

Decisions

THE CREATION OF A SINGLE PHOTOGRAPH is the result of a series of decisions about organizing the raw materials or elements at our disposal. These decisions are the grammar of our expression, the way we move the words around to say something in a unique way. Even when the light is beyond our control or the moment happens so quickly we barely have time to react, it is our choice and that's what gives it the potential to be art. Art, my friend Jeffrey Chapman says, must have something of the artist within. That *something* is the series of choices we make in what we say and how we say it. We decide what to include and exclude, we decide which moment to capture from which angle, and with which settings and optics. Ultimately, when an image succeeds it is to our credit, whether or not we feel it was made entirely through dumb luck.

► Nikon D3s, 52mm, 8 seconds @ f/22, ISO 200

Cape Foulwind, New Zealand, 2010.



When an image fails, it is we who must take the responsibility. “But,” I hear the voices protesting, “the light just didn’t cooperate, there was no room to move forward or to the side, and the moment just never happened!” Fair enough, but it is we who still insist on making the photograph. If the elements don’t line up, it is still we who choose to make, or not make, the image. If we decide to make it and it fails to line up with our intent, it’s not the elements or the constraints that held us back that are to blame. Recognizing the role of our decisions in stringing together the words of our craft leads us to greater mindfulness, and that mindfulness leads us to photographs that are increasingly in line with our intention. If we’re still in agreement that a successful photograph is one that best expresses our intent, then this approach gets us closer to creating those photographs.

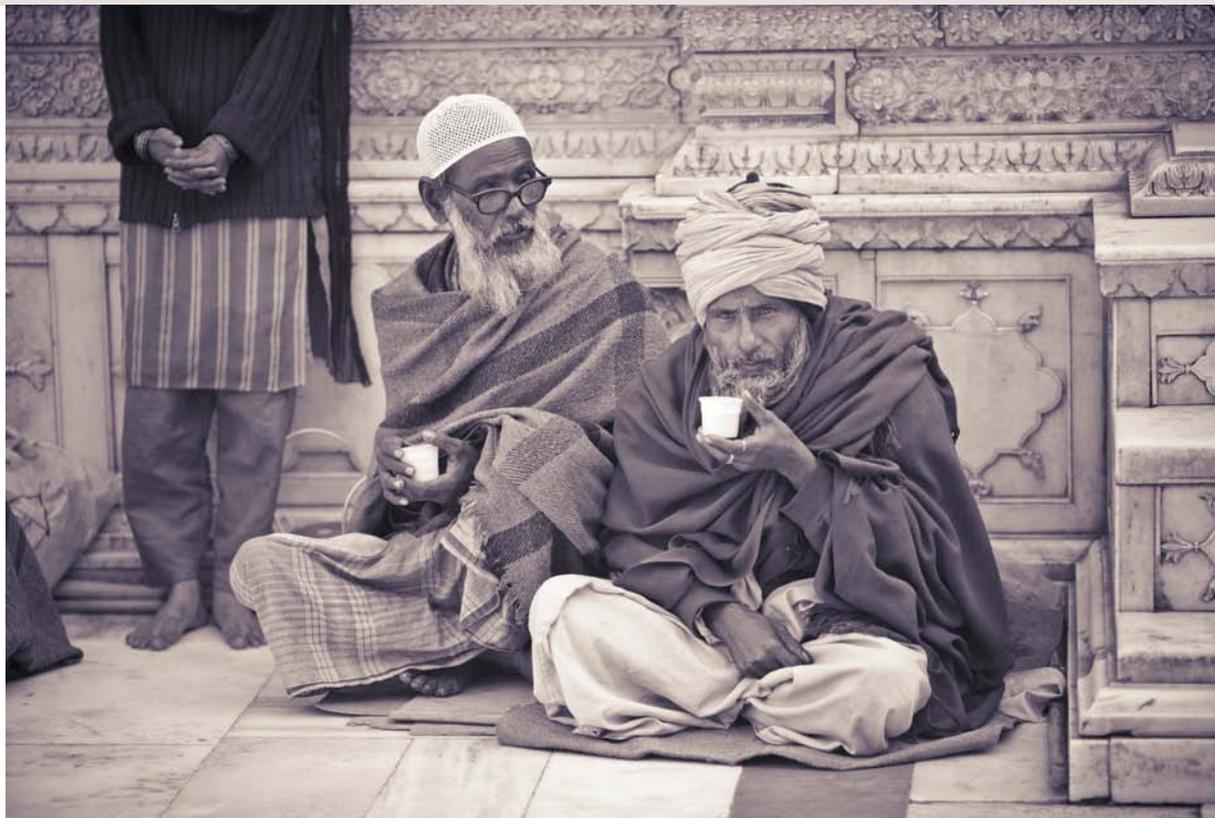


Framing

When I speak with my students about a photograph, one of the things I ask them for is as complete a description of that photograph as possible. That includes consideration or description of the frame itself, and although students roll their eyes at its obviousness, it’s important. The decisions we make about the way we use that frame are not mere details; this is the moment, before the painting begins, when the painter chooses his canvas and sets it on the easel. The frame is the stage on which we tell our story. If it’s in the frame it matters and means something; if it is not in the frame, it doesn’t exist. More than just the thing that holds the content of our photograph together, the frame is a part of the photograph itself and defines how the story is told. The crop, orientation, and aspect ratio of that frame determines how the story is read.

◀ Canon 1Ds Mk III, 1/2000 @ f/1.2, ISO 800

Ladakh, India, 2010.



Crop

Our choice of crop—the things we allow within the frame—tells the reader, by excluding all else, “Look here.” It says, “I could have included other things, gone wider, turned to the left, but I didn’t. I photographed this exact scene.” This is where photography begins, pulling life from its context and presenting it in vignettes and memorable moments by pointing with greater specificity. It creates new implied relationships and pulls the eye to new details by excluding all else. It’s for this reason that objects partly in and partly out of the frame are jarring to us. They don’t seem to belong either to the world of the frame or the world outside the frame. This isn’t about right and wrong; the permeability of the frame can be used to great effect. What’s important is simply to be *aware* of the frame. Implying a world beyond the frame can lead us to be more aware of the photograph itself, or to question what we do not see just outside the frame. But it must be done judiciously, and with intent. Readers seldom forgive or are engaged by sloppy storytelling.

