

Composing Good Photographs

CS 178, Spring 2011



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“There are no rules for good photographs,
there are only good photographs.”

- Ansel Adams

Outline

- ◆ the pictorial elements of photography
 - line and form
 - pattern and texture
 - tone and color
- ◆ pictorial design,
i.e. the design in the 2D picture frame
 - symmetry and balance
 - framing
 - common compositions
- ◆ things we won't talk about today
 - situation, storyline, viewpoint, field of view, focus, lighting, exposure, color balance, post-processing

Learning good composition

- ◆ there are no rules
 - there are only tools and heuristics
- ◆ like describing wine with words, they don't mean much
 - they merely give us a framework for thinking about issues
- ◆ the best way to learn is to take lots of pictures
 - think about the issues as you take them
 - critique your photographs, and have others critique them
- ◆ look at good photographs by others
 - most useful if you've also tried the same thing yourself

In response to one student's clever question about how I would summarize this lecture if I had to do so while standing on one foot, I might say that I hope to convey the message that great photographs are seldom accidents. Good photographers think about pictorial design. You should too.

Lines as a pictorial element



Ansel Adams,
Aspens, 1958

Arrangement of lines



(Freeman Patterson)

Lines as a decorative element



(Howard@photodelusions.wordpress.com)

Lines that lead your eye to the subject



(London)

Hiromu Kira, *The Thinker*, 1930

Lines that lead your eye to the subject



- the lines don't need to be man-made, or smooth

(Bryan Peterson)



Raphael,
Galatea, 1513

(Gardner)

Form - lines with meaning



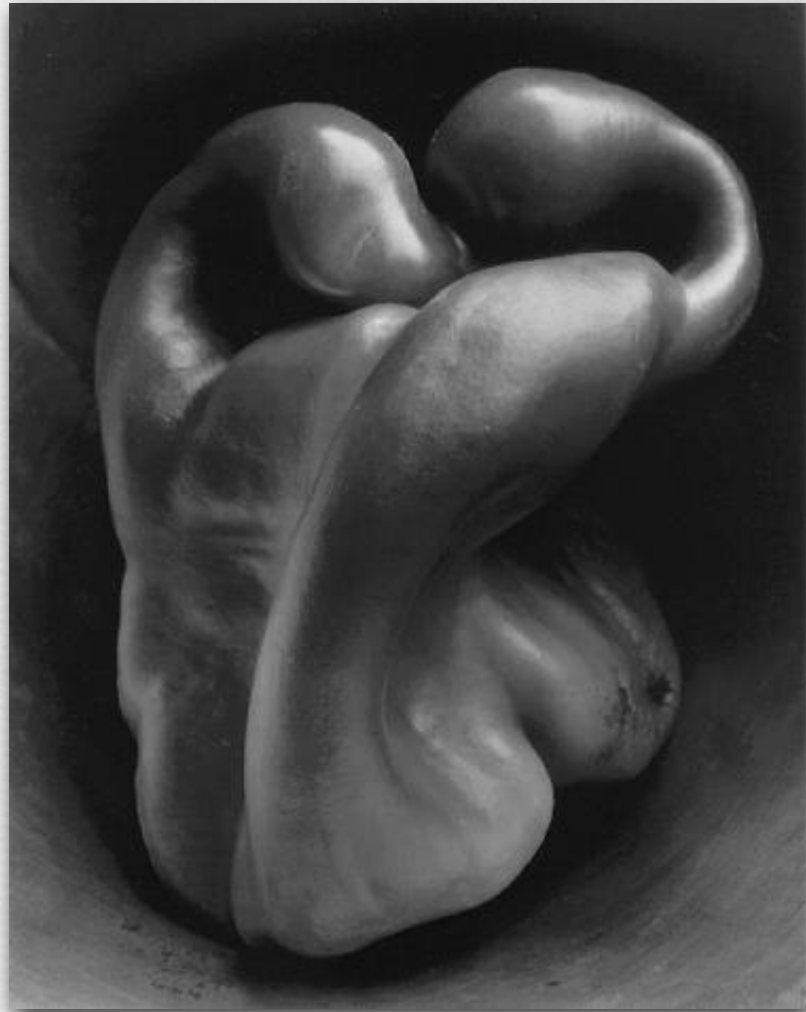
(Bryan Peterson)

first shot



second shot

Form - lines with meaning



Edward Weston, Pepper No. 30, 1930



Georgia O'Keeffe,
Grey Line, 1923

Shape - readily identifiable form



- backlighting draws attention to shape

(Bryan Peterson)

