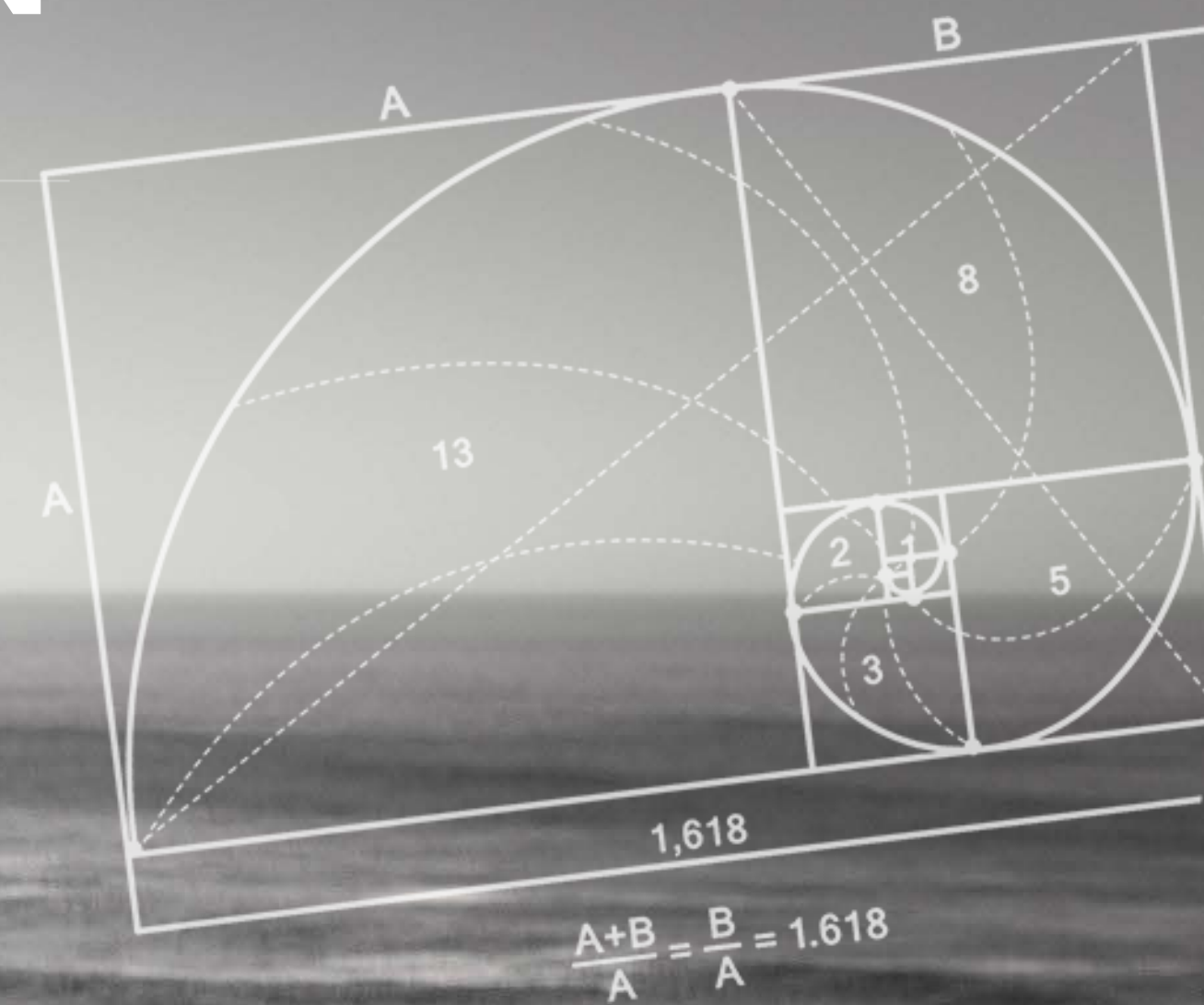

$$\frac{a+b}{a} = \frac{b}{a} \approx 1,618$$

0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, ...

A MODERN APPROACH TO PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION

COMPOSING FOR PHOTOGRAPHIC SELF-EXPRESSION



A CONTRASTLY EBOOK
by Adam Welch



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“Friendship is so weird. You just pick a human you’ve met, and you’re like, ‘Yep, I like this one,’ and you just do stuff with them.” -Bill Murray

Starting this book with what appears to be an out-of-place quote by actor Bill Murray may seem odd.

Yet, it is **the** most appropriate (if not the **only**) way I could think of to write about Adam Welch, his work, life approach, and where I, a French portrait and street photographer from New York, incidentally fit in the grand scheme of the sharp but witty photographic mind of this Tennessee born artist and author.

Let’s back up a few years, to when I was teaching myself everything there was to know about photography, with no money but great expectations

and the highest of ambitions. I stumbled upon a fascinating article on Adventure Photography by a young photographer (or ‘*photographer*’ as he prefers to call himself) with a unique and fresh writing style.

He was impressively knowledgeable on all things technical. His horizon seemed limitless, his personality determined, his artistic eye was original yet focused, his photographic work thorough and edgy at the same time. It was clear to me right there and then that not only was he passionate about his subject and his art, but he was unquestionably qualified to discuss it.

As we developed our friendship through quasi-daily debates on photography, film, techniques,

equipment, lens performance, and all things Bill Murray or Big Lebowski, it became obvious that besides bacon, beer, and sombreros, there was not much about Adam that was not entirely dedicated to his craft.

Both self-taught, we learned a lot from each other over the years. I advise him mostly on portraits and lighting. He has been a bottomless well of knowledge for me on landscape composition and gear, to name a few. We share work, request opinions on images from each other, discuss best framing or editing options, and of course, composition.

I trust his advice, as much as I enjoy disagreeing with Adam, based on solid argumentation.

Beyond that, I have learned from him how to hold on to my 'eye', trust my gut, to dig deep in how I see and frame the world through my lens. Adam knows the classics and the theory of photography, but he also knows how to break the rules to be a visionary and stand out from the crowd.

He takes simple, true subjects and composes his images with a subtle and personal angle, somewhere between timeless and unexpected.

The art (and science) of composing is a pillar of any creative work. It is the foundation of an artist's message and vision, the backbone of any art piece.

Composition leads the eye, draws you in, creates the bridge, connects the author to the audience.

In this book, Adam will give you the basics of composition, the reasoning, and origins behind it, as well as the fundamental rules to help you see with a structured eye. But because he is a rebel at heart, he will also show you how to question said rules and make them yours.

You can trust him to lyrically walk you through the composition essentials and leave you ready to write your own song.

—Hélène McGuire

It's painless to be ordinary. The difficulty lies in being unique.

What separates a fine photograph from a crude one? Is it the camera? The resolution of the sensor? Does the lens decide what is good and what is bad?

The idea of what makes a "*superior*" photo can be argued until the end of time and likely will be. As with most works of humanistic art, it's extremely difficult to verbalize what makes a photo vibrate our internal chords so that we quite literally "*feel*" an image instead of just seeing it with our eyes.

How do we make our photographs more powerful, more pointed? Where does that line between a simple snapshot begin to transition into self-expression?

As I ponder this, I'm reminded of Mark Twain. Yes, this prolific 19th century American author is certainly not a figure which springs to mind when it comes to deciphering the in's and out's of photographic expression. Yet, he offered us some great wisdom when he said:

"THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE ALMOST RIGHT WORD AND THE RIGHT WORD IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE LIGHTNING BUG AND THE LIGHTNING."

These words carry enormous weight. Simply put, it's the little things, the small nuances of form and inclusion or exclusion, which determine the final coefficient value of our photographs.

Where Mark spoke of the literary perfection of prose, we will be speaking of the visual representations of light and shadow; how we sew together our visions of self-expression within the photographs we make. In a word; **composition**.

But what does that mean? "*Composition*"?

Quite often, the term itself is metered as somewhat of a dodge, a cop-out for the inability to address why we feel a certain way about a photograph. To reach back to our original question: what separates a good photo from a bad one? We might say that a particular image has "*great composition*," but what does that mean, really?

With this book, our goal is to investigate (and demonstrate) those small pieces of the photographic puzzle that must be assembled to accomplish the most uniquely marvelous feat any of us can hope to achieve: *expressing ourselves through effectively composed photographs*.

We will magnify the nuances of photographic

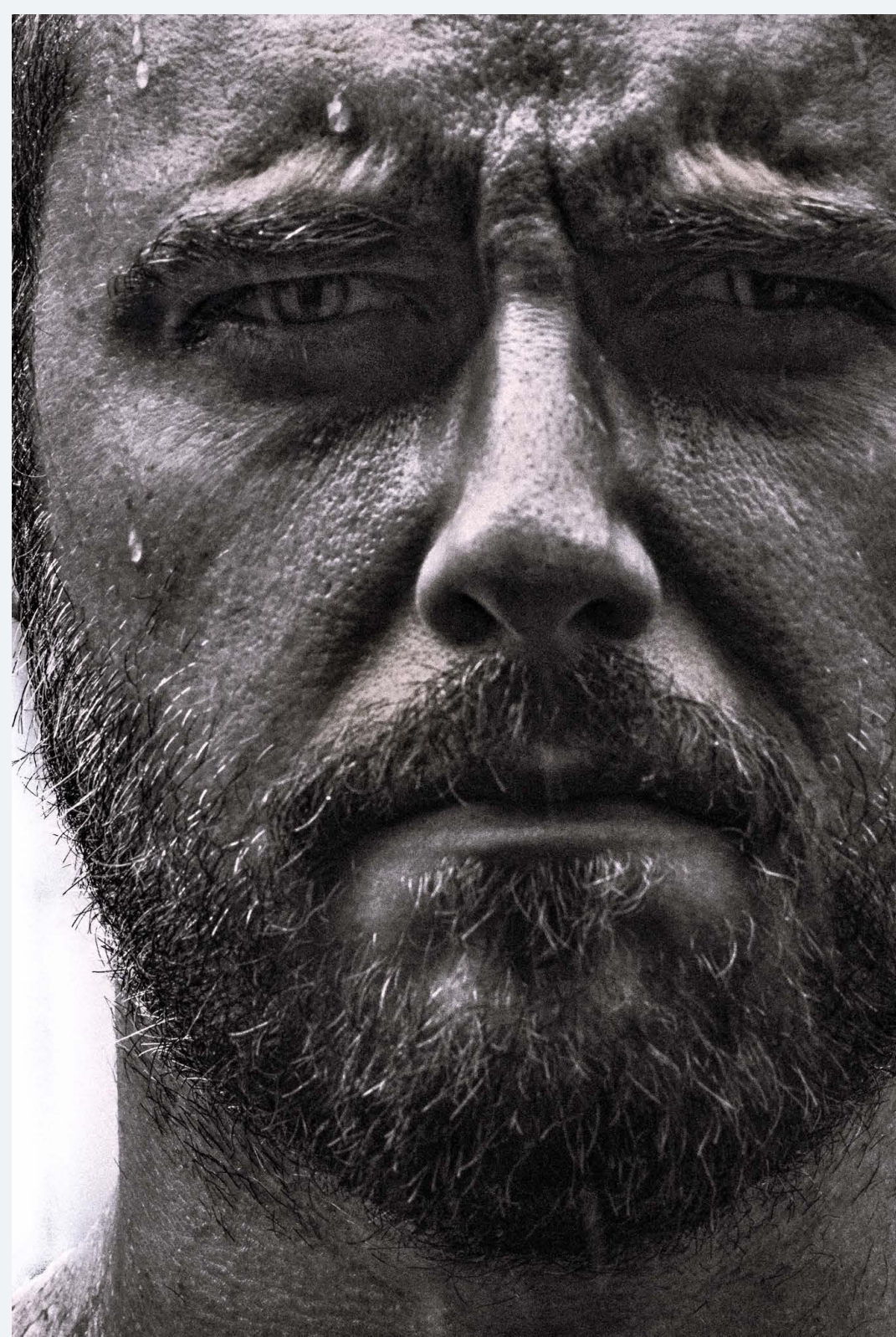
composition to show the basics of established compositional theory and incorporate those ideas into your own photography. More importantly, we will attempt to impart to you a sense of freedom through knowledge.

Once you reach the realization of this freedom, you will become more proficient in your understanding of some of the most common aesthetic principles of photographic composition.

These universal principles will help you be more aware of the totality of a scene or subject. This awareness will enable you to make your own compositional decisions that follow or do not follow... the typical methods of composing your images.

In short, we're going to teach you the rules of composition in photography and then make sure you know that it's altogether acceptable to break them.

—Adam Welch



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adam Welch is a photomaker, author, educator, self-professed bacon addict, and a hardcore nature junkie. You can usually find him on some distant trail making photographs or at his computer writing about all the elegant madness that is photography.



ABOUT CONTRASTLY

Contrastly is a producer of Lightroom Classic presets, Photoshop actions, ebooks, and video course, as well as a publisher of resources for enthusiast photographers such as articles and tutorials about the techniques that make great photographers.



1

COMPOSING FOR PHOTOGRAPHIC SELF-EXPRESSION

Like musical instruments, our cameras and lenses serve only to express to our viewers the way our minds perceive the world. This vision is then translated visually in the form of a photograph so that our interpretation of a scene, subject, or idea is communicated as effectively as possible through the finished image.

At an elemental level, the notion of a “*correctly composed*” photograph becomes non-existent if the process of making the photo is approached with the understanding that photography, just as any other form of art, offers us infinite potentialities for distinctive self-expression.

To that end, the strength of our photographs should be judged not by how well they adhere to standardized compositional methods and ideas but by how accurately the final image mirrors our intentions. How efficiently does our photo connect that vast expanse that separates the photographer’s mind from that of the viewer?

Effective photographic composition should be thought of as an exercise in fidelity; of how

accurately we can reveal our thoughts, emotions, and experiences through photographs.



Who were they? Friends? Strangers?

FEEL THE MUSIC

It’s no small coincidence that the term composition stretches through both the musical and visual arts.

Much like music, photography is simply an

arrangement of a vast number of small pieces that come together to form a greater whole.

In musical composition, notes are arranged and presented in a particular order to convey specific emotions to the listener. In photographic composition, which is what we're here to talk about, all the elements within a specific scene must be presented as effectively as possible to convey

specific emotions to the viewer.

This is why composition becomes so essential in photography. An effective photographer must be capable of arranging all the small parts within a photograph to vibrate in tune.

Much like Twain's lightning bug, a single misplaced element can make the difference between a strong photograph and a weak one; between a photo that is representative of a person, place, or thing and one that is flat, generic, and lacking in substance.



A WORD ON "RULES"

Before we venture further into our examination of composition, one aspect of the entire discussion needs to be made abundantly clear.

