This is a very special book, but in all honesty, I'm not sure it's really as much about photography as it is about passion. Roberto never compromises on anything, including the quality and intensity of his images.

Jack Canfield, author of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, is quoted as saying, "If you're passionate about what it is you do, then you're going to be looking for everything you can to get better at it."

Roberto never stops learning and exploring ways to fine-tune his skill set. His passion is virtually unmatched in our industry. So, sit back and enjoy the journey Roberto is about to take you on—a journey to make yourself not only unique, but a stronger, more creative artist.

INTRODUCTION

I wrote this book with a very specific purpose. It is meant to be a self-training guide for teaching yourself how to learn to no longer be intimidated by light, and to understand how to harness its photographic beauty regardless of the time of day, to be able to break down any location in order to find its hidden potential, and finally, to tackle any pose and achieve natural, flawless posing with anyone. If you are holding this book in your hands, the title must have spoken to you: *Picture Perfect Practice*. The word *practice* is an interesting word because it means different things to different people. For me, practice has been a lifestyle. I practice everything I want to learn. I am relentless about it, and it has paid off.

This book is about giving you the tools for scanning any scene and dissecting it for its photographic potential. It will serve you as a training guide where you will learn how to turn ordinary objects into stunning photographic elements. Through deliberate practice, you will learn to be more resourceful with your surroundings and light conditions. Where most see just a white van parked on the street, you will see it as a light reflector. Where people see an average office building, you will see it for its geometry, patterns, symmetry, and reflections, and you will know exactly how to incorporate those characteristics into your photographs. Photography is so interesting to me because it seems like the creative potential is endless.

The pages in this book contain a systematic program I developed out of photographic curiosity. We all know there are some artists out there who can create mind-blowing photographs anywhere and anytime. I wanted that ability! I have great respect for the art of photography because, to me, it allows you to create visual magic. But photography is like an untamed horse; if you don't have a system, the patience, and the dedication required to understand it, it will run away from you and leave a complete mess behind. But if tamed, it will reward you more than you could imagine. It was from this passion and desire that the learning system you are about to read was created.

Remember to keep a camera, a lens, and a flash readily available around your house so you can quickly practice a technique at a moment's notice.

I hope you enjoy this book. The pages that follow will prepare you to recognize photographic potential anywhere, react to it seamlessly, and execute your vision. I feel confident saying that if you complete the exercises in this book, your photographic vision and creativity will exponentially increase.

Have fun and good luck!

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

If, with one word, I had to answer the million-dollar question I have been asked so many times—“How does one become a better photographer?”—I would have to say that the key to becoming an expert at anything boils down to one thing: practice! And not just practice, but *deliberate* practice. There is a considerable difference between the two. One will get you nowhere, and the other will change your life!

This book is best read cover to cover. I wrote the book with principles and techniques that will build upon each other as your knowledge and skill set increase. Once you have read the book, it will serve as a reliable reference guide for what to do in many problematic situations.

My main focus for this book is you! Throughout the book, I purposely chose photos that contained teaching substance. I was not interested in only showing you beautiful photography and telling you how I did it, or what camera settings were used. My desire is to take you through my thought processes, walk you through the necessary steps that go into creating remarkable photographs, and teach you how to become your own critic. Then, *you* see where there is room for improvement and how to achieve it.

The book is based upon a method where we will take a very detailed look at how to recognize the photographic potential of locations using the Location chart, a systematic approach to posing people using the Posing chart, and the technical and artistic execution of both charts combined using the Execution chart. All three charts work together like an orchestra to create beautiful photographs. But the entire system depends upon you actually practicing what you are learning. The deliberate practice section of this book will teach you how to correctly implement deliberate practice techniques and to maximize learning for every practice session.

Keep in mind that photography is subjective, and you might not agree with all the material in the book. The book is intended to give you a different perspective, so read it with an open mind. In art, nothing is set in stone. But this system I created has worked incredibly well for me, and it has been largely responsible for my successful career. My hope is that you find this book helpful, as well.

IS THIS BOOK ONLY FOR WEDDING PHOTOGRAPHERS?

No. This book is for photographers who photograph people. It is about giving you the tools and mindset to take remarkable photographs at any location, regardless of its aesthetic appeal. It will teach you how to break down a pose to create natural, finessed, and confident portraits, regardless of who is in front of your lens. I am a wedding photographer, so naturally many of the portrait and posing examples shown were photographed at weddings all across the world. Nonetheless, if you photograph children, high school seniors, lifestyle portraits, couples, fashion, travel or weddings, the principles taught here can be seamlessly applied to any form of people photography. As long as there is a person in front of your camera, this book is for you.