Shape - readily identifiable form



Pattern - repeated forms



(Bryan Peterson)

first shot



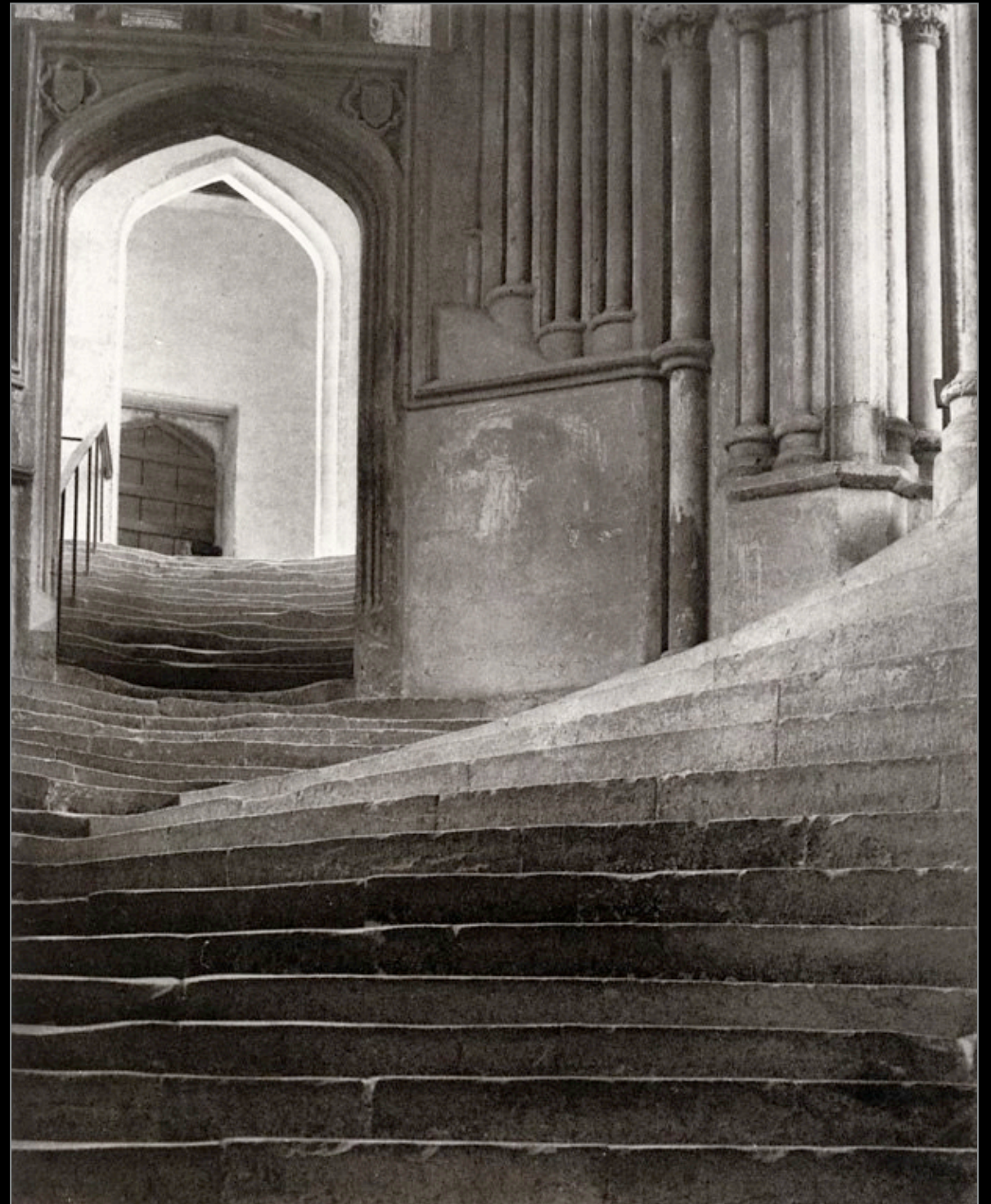
second shot

Pattern - repeated forms



Abhaneri Stepwell,
Rajasthan, India





Frederick Evans,
The Sea of Steps -
Wells Cathedral, 1903

Rhythm - a looser kind of pattern

(Freeman Paterson)





Auguste Renoir, *Le Moulin de la Galette*, 1876

Texture: fine patterns

- early product of f/64 club
- sharp focus, smooth papers
- reaction against Pictorialists