Photography is an incredibly intimate pursuit. No matter the genre and no matter whether the work is commercial or personal, the photographs we make carry with them fragments of ourselves.

As such, the making of a picture can only be influenced — never dictated — by standardized considerations of composition and technique. In short, there are no unbreakable “*Rules*” for effective composition for photographs.

Aside from the basic optical and photographic principles involving exposure, focal lengths, depth of field, ect., we are left with immense freedom for how we approach the construction of our photos. There is no denying that there are many tried and true recommendations for composing our photos.

Ever since our earliest human ancestors spit paint onto fire-lit cave walls, we have been continuously striving to improve the ways we present ourselves through art.

As a result, throughout multiple millennia, we have been able to pool various concepts and ideas that can help us produce more aesthetically pleasing images.

Many of these compositional ideas stem from non-photographic artworks but readily transplant themselves to aid in building our photographs.



Even within this book, when a particular technique is referred to as being a “*Rule*,” always remember that it is nothing more than a baseline, a precedent approach that has proven effective in the past.

No rule of composition can replace personal judgment. A beautifully executed photograph is just as likely to follow the rules as easily as it can break free from them.

If you feel a photograph accurately points to your original creative vision, you simply cannot make a mistake.

You hereby have permission to break the rules.

2

PRACTICAL COMPOSITION

Effective photographic composition (like all art and music) is a journey towards harmony regardless of whether or not that final and ultimate balance is even obtainable remains debatable.

Can a composition be truly perfect?

On what scale do we measure the strengths and weaknesses found within the photographs we make?

There is likely no reachable apex of completeness for our photos. If we approach the construction of our images with the belief that there is such a thing as the *"perfect composition,"* we will forever be laboring towards an unattainable perfection. At the same time, the compositional door swings both ways.

This means that while there is no *"perfect"* composition for a particular scene or subject, there is likewise no wholly wrong composition.

STRIVING TOWARDS COMPOSITIONAL HARMONY

No photo will ever be made that is conclusively

correct or conclusively incorrect. Instead, our photos occupy space somewhere between the absolutes of perfection and imperfection.

One way to look at this concept is to assume the mindset that there are no *"bad photos"...* only *"better photos."*

We've already talked about the fact the idea of a perfected photograph is entirely false, and to some degree, a dangerous attitude to adopt about the nature of our work.

You could very well be thinking something along the lines of *"Well, if it's impossible that my photos will ever be perfect, then what's the point of even trying?"*

This is a wonderfully valid question.

How do we reach this *"compositional harmony,"* while at the same time accepting the fact that our photographs will, to some extent, always be lacking?

To find the answer to these questions, we must look at some unlikely teachings that are entirely unrelated to photography.

Or are they?



Image by [Jared Rice](#)

"Do less" is often a mantra encountered when it comes to my attitude towards photographic composition. Now, that isn't to be confused with a mindset of laziness towards the construction of a photo, but rather the idea that great success can be achieved through little effort if we learn to get out of the way. Wait a minute, first a little bit of background on what I mean before we venture too far down the rabbit hole...

WU WEI AND THE ART OF PHOTOGRAPHIC NON-INTERVENTION

As much as I would enjoy the title, I'm no Zen philosopher or Daoshi. I don't claim to be an authoritative source of information on any school of thought or religion from the East or West, although I do hold an honorary Doctorate of Divinity in Leisure Science.

With that being said, I often find it easy (and highly beneficial) to draw parallels between certain serenely flexible approaches to life, philosophy, and consciousness to my work as a photo maker. Let's talk about this.

One of the greatest assets one can learn about composing a photograph for maximum harmony comes from a principle borrowed from Chinese Taoism; that of Wu Wei. Literally translated, Wu Wei means "*without action*" or "*without effort*."

The principles of Wu Wei can be extremely helpful when it comes to composing our photographs, especially if you are a beginner and have been constantly bombarded with "*photographic absolutism*".

I say *absolutism* because somewhere along the way, varying schools of thought (both real and figurative) have somehow managed to become extremely uptight in terms of adhering dogmatically to certain compositional rules. That's not to say that you can't learn from these people, far from it. There is nothing inherently wrong with learning as much as you can about the "*rules*" of photographic composition. We're going to begin introducing you to many of them in the coming chapters.

So, if the problem isn't with the rules themselves... what is it?

Well, this is where the concept of Wu Wei comes into play. It's true; the issue doesn't arise from forever

and always following the rules of composition to the letter. The issue arises when we believe that we have to.

When we feel as if we absolutely have to compose our photos based precisely within the confines of a specific compositional principle, we inadvertently put ourselves in the way of... well... ourselves.

We can become the problem by being so enamored with making a particular shot fit perfectly into some compositional mold. The intense effort we put towards perfecting our composition can unknowingly build imaginary obstacles between what we feel is right, and what we've learned is technically correct.

The tried and true compositional concepts exist because they have consistently been effective in the past and can help you look deeper into the meaning behind the construction of your photographs, nothing more or less.

If the rules of composition are seen as anything more significant than an accumulation of technical observations, we have entirely missed the mark.

But here's where things become truly interesting.

First, do me a favor... go to your computer or tablet or photo album (remember those?) and pick out ten or twenty photos that you have made, which you consider to be your best.

Don't even think about it; pick the ones which you love.

I would hazard to guess that most of those images follow, at least to some extent, many of the rules of composition we're about to discuss in this book. You might not have known you were doing anything but "*following your gut.*"

Still, weirdly enough, it's when we can remove our creative barriers and essentially "*let the image happen*" that we tend to produce our most emotive and strong photographs.

It's this quiet method of non-obstructive yet conscientious approach, which I hope you will remember when you practice each of the techniques with which you're about to become intimately acquainted.

Effectively composing your photographs involves a large amount of self-trust. The first two chapters of this book have been devoted to helping you grasp the value of recognizing and trusting your instincts

enough to allow yourself to get out of the way of making a great photograph.

REMOVING THE BARRIERS

Although this relaxed attitude of Wu Wei can help you slow down and interpret the way you compose your photos, it comes with one caveat: Don't. Be. Lazy.

The idea of *"success without effort"* can easily be misconstrued as *"success without trying."*

If we allow ourselves to believe that we will be able to make great photos by taking the easy way out every time, then we are being lazy, not relaxed.

Attempting to remove your own mental and creative barriers by becoming a slothful photo maker only confounds the very problem we were trying to rid ourselves of in the first place. As you travel through the next chapters, remember to approach those compositional techniques and concepts as tools rather than rules, even though some may be referred to as such.



Keep in mind that your composition is as much a part of your ability to observe the elements of your subject or scene and judge how they are best presented to the viewer.

The lessons you will learn here will help you better translate the light, mood, colors, and textures, and most of all, they will help you convert your own creative vision more strongly through the photographs you make and show to the world.

The key to more effective photographic composition is to reach that oh-so-elusive harmony between the technical, aesthetic considerations, and personal self-trust, connecting the expanse between the *"rules"* and your own intentions.

3

THE RULE OF THIRDS

The old standby... the one compositional method most of us probably have heard about time and time again. When we talk about "*The Rule of Thirds*," the name itself is somewhat one dimensional. On first blush, it sounds as if this technique has something to do with dividing your frame into thirds or at the very least some relationship to the number 3.

If you assume all of this, you aren't far from the truth.

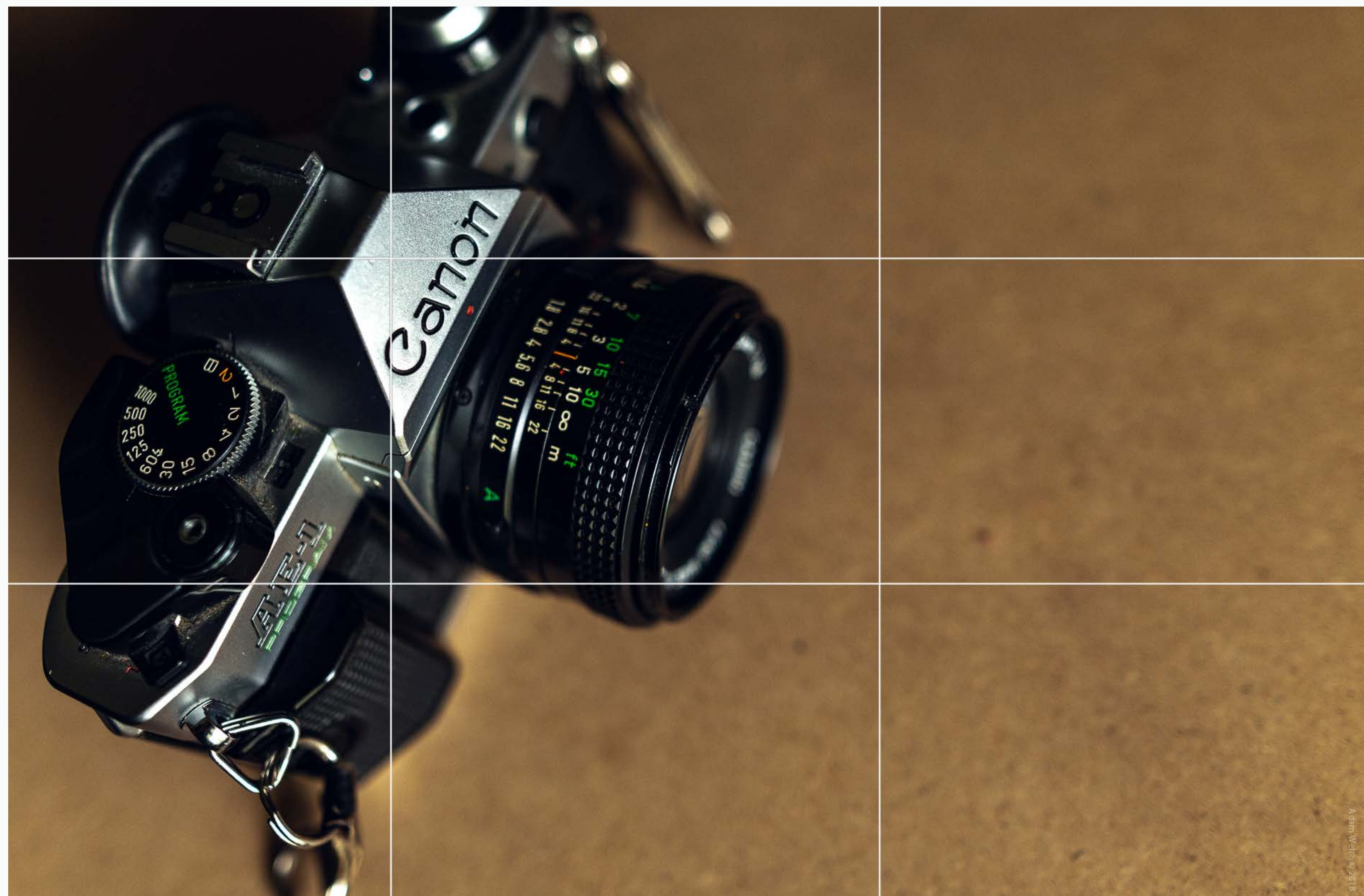
The Rule of Thirds could very well be one of the easiest, yet most far-reaching compositional tools you will ever put into practice. Let's take a look at the Rule of Thirds and find out why this simple little process can be so useful in your photography.

FOUR LINES, NINE BOXES, UNLIMITED POTENTIAL

The Rule of Thirds, while of course not being an unbreakable

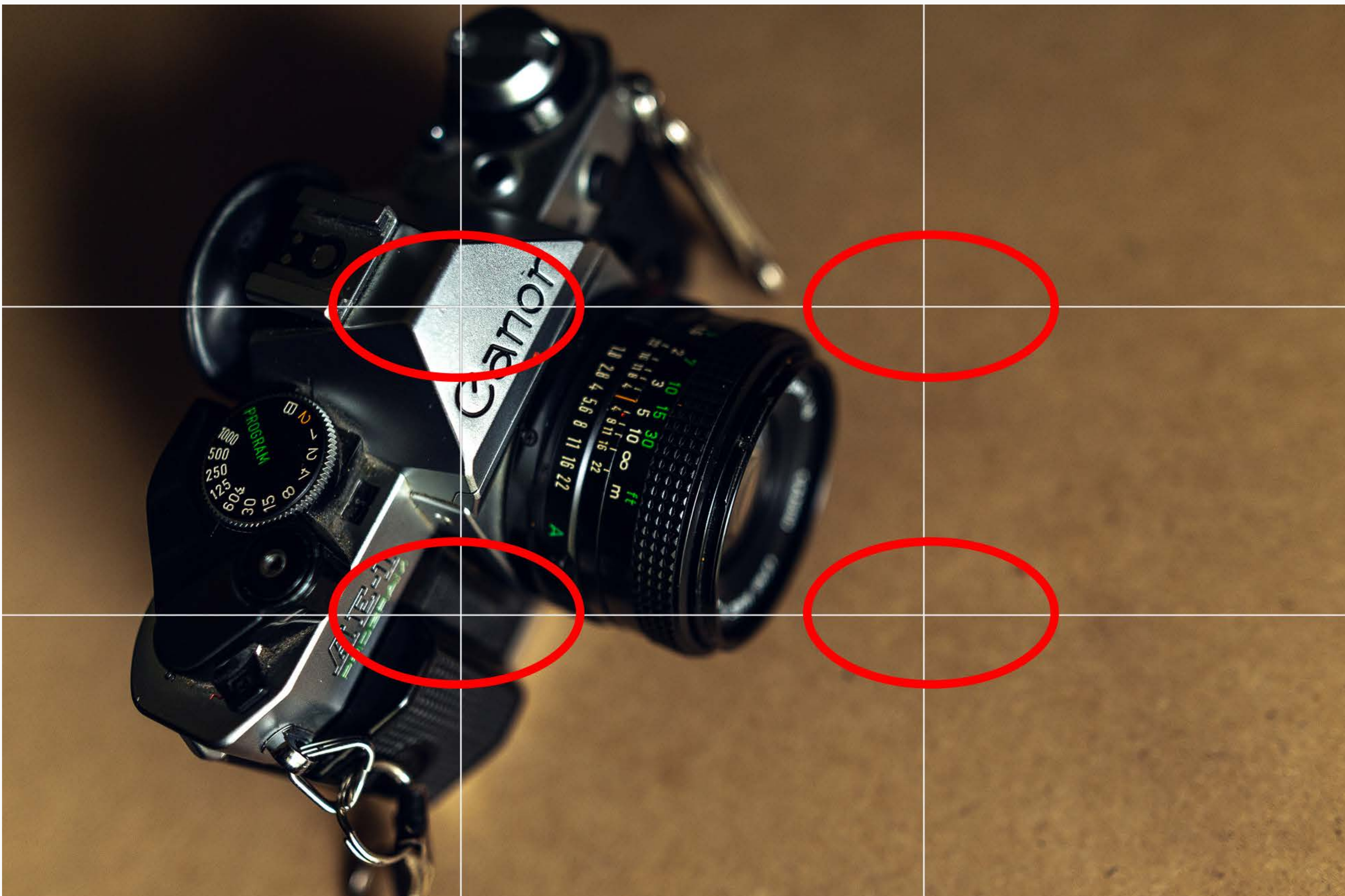
"Rule," is all about giving you a suggestion on where to place the most critical elements of your frame so that they are more aesthetically pleasing in relation to the rest of the frame.