▲ Canon 5D, 135mm,
1/3200 @ f/2, ISO 800
Delhi, India, 2008.

What’s in the frame—and what’s out—is important to the implications of this photograph, notably the absence of the face of the woman. What her anonymity says in the presence of these elder men—as though her sole purpose is to serve them or stand silently by—is directly implied by the way her face is cropped from the frame.

Orientation

The direction of the frame, whether vertical or horizontal, determines the direction in which the image is read. The way the image is read will either reinforce what you want to say with your photograph or it will work against you.

Orientation of the frame tells the reader, “The story takes place this way.” We look at vertical images differently—up to down—from how we look at horizontal images—left to right. If your goal is to create a photograph that says what you want to say, and also does so for the reader, then beginning with the right orientation matters. When the story is better told vertically, a horizontal orientation of the frame diminishes the impact of the photograph, or even prevents the story from being told completely. Everything matters, and making a photograph is not unlike making a painting. You start by putting your canvas on the easel in the way that makes the most sense, not merely because “that’s the way you were holding the camera at the time” or “to fit more stuff in the frame.”

The horizontal frame is often a better storytelling orientation because life, for most of us, happens this way. We relate horizontally, move horizontally, and get our stories horizontally in the most prominent storytelling medium of our time, the movie. But when the story happens vertically—whether that’s a rock climber scaling a long tall ridge or a man looking at a plane in the sky—the vertical frame will emphasize that by directing the eye of the reader.

Aspect Ratio

My friend Dave Delnea hates the 2:3 aspect ratio of the normal 35mm frame. Drives him crazy—especially when oriented vertically. He loves 4:5 and a square crop. They suit his vision and style much more. Frankly, the 2:3 aspect ratio is a hard frame to use, and the more my own voice evolves, the more space I find for alternate crops, which has pushed me to begin exploring the 4:5 ratio much more. Sometimes choosing an aspect ratio is something we do in the camera—sometimes we’ll choose a camera based entirely on the aspect ratio—and other times it’s something we do with the conscious intention of cropping to a more appropriate aspect ratio later in the darkroom. But it always matters, because it determines how the image is read.



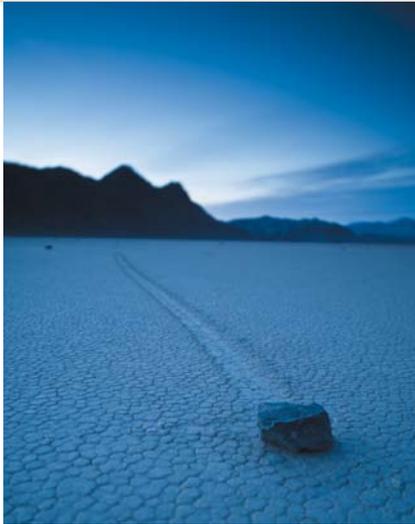
▲ Nikon D3s, 24mm, 1/60 @ f/9, ISO 400
Milford Sound, New Zealand, 2010.



► Nikon D3s, 24mm, 1/125 @ f/9, ISO 400
Milford Sound, New Zealand, 2010.

I made these two photographs seconds apart on the waters of Milford Sound in Fiordland National Park on the South Island of New Zealand. The horizontal frame was my first sketch image, but as I played around with the forms in the frame it was the vertical orientation that worked best for me. It forced me to change the relationship of the shapes to each other, allowing me to make the cliff on the left much larger and looming while also forcing me to include less of the landmass on the right, diminishing it in relative size. No amount of horizontal framing would have allowed me to achieve a composition with this same scale and the resulting sense of looming. The frame itself forces relationships on us, and we read the photographs differently.

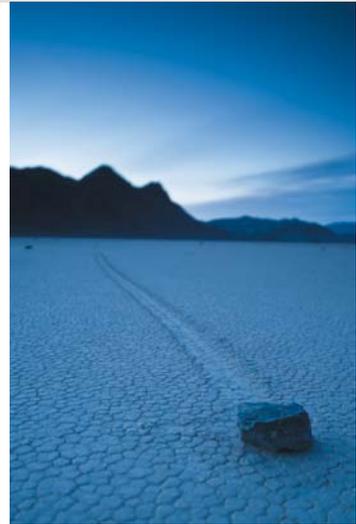
Whereas the orientation of the frame tells readers which way the story flows, the aspect ratio tells them, in a sense, how powerfully it flows in that direction. The square frame says that the vertical world within the frame is as important as the horizontal world, and the reader's eye will move differently within that frame than it will in another. A 16:9 horizontal frame will flow strongly from left to right, creating a powerful wide feeling with little sense of height. Turn that same frame vertically and use it to photograph a towering redwood tree, and the photograph will be read straight up and down with little to none of the horizontal world included, which implies its absence. The same tree photographed in



A



B



C

▲ Nikon D3s, 24mm, 4 seconds @ f/3.5, ISO 200

Racetrack Playa, Death Valley, California, 2011.

This photograph was shot at 4:5 (A) and cropped afterward to both 1:1 (B) and 2:3 (C). Forget how much these aspect ratios allow into the frame—that can always be changed by moving around as you compose the image—but look instead at how the proportions of the frame change the weight of the elements and their balance and relationships within the frame. A good place to begin that study is with the appearance of the horizon and elements between the horizon and the top of the frame. Look, for example, at how the mountains and sky change in prominence as you move from 1:1 to 2:3. Subtle differences in this image, yes, but each implies something the other doesn't.

a 1:1 square or 4:5 would not create the same towering feeling. The orientation of the frame is part of this, but *how* towering that tree feels is in part due to the aspect ratio of the frame.