Ansel Adams,
Boards and
Thistles, 1932

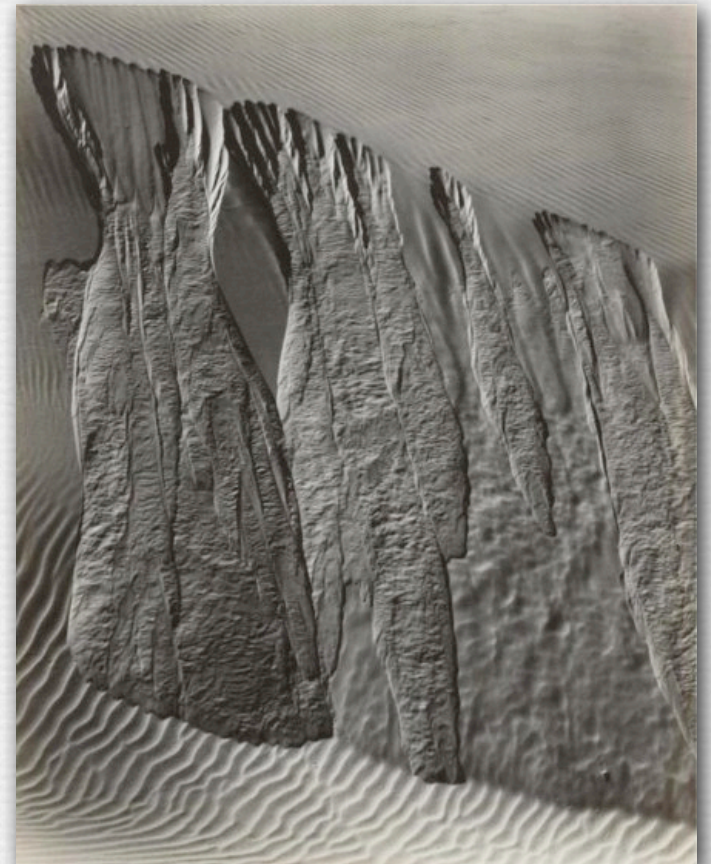


Texture



Edward Weston,
Dunes, Oceano, 1936

- co-founder of f/64 club with Ansel Adams





Frank Lloyd Wright, Fallingwater, 1934



(photographs by Galen Frysinger)



Frank Lloyd Wright, Fallingwater, 1934

Lighting as an aid to pictorial design

(London)



Fluor Garduño,
Basket of Light, Guatemala,
1989



Yousuf Karsh,
Winston Churchill, 1941



Rembrandt van Rijn,
Self Portrait, 1660



Yousuf Karsh,
Winston Churchill, 1941

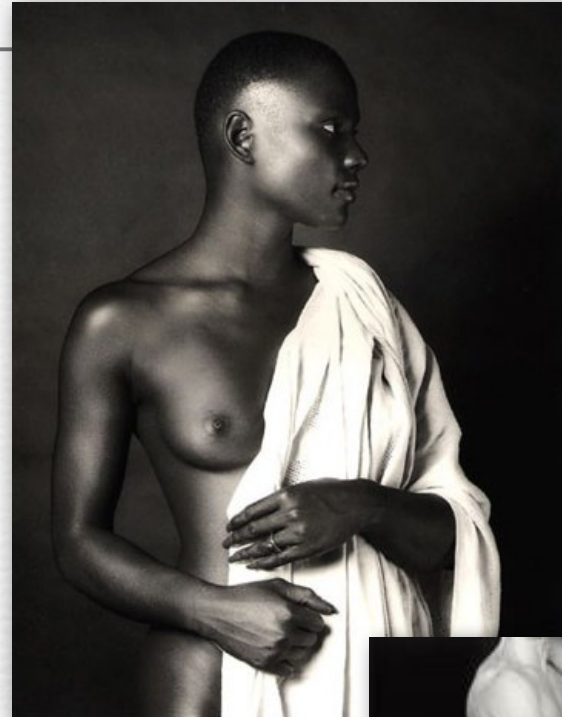


Rembrandt van Rijn,
Portrait of Nicolaes Ruts, 1631

Tone as a pictorial element



Robert Mapplethorpe



Color as a pictorial element

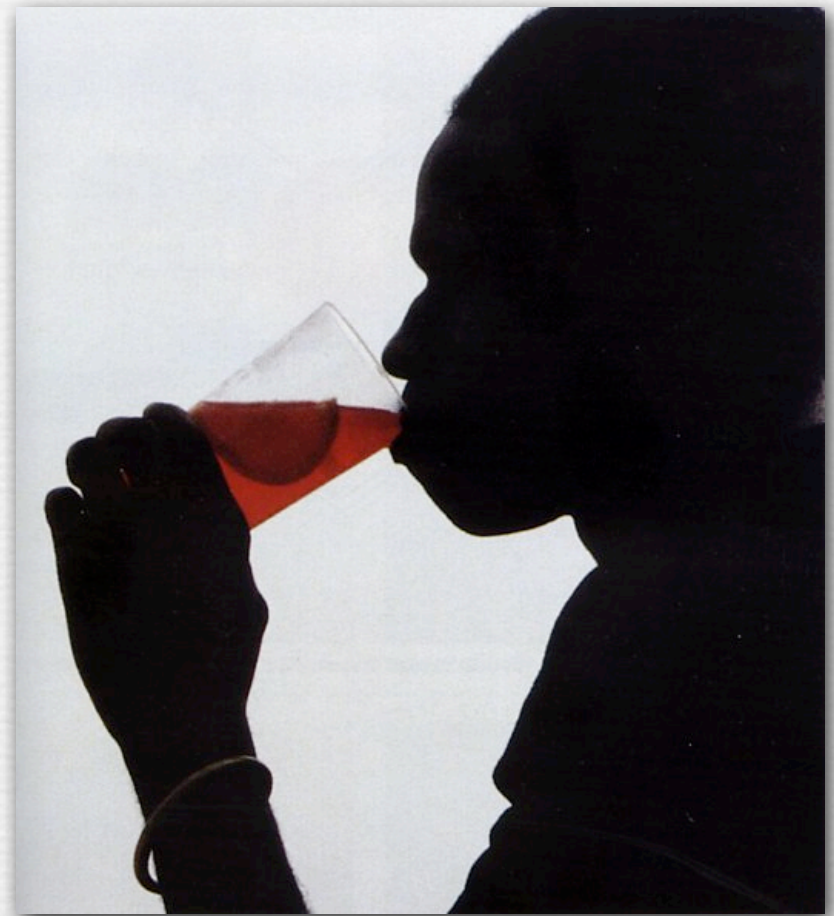


(London)

warm



cool



(Hedgecoe)

pictorial

Color as an accent

(Hedgecoe)