This is accomplished by a grid (either real or imaginary), consisting of four lines that divide your image into nine equal parts. Just think of it as photographic tic-tac-toe.



This grid serves multiple purposes. The first is that it provides those points of interest where it is ideal for placing essential areas.

It's as easy as placing your important points on or close to the areas where the four lines intersect.



It really is that simple. At its core, the Rule of Thirds helps us to curtail constantly placing the main subject of the photo in the center of the frame.

While it can be perfectly fine to do so, it is preferable to place the center of attention in most cases... not in the center.

When the object of interest is placed in areas of the frame other than the middle, it forces the viewer's eye to search the image for what it thinks you intend for it to see.

This is what you might have heard referred to as "*drawing the viewer into the photo.*"

When the subject is not intensely obvious, it automatically demands that the person examine the photo for an extended period.

On the next page is a photo that pays no attention to the Rule of Thirds concept.





Now, let's take a look at the same photo. Only now it has been chiseled down to better align itself based on the Rule of Thirds. Which do you prefer?

HORIZONS, POWER, AND THE RULE OF THIRDS

If you happen to be a landscape photographer, you've likely learned that it's often more appealing to place the horizon line of your scene someplace other than smack in the middle of your composition.

This is because the horizon line of your image directly relates to the perspective of the image and, by proxy of the camera, to that of the viewer.

However, as we'll discuss later, this technique is not exclusive to landscape photography.

Positioning the horizon in the top third of the frame generally imparts a sense of smallness to the viewer. The reason for this is that the perspective of the camera is perceived to be lower than the horizon.

The opposite is also true. Placing the horizon in the lower third of the composition imparts a higher perspective to the photo.

This causes the viewer to feel as if they are larger, or at the very least, positioned much higher relative to the rest of the frame.



THE IMPORTANCE OF HORIZON PLACEMENT IN COMPOSITION

Why exactly does it matter where we place our horizons? This question can be notably puzzling when you factor in the reality that many beautiful photos seem to ignore the Rule of Thirds.

In truth, discretion has the ultimate say in where you position your horizon, but this doesn't mean that high and low perspectives don't play a significant role in determining how a photograph impacts the viewer.

NOTHING TO DO WITH THE GOLDEN RATIO? REALLY?

"Golden Section" or "Golden Mean" is a hauntingly beautiful mathematical concept that can be found everywhere from legendary works of art by Leonardo DaVinci (among others) and in both present-day architecture and ancient ruins.

It's even been revealed to be present in the wonderfully complex mechanisms which comprise the known Universe and in Mother Nature herself.

More often than not, we photographers commonly refer to this piece of golden technique as the *"Golden Ratio."*

And yet, many of us misunderstand the inherent applications of The Golden Ratio, and for good reasons.

Although relatively simple compared to other mathematics and geometry functions, the Golden Ratio remains somewhat complicated. Well, if not complicated... perhaps slightly unwieldy.

We'll be examining some of the more practical photographic uses for the Golden Ratio in the coming chapters.

For now, just know that any rectangular or square-shaped composition can be divided into nine equal sections and thus produce a framing guide based on thirds.

As you're about to see in the following chapter of this book, this is not the case with the Golden Ratio.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMPOSING USING THE RULE OF THIRDS

Just because a technique is extremely popular doesn't mean it's overused. It's possible to approach the Rule of Thirds as a tired and overly-implemented method for quickly constructing strong compositions. While it's undoubtedly true that the Rule of Thirds is one of the most common compositional tools in photography, it is also true that it is a convenient method for composing more effective photographs across virtually all genres of photography. However...

Just because a technique is extremely popular doesn't mean that you always have to use it in your photographs. The Rule of Thirds is a "tried and true" way for you to make more visually impactful photos, especially if you're just beginning to invest more effort into your photography. However, it is only a guideline, just as all compositional tools are guidelines and not blueprints. Don't hesitate to deviate from the Rule of Thirds even if you happen to begin your composition based around its premise.

The Rule of Thirds method can be used with

virtually any composition. As long as your frame is a quadrilateral shape with 90-degree angles, i.e., square (technically a rhombus) or a rectangle, it can be divided into nine equal segments or "thirds." This is expressly different from the Golden Ratio approach, which we'll discuss in the next chapter. Simply put, the Rule of Thirds is versatile, which is what makes it such a powerful compositional tool. Furthermore, the flexibility of the Rule of Thirds lends itself to compositional "re-working" when cropping during digital post-processing.

Be careful not to overstuff your scene just because it might fit with the Rule of Thirds. Even if every single element within your composition falls on an intersecting line of the Rule of Thirds grid doesn't mean that it will be an effective composition. The foundation of a strong photo is based as much on what is excluded as what is included within the frame.

The Rule of Thirds is an excellent system for better placing your horizon line for better aesthetic effect. Where you choose to situate the horizon within your photographs, especially landscape photographs

can be the deciding factor for whether or not the composition is interesting for your viewer. Experiment with placing your horizon in either the upper or lower third of your composition using the horizontal lines of the Rule of Thirds grid as your guide. Since the Rule of Thirds is based on your frame's spatial characteristics (square/rectangle), the final aspect ratio of your composition doesn't matter in the slightest, making it a great way to locate an ideal location for the horizon.

4

THE GOLDEN RATIO AND THE GOLDEN RECTANGLE

In photography, the Golden Ratio helps us better construct our photographs to be more aesthetically pleasing. For our purposes, we'll talk about the Golden Ratio more as it relates to composing photos. This means a relievingly small amount of math and geometry will be involved in the following pages. You can thank me later.

However, let's at least scratch the surface of what makes the Golden Ratio tick before moving on to making use of it with your photography. More specifically, we're going to talk about one of the derivatives of the Golden Ratio; the Golden Rectangle.

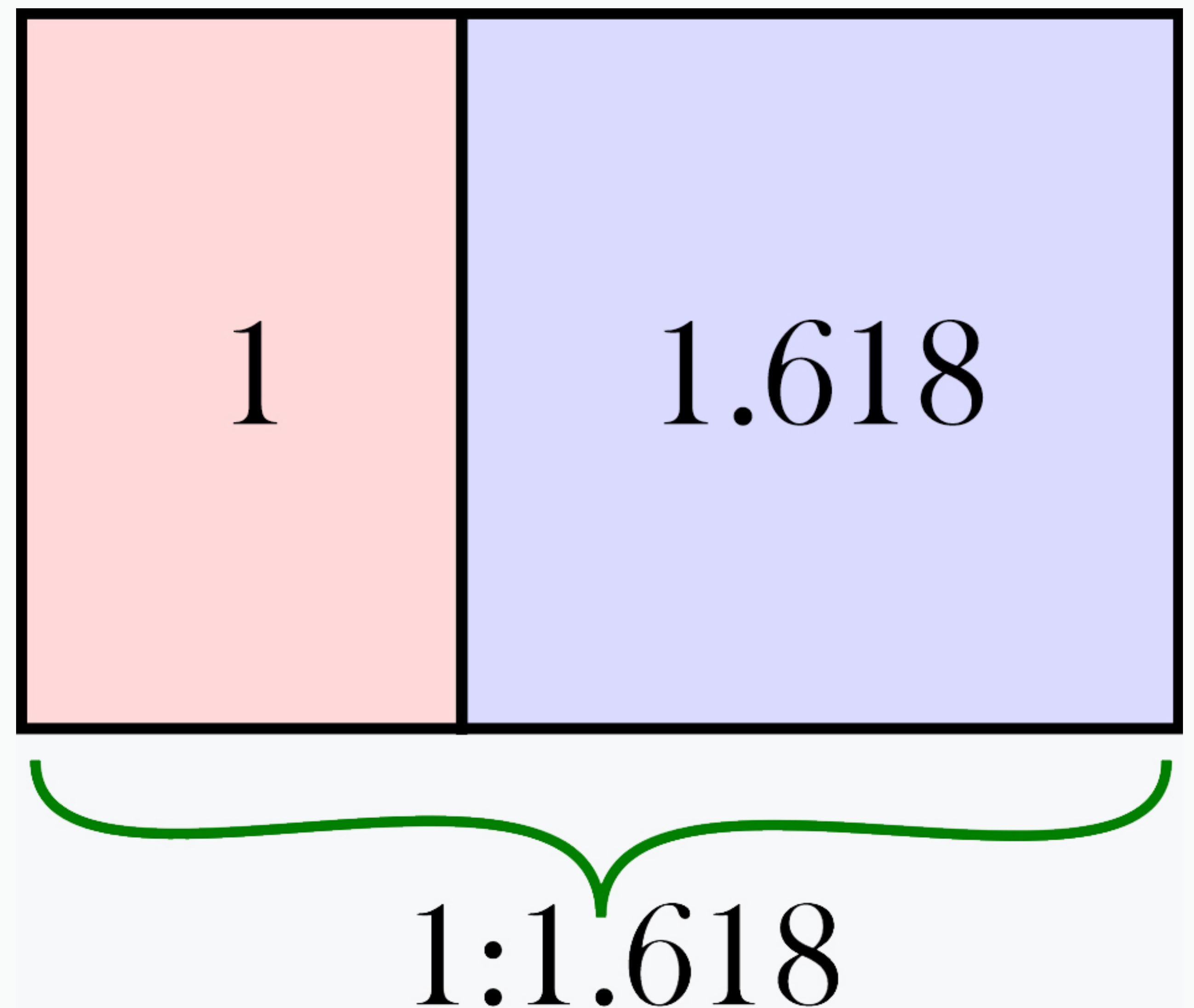
A GAME OF SQUARES

No, my astute and beloved photographic champion, that is not a typo in the title of this section. One of the easiest ways to get a grip on the Golden Rectangle is by thinking of it not as a single rectangular shape but rather as the result of tacking a square onto a rectangle whose sides have an

approximate proportion of 1:1.618.

Yes, really. Well... mostly.

The basis for this approach is that the Golden Ratio, and thus the Golden Rectangle, hinges around the approximate proportion of 1.618. Now, that is an approximation as the number goes on, well... forever.



Since we're prepared to descend into that mathematical rabbit hole, we'll leave the Golden Ratio resting comfortably at three decimal places.

So, now what? How does the number 1.618 have anything to do with gold, rectangles, squares, or at all presume to intrude itself into photography? Well, the magic happens when you apply that number to drawing shapes. Put plainly, a Golden Rectangle consists of a simple square that has been extended into a rectangle whose long edge is 1.618 times larger than its height.

Understanding how the Golden Ratio and Golden Rectangle is derived is a beautiful bit of knowledge for you to store away in your brain. It will give you a better appreciation of art, architecture and ultimately provide an open opportunity for you to impress your friends the next time you visit an art museum.

However, in and of itself, the Golden Ratio doesn't help you compose a stronger photograph.

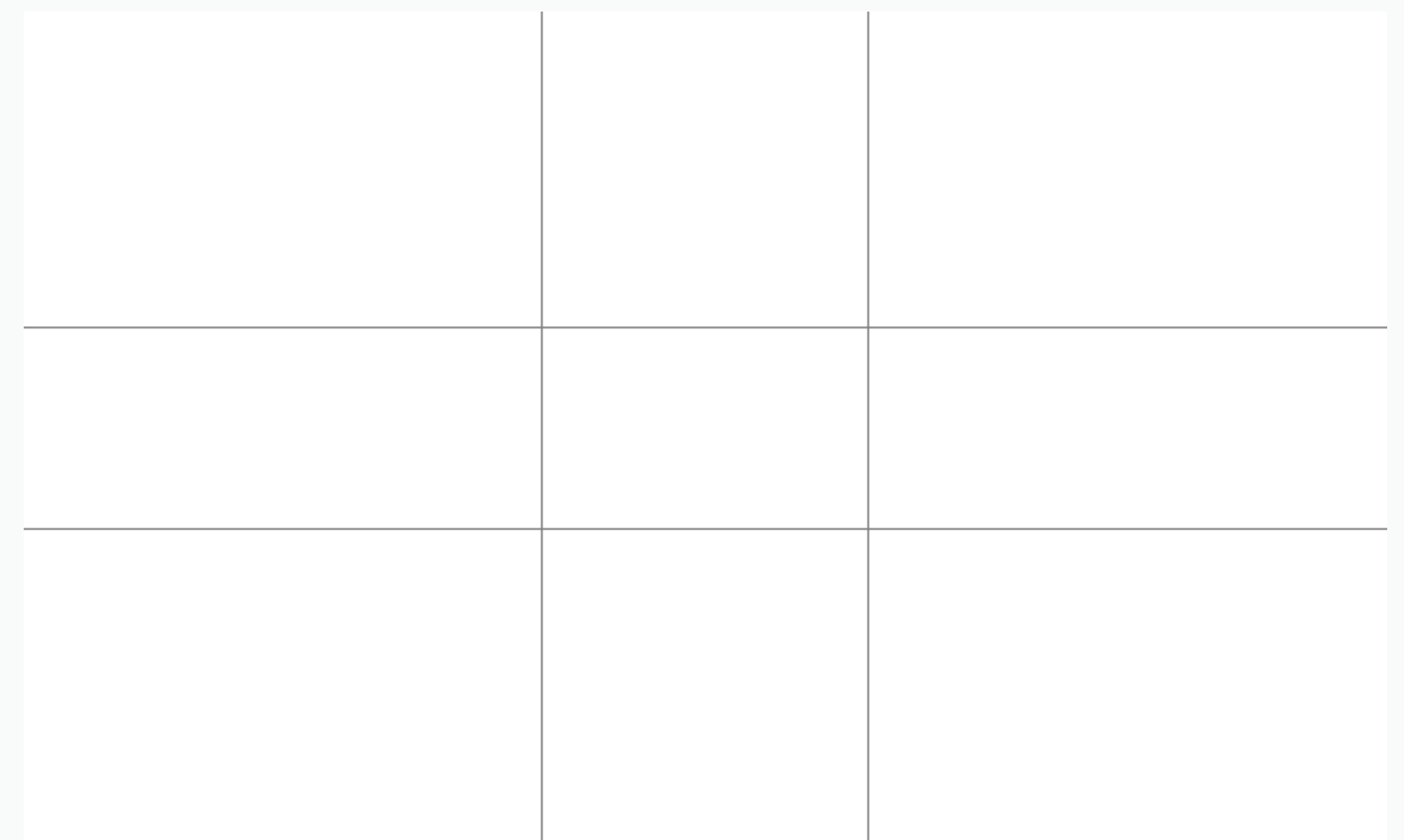
What it does allow is for us to construct a couple of sleekly sophisticated compositional frameworks which, when used correctly, will work wonders for your images.

