

Elements of Good Pictures

The following elements of good pictures have been selected by a group of judges as a STARTING POINT for study. The suggestions under each should help you in analyzing and evaluating. Some of these elements are technical, some are emotional. All are important. Study these elements and your vision will be enlarged, your enjoyment of pictures increased, and your life enriched. Master them and you will recognize and produce better pictures more readily.

1. IMPACT—FIRST IMPRESSION

Glance quickly at the picture. What do you see first? What is your first impression? Does the picture send forth a feeling of power? Does it command you to look at it? What has the most impact? Subject matter, composition, color, lighting, expression, technique, mood, quality, pattern, contrasts, repulsion, rhythm, the story told, unexpectedness, style or what? Is your first impression verified by closer inspection.

2. PRINT PRESENTATION

Give the mounting, matting, cropping, spotting, negative retouching, print corrections, spraying, texturizing, etc. close up inspection. Are any of them done poorly? Is your vote the same after close inspection as upon initial impression? Is the overall presentation dull, average, fair, satisfactory, dynamic, creative, inventive, traditional, modern, conservative, daring or what? Does the presentation enhance or detract? Is the title important?

3. DOMINANCE— CENTER OF INTEREST

Does the print have a center of interest? Is it one object, a group of objects, mood, idea, or what? Is the center of interest well placed? Does the right thing dominate the picture? What are the secondary points of interest? Is the eye caught by any of the wrong things? How could this be overcome? Does the picture hold your attention? Are you led through—in and around— back and forth to enjoy— pause a moment— move again but always come back to the dominant area?

4. COLOR

Is the color realistic, interpretative, creative, symbolic, moody, abstract? Is the overall picture warm (towards the orange) or cool (towards the blue)? What tone covers most of the picture area? Which color is used most sparingly? Which color is brightest? Which is most subdued? What is the total color effect? Do you have a dislike or preference for certain colors? Has this influenced your judgment of this picture? Is the color mood suitable to the subject matter? Does the print or slide depend upon strong complimentary colors for its effect.?

5. CREATIVITY—IMAGINATION— ORIGINALITY

Is the maker's approach fresh, tired, inventive, in a rut? Has he thought out the problem in a creative manner? How? Have you seen the same subject matter done better? Is this an original interpretation of an old theme or style? What makes this picture stand out from the rest? Is its appeal passing or do you think this picture will live? Would you overlook flaws in this picture because of its outstanding creative qualities? Do you think this print can hold its own in the company of top prints or slides? Would it stand out as superior?

6. STYLE

Style is something individual which sets one photographer's work apart from another. It may be one person's way of seeing or approaching a subject matter or a technique. Styles go in cycles and are a reflection of the times in which we live. Every "new" style has some elements of the past. Often a successful style one year is copied in succeeding years to the point where it is no longer individual. If it is a good style it joins tradition along with the Old Masters. If a picture emulates a style the maker admires, we evaluate on how well the maker has done it. We look for any individual touches of his own which he may have added. Is the style of this print or slide individual, copied, trite, fresh, contrived, real, traditional, contemporary, experimental, avant garde, conservative, representational, abstract, or what? Is the style appropriate to the subject matter? Is this merely a fad?

7. VALUES

Value is the lightness or darkness of an object or area. Each thing has its own overall value in the general value scheme of the picture. If any object or area appears too light or too dark in relation to its surroundings it is called "out of value". The eye is naturally drawn to the lightest spots. The most important part of the picture generally contains the strongest contrast from light to dark. Find the strongest area of contrast in this picture. Trace the patterns and movements created by the lights alone; the middle values; and the deep values. Analyze the maker's use of values in this picture. Would changing any of them help the picture?


8. DIRECTION—LINE— TENSION— EYE PATH

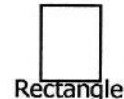
Each object, mass or area has a general feeling of direction or movement. In pictures, edges, outlines, or plain lines are relatively easy to follow. There are other less obvious movements which play important parts in directing the viewer's eye. Of this eye direction is guided by implied lines or directions. This is called tension. Tension results when two or more unconnected items force your eye to travel from one to another. These items create a pull between them or tension, which acts as an eye path. Often these tension lines form completely new shapes on the picture surface, sometimes they repeat an already established theme. Trace the eye movements in this picture. Are the directions strong, subtle, obvious, or implied? Do tension lines strengthen the picture? What new shapes are formed?