Encircled by color

(Hedgecoe)



Giovanni Bellini, Altarpiece of
S. Zaccaria, Venice, 1505



Color as rhythmic accent

(Hedgecoe)





Peter Paul Rubens, The Judgement of Paris, 1636

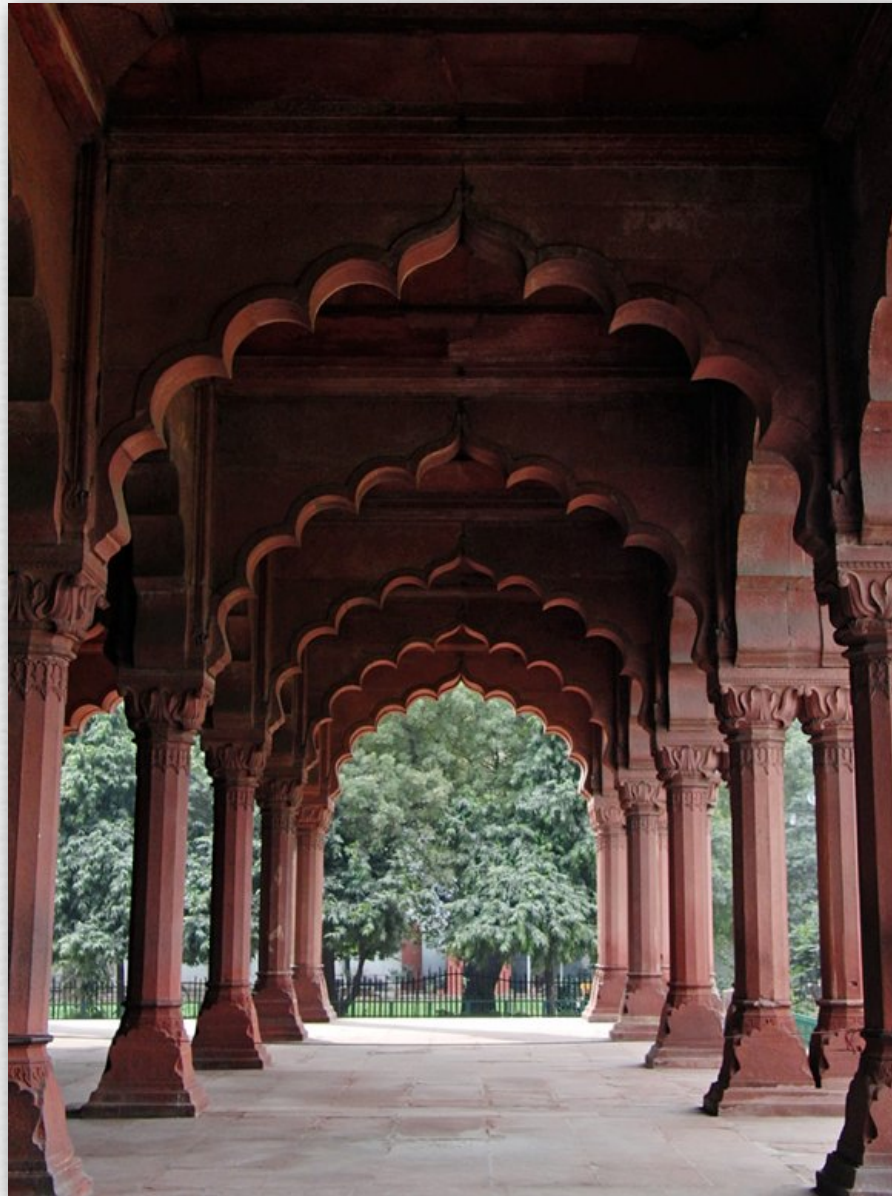
Diego Velázquez,
Las Meninas, 1656



Pictorial design

- ◆ symmetry and balance
- ◆ framing
- ◆ common compositions

Symmetry



Arcade in Red Fort,
Delhi, 2008

Symmetry

(Marc Levoy)



Place du Carrousel,
Paris, 2009

Asymmetry



Montmartre, 2009



(Marc Levoy)

Rajasthan, 2008

- off-center placement of main subject underscores the asymmetry of the architecture

Balance

- symmetrical background + dynamic, unbalanced foreground



(Freeman Paterson)



Jacque-Louis David, Oath of the Horatii, 1784

Framing

(Marc Levoy)



More dynamic framing

(London)