PHI IN THE SKY...

Yes, that was the best pun I could come up with to break the ice as we begin discussing how the Golden Ratio can be used to construct stronger compositions.

In case you're a bit rusty, Phi is the 21st letter of the Ancient Greek alphabet. It is also used to describe a nifty grid, which is derived from the Golden Rectangle.

This is a Phi Grid.



That looks somewhat familiar, doesn't it?

If you recall back to Chapter 3 and the Rule of Thirds, you'll remember that we divided our frame into nine equal sections using a four-line grid.

While a Phi Grid might look extremely similar to the Rule of Thirds, it is very much its own animal.

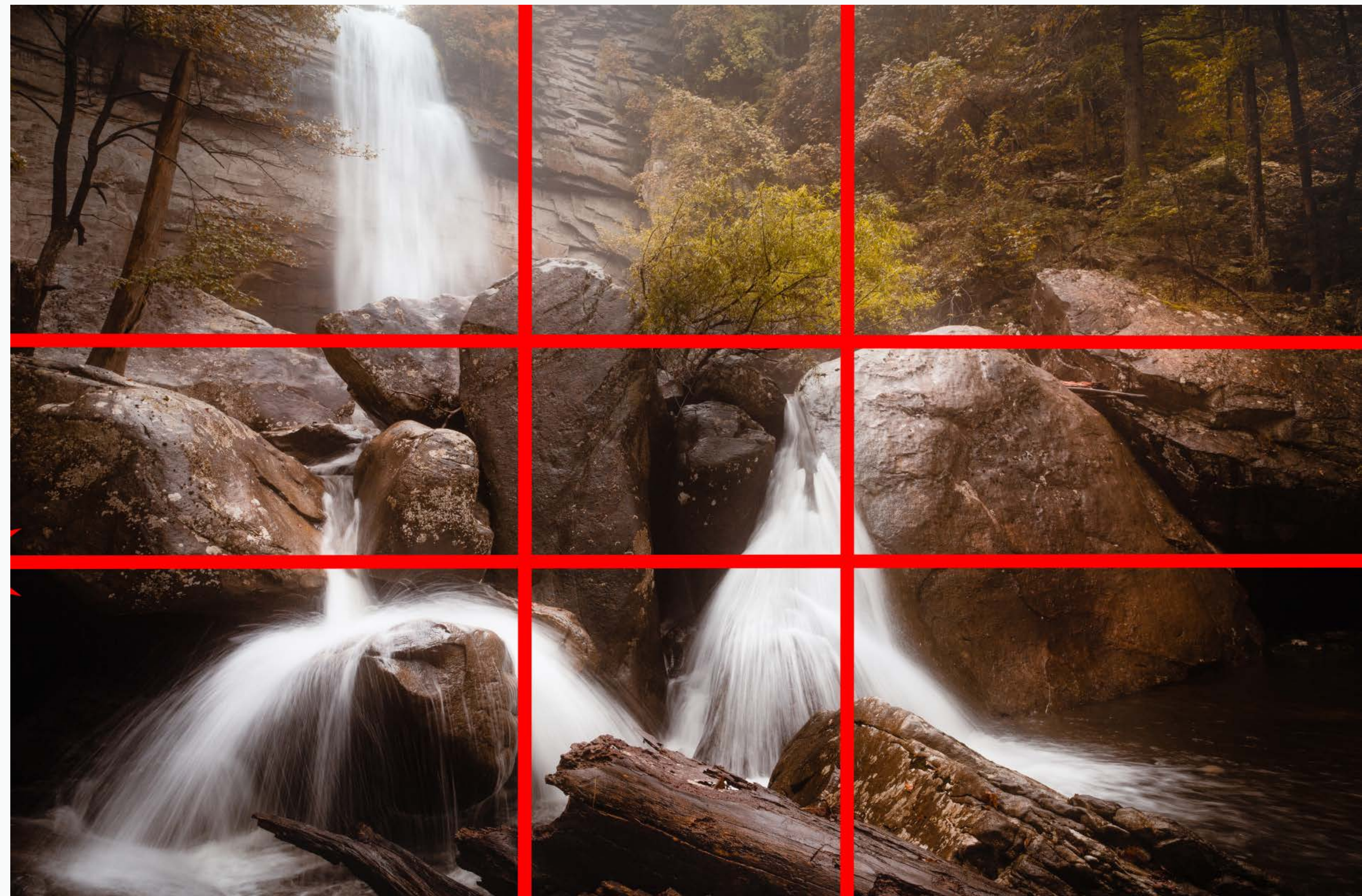
Being the product of mathematics (the 1.618 Golden Ratio), it has nothing to do with your photo's final framing.

What this means is that a picture composed around a Phi Grid will and will always be a derivative of a rectangle... a Golden Rectangle.

Notice that the Phi Grid is formed by combining four Golden Rectangles. The resulting grid lines separate the whole into eight smaller rectangles that surround a single rectangle at the center, making for nine separate sections.

Fortunately for us, we can still use the Phi Grid in much the same

way as we do the Rule of Thirds. Since the Phi Grid provides us with particular locations to place the elements of interest, all we have to do is visualize the areas where the grid lines intersect and compose our photos accordingly.



You'll notice that the Phi Grid closely resembles the grid formed by our old friend, the Rule of Thirds, but instead of dividing our frame into thirds, this time, the frame is divided by the Golden Ratio and its corresponding geometries.

THE PHI GRID: LANDSCAPE'S BEST FRIEND

If you haven't ascertained already, the compositional concepts held within this book are deliberately presented in such a way as not to imply that one technique is limited to only one scope of photography.

With that being said... the Phi Grid is extraordinarily useful in landscape photography! This is not to say that the Phi Grid can't be used to help compose stronger photographs of any genre, but it was if it was custom-made to be implemented when composing your landscape photos.

The Phi Grid provides a useful framework for arranging the main subject elements of your photo. Still, it is also a fantastic method for helping you

orient the horizon within your images.

In chapter three, we touched on the merits of placing the horizon lines in either the upper or the lower third portion of the frame, essentially aligning your horizon on the horizontal (funny how that works) grid lines formed by the Rule of Thirds.

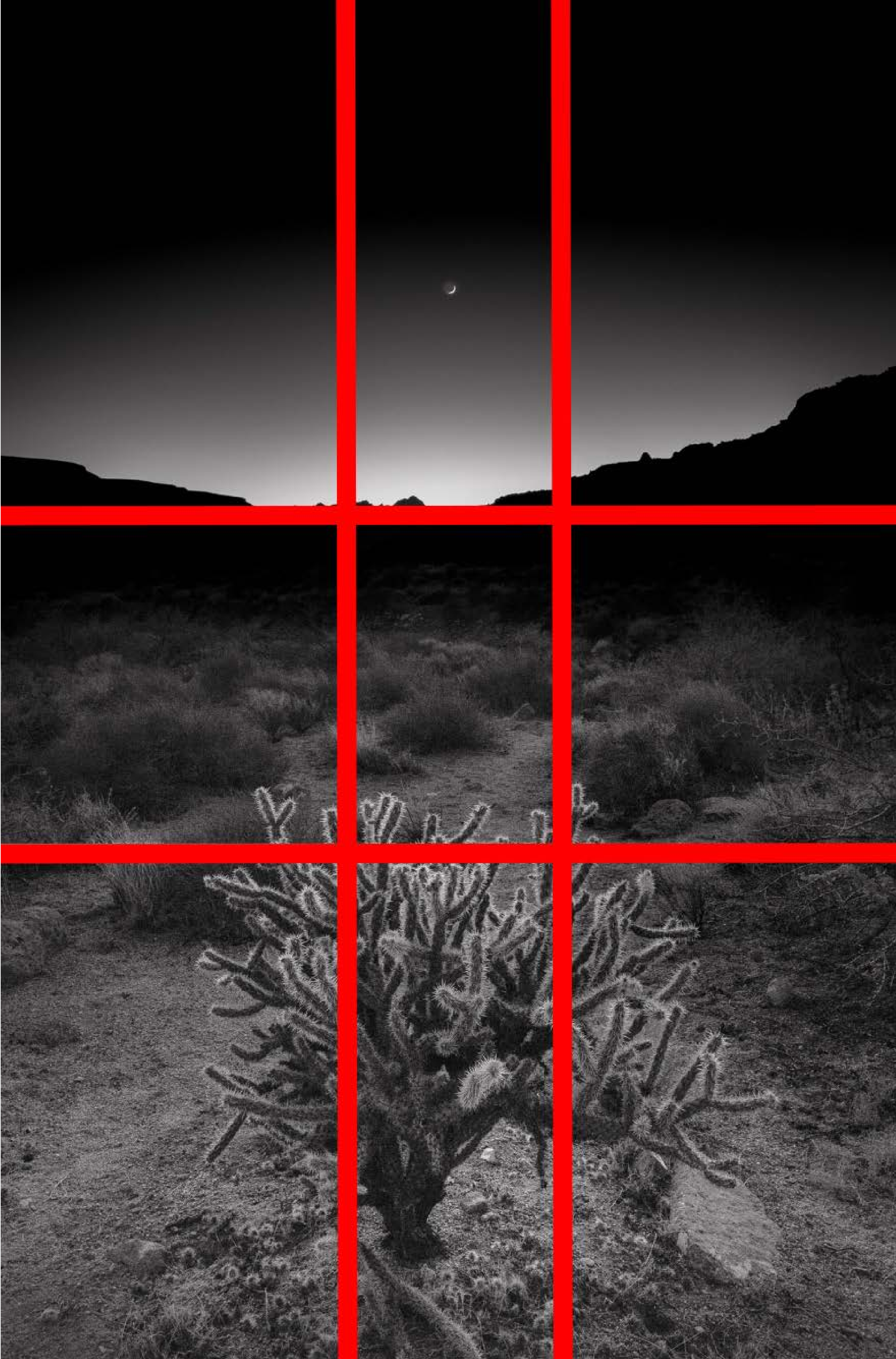
This has several benefits, such as controlling perspective and guiding the attention of your viewer. The Phi Grid takes this a step further by applying these same aesthetic principles based around the geometry of the Golden Rectangle.

Give it a try.

Place your horizon on the upper or lower horizontal line of the Phi Grid to add instant visual appeal to your landscape photos.

This technique is especially powerful when composing your landscape scenes in a vertical orientation.

It provides an easy way for you to quickly arrange the critical elements of your composition in relation to the horizon and vice-versa.



In the next chapter, we're going to dive into what can arguably be considered the ultimate in Golden Ratio wizardry. But before we move on, let's go over some of the crucial points about Golden Rectangles and the Phi Grid should you decide to include them in your photographic compositions.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMPOSING USING THE GOLDEN RATIO AND GOLDEN RECTANGLE

Ancient geometry that can still be used by anyone. Although based upon beautifully (some would argue sacred) articulated mathematics, the Golden Ratio is easily applicable to your photography when it comes to composing more visually dynamic images. The abbreviated ratio of 1.62 (or 1.618 if you're feeling adventurous) is the key to understanding how the Golden Ratio and its resulting geometry can be used to arrange the elements in your photos for better aesthetic appeal. Simply put, the Golden Ratio is used to construct a rectangle whose sides have a relative proportion of approximately 1.62, known as a "*Golden Rectangle*."

The Phi Grid is the operational component for your compositions. On its own, the Golden Ratio, and the resulting Golden Rectangle, aren't of much practical use compositionally. However, the Phi Grid, derived from the Golden Rectangle, is "*where the rubber meets the road,*" so to speak. Just as with the Rule of Thirds, the Phi Grid provides us with four lines, the intersections of which serve as compositional anchor points where we might ideally place the more important elements within our scene.

Though similar in appearance, the Phi Grid is not the same as the Rule of Thirds. Whereas the Rule of Thirds can divide any square or rectangular composition into nine equal parts, or "*thirds,*" the Phi Grid will always separate the frame into three sets of eight rectangles which surround a central rectangle (making the total nine); a set of four of the same size, a set of two of the same size, another set of two of the same size. Keep in mind that while this might sound complicated, it truly is not. Just remember that the points where the four lines that form those rectangles are important and are these points where

you should place your primary subject matter.

Landscapes love the Golden Ratio. Since the Golden Ratio and the Phi Grid are based upon the Golden Rectangle, they are perfect for landscape photography. No matter if your composition is oriented vertically or horizontally, the Phi Grid is a wonderful aid for arranging the elements within your landscape photos and for helping to judiciously position the horizon line for the greatest visual appeal.

5

THE FIBONACCI SPIRAL

Welcome to the chapter that is likely to convince you that it is indeed possible to inject a bit of mathematical mysticism into your photographs or, just as likely, sway you to the opinion that sometimes we might be overthinking things just a bit.

Whatever the case may be, we're going to discuss some concepts that extend far past the bounds of photographic composition.

In doing so, we'll talk about how the Golden Ratio can be extended even further. Further than grids and rectangles, and into a world where there have been some unfortunate misconceptions about what is and is not true about one of the most powerful methods for composing better photographs.

In this chapter, we're going to examine how you can incorporate the Fibonacci Spiral into your photographs so that your compositions carry a heavy dose of classical artistic appeal.

As usual, we'll do everything possible to limit our investigation into this compositional method to the practical applications you can easily use to strengthen your images.

With that being said, some of the ideas and history behind this technique are too interesting for us not to stray from the path just a little.

FIBONACCI, THE GOLDEN RATIO, AND... RABBITS???

What does the Fibonacci Spiral have to do with the Golden Ratio? Furthermore, how can we bring it all home to be used as a better photographic composition tool?

To answer both of these questions, we first have to take a brief dip back in time to the twelfth century. We'll visit the work of an Italian mathematician named Leonardo of Pisa, also known as Leonardo Bonacci... even better known by the name he was gifted a few hundred years after his death: **Fibonacci**.



This engraving of Fibonacci is dated to around 1850 and may or may not be an accurate representation.

Fibonacci wasn't just one of the many proud members of the historically celebrated "one name" club.