Second to how we read a frame in terms of its length is the proportions within the frame. The choice of a 4:5 aspect ratio over 2:3 allows us to frame elements with more width, and although this seems obvious, it's important to remember that this increased width will completely change the relationships in the frame, and therefore change the meaning of the photograph. A 4:5 ratio, for example, will allow an S-curve within a photograph that winds its way deeper into a vertically framed image, along a wider diagonal, than a vertical 2:3 ratio will allow. If you have an interest in further exploring aspect ratios, I can think of no better resource than my friend Bruce Percy's excellent ebook on the subject, which

you can find at www.brucepercy.co.uk/. Bruce discusses some of the challenges of aspect ratio and its effect on the form and meaning of our photographs. For now, in this book my purpose in briefly discussing it is to make you aware of the fact that aspect ratio is a choice—not merely something you *must* use because of 35mm convention—and that choice affects the way the image is read.

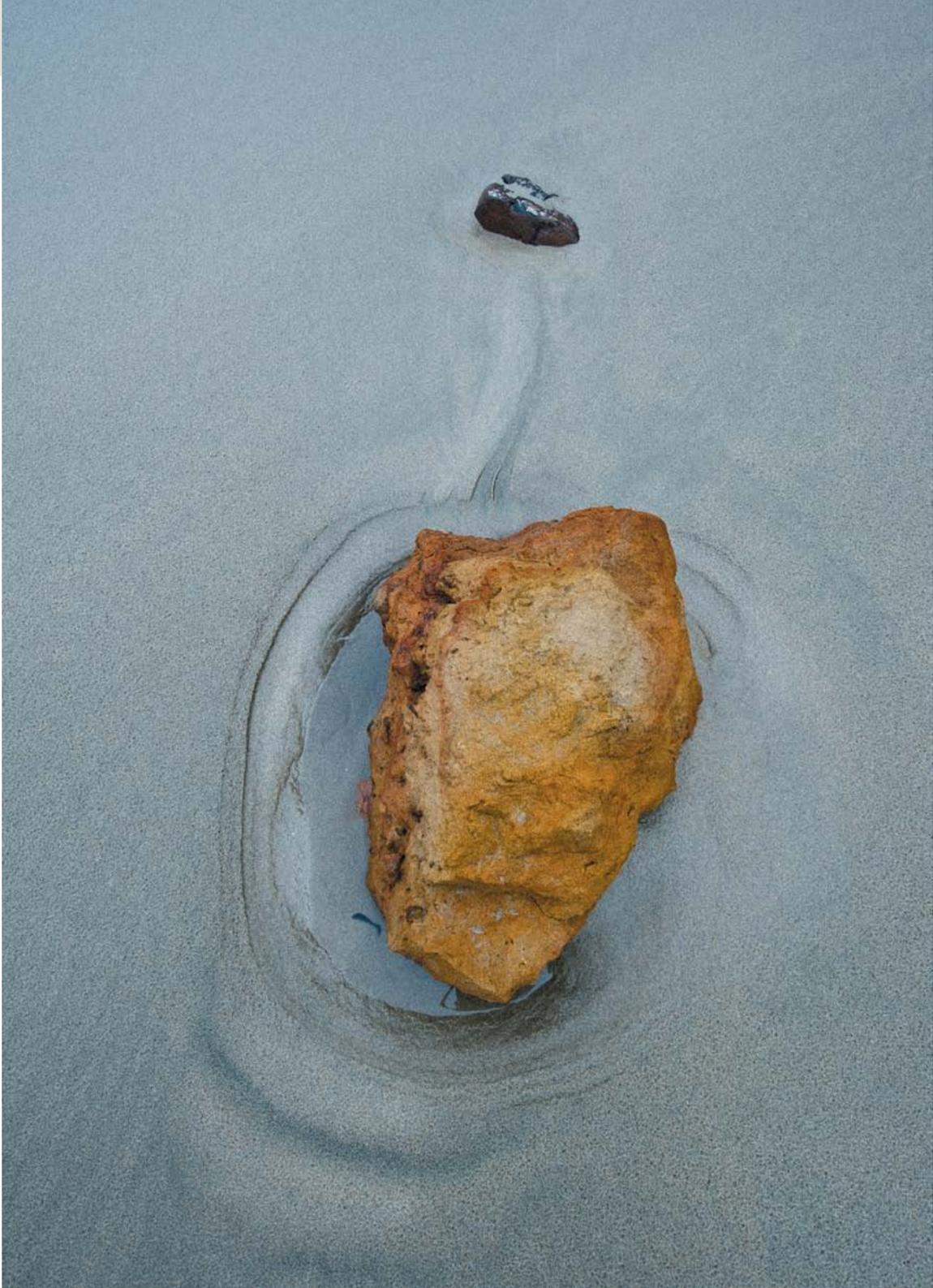
Being mindful of the way in which we want the image to be read, and therefore experienced, will help guide our decisions about the kind of frame we use.

Creative Exercise

Look at a dozen of your favorite photographs. They could be yours, they could be classics of the masters. Now do two things. First, simply describe the framing—the orientation, crop, and aspect ratio. Now speculate about what the frame itself contributes to the image. How would a vertical framing change the way the photograph works? Would a different crop or aspect ratio strengthen or weaken the image? Why does this particular set of decisions—the photographer's choice of orientation, crop, and aspect ratio—work with this image? The more mindful we are of this most basic set of decisions, the stronger our foundation as we move forward.

Placement

In a larger sense, the notion of placement often gets pigeonholed as composition, but composition is a much broader subject, and it's worth considering in pieces. Balance is one of those pieces, as are our choices of frame and crop, as well as implications of perspective, which we'll look at next. Placement is about where we put our elements within the frame. In fact, it is our choices regarding placement that lead to a balanced—or imbalanced—image. And it's our choice of framing that influences the decisions we make about where we place elements in the frame. So, like the distinction between Elements and Decisions, which I make purely to ease the teaching, this distinction too is connected and ultimately a little contrived. Composition is all much more organic than this sterile dissection suggests.



Gesture

First of all, to channel the esteemed Jay Maisel, everything has gesture. In fact, it was Maisel's breaking down the basic elements of a photograph to light, color, and gesture that got me thinking about what makes a photograph, and what might make a photograph good. Gesture isn't easy to explain, mostly because we're so accustomed to thinking of gesture as a human movement that it's hard to think of gesture as something intrinsic in an unmoving photograph, much less in a photograph lacking any human element. But it's gesture that brings an image to life; it points, it leads the eye, it gives the photograph motion and energy. In one sense, it's everything in the image that points, that says, "Look here." Instead of expanding on the idea of gesture too much here, we'll look more carefully at it as we walk through the photographs in the second half of the book. But I want to make a couple of observations that might inform how we perceive, or read, gesture in an image.

