

Landscape photography: composition

Composition – structured thinking

- Com-position = putting together
- How do I put the visual elements together in order to express what I see and feel?
- Expression pre-supposes an audience : Who is the spectator of my picture?
 - Me
 - My family and friends
 - Public: Commerce, magazine, competition
- How to make my picture legible?
 - At the multiple picture level by way of the context
 - At the single picture level by way of simplification

Gallery level: Style and context

- Style is defined by a series of pictures
- Composition follows styles
- The spectator's understanding of my picture is subject to it having a style s/he recognises:
 - A new composition in an old/known style will be easy to understand;
 - An unknown style is very hard to understand;
 - New style means a new understanding is required: the artist must allow for the spectator's learning curve.
- What or whose style do I want my picture to follow? This decides the composition

Single-picture level: Clarity

- My picture is made up of visual elements, which structure the composition
- Foreground and background: how to make certain elements stand out?
- Elements are defined by their edges. Edges are determined by contrast.
- Which properties can I contrast?
 - Points: hue, tone, saturation
 - Groups of points: texture, patterns, sharpness
- Groupings: see Gestalt theory

Minimum composition = frame

Bare.

No movement.

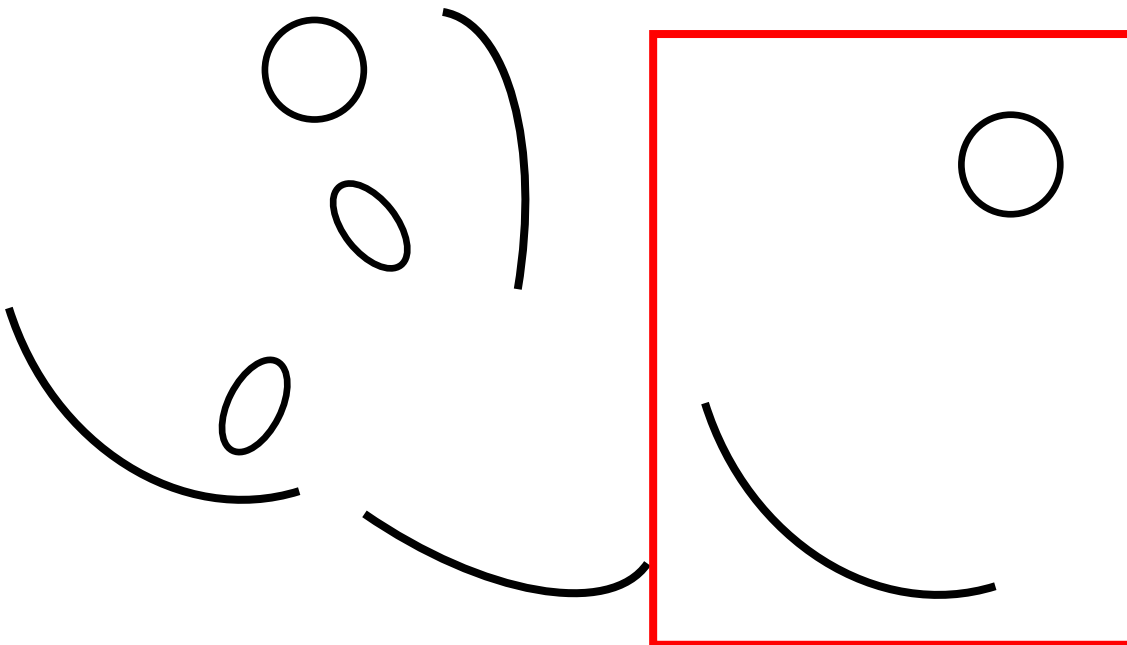
The simplest element.

Real life = vast number of elements



Composition selects elements

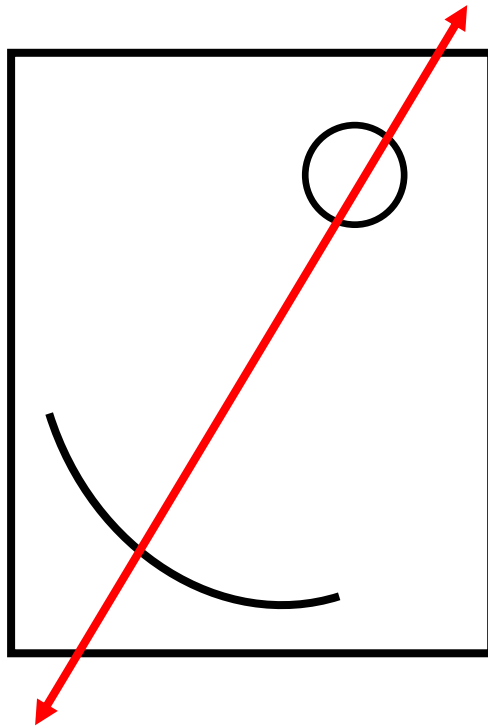
How to reconcile the ultimate simplicity of the bare frame and the rich variety of life?