He also imparted to us a sequence of numbers, fittingly referred to as the "*Fibonacci Sequence*." This numerical sequence was initially part of Leonardo's famous mathematical work *Liber Abaci* in which, among other things, he posed an interesting problem concerning the exponential breeding of rabbits.

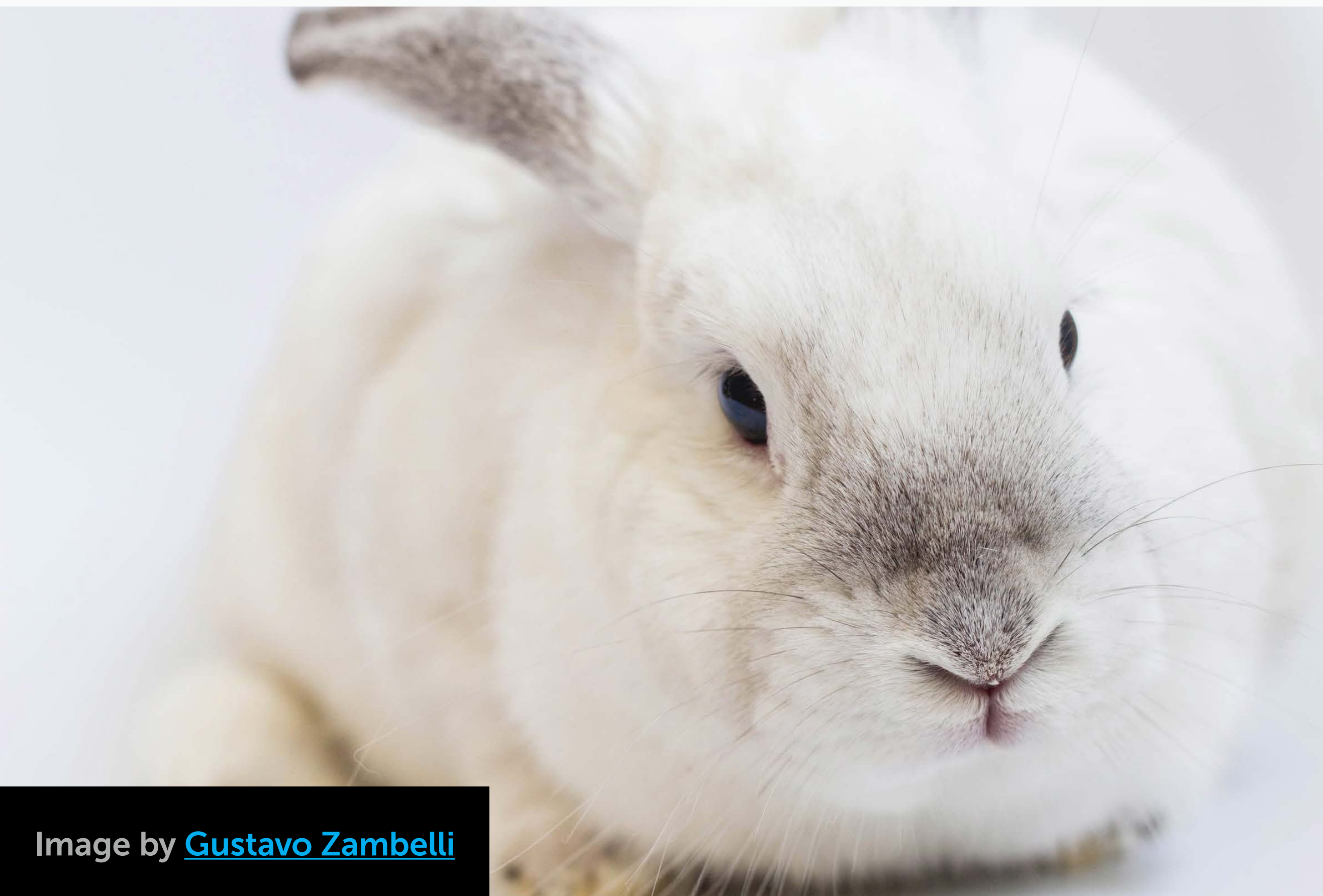


Image by [Gustavo Zambelli](#)

The Fibonacci Sequence goes like this: 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144, 233, 377... and continues into the great numerary void, well... forever.

This sequence of numbers is nothing more than a series of progressive sums. Each resulting number in the sequence is arrived at by adding the two numbers before it, which is why the arrangement can proceed infinitely.

Not only did the Fibonacci Sequence form the basis of one of my favorite Tool songs of all time, but it also weirdly intertwines with the Golden Ratio and thus the Golden Rectangle, both of which we discussed in the previous chapter so vigorously.

This relationship (although somewhat misunderstood) will eventually lead us to how we can incorporate the Fibonacci Spiral into our photographic compositions.

As we've already learned, the Golden Ratio is roughly 1.61803398875, which for the sake of simplicity within our context, I've thus far chosen to keep rounded to 1.62. You're welcome.

The Golden Ratio is the basis for the Golden Rectangle, and it's this rectangle that gives rise to the trusty Phi Grid, which we can then use to help us

better arrange the elements within our photos. It's here where things get interesting.

Stay with me...

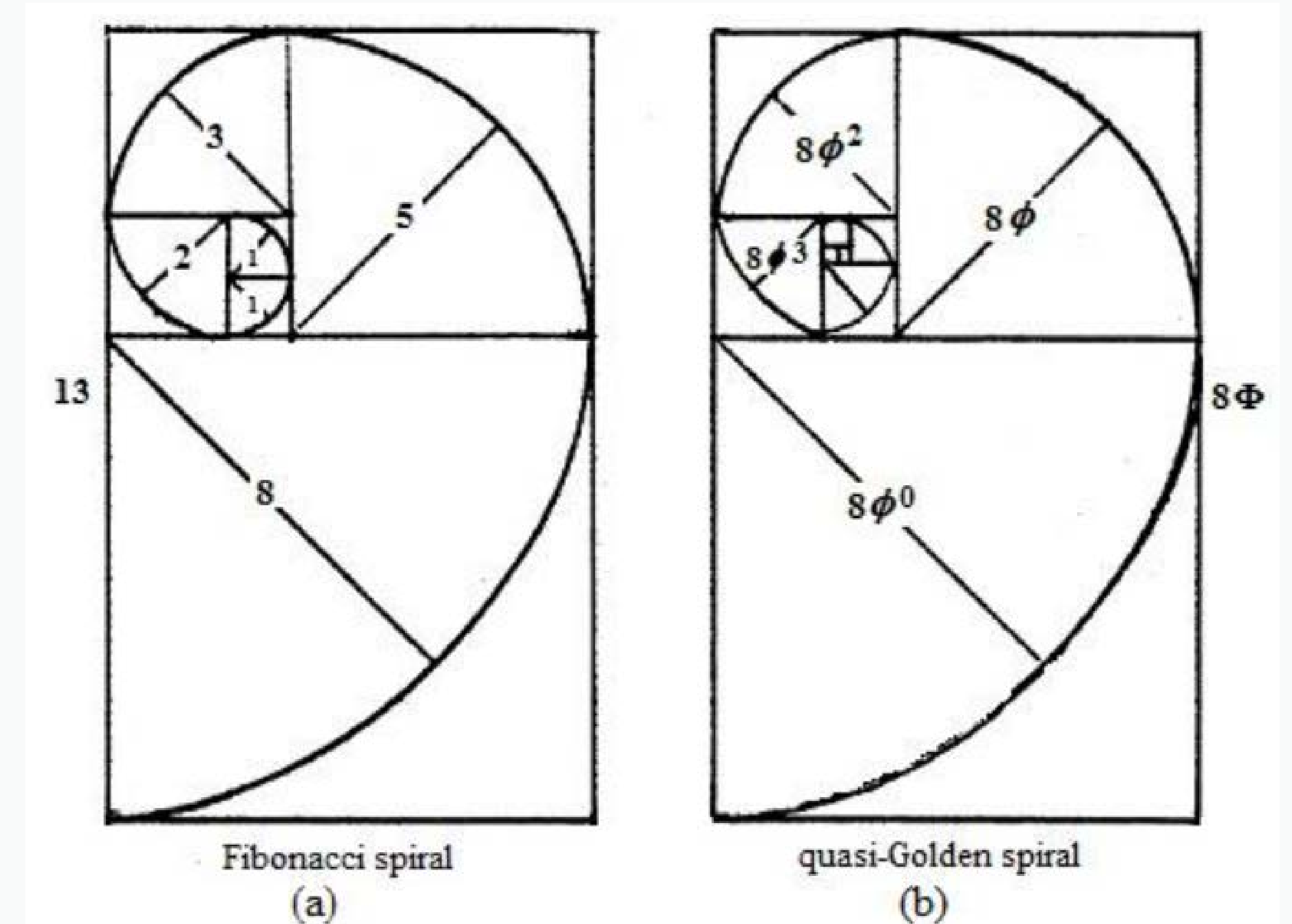
Looking at the Fibonacci Sequence more closely, we notice something fairly miraculous.

If we divide each number in the sequence by the number before it, we end up with a hearty set of ratios that looks like this:

- 1/1=1
- 2/1=2
- 3/2=1.5
- 5/3=1.666666667
- 8/5=1.6
- 13/8=1.625
- 21/13=1.6153846154
- 34/21=1.619047619
- 55/34=1.6176470588
- 89/55=1.6181818182
- 144/89=1.6179775281
- 233/144=1.6180555556

Now, doesn't that look eerily familiar?

The further we progress through the Fibonacci Sequence, the closer the ratios formed by the successive numbers approach 1.62... the Golden Ratio. Dispensing with any further mathematics, we realize that, although not precisely analogous to the spiral that can be drawn based on successive Golden Rectangles, the Fibonacci Sequence gives birth to its own similar spiral.



The Fibonacci Spiral results from successive "Fibonacci Squares," where each successive square possesses dimensions corresponding to the Fibonacci Sequence. (Iniguez, Jose. (2016). The Golden Quadratic and the Fibonacci System III)

At long last, this is why the Fibonacci Spiral is such an interesting compositional tool for our photography.

It is the result of an oddly unexpected correlation to the Golden Ratio, which of course, has been proven over the centuries to add greater aesthetic appeal to all manner of artistic works. It arguably can be found in nature as well. However, naturally occurring manifestations of the Fibonacci Spiral have been somewhat misrepresented and often misunderstood in popular culture, possibly leading to parallels being drawn where they might not truly exist. Fortunately, none of that concerns us here today. Thank Goodness...

THE FIBONACCI SPIRAL IN PHOTOGRAPHY

Now that we've adequately steeped ourselves in the history and fundamentals of the Fibonacci Spiral, it's time to learn how this sensational piece of mathematical sortilege can be applied to your photography.

For all its enigmatic splendor, the practical application of the Fibonacci Spiral is surprisingly uncomplicated.

In the same manner that we visualize the Rule of Thirds and the Phi Grid, we can overlay Fibonacci's beautiful spiral. Those techniques help guide us for placing important elements within our compositions.

Ultimately, the Fibonacci Spiral is best used when your composition presents a singular subject matter surrounded by relatively interesting environmental content.

The spiral's eye serves as the anchor point for the main subject, with the remainder serving to lead our viewer throughout the rest of the frame. Unlike the Phi Grid or Rule of Thirds grid pattern, where we have the choice of multiple intersecting points, the Fibonacci Spiral is primarily effective only when used directionally.

This means that your composition generally should be concentrated on the main subject (at the heart of the spiral) with all other informational elements following concentrically as the spiral radiates towards the edges of the frame.

Have a look at the following image.

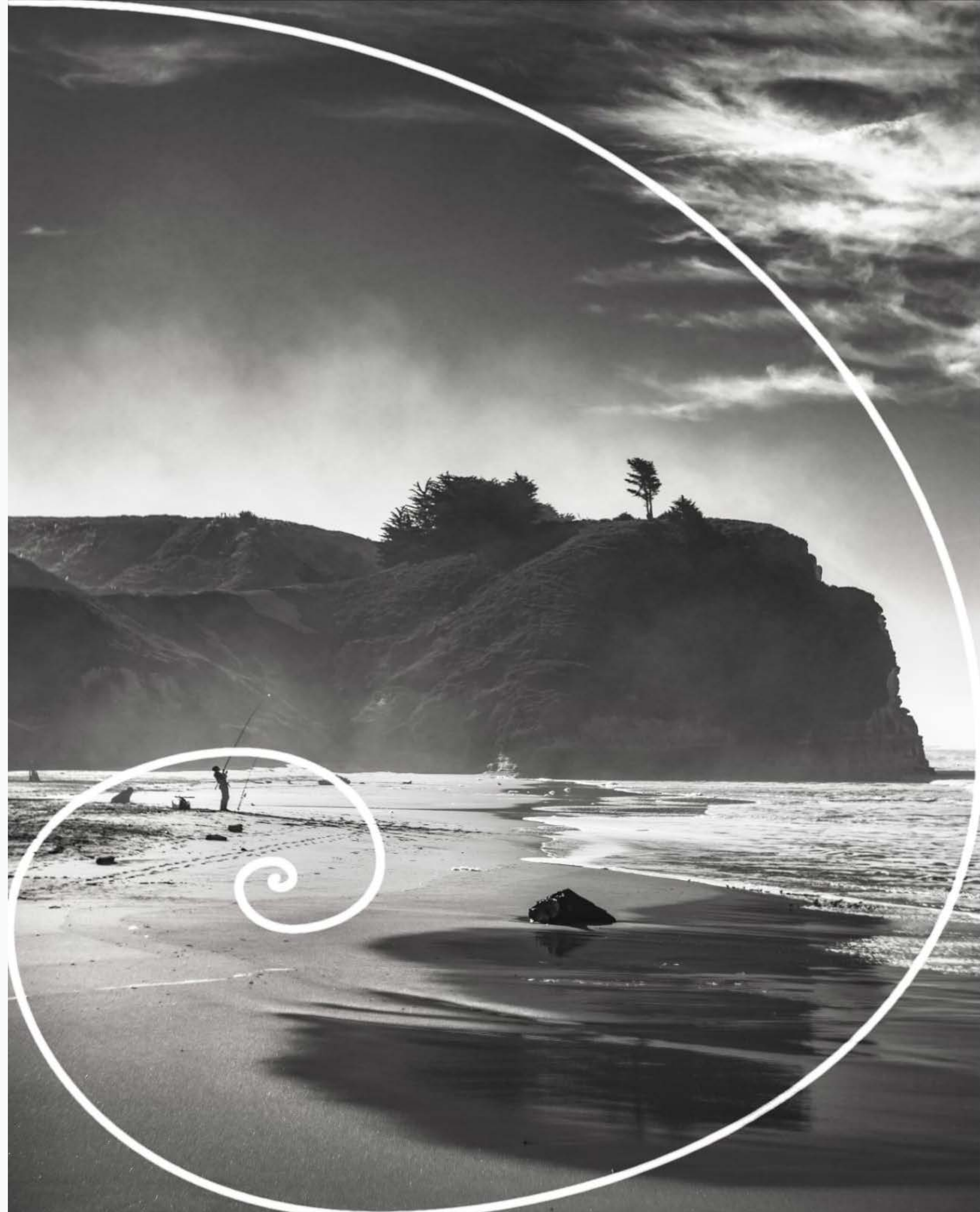


This might seem like the Fibonacci Spiral is somewhat limited, seeing as it relies on a more directional compositional approach.

