



Volume V, Issue 1, Winter 2007

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• **Artistic Considerations for Better Photos**

Mark Sincevich, Executive Director of the Digital Photography Institute

Have you ever wondered how some serious consumers or photography enthusiasts have the 'eye' or the ability to properly frame a photograph with great colors? With practice everyone has the ability to improve their photographs. It's a matter of discipline. Are you willing to take lots of photographs and then ask yourself this one question, "How can I improve this image?" There are many ways to improve your photographs from an artistic perspective. I will focus on four: simple shapes, the decisive moment, golden hours and the rule of thirds.

Simple Shapes

I went jogging one day past an art gallery that had displays of photography when it hit me. The photographs that are simple are the most powerful. When a photographer focuses your attention on the simple shapes of the triangle, square and circle, you have less to distract your eye. The result is that you can more easily 'get it' or get the powerful message that the photographer is trying to convey. One of the most widely viewed photographs of the 20th Century is Steve McCurry's 1985 cover photograph for National Geographic Magazine. It is of a young Afghan girl with green eyes whose name is Sharbat Gula. Sharbat's plain green background and her tattered red headscarf suggest movement in a counter-clockwise direction around her face. It's the circle of the scarf, the triangle that makes up her nose and the circles that are those piercing green eyes that convey simplicity and power.

How can you get more simple shapes in your photographs? For starters, I always bring a camera with me whenever I travel. Even when I am hired for a photography assignment I always take extra photographs for my personal archive. This 'in front of and behind the lens' practice led me to develop a system of perspective based on simplicity. Simplicity leads to more powerful communications. While you don't literally need to have these simple shapes in your photographs, you need to keep thinking how you can have them represented in your images.

The Decisive Moment

The master of 'the decisive moment' was an extremely successful photographer named Henri Cartier-Bresson. He captured some of the most memorable black and white street scenes of Paris and used his patience and creativity to allow for that 'decisive' moment to occur. One of his most famous black and white photographs shows a man leaping over a large puddle of water in mid-air with the man's reflection caught in the puddle below.

How do you master the decisive moment? It's becoming increasingly harder to do in our fast-paced society and nearly impossible if you are on a group tour. Often times Henri would wait for hours at a staircase or at a very interesting intersection just waiting for the right person to pass by or for a memorable event to take place. He practiced 'luck.' Louis Pasteur defines luck as 'when opportunity and preparation meet.' I had a bit of this luck when I took a photograph of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.

I visited the first time to understand where the sun would set and how it would affect the bridge. My first visit was during the harsh light of mid-day and the bridge looked unflattering in its cold gray color. I returned two days later with only about 20 minutes to set up my tripod. I framed the bridge in a landscape view and waited. Every photographer there left, and I was beginning to wonder if I was missing something. Finally I saw an ocean tanker ready to sail under the bridge and complete not only a decisive moment but also complete a triangle in the photograph.

Golden Hours

The main reason I made the initial visit to the Golden Gate Bridge was to pay attention to the light and to understand its relation to my subject. This is a critical step if you want to capture images and people using the best possible light.

The Rule of Thirds

I had occasion to photograph the U.S. Capitol building at dawn from

adjacent rooftops. In some frames I photographed the Capitol slightly left of center and other times I took the image slightly to the right. I wasn't having a hard time putting the image directly in the center of the frame; rather, I wanted to practice what the Ancient Greeks called, 'the rule of thirds.' They said that the most beautiful works of art were those that could be divided into thirds. Earlier in the week I visited the opposite side of the Capitol to take photographs at sunset next to the Botanical Gardens and framed the building in the center, but I put trees to the left and to the right to complete the rule of thirds.

The rule of thirds isn't limited to images horizontally or vertically. It can also be used diagonally or even within the photograph as in foreground, mid-ground and background. You can also extend the rule of thirds to fifths. This will come in very handy the next time you take photographs of people. It's easy if you have three or five people in a photograph, but what happens if you have two? Create an imaginary third person and put that 'extra' person either to the right or the left of the other two people. The result will be a more balanced photograph and one that is much more interesting.

Mark Sincevich is the Executive Director of the Digital Photography Institute (DPI), a world-class professional photographer and the author of Snap: the ultimate guide to digital photography for the consumer. He regularly speaks about photography and related subjects and is the founder of Staash Press. He will be presenting a pre-conference workshop at the Connect 2007 Conference.

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