WHY DO I REPEAT PHOTOGRAPHS THROUGHOUT THE BOOK?

As you read through the chapters, sometimes you will notice the same photo appearing two or three times. This is because I ran out of photos to put in the book. Okay, I'm just kidding! It's actually because the principles of my teaching method build upon each other. Therefore, as you are learning the principles from all three charts, it is best to see them applied to the same photograph. This way, you can see the building blocks coming together to create artistic photographs that you will be very proud of.

THE LOCATION, POSING, AND EXECUTION CHARTS

These are the three charts that the whole book is based on. My system was designed to use the Location, Posing, and Execution charts together to best help you see what others don't when you are location scouting, creating and finessing natural poses, and putting together the building blocks to execute your best work yet! I carry these three charts with me everywhere I go.

LOCATION CHART

Geometry	Balance	Parallel Lines	Symmetry	Color Elements	Depth
Shadows	Silhouettes	Reflections	Patterns/ Repetitions	Frames	Contrasts
Lens Flare	Paintings	Art Pieces	Translucent Surfaces	Walls	Textures

POSING CHART

Traditional	Him Behind Her	Her Behind Him	Walking	Kissing	Playful/Action/ Movement
Holding Hands	Sitting	Together Side by Side	Interpretive	Distance Apart	Hugging
Foreground/ Background	Facing Each Other	Kiss Anticipation	Featuring Him	Featuring Her	T-Pose

EXECUTION CHART

Lighting Through Direction	Beauty Through Angles
Simplicity Through Subtraction	Perspective Through Lenses

SYMMETRY

SYMMETRY refers to a line that splits an object in half and, if both sides of the object are an exact mirror image of each other, then this object is said to be symmetrical. The line that splits a symmetrical object is called the *line of symmetry*. Symmetry is a powerful tool that lets you automatically create harmony and a sense of aesthetically pleasing balance and proportion in a photograph. You probably remember learning about symmetry in geometry class, but I rarely see photographers apply it in their work. That's too bad, because symmetry is a powerful photographic tool. Symmetry is all around us and has always been associated with beauty, so why not use it? Depending on how you are holding the camera and how much of a scene you choose to show, you can strengthen or weaken the symmetric properties of an object or scene. Although there are many types of symmetries, for our purpose let's focus on two types:

- **Vertical Line of Symmetry (VLS):** If an object's line of symmetry is perpendicular to the horizon line, it has a vertical line of symmetry.
- **Horizontal Line of Symmetry (HLS):** If an object's line of symmetry is parallel to the horizon line, it has a horizontal line of symmetry.

EXERCISE: VERTICAL LINE OF SYMMETRY

Exercise: Look around every room in your house (or outside) and discover anything that could have a vertical line of symmetry. Try your window frames, the backrest of your dining room chairs, a table lamp, and so forth. Using a zoom lens, try to zoom in to just show the VLS of objects.

Just focus on VLSs. Be sure to hold your camera vertically to enhance the visual effect.

Goal: 10 objects with vertical lines of symmetry.

Explanation: I find vertical lines of symmetry easier to spot than horizontal lines of symmetry. The trick is to find your symmetrical object of choice and center it in your frame. Ask yourself if anything present in your photo is taking away from the symmetry. If you tilted your camera, for example, most likely you have lost symmetry. Instead of straightening it in postproduction, get it right in the camera. Images 4.1–4.4 are photos I made while I was taking a walk and doing this exercise myself.



4.1 At a restaurant, I noticed the back of the chairs had VLS, so I zoomed in to show just the portion of the chair that is symmetrical.



4.2 By zooming in on just the back of the chair and keeping it centered in the frame, you create a very nice vertically symmetrical photo.



4.3 I noticed that the green wall in the center had a vertical line running right down its middle. This automatically showed me where the line of symmetry lay. I zoomed in to isolate just this portion of the scene. I placed the vertical line in the middle of my frame and took the photo.