While it's true that the spiral can indeed be considered a more *"specialized"* means of composing a photo, it is also true that it is potentially quite versatile. Even though it is not as straightforward as a grid, it can be flipped and rotated to facilitate a wide range of compositions and orientations, whether vertical or horizontal.

This photo was cropped in post-processing based on the Fibonacci Spiral.

Notice how neatly the spiral wraps the entire frame. The fisherman in the lower-left portion is the main subject, which is where the spiral originates. Radiating from here, the curve then envelops the background's tree and cliffs to balance the composition.



Furthermore, allow yourself to visualize the Fibonacci Spiral more fluidly; that is, learn to overlay the spiral in different orientations using your mind's eye.

If your primary subject is better suited on the right side of the frame, place it there, and arrange the other portions of your photo along the spiral.

Is your subject to the left?

Flip the spiral and proceed in the same way.

The same is true if your subject is better suited in the upper or lower spatial locations of the photo; don't be afraid to judiciously re-work the frame based on the fundamental principles of the spiral.

Take complete liberty with the orientation of your spiral, as you can see in the two photographs on the right.

Of course, we still have to be careful that we don't use the Fibonacci Spiral recklessly by attempting to "*make it fit*" where it doesn't belong.



Most any photo can be composed by drawing an imaginary spiral connecting the subject to its surroundings. The key to effectively using and thereby gleaning the real benefits of the Fibonacci magic is only to incorporate the spiral when it aligns harmoniously with the particular scene you happen to be creating. This is true for any compositional tool. Refer back to Chapter 2 for a refresher on this concept.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMPOSING WITH THE FIBONACCI SPIRAL

A firm understanding of the basis of the Fibonacci Spiral is extremely important. In this chapter, we've included a larger than usual amount of technical information, historical framework, and mathematics. Admittedly, even this has only scratched the surface of how the Fibonacci Sequence and its resulting geometries are contrived. This degree of background is needed to help you better understand how and when the Fibonacci Spiral can be effectively

incorporated into your photographs.

The Fibonacci Spiral is not the same as a Golden Spiral. Although quite similar in appearance and often terminologically confused, the Fibonacci Spiral is not a direct derivative of the Golden Ratio or Golden Rectangle. Even though the progressive divisions within the Sequence come suspiciously close to 1.618, the Fibonacci Spiral is most definitely its own animal.

Although not as versatile as the Phi Grid and Rule of Thirds, the Fibonacci Spiral is surprisingly versatile as a compositional tool. Don't be afraid to flip or rotate the Spiral to better suit the orientation and creative direction of your particular composition.

Don't force the Spiral. While it is certainly acceptable to mold your composition based on the Fibonacci Spiral, be mindful that you never find yourself "making it work" with your image. Go where the natural creative direction takes you even if it leads to a more simple construction of your image.

Authors Note: We photographers work and operate in the real world, so it's worth mentioning that few people, if any, can visualize a perfect construct of the Fibonacci Spiral while composing your photos.

This technique is ideally suited for application during post-processing.

If you feel the Fibonacci Spiral suits your particular composition, just do your best to capture the photo with the intent of recomposing using the Fibonacci Spiral overlay available alongside the cropping

tools found in the majority of post-processing software and applications on the market today such as Lightroom Classic.



6

COMPOSITIONAL USE OF SYMMETRY AND PATTERNS

Patterns. Symmetry. The simulacrum (nice word, right?) of natural and artificial objects, light, shadows, and even textures. When we think of these things, should we approach them as tools for composition or as subjects unto themselves? The short answer is...

Yes.

The usage of symmetrical formations and repeating patterns are some of the rare facets of photography that happily occupy two spaces at once.

On the one hand, symmetry and patterns have long stood solid as the main subjects of many, many, **many** photographs, both historical and modern.

Simultaneously, the usage of patterns and symmetry also avail itself as robust compositional aids that you can put to work to make stronger, more impactful photographs. While it's certainly true that both symmetrical and repeating alignments of well... anything... can make for outstanding photo opportunities, especially when presented in the abstract, they shouldn't be used solely for this purpose.

As we're soon to discuss, patterns and symmetry

can be extremely useful for injecting extra creative juice into virtually any photography genre.

A BEAUTIFUL ARRANGEMENT

In the last chapter, we learned that even complex geometrical phenomena could be readily observed in nature (although misinterpreted at times) once you know they exist.

Just like those beautiful spirals, other patterns and geometric symmetries can be found all around us once we begin to search for them.



However, be warned; it could very well be that once you start to actively hunt for patterns and symmetry to use in your compositions, you might find it difficult to stop.

The reason why interesting arrangements of shapes and patterns can make for such powerful compositional tools is that they appeal to our brains' natural inclination to look for repetitive occurrences in our environment.

The brain wants to make things make sense and understand or even anticipate situations. This is one reason why it's so easy for us to see familiar shapes in clouds and why some people see faces on pieces of toast.

As it relates to photography, due to its process of cognition, the brain often attempts to latch onto visual elements within a photograph. This is why using patterns and symmetry can make our photos more visually interesting.

When we recognize a certain pattern within a scene, we can use that to draw our viewer's attention to our main subject or, in some cases, creatively present the pattern itself in a way that becomes

something of a natural composition on its own merits.

A bit later, in Chapters 8 and 9, we'll explain the use of "*leading lines*" and "*framing*," both of which are marvelous ways to expound on the applications of patterns and symmetry in your photography.



Perhaps what makes patterns and symmetries such compelling compositional devices is the simple

abundance in which they can be found. Once you actively begin to train yourself to find them.

Patterns are not always so obvious. The same building or tree or street can present itself radically differently based on the perceptions of the person viewing them. As a photographer, your ability to show that which is otherwise unseen, such as hidden patterns and symmetry, can essentially “*make something from nothing*” through your photographs. This ability is extremely useful.



Just as with any skill, your amplitude to pick out and make use of patterns and symmetry is directly related to how much you practice. Luckily, this is one of the few photographic techniques that doesn't require a camera to exercise. Even when you're not taking photographs, keep your eyes open to the availability of symmetry and patterns. Ask yourself how you would make the best use of the opportunity if you were shooting.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE USE OF PATTERNS AND SYMMETRY

Symmetrical patterns and repetition shapes play into our brain's natural inclination to seek out that which helps it better interpret its environment. Incorporating patterns and symmetry into your compositions can instantly cause the viewer to search more deeply within your photo. This active, yet incidental cognitive participation, adds instant strength to your photograph.

Look for ways to make patterns and symmetry work

to accentuate or highlight your photo's main subject. See the chapters on leading lines and natural framing for more insight on this technique.

Don't be afraid to let the patterns and shapes within your photo stand as the main subject. Trust your creative instincts as a photographer. If you stumble across a pattern or interesting morphology, whether natural or human-made, then there's a 100% chance that it's worth shooting.

Practice makes perfect... or at the very least, practice breeds opportunity. The more you train yourself to see patterns and symmetry, the more apt you are to make better use of them in your compositions. You can exercise your creative eye in this regard quite literally anywhere and at any time. Why not right now? Take a look around you and find at least one instance of patterns or symmetry. How might you use this in a photo?

Authors Note: The words "*pattern*" and "*symmetry*" or their derivatives have appeared nearly fifty times in this chapter.

If you tilt your head to the left at a 30-degree angle, close one eye and draw an imaginary line connecting them, they create a pattern that roughly resembles the outline of a Canon AE-1 camera.

Just kidding... or am I?

7

POSITIVE SPACE, NEGATIVE SPACE AND MINIMALISM

Think of a cup. It can be any cup, a coffee cup, a teacup, or if you must project yourself as a non-conformist, the cup can even be a glass or a bowl of some kind.

Next, imagine filling that cup or glass with water

or another favorite beverage of your choosing.

Simple enough, yes?

Let's dig deeper.

What have we done by filling the cup? What's happening here? Logically, you would assume that the cup is now full, but this is only a half-truth.

While it is certainly true that the cup has been filled, it is equally correct to say that we have removed the empty space from within the cup, replacing it with the water. Essentially, nothingness (the empty space within the cup) has now been replaced with somethingness (the water).

Armed with this new understanding, we must now realize that it would be impossible to fill if the cup were not empty initially.

This leaves us with a somewhat startling revelation: empty space, that which is not there, is just as important as what is there.

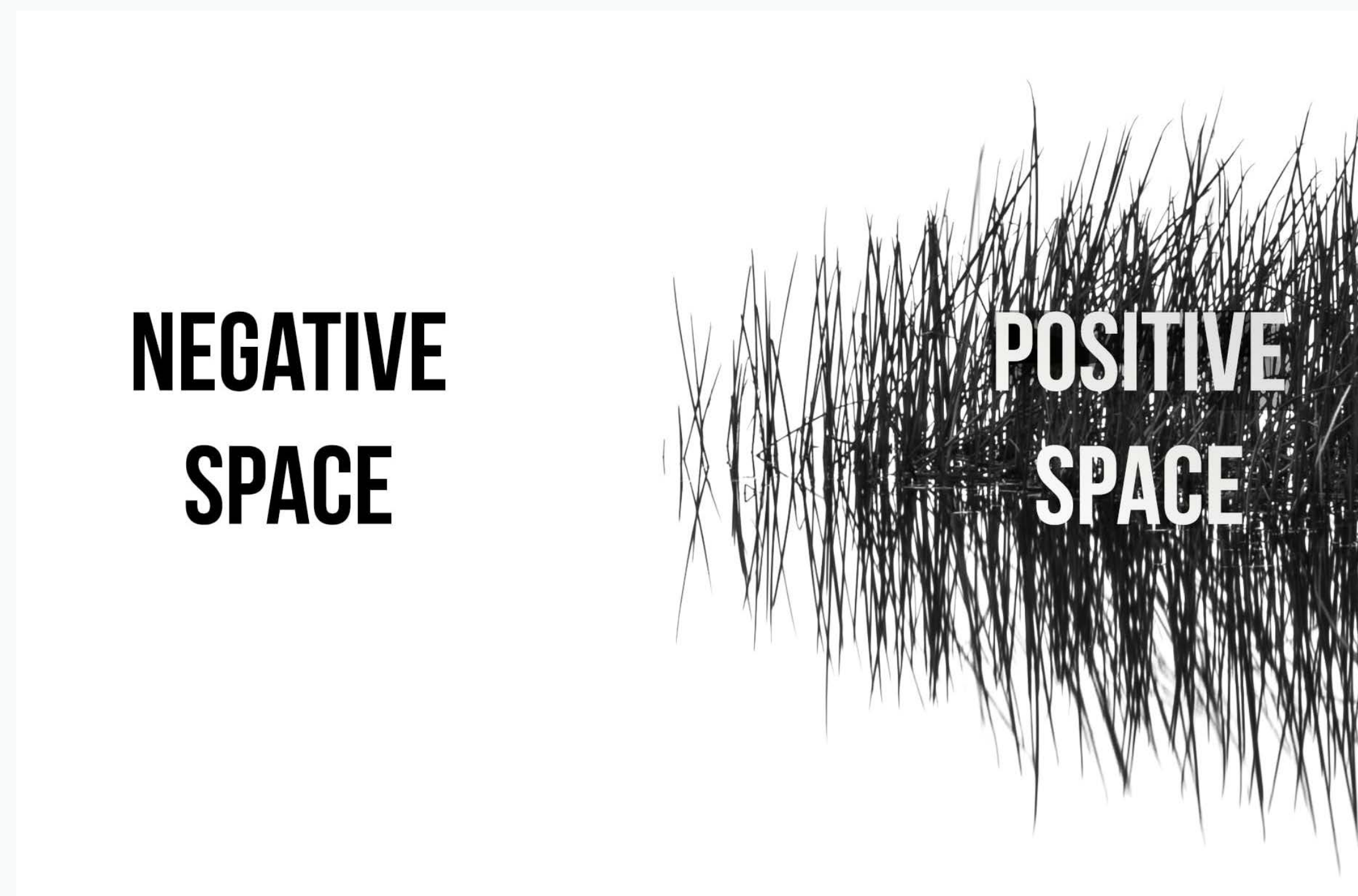




This small dose of Zen-like philosophizing can be enormously important in the composition of your photographs. Virtually all photos (and other artworks) consist of positive and negative space.

Positive space can be thought of as the space occupied by the subject or subjects within your photo. The negative space is the space (emptiness), which surrounds the positive space (your subject).

Essentially, any space which is not occupied by an element within your composition is considered to be negative space.



Reeds and their reflection in a still pond. It is a rare breed of photograph that manages to be abstract, simplistic, and minimalistic, all while incorporating a relatively large amount of negative space.

Just as with our Zen coffee cup, understanding the importance of emptiness and making successful use of negative space can add a surprising amount of aesthetic to your photographic compositions.

MINIMALISM

Many years ago when I was first considering dipping my toes into the deep end of the photographic pool, the then chairman of the photography department at the college I was attending (not for photography ironically enough), laid a bit of wisdom on me that I still mill over to this day.

In his small yet oddly impressive office confines, surrounded by photographs accrued from his many years as a working photojournalist, he told me that *"...the value of a photograph can be measured by the amount of information it contains."*

At the time, those words rung a far distant bell somewhere in my still blooming creative subconscious.

As I sat there listening to stories from Cuba and

how he had crawled onto Castro's desk to get his shot of the perplexed dictator, I somehow realized that he was indeed correct.

A photograph, no matter its content, is meant for one thing and one thing only; to convey a measure of information to the viewer and, by doing so, directly elicit an emotional vibration.

I'll never forget those words, and for the next few years, I attempted to apply that wisdom as I understood it; more is more when it comes to making a photograph.

Squeeze in as much information as you can, and the photos you make will inherently be better.

More than ten years have passed since I walked out of Mr. Veneman's office. Looking back through the lens of hindsight with over a decade of professional camera slinging behind me, I now see that I only partially understood what I had been told that day.



There is an enormous difference between the amount of information presented within a photograph and the amount of content shown within a picture.

Visual content and information are not directly proportional. A picture can contain a multitude of informational layers while visually displaying a sparse amount of physical elements. At its most basic level, this is the concept of minimalism in photography.

