Composition: The Essence of Good Photography

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Washington Photo Safari

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What is the difference between a snapshot and a photograph?

A **snapshot i**s a picture taken without any thought or planning. The photographer aims the camera in the general direction of the subject, and pushes the button.

A **photograph** is taken by a person who makes a plan before pushing the button, a person who asks: "Why am I taking the picture? What am I trying to show? What is the point I am trying to make with this photo? "
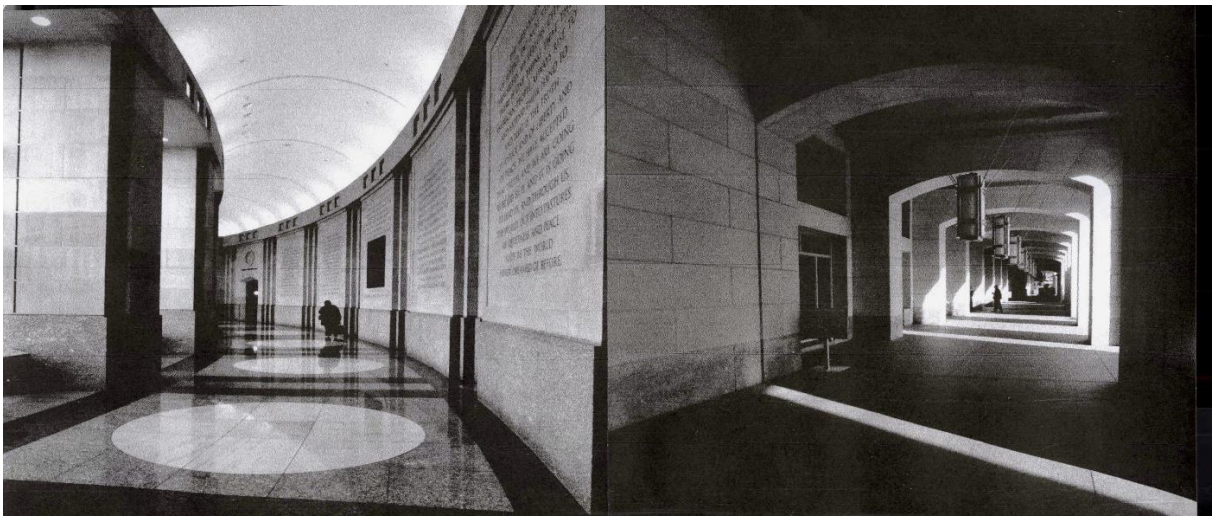
(capturing that "decisive moment" when all composition elements line up nicely!)

That person then goes on to draw on experience and training to incorporate all the good elements of composition: rule of thirds, leading lines, framing, placement of a foreground element, framing, filling the frame with the subject, getting low and close, shooting at the decisive moment, symmetry and patterns, blurring or sharpening the background, stopping or blurring action, or taking a picture that tells a story.

All of which causes the photographer's companion –perhaps a snapshot shooter – to utter: "Honey! Why is it taking you so LONG to take the picture?"

So let's examine all the elements that make up good photographic composition

 **Rule of Thirds** :Avoid placing your subject right in the middle of the picture. Instead, place it in the lower right upper right lower left or upper left corner of a tic-tac-toe grid. The subject should be looking into, walking into, driving into, not out of, the picture

***A foreground element*.**: Place an object, a person, a tree, a statue or any other object in the left or right foreground of the picture to give it depth and that three-dimensional quality called "repoussoir" by French artists, or "pushing the background back."

Framing the subject: Use tree branches, archways, doorways, or any other object to place a frame around the subject, making it more interesting, just as a woman's uses hair to frame her face to enhance her beauty.

Leading lines. Find straight lines that lead the viewer's eye right up into the subject.

Shooting at the decisive moment. Wait for a person, bicycle, car, or other moving object to appear at just the right point in your composition, breaking up an otherwise ordinary background.

Turn your subject sideways. People should always have their bodies turned sideways and look over their shoulder at the camera. Most people pictures should be taken from the shoulders up, unless the person's clothing is part of the subject Buildings, like people, should be photographed from a corner, not straight on.

Get low and close. The most dramatic pictures, especially those of people and animals, are done from a low and closed ankle. For example, statues are made to look much taller and more impressive when shot from the feet up.

Look for red. If you see a person dressed in a red article of clothing, follow that person and place them in the picture at some point. The red color draws the viewer's eye and gives an interest point to the composition.

__Use aperture priority__. To blur the background, go for the largest aperture, such as F 1.4 or F 1.8. The closer your lens is to your subject, the more of the background will be blurred. To sharpen your subject, use the smallest aperture, such as F-16 or F-22 for greater depth of field. Telephoto and macro lenses have very limited depth of field, and wide-angle lenses have extremely wide depth of field of focus. Use the lens that is appropriate for the picture you want to take (Remember that at F2 you get 2 people in focus, at F22 you get 22 people in focus.)

__Use Shutter priority__. To stop action, use a fast shutter speed such as 1/ 250th or 1/500th of a second, or faster, depending upon the speed of the object. To blur action, use a slow shutter speed, such as 1/4 or 1/8th of a second. To make action disappear, use a tripod and an extremely slow shutter speed such as 2 seconds, 3 seconds, or even 10 seconds, depending upon the speed of the objects that are moving through the picture. To achieve a ghosting effect, while using a tripod have your subject move quickly out of the frame at about 2 seconds out of a 4 second exposure

__Fill the frame__. Photographs are much more interesting when the subject takes up most of the frame. The difference between snapshots and photographs are that snapshots are generally taken from a distance too far away from the subject.

__Use of light.__ The best daytime photographs are taken in the **golden hou**r, which is the hour after the sun comes up, or the hour before the sun goes down. The light is softer, more golden, the shadows are longer, and the pictures- with that "National Geographic Magazine" - look are much more pleasing. When the sun is behind a person's head, use a flash or reflector to put light on the person's face.

Use the Sun. Buildings look better in sun. This means you should shoot east-facing buildings in the morning, west facing buildings in the afternoon, south-facing buildings all day long. North-facing buildings are generally always in shade. (For **_nighttime pictures,_** use a tripod, put the camera on manual mode, set an aperture of f8 or f11, and play with the shutter speed until you get the desired exposure

Civil Twilight shooting. The best time to do night time shooting is in the period that begins about 20 minutes after Sunset known as Civil Twilight, when the sky is still deep blue, not black. This is especially useful for buildings, monuments and structures that are illuminated at night, because it is now just dark enough for those lights to show up

Straight verticals. When doing buildings be sure to keep the vertical sides of the building perfectly parallel to the vertical edges of your viewfinder for a more professional look of architecture that avoids the converging vertical appearance known as "keystoning.". This is easily done by using a wide angle lens held vertically and, instead of leaning back, moving back until all the building sides remain perfectly straight.

Get accurate exposure Check your image on the digital camera screen to make sure that your image is not too dark or too light, adjusting the exposure compensation dial or by varying the shutter speed on Manual mode. On cloudy, gray days, point your camera at the green grass or trees, hold the Exposure Lock button, reframe, and shoot.

Check your white balance Make sure that the color of the subject and its background in your digital screen exactly matches what you see with your naked eyes. Adjust the white balance settings accordingly, or use the Kelvin Scale if your camera is so equipped to get the most accurate color while taking the picture, instead of relying on your memory to correct the color later in your computer in Lightroom or Photoshop

Telling a story. What is the story you wish to tell with this picture? Make sure that what you see on your digital camera screen accurately portrays the story or message you are trying to tell with this particular picture. If it does not, take the picture again! Rinse, lather, repeat!