When I talk about implied motion, I do not mean a slower shutter speed that allows moving elements to blur. That's less an implication of movement than an illustration of it. By *motion*, I mean the way the elements work together in the frame to give it a sense of dynamism, often through balance or strong diagonal lines. Much of this has to do with the way in which we read photographs. The eye scans an image, moves back and forth. If the elements in the image slow the eye, trap it, or stop it entirely, it takes more energy to get the eye moving again—or it *feels* that way. On the other hand, if the placement of elements takes advantage of the momentum of the moving eye, and flows with it, the energy builds. The best I can do in explaining this is to use the metaphor of Judo or Aikido. Both martial arts use the energy of a moving opponent against that opponent rather than trying to stop it cold; the same feels true of our experience reading an image. If the photographer takes advantage of the momentum of my moving eye and guides it rather than stopping its flow, the experience feels more dynamic. This is one of the reasons we talk so much about the so-called rule of thirds, and why in more advanced discussions of composition we talk about the golden spiral, or golden ratio. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

◀ Nikon D3s, 20mm, 1/100
@ f/10, ISO 400
Oregon Coast, USA, 2011.



▲ Canon 5D, 23mm, 1/50 @ f/9, ISO 800

Varanasi, India, 2007.

The gesture in these two separate frames is different. It's been suggested that gesture isn't in the content of the image but in the composition, but what is composition if not an intentional arrangement of the content? Here the gesture in the first image comes from the entry of the leg, the pointing of the boat, and the glance of the dog.

Related to the idea of motion and how we read a photograph is the fact that, in the West, we read from left to right. Whether this translates to other cultures I don't know, but from the written word to graphic novels, to cinema, and into the still image, we generally read from left to right. As a result, our eyes enter the image at the top left and move right. This is why the primary diagonal is the stronger of the two possible extreme diagonals in the frame—the left-to-right and top-to-bottom directions of that diagonal have both the momentum of our eye and the force of visual gravity working for it. There's nothing to slow the movement of the eye. Going the other way takes more work—and we're still inclined to see the secondary diagonal as a line going from bottom left to top right, rather than having our eye go all the way to the other side of the frame and reading the image from right to left. We just don't seem to work that way. Understanding this as the way most people will read the image enables the photographer to place elements in the frame to work with this tendency, creating images with either more or less energy—or gesture. For most of us, a photograph of a car driving down a slope on the primary diagonal seems faster than the same image flipped horizontally, such that the car goes downhill on the secondary diagonal. Furthermore, if you wanted the car to drive *up* the hill, it would go up the hill faster if it went up from the bottom left and toward the top-right corner of the frame, in the direction the eye prefers to read the photograph, rather than having it moving up the secondary diagonal against the natural movement of the eye.

Not all gesture need be so dramatic. Gesture can be soft, following the lines of a woman's naked form or the contours of bubbles under river ice in winter.

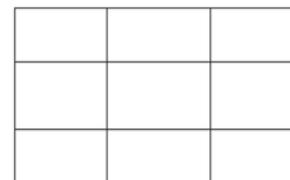
Gesture is the dark sweeping line made by a length of burnt driftwood on a light beach. It's the reaching arms of a child that form lines that direct our gaze to the top of the frame. It's the glance in a portrait, and the line of a face. Gesture is the *form* of the photograph, and it is a big part of how we create—and find—meaning in photographs.

Thirds

No discussion of composition is complete without a discussion of the so-called rule of thirds, but I think it's been given more attention and priority than it is due. That is to say, like many rules, we've followed it without so much as questioning it. Does every photograph benefit from an unwavering obedience to this so-called rule? Of course not. So the more interesting question is, "How can we understand and apply the rule of thirds in a way that leads to more expressive photographs, and not merely drop elements into a one-size-fits-all template?" Furthermore, is our usual understanding of thirds—one entirely concerned only with two dimensions—sufficient, or can it be expanded?

The rule of thirds states that if you divide the frame into three equal vertical columns and three equal horizontal rows, then placing elements along one of those lines or at one of the points where those lines intersect will make the photograph more interesting. The implication is that a horizon placed along a third will be more interesting than if it bisects the image across the middle. There's nothing wrong with this principle per se. It forces us to place key elements somewhere other than the center of the image, and for many beginning photographers that's a good first step. But it's no closer to making expressive photographs than if a painter is told, "Use more red. Red makes things more exciting."

The rule of thirds matters because, when used, it forces us to dynamically balance the elements in our frame. Placed in the center, the elements can be perfectly balanced, but they're static. They engage us less. But move those elements into thirds and we're forced to re-balance, to consider the visual mass of objects in the frame and balance them against each other. We're left with the greater possibility of tension and the energy that comes with the feeling of potential, or implied, movement. Our eyes, seeing one element on a third, scan the rest of the image to find enough mass there to balance it. Used correctly, it is much more engaging. But is it a rule? No. It's a principle to be used or ignored in service of expressing your vision.



► Canon 5D, 30mm, 1/500
@ f/10, ISO 200

Jamaica, 2010.

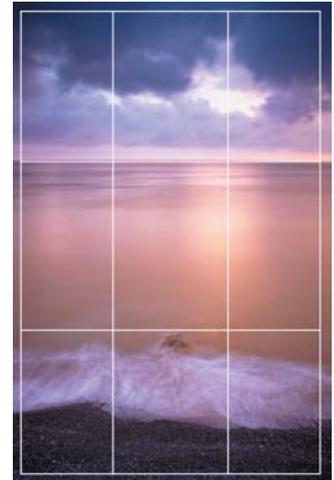
There are always choices to be made, and in this image I chose not to place the horizon on a third; it ends up roughly in the middle of the frame. Giving the sky and water equal weight works in this image, in part because of the way the clouds repeat the wave pattern, and I wanted to keep that. But the horse and rider do align with the vertical line on the left third of the frame, giving space on the right to balance them out and lend a sense of motion with the implication that they've come from that direction. Remember that the so-called rule of thirds is not a rule at all, but a principle to be adapted according to your tastes and your vision. I could have used the rule of thirds several ways here, but it was this one that resulted in a photograph expressing what I wanted.