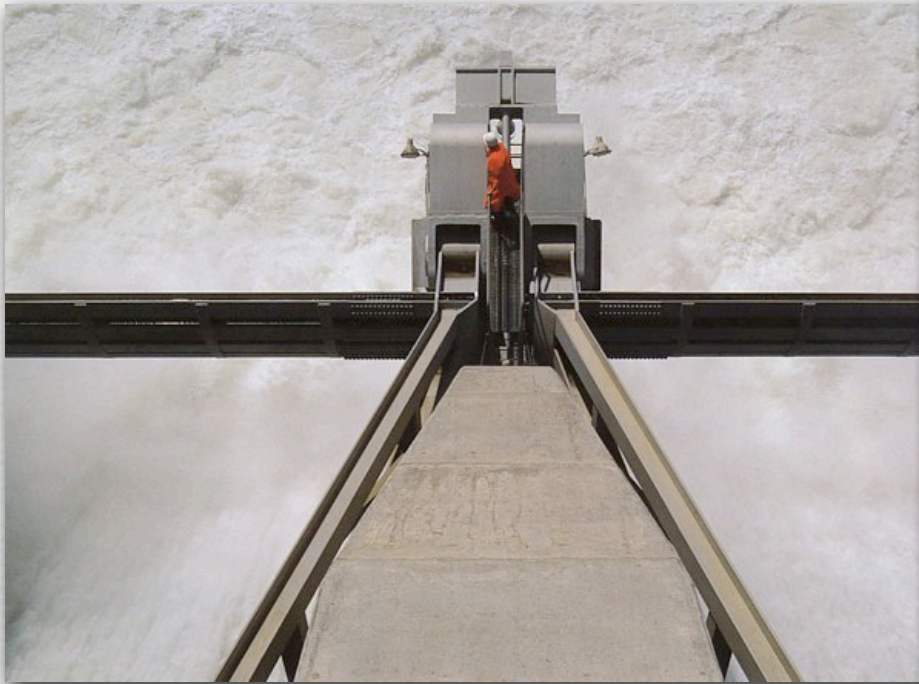
- shadow edges complete the frame
- slashing diagonals create tension

Dennis Stock,
James Dean,
1955



The picture frame

(Bryan Peterson)



first shot



second shot



Raphael, School of Athens, 1511

Common compositions

- ◆ upright equilateral triangle
 - calm, stability, power
- ◆ diagonal
 - tension, discord, dynamism
- ◆ S-curve
 - motion, sensuality
 - eye flow
- ◆ rule of thirds

In response to an insightful question from a student about whether this lecture would have a different message, or whether this list of compositional ideas would be different, if I illustrated the lecture with examples from modern art rather than pre-20th century art, I conjecture that modern art has contributed additional ideas, but not banished the ones on this list. Later in the course I'll talk about 20th century photography, interleaved with examples of modern art. Let's see if my conjecture proves right.



Raphael, *Madonna with the Goldfinch*, 1506



Titian, *Madonna of the Pesaro Family*, 1526



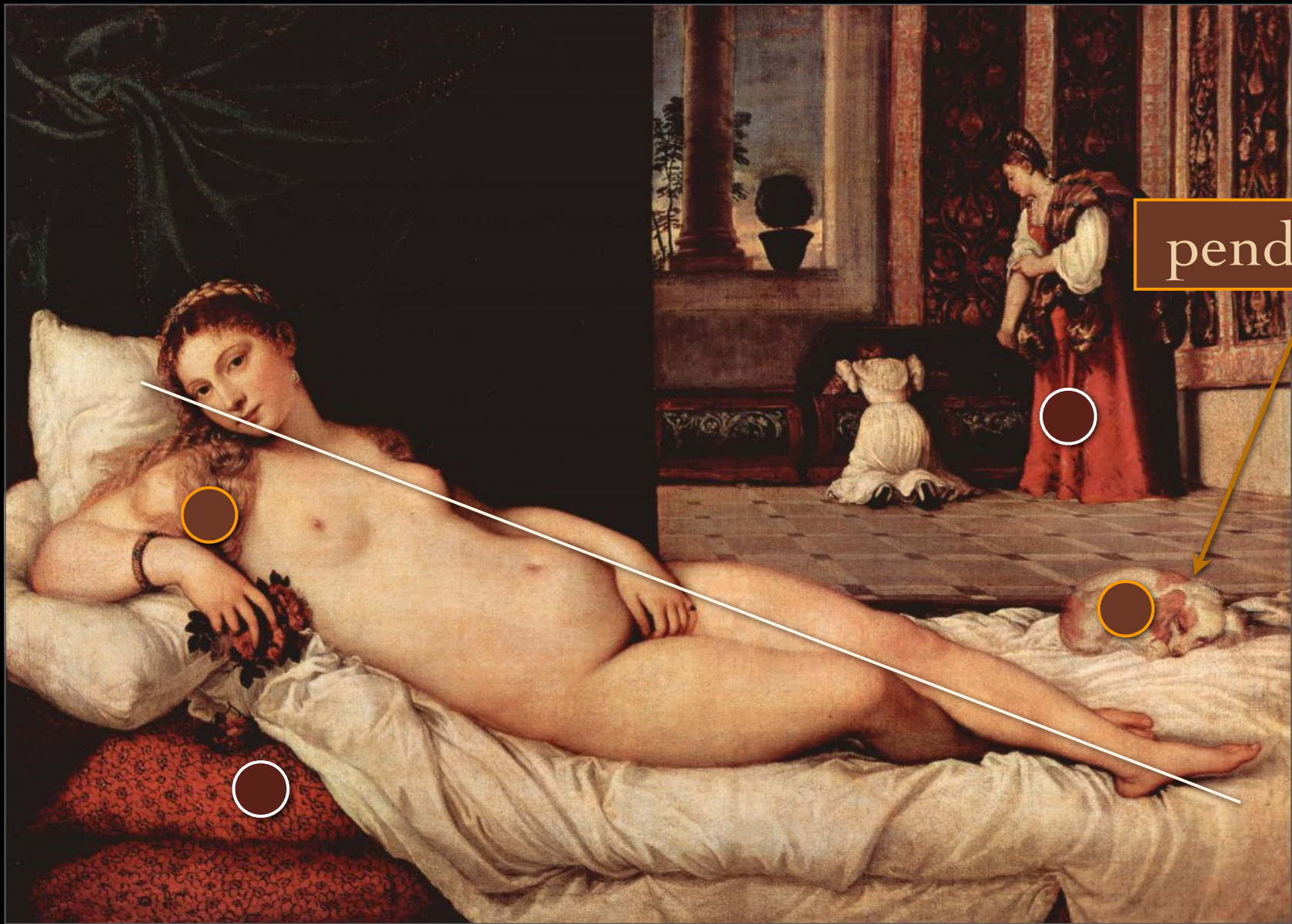
Raphael, *Madonna with the Goldfinch*, 1506