9. EQUIVOCAL SPACE

Equivocal space is space that can be seen in two ways at one time. Objects seem to float backwards and forwards in space from one plane to another as you look at them. The objects will not establish a definite spatial position. A line which continues through objects which are in two or more planes of the picture creates an equivocal reaction. See-through space, or overlapping transparent planes, also produces equivocal reaction. Strong complimentary colors next to each other seem to float backwards and forwards. In this picture are the positions in space of all the objects and area firmly established? Is this important to the picture? Has an equivocal reaction been created which hinders the picture—such as a bad merger? Entirely new shapes can be created by equivocal space. Turn the picture upside down. Forget the subject matter. Squint your eyes. Concentrate on the shapes of like values or like colors. What do you see?

10. PATTERN - DESIGN - GEOMETRIC SHAPES

In our picture EVERYTHING, including background spaces, can be represented by straight lines _____
And curved lines . These lines form several basic geometric shapes.



If we learn to see our picture as combinations of these, we abstract or simplify our pattern. This helps us to organize our picture as a DESIGN in addition to being a good expression of little Susie, the true color of a flower, or the best angle of a building. Analyze the lines and shapes of this picture. Are they related, repeated, contrasted, or what? Is there an overall pattern or theme? Does the design alone give you a feeling of everything being in its right place, a sense of unity? Is the picture pleasing and successful from a purely pattern standpoint?

11. TECHNIQUE

Many different techniques are possible in photography. Few of us are familiar with all of them and the many variations seen in today's prints. Is the technique here appropriate to the subject? Is it well done? How is this technique accomplished? Have you ever tried it? Is it difficult to do? Has the maker contributed something individual by his use of technique?

12. CONTRASTS

Contrasts are one of the artists most valuable tools. Describe some of the contrasts in this picture such as:

Large-small	dark-light	warm-cool
Active-quiet	steady-intermittent	sad-gay
rough-smooth	tall-short	thick-thin
gentle-harsh	pointed-blunt	broad-narrow
much-little	positive-negative	straight-bent
transparent-opaque	strong-weak	still-moving
sharp-fuzzy	high-low	old-young

Do contrasts contribute to the success of this picture? What additional contrasts can you suggest which might strengthen the picture?

13. HARMONY - UNITY

Is there harmony between subject, foreground and background? Does the whole picture "hang together"? Or do you feel it is disjointed? Is anything "out of character"? Does the selection and placement of props, objects and masses contribute to the unity of the picture? Which are really essential to the picture story? What could be left out? Does repetition (rhythm) contribute to the sense of harmony. In what way? Would additional cropping improve the unity of this picture? Is the picture held together with a strong design? Does simplicity create its unity? Is the technique used harmonious with the subject matter? Is the picture's mood or emotion harmonious with the subject matter?

14. STORY - STATEMENT - MEANING

Some pictures are successful without telling a story. Does this picture or slide tell a story? What is it? Does the picture have a double meaning? Is it symbolic? Has the photographer made a significant statement of any kind? Do you get the meaning at first glance or do you have to search for it? Is the picture's meaning felt? Why does the picture make you feel this way? What has the maker done to heighten the story? Is his message clear? Is the message universal? Would anyone anywhere in the world looking at this picture get its meaning?

15. SUBJECT INTERPRETATION

First what IS the subject of this picture? An object, a group of objects, an idea, emotion, overall pattern, or what? Is the subject controversial? Is it well interpreted? Has the maker done a good job with the variables over which he had control, such as choice of camera angle, type of lens, focus, depth of field, color, lighting, arrangement, props, foreground, background, etc? Are the best features of the subject shown to advantage? Has the physical reality of the subject been objectively recorded? Has the spirit, the subjective imagery of the subject been captured? Do you FEEL the subject rather than SEE its details? Name them. Is the color scheme analogous—composed of colors similar to each other? If so what common color identifies them? Is the color selection of props, background, foreground, attire, etc. effective? Do you see a jarring note of color anywhere? Is this a good technical job both in the negative and the print? Is hand work on the print visible close up?

16. MAKER'S INTENT - ACHIEVEMENT OF PURPOSE

What do you think was the maker's intent? Why did he make this picture? Is his purpose clear? Did the maker fully achieve his purpose? Why?

17. EMOTIONAL— APPEAL— MOOD

What emotion does this picture invoke? Can you relate to the mood of this picture through your past experience? Would you like to live with this print or slide? Is the mood-emotion-expression natural, forced, appropriate, jarring, specific, universal? Does it seem spontaneous or contrived? What contributes most to the mood you feel? Has the maker made an aesthetically moving statement? Does the maker invite you to participate with him to become involved, finding more in the picture than appears on the surface at first glance? Has the maker left something for you to imagine and to interpret for yourself in your own way? Could there be a difference of opinion about the emotional responses this picture invokes?