The other thing for which the rule of thirds is helpful is implying a *visual hierarchy*. That is to say, you tell the reader that some elements in the photograph are more important than others. You can do this in two ways.

The first is by placing the most important elements at the points where the thirds meet, which is where the eye seems to be naturally drawn. By implication, that element—though never to the exclusion of other considerations—will draw the eye a little more. In doing so, you are telling the reader that this element is more important than others. Using the thirds is only one way to do this, but it's helpful, especially if used in conjunction with other principles of visual pull.

The second is simply a matter of how much of the frame you fill. If you make a vertically framed photograph of the rolling ocean under the boiling sky of an inbound storm and place the horizon at the center, you tell the reader that both elements are equally important. You, in fact, make the horizon the main focus. You're telling the reader, in the absence of other clues, that the meeting place of ocean and sky is the subject of the image. Now place the horizon on the bottom third of the image. The framing forces you to include more sky and less ocean, cueing the reader to read the sky as much more important than the ocean. Simply because there is *more* of it, the image is *more about* the sky than the ocean. The balance potentially changes, too. If the sky is dark, the change in composition gives the sky greater visual weight and makes the image a little more top-heavy. It's still balanced, but that implied top-heaviness gives a dynamic balance to the photograph.



◀ Canon 5D Mk II, 32mm,
6 seconds @ f/22, ISO 50

Italy, 2010.

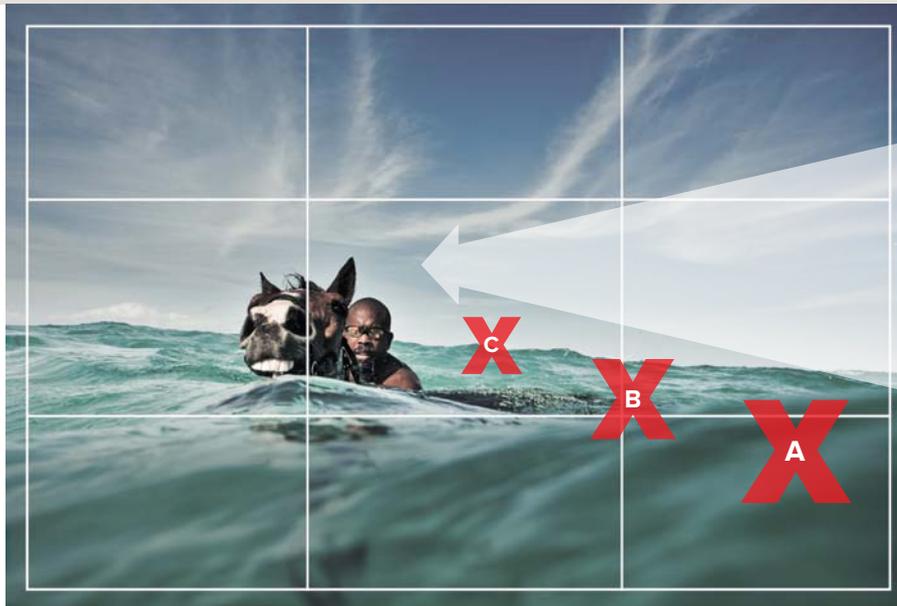
Placing the horizon so high within the frame—at the topmost third—gives the ocean greater prominence than the sky. And though I could have placed it lower—the sky was fantastically moody—I would have lost the meeting of wave on shore, which effectively divides this photograph into one third for each element here: earth, water, sky. It also allows the dark beach and shore break to echo the brooding sky. Changing the composition by raising the camera would have made the sky more important than I wanted it to be.

Now consider a horizontally framed image. If you place a solitary person in the center, the eye has little exploration to do within the frame. The balance is static. The visual hierarchy is clear, and there's not much left to do but enjoy the photograph and move on to the next image. Moving that person to the left third of the frame gives you room to suggest a relationship between this person and his background; in fact, it forces you to balance that person against other elements, creating that dynamic balance. The eye will read the image from left to right, and it will move on from the person on the left third toward the right edge of the frame, encountering something else that diverts the eye, forcing it to explore. And if you've added enough depth and placed the elements accordingly, the eye can be forced into a spiral—never leaving the frame—and have a longer and more engaging experience. We'll get to a discussion of the spiral soon, but I want to expand our discussion of thirds into the third dimension—the depth of the photograph—which it's seldom associated with.

The usual discussion of thirds is communicated as a rule, and I think it's time we stopped talking in terms of rules and discussed principles instead. Furthermore, it's almost always discussed—as I have in the preceding paragraphs—as it relates only to the height and width of the frame. But the principle of thirds can as easily be applied to the perceived depth of the image, and that application makes for images with not only greater dynamic balance or tension, but greater depth and balance and tension in that perceived dimension as well. I say *perceived* because it's still a two-dimensional photograph, but we can create the illusion of depth using perspective, and within that illusion the principle of thirds can contribute to more compelling compositions. Consider the image of the man and horse in the water (top of next page).

I've overlaid a traditional thirds grid to show you the rough thirds on the horizontal and vertical planes. But it's the red Xs that indicate, roughly, the *depth* of the image. The Xs get smaller to roughly correspond to the effect of perspective, with A, B, and C indicating the fore-, mid-, and background. What I'm trying to illustrate is their position roughly on thirds within the depth of the photograph. If thinking of it as a cube (rather than a grid) helps, great. If merely thinking of it as considering placing elements on thirds *into* the image rather than only across or up and down, then that might help, too. Again, the goal isn't compliance, but adding in depth to deepen the experience of the reader.

As far as the so-called rule of thirds, what was once such an easy “rule” is getting more complex, but it's not so difficult if you take a moment to consider that



all we're doing is re-mapping our thinking to apply the principle of thirds to the depth of the image, which we read into photographs because of perspective. If the balance and tension along the thirds and at intersections of thirds is a helpful place to start in our compositions on one plane, it's a good starting point as we place things into the depth of the frame as well.