Titian, *Madonna of the Pesaro Family*, 1526





Titian, Venus of Urbino, 1538



pendant

Titian, Venus of Urbino, 1538

Photographic examples



Edward Weston, Charis Wilson Nude, 1936

Photographic examples

- diagonal leading to her eye
- eye and shoulder use rule of thirds
- stems create frame within a frame
- partially hidden face creates mystery

Jimmy Sin

http://www.pbase.com/aloha_lavina/librodo_workshop_malaysia

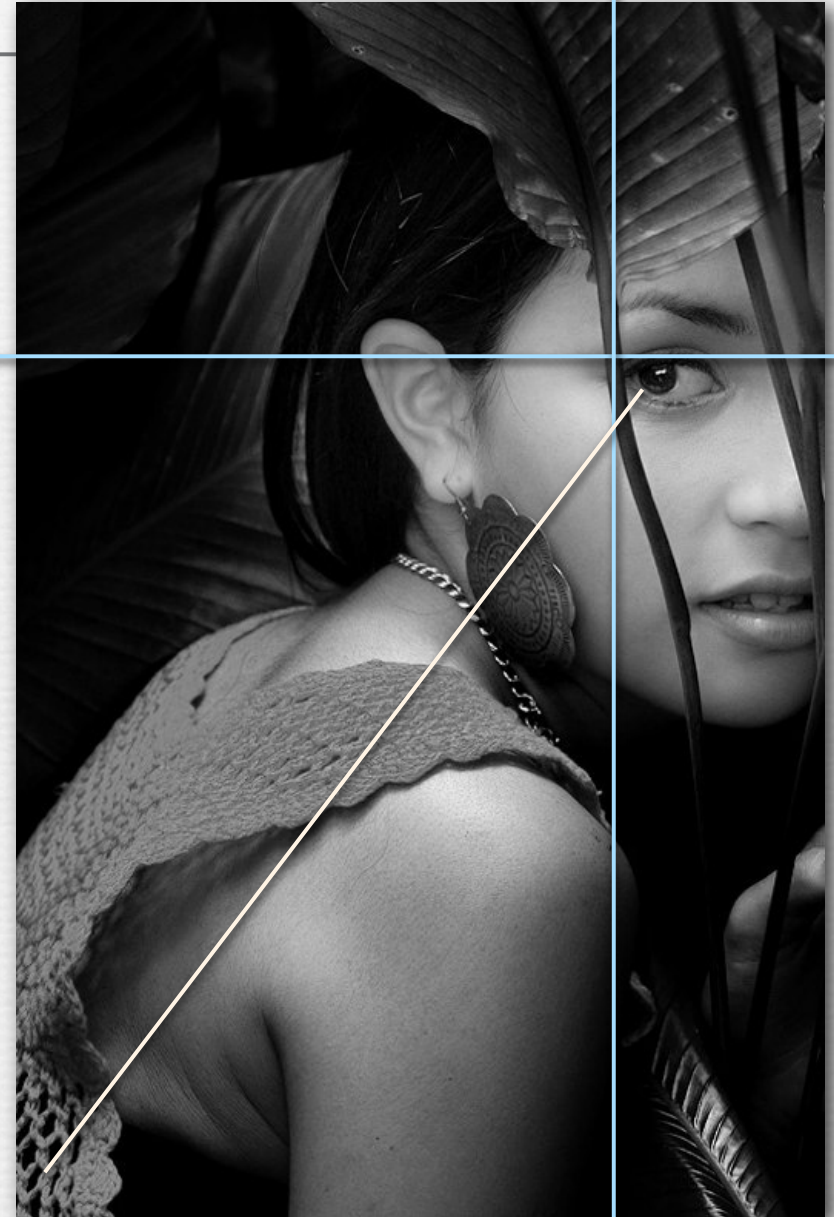


Photographic examples

- diagonal leading to her eye
- eye and shoulder use rule of thirds
- stems create frame within a frame
- partially hidden face creates mystery