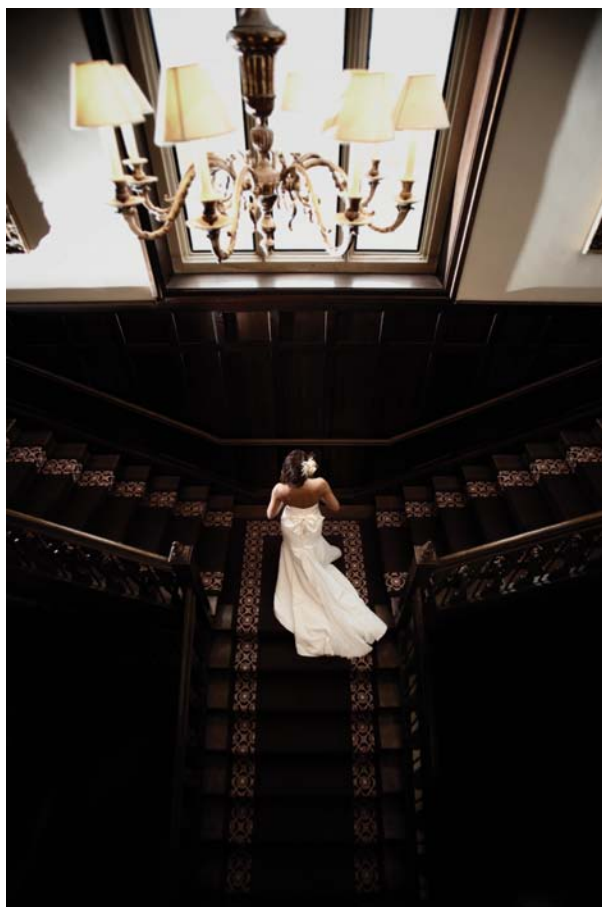


4.4 By zooming in on the green panel's middle line, you can emphasize its vertical symmetry.

COMBINING VERTICAL SYMMETRY WITH PEOPLE

Image 4.5 shows how I applied this symmetry skill on the job. I zoomed my lens enough to isolate just this vertically symmetrical portion of the interior. The only object that is taking away from my perfect vertical symmetry is the light fixture hanging from the ceiling. Notice it was hung a bit to the left. Although the light fixture is not centered, the rest of the scene is very much symmetrical. I positioned the bride in the center to add to the symmetry. Unfortunately, it also looks a bit posed.

Image 4.6 is almost identical to 4.5. However, I changed the overall feel of the photograph by keeping the symmetry in the composition but introducing a bit of tension. The bride being off-center creates the tension. Now the photo takes on a photojournalistic feel combined with a symmetrical composition.



4.5



4.6

EXERCISE: HORIZONTAL LINE OF SYMMETRY

Exercise: This exercise is the same as the previous one except this time instead of VLS you are going to look for HLS.

Just focus on HLS. Be sure to hold your camera horizontally to enhance the visual effect.

Goal: 10 objects with horizontal lines of symmetry.

Explanation: You can always find HLS by looking at a reflection from a lake or any other body of water. Water creates a perfect mirror reflection of whatever is in close proximity to the water source. Think of how many photographs you have seen in magazines or books

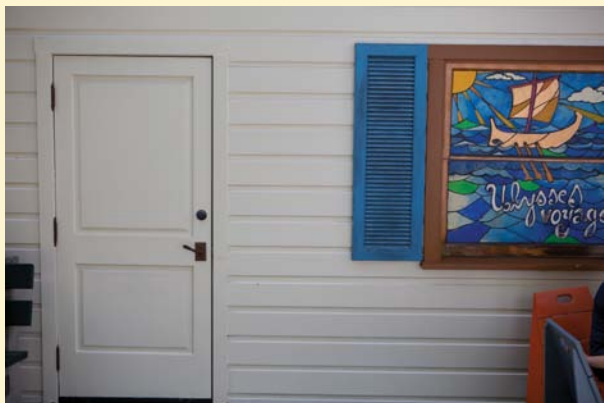
with reflections of water. These landscapes are beautiful partly because of the scene, but mostly because those images have symmetrical and balanced properties. The key to this exercise is to bring those same powerful properties to an urban scene that has no body of water. Easier said than done, right? But if you work on recognizing these properties everywhere you go, you will be better able to harness the symmetrical properties of any scene you are faced with. The work is a bit tedious, but it is well worth it! Images 4.7–4.10 are some of my examples doing this exercise.



4.7 During my little walk, I noticed this orange chair from some distance. Because I was actively looking for HLS, I stopped to take a photo of the back of the chair.



4.8 You can see how I isolated the symmetrical portion of the chair from all the other distractions. The back of this chair has a very clear HLS.



4.9 In this example, it was the blue shutters that had the HLS I was looking for.



4.10 Here are the shutters isolated for its HLS. Remember to place the HLS in the middle of the frame. That way, the symmetry will be centered.

COMBINING HORIZONTAL SYMMETRY WITH PEOPLE

Image 4.11 took place during a wedding in Maine. I had just a few minutes of clear weather to complete all the photographs of the wedding party and the portraits of the bride and groom before it started raining again. Since there were no raindrops disrupting the calmness of the lake, it created a gorgeous crystal clear reflection (HLS) of the landscape. This gave me a great opportunity to apply HLS using the wedding party. The key is not to see this scene as a big rock and a tree, but to see it for its horizontal symmetrical properties. That way, you can enhance the symmetrical feel of the photograph through your composition.



