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Photo Composition

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Techniques Used to Improve Photos

Photography is the art of capturing an image with a camera to produce satisfying artwork. There are several elements that go into a well-composed photograph. While some people have a natural eye for composition, it is a skill that can be learned with observation and lots of practice. Digital photography makes this trial and error method of learning much less expensive.

The following topics covered in this fact sheet can be used to improve photos.

- Simplicity
- Orientation
- Distance from Subject
- Rule of Thirds
- Silhouettes
- Subject Framing

Since photography is not guided by strict rules there may be instances where these guidelines must be broken in order to achieve the desired artistic effect.

Simplicity

A photograph should tell a story. Foreground and background clutter distract from the story of the photograph, unless clutter is part of the story. A simple photograph that doesn't distract from the subject is more visually appealing than one with too many details and disorder around it. The background can be blurred by changing the aperture setting of your camera, or the photographer can change

position in relation to the subject so the background is more desirable.

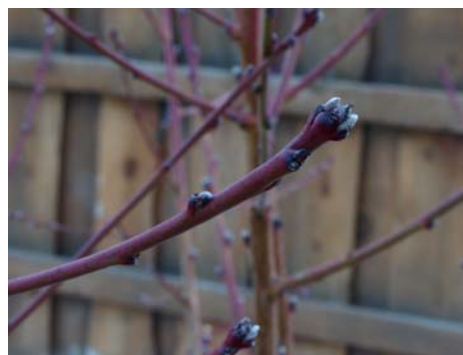
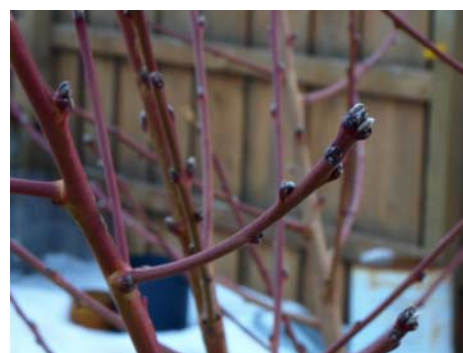


Figure 1. The above photos show how moving around the subject can help to reduce some of the background "noise", but there is still a lot to distract from the subject. The aperture in these photos is f/22.



Figure 2. These two photos are the same angles as the above pictures but the aperture has been changed to f/5.6. Changing the aperture can help to almost eliminate the distraction of the background.

Orientation

Camera orientation can be used to emphasize certain elements of the subject. When taking a picture of a tall, skinny subject the camera should be turned to a vertical axis. This is also true of most portrait photographs. If the subject is a group photo, or low structure, then a horizontal orientation is usually best. Some of the photos in this sheet demonstrate how the background and subject can be more appealing if they are taken with the camera rotated 90° to a vertical orientation.



Figure 3. These photos were taken of the same subject on the same day, but they tell different stories. The camera orientation also changes the focal point.

Distance from Subject

While most digital photographs can be easily blown up to a fairly large size before becoming pixelated, it is a good practice to get as close as possible to the subject for the desired picture. It is always easier to shrink a picture than it is to crop to a small portion of the picture and blow it up to a large size. However, when taking full-body photographs of people or animals, be careful to not cut off the feet or head in the picture.



Figure 4. This picture cuts off the legs of this 4-H project (which is an important part of the story).



Figure 5. This picture tells the story of the boy and his project but also includes the stock show.



Figure 6. This picture has been cropped to focus on the boy and his successful project.



Figure 7. In this picture the closeness of the photo adds to its intimacy and appeal.

Rule of Thirds

The rule of thirds is something that will improve the aesthetics of most pictures. In many cases it even has the suggestion of movement. When you divide the picture into thirds, horizontally and vertically, the subject should be placed where the lines intersect. This will be 1/3 the distance from the bottom or top and from the left or right sides. When looking at a picture your eye will go more easily to those intersecting points. The following diagram illustrates this principle.

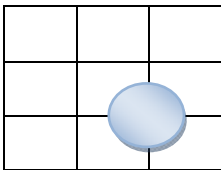


Figure 8. The subject is not directly in the center; it is 1/3 of the distance away from the bottom and right.

Silhouettes

Silhouettes can enhance the composition of a photo by creating appealing visual effects. Silhouettes are created by taking the picture from the shaded side

of the subject. A silhouette can be used to contrast portions of a photo such as the palm tree next to a moon at dusk. Creating silhouettes by contrasting shadows and light can enhance the composition of photo.



Figure 9. The dark silhouette of this palm tree has enhanced the appeal of this photo. It also follows the rule of thirds.

Another method used to enhance a photo is to darken the background. Artificially creating a shadow behind an object can make the object stand out and make the subject more noticeable. In order to do this a barrier is placed between the sun or other light source and the background. The shadow does not cover the subject, it simply shades the background, bringing greater notice to the subject.



Figure 10 A ball cap was placed behind these small desert flowers. The sun rays reflect on the flowers and the background is shaded to enhance the composition.

Subject Framing

Another concept used to make photographs more aesthetically pleasing is the “framing” of a subject. Taking a picture of something with a border around it can make it look interesting and change the dynamics of a picture and just make the overall appeal much better. This is done by shooting a subject through an artificial boundary such as an arch, a frame, or some other structure. Sometimes just the suggestion of an internal frame is enough.



Figure 11. The internal framing makes these pictures a little more unique.

Summary

Digital Cameras have become the preferred method of photography for most professionals and amateurs. While the technology used to record and edit the photo have drastically changed, the principles of good photography remains the same. Good composition is essential to quality photographs. Any deviation from these basic concepts makes it difficult to have an appealing photograph. The best method of becoming a better photographer is to practice and experiment with your camera.

References

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2008. *Coolpix P80 User's Manual*, Nikon Corporation. Tokyo, Japan.

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