18. RHYTHM

Rhythm is created by repetition. In pictures many things can be repeated. Numbers, letters, lines, masses, objects, motions, values, colors, spaces, images, expressions, words, moods, divisions of picture space, etc. Viewers respond favorably to pictures composed with a strong sense of order and rhythm. Harmony and interest can be created by the use of regular repetition but greater visual appeal can usually be achieved with free rhythm— sensitive controlled variation. What can you see in this picture that is repeated? What effect does this repetition have on you? Do you feel a sense of fast movement, balance, pleasure, or what? Does the success of this picture depend heavily on rhythm?

19. DYNAMIC SYMETRY - MATHEMATICAL DIVISIONS OF SPACE

The principle of Dynamic Symmetry deals with harmonious proportions based on mathematical relationships or sequences of numbers. How can this be of use to us?

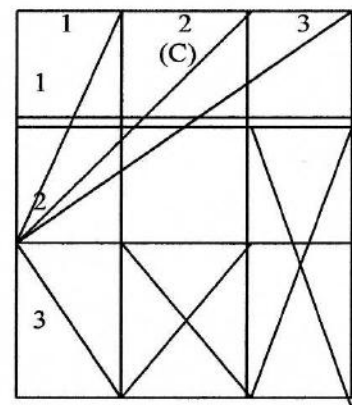
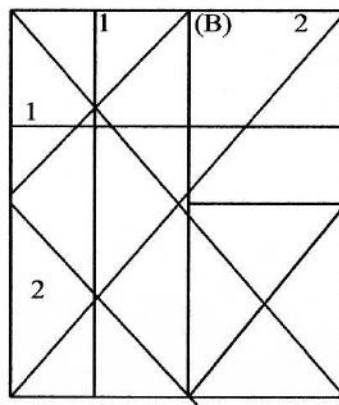
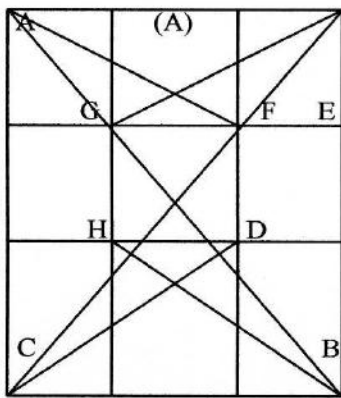
Dynamic Symmetry can show us ways to locate centers of interest, important diagonal movements, places for prominent verticals and horizontals such as horizon lines, harmonious divisions of our picture space, and even the pleasing proportions of the outside dimensions of our picture itself.

An analysis of great paintings of the past of all sizes and shapes reveals the use by the artists of various mathematical methods for divisions of picture area, placement of objects, and direction of movements.

16 X 20 is not in itself a dynamic proportion. When we divide its width into its length (16 into 20) we get a ratio of 1 to 1.25. This ratio is between a Root One Square (ratio 1 to 1) and a Root Two Rectangle (ratio 1 to 1.414) and a long ways from the Whirling Square Root Rectangle (ratio 1 to 1.618), called the Golden Section in Dynamic Symmetry.

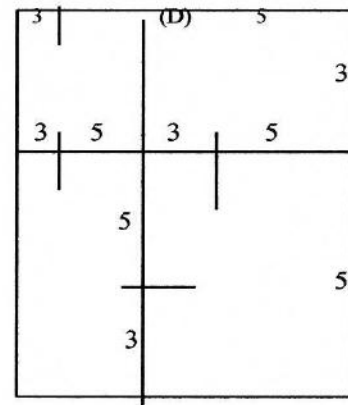
Since so many photographic exhibitions are geared to the 16X20 format, let us look briefly at just a few of the mathematical divisions possible.

- A. Draw a diagonal AB. At right angles to AB draw the crossing line CD from corner C. Continue line DC to Point E. Where the lines cross at DFGH are the main points of interest.
- B. C. Divide the sides by the same number. Place as many horizontals, verticals, and diagonals as you need.
- D. Divide sides and all subsequent distances by the "Golden Section." proportion of 1 to 1.618 or roughly 3 to 5 to 8. (First divide sides by 8 then mark off 3 and 5).



20. COMPOSITION - ARRANGEMENT— PLACEMENT—POSE

Every picture is "composed" even if it is composed badly. Successful arrangement results most often from deliberate choice. This choice is based on knowledge, training, experience, study, observation, instinct, imagination. We can study and observe. Look at this picture. Is the composition— arrangement—placement—pose— dynamic, pleasing, suitable, natural, awkward, contrived, rhythmic, classic, modern, subtle, obvious, harmonious, exciting, static, powerful, weak or what? What principles of composition were employed by the maker?



Don Loseke