While this “cube of thirds” isn't the usual way of looking at things, the notion of foreground, midground, and background is common enough; we're now giving that notion some context. If the advice to “make sure you have a foreground, midground and background” is as unhelpful to you as it always has been to me, this cube of thirds shows us, as a starting place, where balance and tension can be found. It reminds us that the depth of the canvas matters as much as the other two dimensions, and it can push us to make decisions about the elements in the frame that we might not have otherwise considered. And it's here that knowing your optics is so helpful. If you want to place elements in relation to each other and within this imagined cube in a certain way, then the compressing effect of longer lenses can help with this, as can the expanding effect of wider lenses, depending how deep your cube (the actual scene) is, and where, from front to back, you want these elements to be placed.

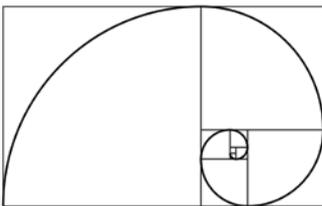
Placing the foreground (**A**), midground (**B**), and background (**C**) all roughly on thirds creates a depth to the photograph that wouldn't be there without the arc of the foreground wave or the background line of the horizon, either of which

could have been left out by a simple repositioning of my camera and a change in the angle of view. Including both gives the image that foreground, midground, and background, but does so in a meaningful way—not to follow a rule, but because we know it creates greater depth and, therefore, a greater feeling of inclusion. The use of thirds allows me to accomplish all that while still maintaining—or creating—a dynamic balance and movement within the image. If my goal in this image is to create a more inclusive experience for the reader of this photograph—and I think the experience of the reader is one of the reasons we create photographs to begin with—then these decisions matter a great deal.

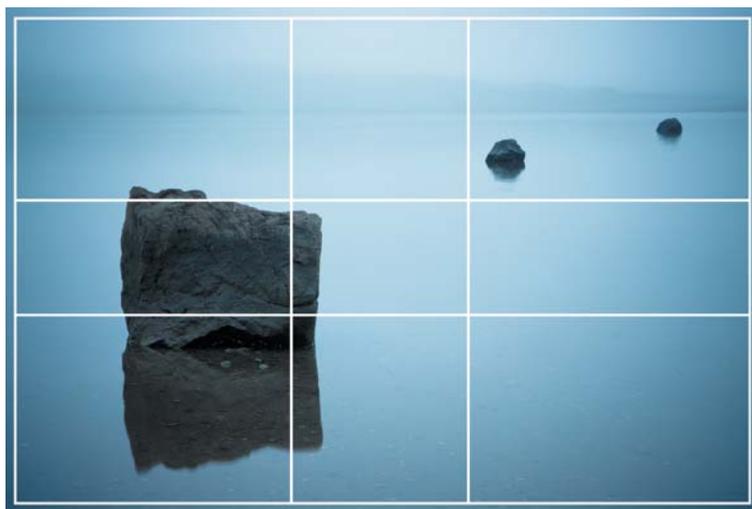
The Golden Ratio and Golden Spiral

Although the rule of thirds is the compositional aid every photographer learns, it is in fact a simplification or variation of something called the golden ratio. Based on some interesting math, the golden ratio and the golden spiral appear significantly in the natural world and have influenced Western art for centuries, though I'm not sure it really has the importance it's often afforded. Without going into a long explanation of the background or math behind the golden ratio (and anyone who knows me knows I am the last person in the world to comment on mathematics), let's look at the ratio itself and why it can be significant in suggesting the placement of elements within our photographs.

The golden ratio is graphically represented as a rectangle. Where a square would represent a symmetrical ratio of 1:1, the golden ratio is 1:1.618. Notice how the golden ratio grid is similar to, but deviates from, the rule of thirds. Same concept, different ratios, and therefore a different balance created through its use. Whereas the rule of thirds encourages a certain asymmetry, it is not nearly as elegant, or subtle, as the golden ratio. I didn't compose the image of the rocks in the water (top of next page) thinking about conforming to the golden ratio, but about tension and balance. It is, however, interesting to see how well the elements fit into that grid.



The golden spiral, or shell, is based on the same ratio; it's an asymmetric spiral that starts with a slow, elegant arc and spirals tighter and tighter into itself according to the golden ratio, also called *phi* or Fibonacci's ratio. In the illustration of the spiral here, a series of squares has been laid on top of the spiral to make the ratios clearer. Each of these squares is roughly 0.618 the size of the next largest square. We'll leave the math at that; what's important is that

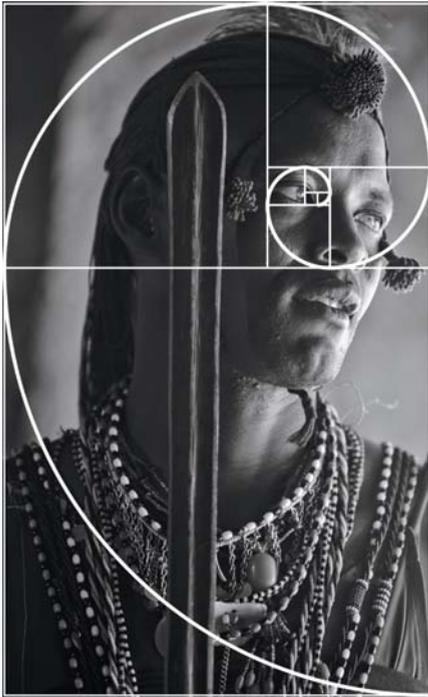


◀ Canon 1Ds Mk III, 62mm, 3.2 seconds
@ f/22, ISO 100
Iceland, 2010.

the spiral is not symmetrical. Why does this matter? To the artist, it's about the aesthetics, and there seems to be something about asymmetry—specifically the golden spiral—that fascinates us. It's been considered aesthetically pleasing for over two thousand years. Also known as the divine proportion, this spiral—like the rule of thirds—forces us to reconsider the placement of elements in the photograph, pushes us to rebalance things more dynamically, and in some cases, puts the eye on a spiraling path that never leads outside the frame.