Jimmy Sin

http://www.pbase.com/aloha_lavina/librodo_workshop_malaysia



S-curve

large collection of articles
about photographic composition



(photoinf.com)



S-curve

Ansel Adams,
Tetons and
Snake River,
1942



Pictorial design



(John Shappell)



(Samuel Schulenburg)

St. Teresa's Church,
Bodega, California



(Jay Bergeson - converted to B&W)

Pictorial design



(John Shappell)

Ansel Adams,
1953



Alfred Hitchcock, The Birds (1963)



Potter's Schoolhouse and
St. Teresa's Church, Bodega



Parting thoughts (from Fredo Durand)

- ◆ simplify your picture
 - avoid cluttered backgrounds



- reposition yourself

Parting thoughts

- ◆ simplify your picture
 - avoid cluttered backgrounds



(Marc Levoy)

- use a shallow depth of field

Parting thoughts

- ◆ simplify your picture
 - avoid cluttered backgrounds



- fix it in Photoshop

Parting thoughts

- ◆ simplify your picture
 - avoid cluttered backgrounds



- or leave it there!

Parting thoughts

- ◆ simplify your picture
 - avoid cluttered backgrounds
 - get close to your subject



Parting thoughts

- ◆ simplify your picture
 - avoid cluttered backgrounds
 - get close to your subject
 - fill the frame



(Bryan Peterson)

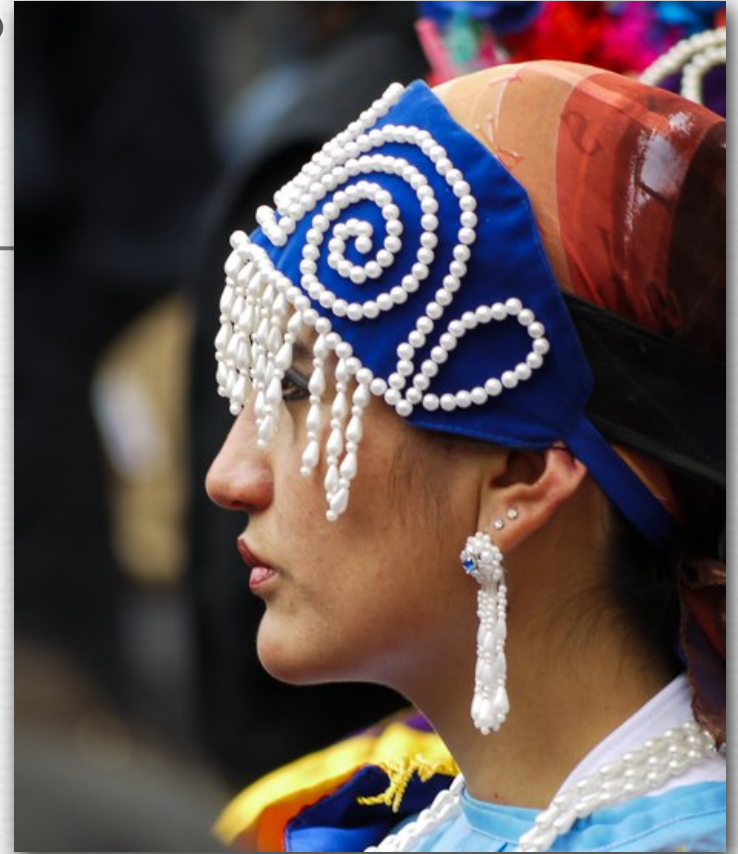


© Marc Levoy

(Marc Levoy)

Parting thoughts

- ◆ simplify your picture
 - avoid cluttered backgrounds
 - get close to your subject
 - fill the frame
- ◆ avoid compositional errors
 - don't center objects needlessly



(John Shaw)

Parting thoughts

- ◆ simplify your picture
 - avoid cluttered backgrounds
 - get close to your subject
 - fill the frame
- ◆ avoid compositional errors
 - don't center objects needlessly
 - keep the horizontal level, or make it wildly unlevel



Parting thoughts

- ◆ simplify your picture
 - avoid cluttered backgrounds
 - get close to your subject
 - fill the frame
- ◆ avoid compositional errors
 - don't center objects needlessly
 - keep the horizontal level, or make it wildly unlevel
 - avoid accidental alignments



Parting thoughts

- ◆ simplify your picture
 - avoid cluttered backgrounds
 - get close to your subject
 - fill the frame
- ◆ avoid compositional errors
 - don't center objects
 - keep the horizontal level
 - avoid accidental alignments
 - sweep the frame to check for trouble
 - cropped element, distracting object, non-parallel line