In a way, it is not necessarily the viewable content (positive space) that carries the information. Rather, it is how the content within the photograph is presented that gets the job done.

This leads us back to the concept of positive and negative space. When taking a minimalistic approach to composition, no matter the subject matter, it becomes of paramount importance that you take into account how the empty space compliments the positive, and vice versa.

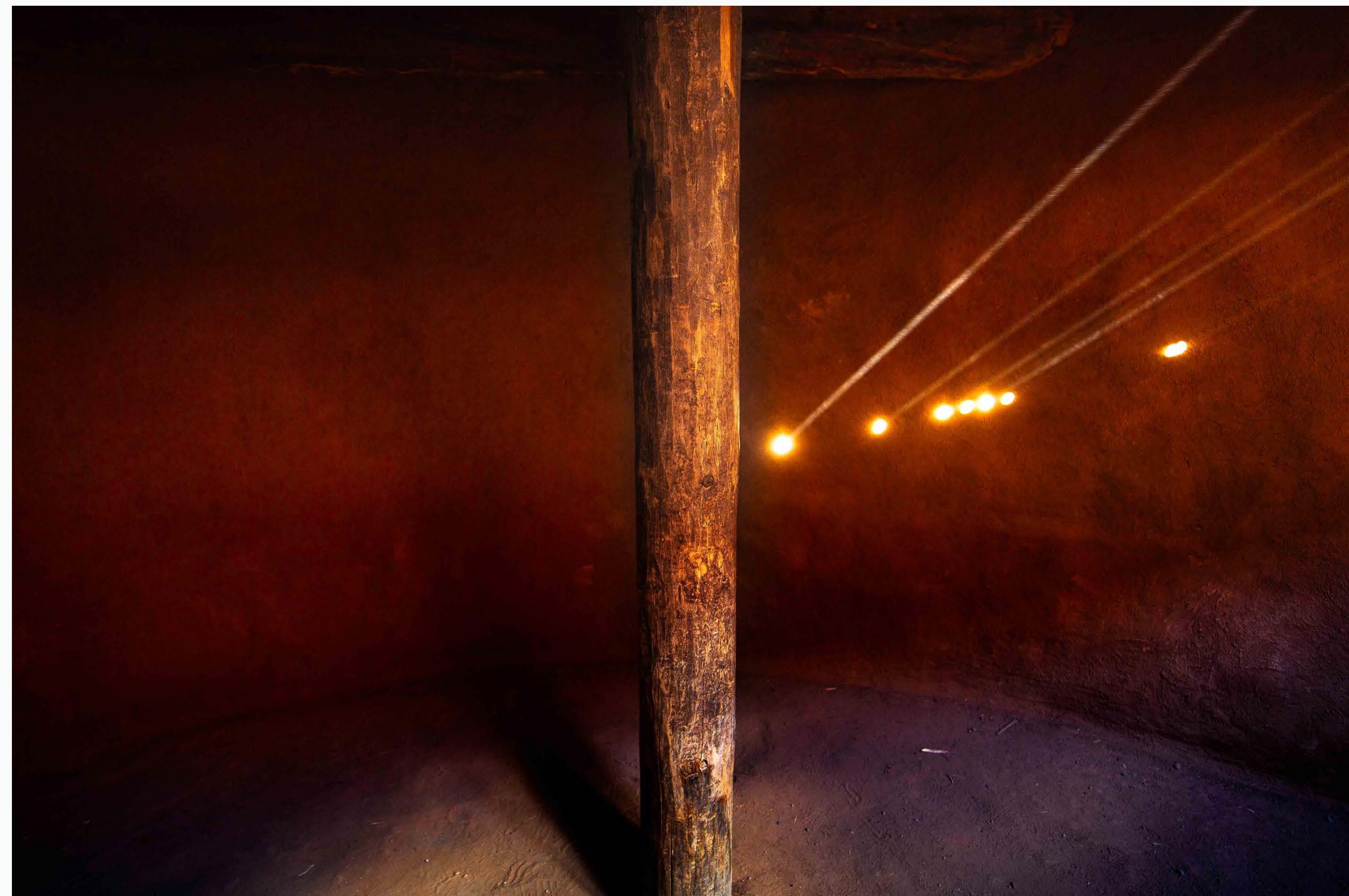
A photograph that contains very little in terms of actual content can still convey a large amount of information for the viewer.

Going further, it could be argued that given the lack of physical distractions, your viewer is left with a more engaging experience since they must inject their imagination into the photo to “*complete the puzzle.*” This means that a minimalistic photo can carry information that is wholly dependent on the viewer based on their own experiences and subjective thought... which is a truly great thing.

A FEW WORDS ON MINIMALISM, NEGATIVE SPACE AND SIMPLICITY

In photography, many things are closely related but, in the end, produce altogether differing results.

This relationship is perfectly demonstrated when we begin to discuss minimalism, simplicity, and to some extent, negative space. Take a quick look at this photo from inside an ancient Kiva at Pecos Pueblo in New Mexico.



The roof support post is placed in the center of the frame, with the light streaming through the top of the Kiva to the right with only hints of the walls and floor being shown through the gloom.

Would you consider this an example of minimalism? Most likely, since there are very few physical elements visible. Is it simple? I believe most people who view the photo would say yes.

Does it exhibit large amounts of empty space? Not really. While it's true that this image is quite simple and displays minimal physical content, the frame itself is full of colors and textures along with interesting tonal ranges. Minimalism, negative space, and simplicity don't necessarily go hand in hand. They are certainly connected, but are the terms interchangeable? Absolutely not.

A minimalistic photo can often be considered simple, but not all simple photographs are minimalistic. Simultaneously, just because a picture contains a large amount of negative space doesn't automatically mean it is simple or even minimal. Aside from the occasional uncommon example (like the reeds reflected in the pond), it is surprising how

seldom both minimalism and negative space collide with simplicity.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE MINIMALIST COMPOSITIONS

Understand your intentions for the subject and your photograph. Minimalism for minimalism's sake is meaningless. If you feel that your photo will be better suited by incorporating large amounts of negative space to isolate or amplify the corresponding positive space, you're likely on the correct path. Ask yourself, "Does the absence add to the composition?" If so, then go ahead. If not, look for alternative compositional approaches.

Color is optional. We mentioned the removal of "distractions" when working with minimalist compositions. Perhaps nothing can be more distracting than the over-presentation of color, meaning that black and white photos can display minimalism beautifully. At the same time, color can enhance the impact of predominant negative space.

Digital photography (and digital scans of negative/positive film) allows us to experiment with color and black and white easily, so don't feel as if you are confined to one route.

Don't assume abstract photography is synonymous with minimalism. While it's true that some minimalist photographs can be considered abstractions, not all abstract photos are necessarily minimal. Of course, the door swings both ways. Refer back to the point about knowing your intentions for your subject.

88

LEADING LINES

In a 1982 interview with Leslie Megahey, the legendary American film director, Orson Welles, spoke of his relationship with the equally legendary cinematographer Gregg Toland.

To grossly paraphrase, Welles recalled Toland once said that he could teach him everything anyone needed to know about filming a movie in three hours and that everything else was a matter of *"if you were any good or not."*

"What does an old interview with Orson Welles have to do with improving your photographic composition?" I hear you say.

Why would I choose to bring it up at the onset of discussing *"leading lines"* in photography?

The reason I mention such an admittedly obscure reference is not some thinly veiled excuse for finding a way to talk about the work Orson Welles and Gregg Toland (which I love doing) but rather to illustrate a very important point.

Just as the Rule of Thirds is a commonly practiced method for making stronger compositions, so too is the idea of using leading lines. Both of which, when

used incorrectly or without careful forethought, can damage the overall impact of your photos.

So, as we move forward and learn how to make use of leading lines, remember that the technique is only as good as your conscientious application of its principles.

With that out of the way, onto the wonderful world of Leading Lines.

THE SUBTLE ART OF DRAWING ATTENTION

Leading lines function as visual *"signposts"* within your photographs.

They are used to guide the viewer's eyes towards the elements within the frame, which you feel merit the most attention.

Simply put, leading lines help to subconsciously lead the viewer's attention to your photo's main subject.

Read back through that sentence one more time. The operative word there is *"subconsciously."*



Here, we see the use of leading lines. Spatially, the bridge occupies much of the foreground, which immediately pulls in the viewer's attention, gradually calling notice to the flowing water and finally the continuing path in the background. This type of composition imparts an immersive sense of depth to a photo.

When using leading lines, it's important not to make the presentation overtly obvious.

Even worse, don't fall victim to the retrograde pitfall of using leading lines for the sake of using leading lines when other compositional methods might be more fitting.

Leading lines can be used in virtually any photography genre, including but not limited to landscapes, portraits, still life and street photography.

That being said, the effective use of leading lines should always be aimed to subtly draw attention to the main subject within your photo.

What elements are available in your picture?

Are there any geometric shapes that can be used to point the way to what you want your viewer to see the most?

Furthermore, leading lines don't necessarily have to be true "*lines*."

Have a look at this photo. What do you notice first?



My intent for the main subject is the tree in mid-frame. Notice how the road emerges vertically from the foreground, leading towards the tree. The mountains in the background form a horizontal plane

that points the way towards the tree as well. Even the fence lines parallel to the road, serve to accentuate the main purpose of the photo. Everything within the image points towards the key element of the scene.



While not overtly obvious, the leading lines cause your eyes to gravitate to the main subject unknowingly.

WALKING A THIN LINE

Unlike The Rule of Thirds and the Golden Ratio, or the Fibonacci Spiral, which rely on your composition's spatial relationships, leading lines are born from the physical ingredients available inside the frame itself.

Whether natural or artificial, leading lines are elements within your composition that you can use to emphasize points of interest. They might be compositionally useful elements, but they are still elements nonetheless.

As such, the same considerations still apply to their usage, and you should approach them just as you would when determining what to include or exclude from your final photo. Remember that your photo acts to creatively convey a certain amount of information to your viewer. As discussed in Chapter 7, the inclusion or exclusion of the informational ingredients can greatly affect the overall outcome of

your composition.

The misuse of leading lines can cause unwanted visual disruptions and, in the end, become counterproductive. Of course, every photograph (and photographer) is different. It will ultimately be left to you and your judgment to determine if using leading lines will hinder your composition.



Notice how the path transects the frame, guiding the viewer through the elements within the photo. This is also an example of "natural framing," which we'll discuss more in the next chapter.

Remember, too much information within a photo, even with good intentions, can lead to a jumbled, confusing, and ineffectual experience for the viewer of your photos.

When in doubt about whether or not leading lines might work to emphasize your subject, ask yourself which will be more apparent: the parts of the photo which make up the leading lines or the subject itself?

If the subject is hindered, consider another route.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR USING LEADING LINES

Leading lines act as visual signposts to guide the eye of your viewer. Look for natural or artificial elements that can gently point the way to your main subject.

Subtlety is key. Leading lines should never make themselves too obvious.

Leading lines don't have to be physical "*lines*."

Anything which inconspicuously draws attention to the primary element within your photo can work as a leading line. However, the path should ideally be an unbroken visual avenue which originates from the sides or corners of the frame.

Don't forget that too much information is almost always not a good thing. Never over-complicate your composition simply for the sake of using leading lines.

When in doubt, revert to your main subject. Do the leading lines detract from the true intent of the photo? If so, try something less obtrusive.

9

FRAMING

When we imagine framing a photo, naturally, our minds leap to some act of physically framing our finished prints. Often, we consider framing to be something that is handled literally at the end of the photo making process. This isn't wrong, but the act of framing a photograph

extends well into a complete retrograde direction when placed in the context of photographic composition.

Just as when framing a physical copy of a photo arrives at the finish, compositional framing begins when we start composing our picture.



Often referred to as “*natural framing*,” compositional framing is a method by which we can make our subjects more aesthetically apparent to our viewers’ eyes.

In a way, compositional framing seeks to reach the same end as its wall-friendly counterpart. Both physical and natural framing work to isolate our work from its surroundings while complimenting the overall content. These both take different routes but somehow manage to achieve a similar outcome.

IN SEARCH OF NATURAL FRAMING

Compositional framing makes use of natural or even artificial elements within the scene so that the main subject/subjects become emphasized.

Whereas picking out the perfect frame to showcase our prints involves a certain degree of intuitional creativeness, so too does making use

of the peripheral aspects available that can serve to frame our subjects for a more concrete composition.

If this act of using the subject’s surroundings to make a more interesting photo sounds slightly familiar, it’s because we’ve discussed it already in Chapter 8 when we talked about the aesthetic power of “*leading lines*.”

When making use of leading lines, the photographer consciously attempts to direct the



viewer's attention using compositional "signposts." This is much the same as compositional framing, but with one major difference, framing can and often should be overtly obvious to the viewer.

If leading lines can be considered a whisper meant to get our viewers, natural framing can grab our viewers and shake them while yelling, "*Hey! Look at this!*" ... speaking purely from a compositional standpoint, of course.

Authors Note: Please do not physically assault your viewers, not even if they don't understand your photography. I know... it's tough sometimes.

Alright, maybe that was a bit of an exaggeration in how to look for ways to use natural framing in your photos.

Perhaps a more fitting characterization goes back to its similarities to real, physical picture-frames and how they serve as complements to the photographs they house.