I've read articles that want to make more of the golden ratio and the golden spiral than I think is helpful. I'm sure there are pages and pages of reasons why the divine proportion matters, but as a photographer without much attraction to academia, what matters to me is the aesthetic. Using the golden ratio or the rule of thirds helps me consider the balance of my images. It's a starting point. A reminder. It's not much more than that. It is not a recipe or a template. But it's another helpful visual aid as we explore the placement of elements in the frame.

Every image is different; slavishly following these guides can just as easily lead to poorly balanced and cookie-cutter photographs as it can to beautiful and expressive photographs. Still, imagining the golden spiral overlaid on my own work has sometimes reminded me that the eye follows a path, and where that path is asymmetrical and inward spiraling, the photographer has more potential to create greater engagement and visual exploration for the reader, as well as adding a greater sense of depth and dynamic balance.



▲ Nikon D3s, 200mm, 1/40
@ f/2.8, ISO 800

Maasai Mara, Kenya, 2011.

Not one to make more of the golden mean or spiral than is pragmatic for me, I do find the shape and proportion—even roughly—to be helpful in describing ways in which our eyes move through some images. In the case of the alternate crop of this portrait, which we'll look at more later, the path of the eye is cleanly described by the elegant spiral from the eye, around the face, around the arc of the head, and down to the beads, before returning to the eye.

Neither the rule of thirds nor the golden spiral is magic; they're both simply guides that, used well, encourage us to create stronger compositions. Nor are the rules infallible or inflexible. Where elements have such strong visual mass that they significantly overpower other elements, they may call for a different placement in the frame—perhaps not on the left third but on the left fifth of the frame, allowing for more negative space or room between elements. As more of us become used to the language of photography, and as placing elements on the thirds becomes the de facto placement, placing an element at the center or much closer to the edges of the frame will be read differently. Putting an element, for example, on the leftmost sixth of the frame instead of the third can force us to make that element smaller, allowing its new proportion in the frame to make it feel smaller, creating a photograph that expresses something very different about the subject, exaggerating how we feel about a subject's smallness or the greater vastness of space surrounding that subject. Reconsidering these so-called rules and asking what they contribute to our photographs—why they've been used so effectively, or intentionally ignored, to great visual effect—can lead

us to more mindful and expressive compositions. The question is not whether these tools “work.” The question is, what does the use of these tools or guides do for the look of, and the reader's experience of, the photograph? What do they force, or allow, in terms of the balance, tension, scale, and the pull exerted on the eye, the awareness of which then permits us to choose them or ignore them based on our intent for the photograph?

Relationship

Where we place things in relation to the frame is important, but no more important than where we place elements in relation to each other. If you take it for granted that everything within the frame means something, then that meaning comes not only from that element's presence in the frame, and where it is located, but also from its relationship to the other elements. When, for example, we press the shutter and flatten three dimensions into two, perspective forces us to see larger objects in the frame as closer than distant objects, which appear smaller. This creates depth but it also creates implications that will be



▲ Canon 20D, 17mm, 1/60 @ f/10, ISO 800

Vancouver, BC, Canada, 2005.

My point of view (POV) in this shot—straight on toward the cooks and staff at one of my favorite restaurants—allows the relationships between the characters to play most fully to the reader. One is standing and looking elsewhere; the others, all sitting, relate to each other in different ways according to where they are looking and their body language. Had I shot this from other angles, the relationships between the cast in this image, with each other and the frame itself, would have changed. Straight on, they are all equal and each look or gesture holds equal weight, allowing us to read each piece of the frame equally, while questioning the odd man out. Why is he standing? Late to the party?

read by the viewer, an implication that the larger object is more important or more powerful than the smaller object. When you swing the camera farther to one side, you widen the apparent distance between those same objects, implying something about distance. Doing the opposite—swinging the camera in an arc that places the two elements into a near-straight line with the camera—will make the distance seem less exaggerated, allowing the photographer to imply connections or intimacy, or make comparisons. Elements relate to each other, and those relationships say certain things. Our framing is not merely a matter of “I just liked it better that way,” but of intentionally communicating not only what we saw, but *how* we saw it.

Point of View, Picture Plane, and Perspective

I suspect if we were to gather all the millions upon millions of images out there in one place like Flickr, a full 80 percent of them would be created from standing-up, eye-level height, and with a standard lens. In my first eBook, *Ten*, I suggested we could change the perspective of the reader by first changing ours. I wish I'd pushed harder on this one. Our POV changes the relationship of *every* element in the frame, and it's not only our own body position that I'm talking about—moving from standing to kneeling, for example—but the angle of the camera as well.

When we move our bodies, and the camera with it, or we angle the camera up or down, or left or right, we change perspective, which in turn changes the way elements relate; it changes the way lines move within the frame, and even how dynamic those lines are. Remember, the moment you press the shutter you collapse a world that we perceive in three dimensions into two, and the photograph created is not buildings, trees, or people; it's lines and tones, all in a spatial relationship to each other, and to the frame. Pressing that shutter forever freezes everything in the frame; your *only* chance to get it right is to be mindful as you compose, to learn to see those lines and tones and the way they relate. The good news is, you can see them—you just have to pay attention.

It's this lack of mindfulness that is responsible for trees and poles coming out of people's heads. What we saw in the viewfinder was perceived as three dimensions, and our minds saw the distance between the foreground subject (person) and the background (tree). When we flatten it in a photograph, our eyes cease



◀ Nikon D3s, 18mm, 20 seconds @ f/13, ISO 200

▼ Canon 1Ds Mk III, 45mm, 20 seconds @ f/8, ISO 200

Vernazza, Italy, 2010.

At the extremes it's easier to see the dramatic difference POV can make. Both of these were made in Vernazza, Italy—one from low on a rock at the waterline of the harbor, the other from a promontory overlooking the town, almost directly above where the first was made, though with a couple hundred feet separating the two.



“Although we can’t move most things in a scene, we can move them in relation to each other by simply moving our own position.”

to be fooled, resulting in the merging of person and tree. If only we’d been more aware of that flattening, and had moved to the left or the right, shifting perspective and putting the elements in less distracting places before they were forever flattened.