Any number of compositions are possible given the richness of life: it is a matter of selecting the best one for the destined purpose of the final picture.

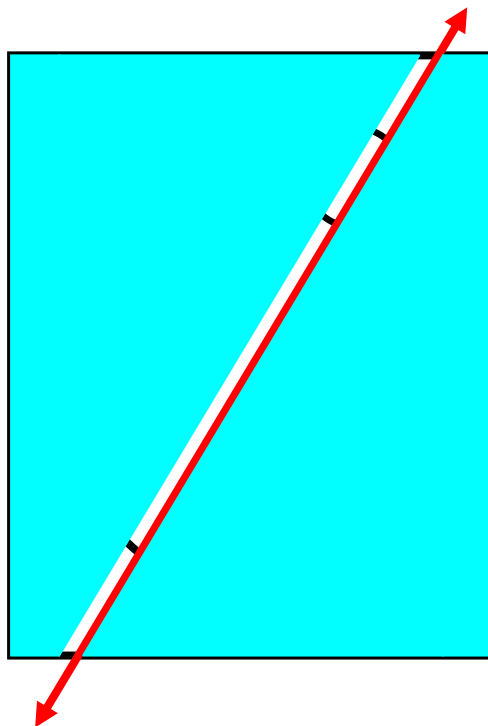
The origin of dynamism

The elements are selected in order to create a dialogue.



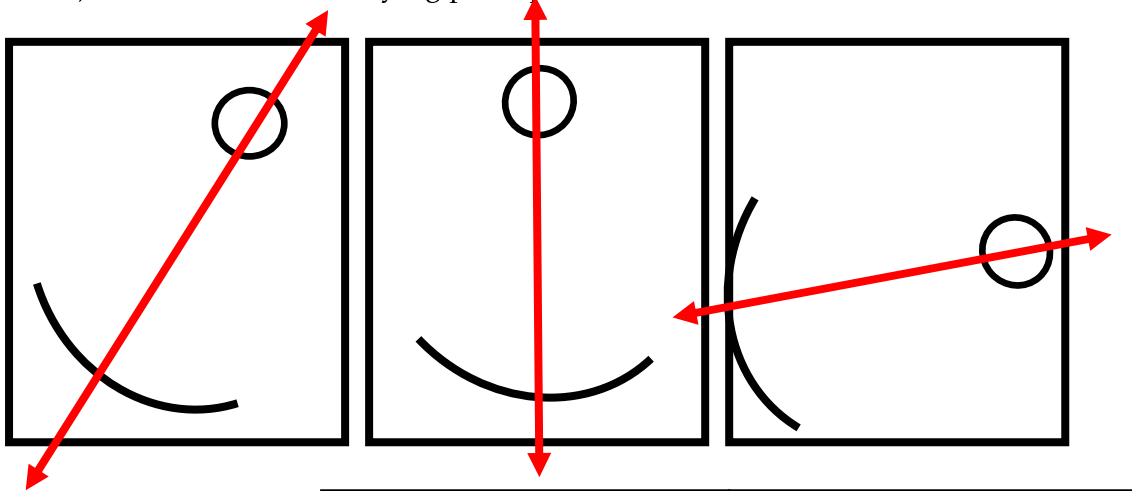
The origin of order

Elements are arranged relative to the frame in order to introduce symmetry and stability.



Anarchy rules OK

Rules are not what they appear. For instance the rule of thirds is a mis-understanding. This rule places the elements in a manner that gives a little stability, but not too much, while making sure that the elements remain clear (i.e distinguishable from the frame and from each other). These are the underlying principles.



If the circle is centred, the order of symmetry increases (now axial as well as rotational) and stability could dominate, even maybe stifle the picture.

If the circle is brought nearer the edge, the axes of symmetry decrease in number diminishing stability, maybe even damaging the picture. Note also how less clear the arc becomes when it touches the frame.

The same suspicion should be held in regard of leading lines, S-curves, golden section, repeating motifs... (cf. Feininger, Principles of composition in photography, p19). The popular press repeats rules that were known fallacies 30+ years ago; quite discouraging! Think free.

In the field

- Styles are different, not wrong
- Not all pictures need structure
- When looking for structure, look for those elements that will stand out *photographically*
- Arrange the elements into groups, marshal these and leave enough space for their dialogue
- Seek a compromise between your interests and those of your pictures' spectators.