(Fredo Durand)

Fredo Durand (MIT)

<http://people.csail.mit.edu/fredo/Photos/Links/>



Fredo Durand (MIT)

- ◆ <http://people.csail.mit.edu/fredo/Photos/Favorites/>
- ◆ <http://people.csail.mit.edu/fredo/Photos/Links/>

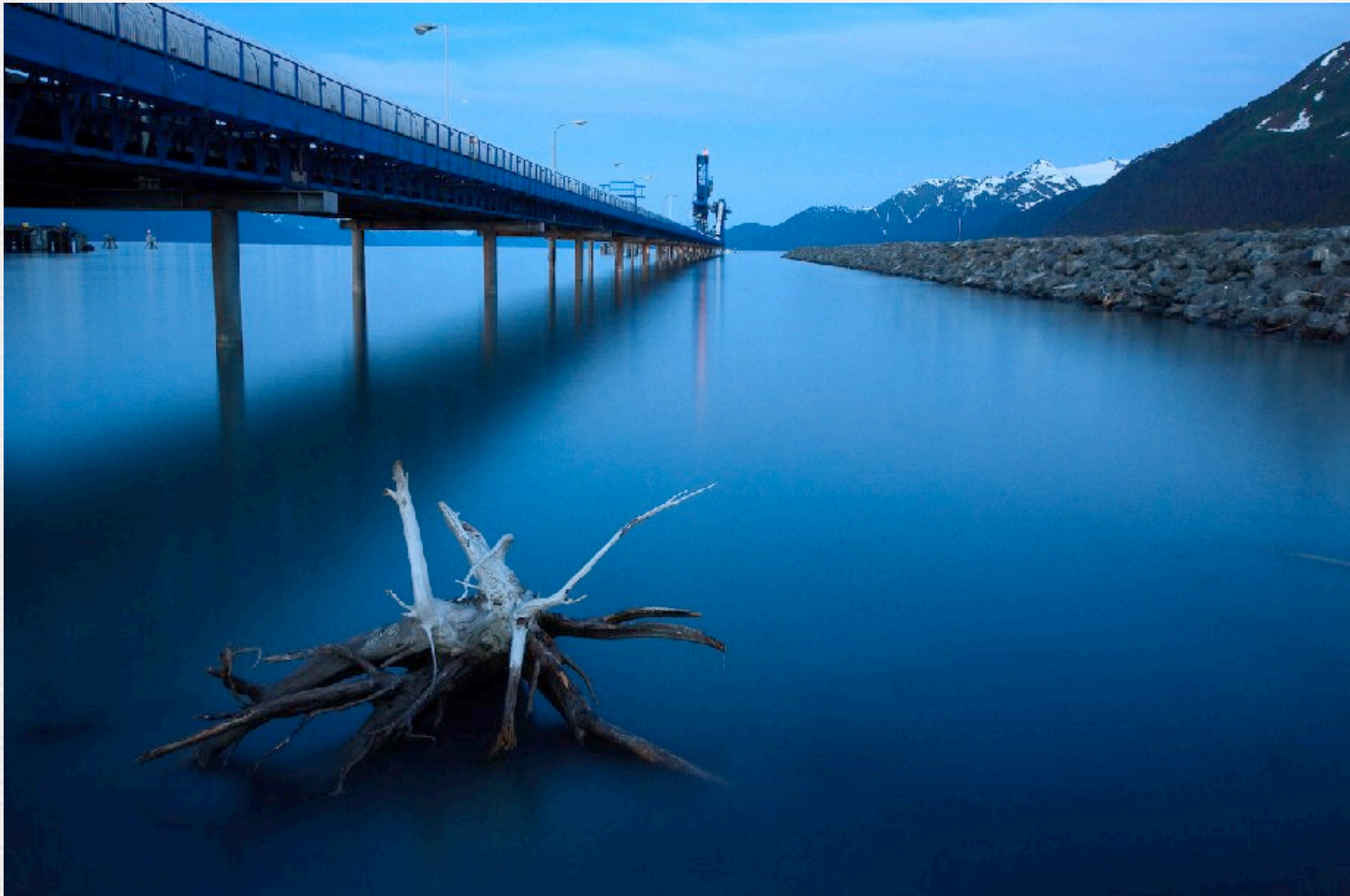


Fredo Durand

Fredo Durand (MIT)



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Fredo Durand (MIT)

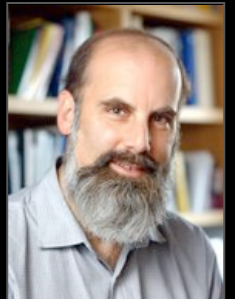


- ◆ <http://people.csail.mit.edu/fredo/Photos/Favorites/>
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Matthew Scott (Stanford Dev Biology),
Snowy Egret, Palo Alto Baylands





Susan McConnell (Stanford Biology),
Bull Elephant Seals, Año Nuevo State Park



Slide credits

◆ Fredo Durand

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