If you skipped the primer on perspective in fourth-grade art class, here are the basics, explained as best I can without simply copying and pasting from someone with a clearer explanation. Objects close to us appear large; with distance, those objects look smaller and smaller until they disappear on the horizon at the point we call the *vanishing point*. Parallel lines do the same; they recede into the distance and meet at the vanishing point. Because of this, shapes too, will take on a distorted appearance. Circles appear as ellipses, squares as rhomboids. That’s part of it, and in art class we had to draw illustrations with lots of lines like the ones I’ve overlaid on the image here (opposite page, bottom) to show the teacher that we understood. Furthermore, as we move, and as our relationship to the vanishing point moves, so too does our relationship to every other object between us and that point. And the relationship between those elements themselves changes. This is a fancy way of saying that although we can’t move most things in a scene, we can move them in relation to each other by simply moving our own position.

A change in your position, and therefore in the perspective in your photograph, can turn a normal horizontal line into a great diagonal, changing the feel of the image and the direction in which the eye moves. It can place subjects closer together or further apart, changing not only the balance of the image—and therefore the way it feels—but also the way those subjects are seen to relate to each other, which changes the message of the image. Changing your POV can change the way we feel about a subject, or it can eliminate a distracting background. The changes can be significant, but they don’t happen automatically. We need to be mindful of them. Where is our background in relation to the foreground? What lines are formed, and how is the image balanced as a result? If we shot from a lying-down POV, would we see less of the ground and get better lines?

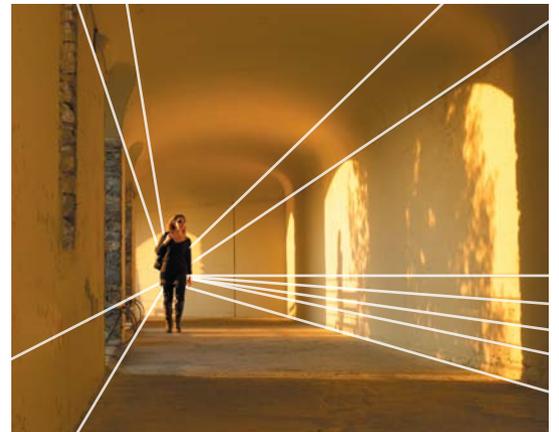
When it comes to learning to read photographs, it’s just a matter of reverse-engineering an image. Initially, this is easier to practice with existing photographs because the flattening has already occurred, and that makes it a great



▲ Nikon D3s, 50mm, 1/60 @ f/10, ISO 400

Liguria, Italy, 2011.

I've overlaid lines along the obvious lines in this photograph to show you the perspective. Notice two things: first, that the parallel horizontal lines all lead to one vanishing point; and second, that due to my own position and the position of the model, the vanishing point is immediately behind her, leading eyes powerfully through the image toward her. Had I moved my shooting position, the lines would all still lead to the same vanishing point in the reality of the scene, but that point would be at a different place relative to the frame, depending on how I composed the photograph.



starting point. When you look at a photograph, as we soon will, ask yourself how the position of the photographer contributed to the image. Where was the photographer, what's their POV, and what does that do to the lines and elements in the image? How would that change if the photographer had been differently situated, perhaps 90 degrees to the left or right, or standing on a chair or taller building? Sure, this is all "what ifs" but it's this ability to think critically and even hypothetically about existing photographs that gets us used to this kind of thinking when our own eye is behind the viewfinder.

Our mind is one of those photographic tools that gets too little attention. I recently read a comment on the Internet by a photographer who said that if he had to think about every photograph he made, he'd give up photography. Thank God songwriters, playwrights, architects, and choreographers don't approach their art with such a ridiculous mind-set. My friend Yves Perreault recently called it *photo-parreseux*—French for "lazy photographer." Indeed.

Adding the illusion of depth is in part a matter of perspective. We're used to seeing two-dimensional representations of the three-dimensional world, and we understand that as objects recede into the background they get smaller. It's one of the conventions of the language we use in photography, and it can be used to create the feeling of depth. But that's not the only way. We've looked at how the use of light can create a sense of depth or dimension, but there is also the way we arrange foreground elements in relation to background elements, and unless either the foreground or background can be physically moved, the way we do that is primarily through our choice of POV. This can be exaggerated optically as well, so our choice of lens contributes to this, but as the effect is one of exaggerating the relationship—rather than changing it—we'll concentrate on POV here.

We've already discussed the key ways in which our own POV affects the relationships of elements within the frame, and how the laws of visual perspective guide that. *Picture plane* is the formal term for the angle at which we permanently view the scene within the photograph. The picture plane determines the perspective and the way in which foreground and background relate. You can shoot straight on, so your picture plane is parallel or perpendicular to your subject, or you can shoot obliquely, from one of innumerable angles. What matters are the lines you produce, how the elements line up, and what mood you create.

Creative Exercise

Next time you're out with your camera, ask yourself how many distinct photographs you can create, all of them with a different picture plane. Practically, this means you move around your scene, and within it. Get low and angle the camera up, creating a dramatic picture plane that emphasizes the size of towering objects, or get as close to the wall as you can and shoot along it, creating a dramatic vanishing point. If you've got a distinct foreground, walk around it, get close, back up, change focal lengths, and keep an eye on where the background elements go in relationship to the foreground. Then look more critically and ask yourself how the resulting relationships of the foreground and background change the message of the photograph. How will one viewer read these photographs differently? What will she feel? What meaning will she infer from the changes? How will the eye move differently within the frame?

Balance

The way we frame an image and manipulate the elements within that frame creates balance, or a lack of balance, within the photograph. That balance (or its lack) will affect the way the reader experiences and reads that image. This is one of the reasons we've used the well-worn so-called rule of thirds so much that we've forgotten *why* we use it. The problem, of course, is that perfect placement of a boring subject won't make the image any more interesting. What the rule of thirds *can* do is create a different sense of balance.

We have a natural inclination to balance our frames, and the easiest way to do that as a beginning photographer is to place the main subject matter in the center of the frame. This does balance the frame, but it's static. Moving the subject to one of the imaginary lines a third of the way into the frame also generally balances the frame—depending on what else is in there, and how much pull it exerts on our eyes—but it is now a more *dynamic* balance. A dynamic balance engages our eyes, creates tension—in some cases, the feeling of potential movement—and allows room in the image for other elements and an implied relationship between them.