4.11

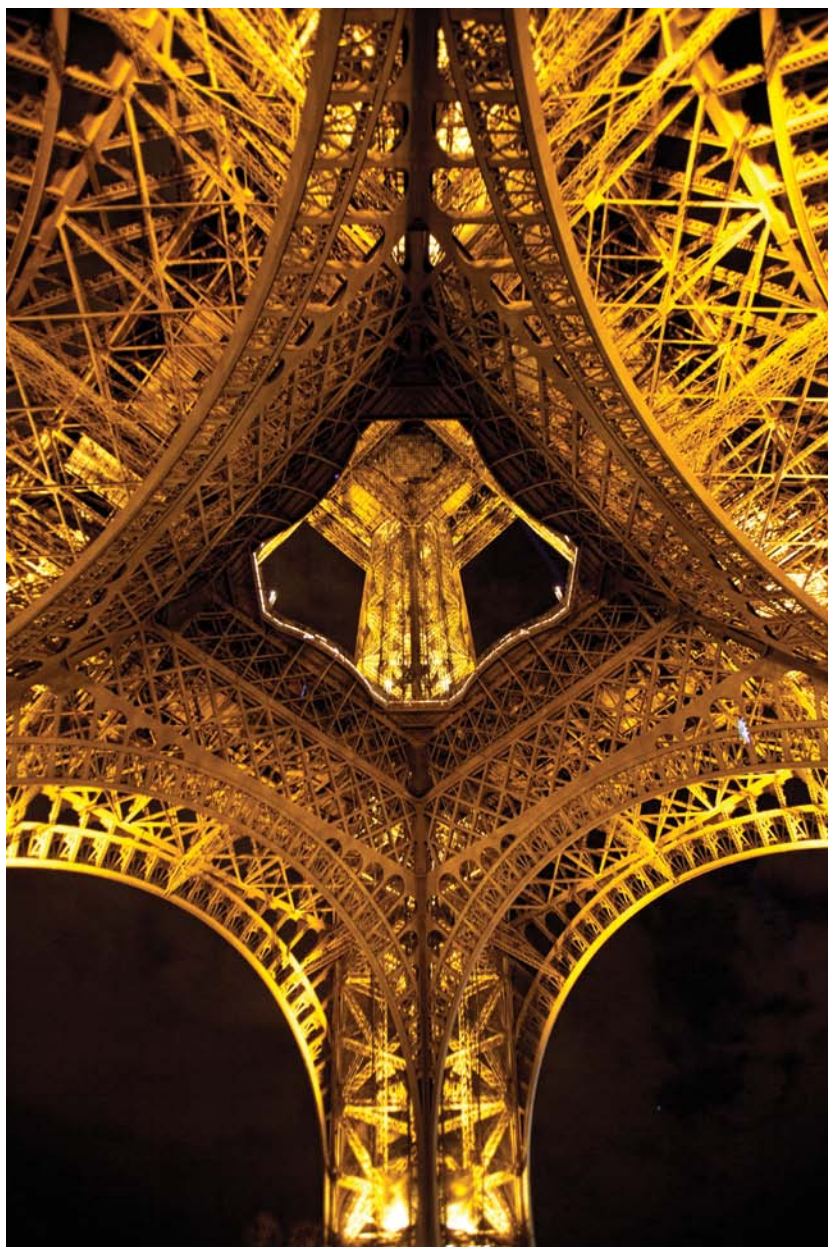
SEEING SYMMETRY EVERYWHERE

One day in Barcelona, Spain, I looked out my hotel window and noticed an abundance of both HLS and VLS in front of me (4.12). These symmetries are literally everywhere. We just have to train ourselves to recognize them and then apply them in our work.



4.12 I've marked some of the symmetry I saw in just one scene alone. There are more, but this hopefully makes it clear how you can find symmetry all around you.

After having done these exercises over and over throughout my career, I can relax and let my training do its job. During my first trip to Paris, my wife and I were walking to the elevator that takes you to the top of the Eiffel tower. I was admiring the sheer size and beauty of this magnificent structure when I instinctively felt the need to take a photo of the Eiffel tower at this exact angle (4.13). As you can see by the photo, my training kicked in when my eyes gazed through the tower and my brain recognized the strong vertical line of symmetry at this angle compelling me to stop and take this photograph. Even when you are on vacation, your training will always be there with you.



4.13

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