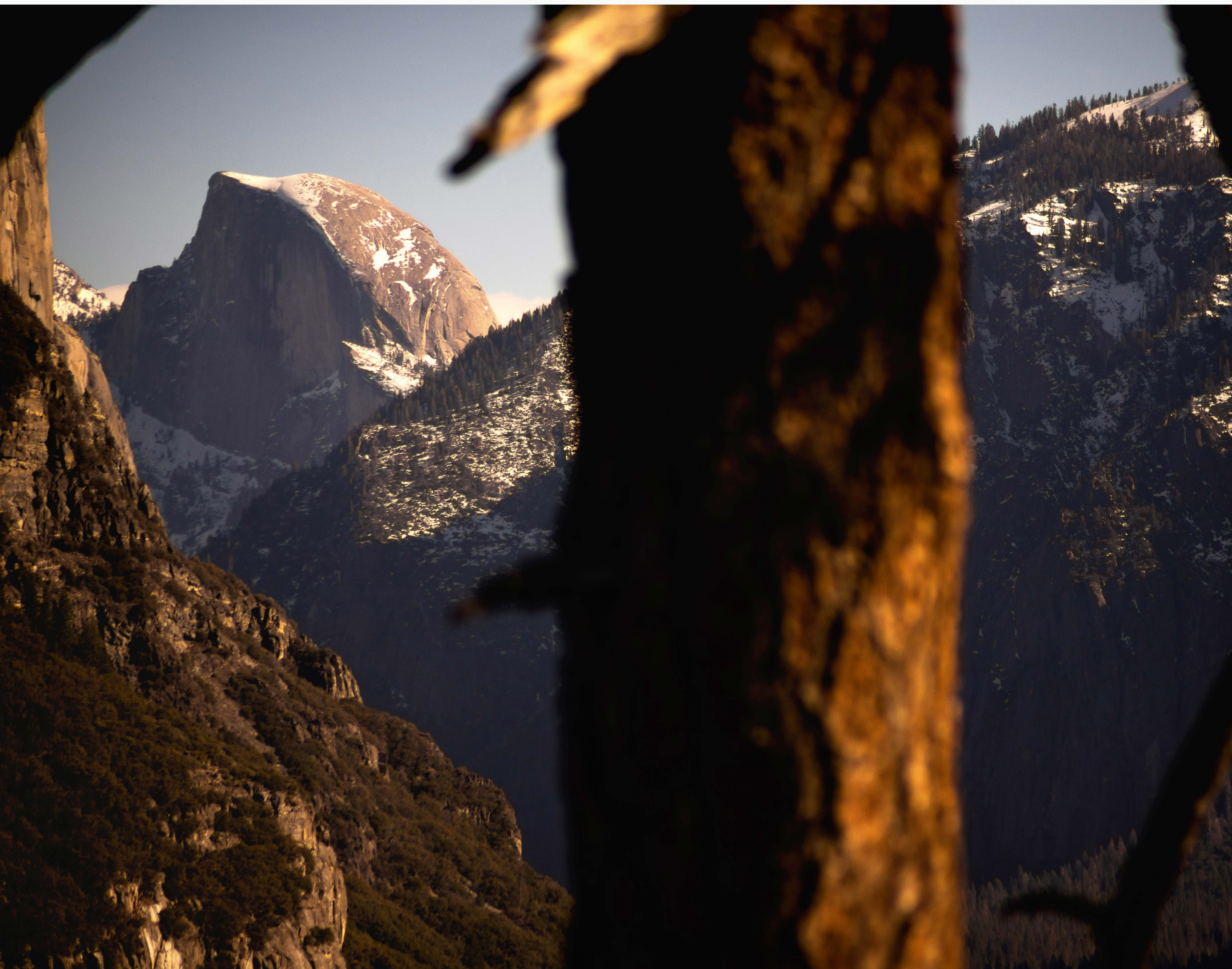


The prominence of the tree in the middle of the frame is amplified using the massive trunks of the surrounding Redwoods as natural framing. With its bright, yellow leaves already standing out from the rest of the forest undergrowth, this framing serves to direct the viewer's attention towards the center even more.

This means that while you know that your image makes use of compositional framing, and your audience knows they're viewing an image featuring this framing, the overall approach should be one of harmony.

Not only that but how we go about including

natural framing in our photos can vary widely. A portrait photographer might make use of a picture frame to frame their clients during a shoot. A landscape photographer could use the convergence of tree branches to subtly frame up a distant mountain peak.



***On the left:** The legendary Half Dome of Yosemite, framed through the trunk and branches of a stubborn pine tree which refused to move from the foreground.*

CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMPOSITIONAL FRAMING

As with any photographic composition, we should constantly be striving towards balance when we choose to feature compositional framing in our photos.

The manner we choose to frame our subjects should work to emphasize their inherent qualities without being so *"on the nose"* that the framing itself distracts the attention of the viewer.

Simply taking a selfie in a mirror doesn't mean it's a great self-portrait just because you happen to be *"framed."*

Just the same, not every photo should include natural framing, even if it happens to be available.

Here are a few recommendations to consider when determining if your particular photo might benefit from natural framing:

Consider the mood of the photo. Does the framing maintain the overall feel of the image?

Will the use of framing come at the benefit of preferred lighting? Great light is a beautiful thing, literally. Don't sacrifice a well-lit photo to make use of natural framing.

Is it a total cliché? I know, it's difficult to avoid at times, and we're all guilty of taking *"overdone"* photos. If you choose to use framing in a situation that has been photographed many times before, only do so after you've made a concerted effort to find a more creative composition. I'm looking at you *"wine glass portrait"* guy...

Remember, nobody visits a photography gallery to look at the frames. Don't use natural framing that completely obliterates the subject matter. If you're ever in doubt about whether the framing takes away from your main subject, it probably does.

One of the great things about compositional framing is that it can be as simple or as complex as the scene might demand.

As a prudent and capable photo maker, your

job is determined when it's best to let the subject stand on its own merits by using some of the other approaches to composition found throughout this book.

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PORTRAITURE

For the most part, when we think of portraiture in photography, our minds immediately jump to “*posing*” the subject.

How do we position an individual so that they look their best? Will it be a true representation of the person’s character? How should we light them?

Continuous or strobe? Why won’t they smile? Should they be smiling? Why am I not smiling? Who are these people? Where am I...?

Sorry, I lost my train of thought for a second.

While it’s certainly true that posing your subject so that the final result is an effective conveyance of how the person looks and feels, the key to creating memorable portraits goes much further than positioning and lights.

Whether indoor or outdoor, on location or in the studio, composition plays just as large of a role in portrait photography work as it does landscape photography or any other type of photography.

COMPOSING THE EFFECTIVE PORTRAIT

Finding workable compositions for your portraits is easier said than done. It’s difficult to nail down how or why a certain composition fits one portrait and not another. The entire enterprise of photographing people is enormously fluid.

This is why there are so relatively few truly legendary portrait photographers throughout history.

A well-made portrait requires a blend of both the physical and the non-physical, with both you and the subject carrying equal amounts of water.

A beautiful person does not necessarily make a beautiful portrait... and the most careful planning, execution, and skill by the photographer can fall short of producing magical portraits if the vibe just isn’t right. But there’s hope.

There are ways that you can stack the odds in your favor (and your subject’s favor) by understanding how some simple compositional methods can transform the way your portraits convey the soul of the person you happen to be photographing. Even if it’s your first portrait session, you can navigate your way to a successful outcome by remembering some key points that we’re about to outline.



Again, composing a portrait is not expressly the same as posing the subject. The terms may carry odd similarities yet are wholly separate actions. As it relates to portraiture, composition implies how your subject exists in space relative to the frame.

To this end, we are left with a few shockingly simple concepts which can be used with virtually any subject depending on the desired result both you and your client happen to expect. Well, usually.

THE EYES

It's been said that the eyes are the windows to the soul. More times than not, I prefer to refrain from commenting on the spiritual, philosophical, or existential implications of that statement. That being said, there remains little room to argue that the subject's eyes are often the creative fulcrum on which the rest of the composition hinges.

Careful consideration must be taken regarding where the eyes of the person being photographed are positioned compositionally in relation to the rest of the photo.

DOMINANT EYE PORTRAITURE

One nearly bullet-proof way to ensure the personality behind your subject's eyes is displayed most earnestly is by practicing a technique known as "*dominant eye*" portraits.

Much like it sounds, this method involves composing your frame with the dominant eye of your subject centered or nearly centered, in the middle of the photo.



This image is composed with the right eye (dominant eye) of the subject centered in the frame.

As unlikely as it might seem, positioning the dominant eye of the subject in such a way can create a better sense of connection with the viewer. In some cases, it can even cause the viewer to feel like your subject's eyes are following them from within the photo.

As unsettling as that might sound at first blush, it fits the intention of a portrait at its most basic level, which is to connect the viewer's attention with the character of the subject.

Not only that, but placing the dominant eye of the subject towards the center of the frame will organically cause the person's face to be naturally offset from the absolute center of the photo. This can instantly add additional aesthetic appeal.

Here, we see the left eye situated as dominant in this portrait composition.



Image by [Jeremy Bishop](#)

Unless your subject happens to know whether they are left or right eye dominant, or you feel up to administering an impromptu Miles test, the best way to figure out which eye to center on is by asking if the person is left or right-handed.

In most cases, about 70% of the world's human population is right-eye dominant, with most of those being right-handed.

If your subject is right-handed, there's a good chance there are also right eye dominant.

Of course, it's always a good idea to shoot a few images using both the right and left eyes as reference points should you choose to employ this compositional method in your portraits.

A MATTER OF ELEVATION

Rise above. On another level. Upper-tier. Upper crust.

There are all sorts of euphemisms dedicated to the presumption that being elevated above your respective audience makes one appear stronger or more powerful than those around them.

This is why we often see those in authority from judges to clergy to talk-show hosts situated on elevated platforms.

Generally, a speaker is perched higher than those being spoken to, and likewise, we view those addressing us with esteem.

As primordial as it might seem, the same concept is true with our portrait photography.

There is a definite place for the usage of height perspective when it comes to composing our portraits. If for nothing else, elevation perspective has a more practical use, which extends beyond the overt portrayal of authority.

More on that part in just a moment, but first, an important caveat for understanding how perspective and camera elevation can affect your portraits.

Authors Note: From here on, whenever "*perspective*" is discussed as it pertains to elevation, it refers more to the angle of the camera in relation to the point of focus on the subject.

Shooting from a high perspective entails the camera be pointed at a downward angle, whereas

shooting from a low elevation angle means the camera would be aimed upward to the intended point of focus.

WHEN IN DOUBT... SHOOT FOR THE CHIN

Before we talk about the role of height perspective in your portraits, it's important to mention that it's always a solid practice to essentially "*split the difference*" when it comes to photographing your subject.

Don't shoot from an exclusively elevated angle and likewise never from a low angle. A strong portrait composition should be a practice of searching for harmony, just like any other type of photography.

Finding that harmony requires experimentation and adjustment based on the nuances presented by your subject.

However, should you find yourself struggling to find a suitable composition for a portrait, it can be beneficial to zero your intentions and simply aim for the person's chin.



Image by [Jurica Koletić](#)

I will admit this topic is bleeding dangerously close to becoming a lesson in posing your subject. But, in terms of composition, it is also incredibly useful, so we'll keep going.

The reason why shooting for the chin is so valuable is partly because it pitches us back to our old friend, the *"Rule of Thirds."*

Regardless of the aspect ratio, whether it be 1:1, 2:3, or 3:4, a composition where the person's chin is approximately placed mid-line in the frame will result in the person's eyes occupying the upper third of the image.

On the right: By centering the chin roughly in the middle of your frame, your subject's eyes will naturally fall (most of the time) within the upper third portion of the photo.



Image by [Štefan Štefančík](#)

You see? Much of the practices of composition merge across all genres of photography. This simple method will often work with any subject you happen to be photographing, no matter their disposition or morphology.

Now that we've shared that little tidbit let's move on and look at how high and low elevation perspectives impact your portraits.

HIGH PERSPECTIVE

A quite influential Jedi once recognized that “*high ground*” is the best place to occupy oneself. While I won't argue whether that belief was true based on his situation at the time, I will say that a high elevation can be detrimental to composing a strong portrait.

This isn't to imply that shooting down onto your subject is always a misstep in composition, far from it.

We'll talk more about the pros and cons of a low perspective in the next section. For now, let's talk about the inherent implications of making portraits of your subject from a high perspective.



Image by [Kirsten Marie](#)

A portrait captured from an elevated camera position.

BENEFITS OF SHOOTING FROM ABOVE

There are not many scenarios where you won't be striving to bring out the best attributes from your portrait clients during your sessions. This means that you will primarily be working to emphasize their more appealing characteristics, such as a great smile, magnetic eyes, or a chiseled jawline.

On the flip-side, it's likely going to be your goal to downplay/minimize any less favorable traits that

they might find unflattering; such as a scar that no one might notice but them, or that face tattoo they got during spring break 2010 of Darth Vader riding a dinosaur. 🧑

All this being said, one of the most wide-sweeping, universal reservations many people have about having their portrait made concerns body image, namely their weight. A study conducted in September 2018 by the Cleveland Clinic found that 74% of Americans were concerned about their weight. All subjective opinions on the matter aside, you will almost certainly encounter a client who wants to appear “*slimmer*” in their portrait.

There are many ways to pose your subject to produce a more flattering appearance regardless of their body habitus. However, from a compositional standpoint, there’s no better way to instantly accomplish this than by shooting from an elevated perspective.

Have a look at this. I’ve purposely used myself as an example here.

Which of the two images is more flattering to my appearance?



The relative camera angle for this photo was approximately perpendicular to my nose. (Note that I did have to slump in the chair a bit.)



Here, the camera was angled mildly downward, roughly 5-7 degrees, and again centered to my nose.

While it's readily apparent in both photos that I'm crushingly handsome, possessing brooding masculinity, and an organic ruggedness that would make a honey badger purr with a sort of...

Wait... where was I?

Oh, that's right—elevated perspective.

The poses are virtually identical; the second photo makes the subject (me) present with a more pleasing appearance.

The reason for this is a matter of perspective.

By slightly elevating the camera and shooting downwards, I have physically changed my body's relationship to the camera's sensor.

The visible portions of my body become relatively smaller compared to the rest of the frame.

This means that my face appears slimmer as it tapers further away from the camera and gives an overall "*slimming*" effect with virtually no effort at all.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR SHOOTING FROM AN ELEVATED PERSPECTIVE

As contrary as it might seem, the real benefits of

shooting portraits from a slightly elevated position can introduce some tricky problems.

I've listed below a few considerations to keep in mind should you decide to take photos of your client from an elevated position.

We'll also revisit a few of these in the next section where we'll discuss low perspective portraiture.

It's not a compositional "*cure-all*." An elevated perspective is a great way to use spatial relationships to present your client's features in a more flattering way, but it's not a magical solution. Considerate posing and other physical considerations help tremendously.

An elevated perspective is situationally dependent. Even if it helps present your subject more effectively, it still might not be the best choice to convey a desired tonal impact. Refer back to the beginning of this chapter on the authoritative implications of high or low perspectives.

Remember, it's better to have too many photos than not enough. You control how to best give your client the images they deserve. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't provide options. That's especially true given the auspices of digital photography. Even if you feel an elevated perspective isn't the best route for your subject, it's a good practice to at least attempt a few frames anyway, just in case.

Understanding the effects of lens distortion is crucial in portrait photography and becomes especially important when shooting from an elevated (or lowered) perspective. Shorter focal length lenses tend to exhibit "*barrel distortion*" which can grossly enlarge portions of your subject. This distortion can be amplified depending on the spatial relationship of your subject to the lens.

LOW PERSPECTIVE

Moving literally in the opposite direction, we come to the matter of low perspective portrait photography.

It's here where we must tread lightly. Shooting from a low perspective can cause several problems, but it can also be an effective method for controlling your scene's visual dynamics.

We've already learned about the effects of shooting from an elevated perspective, which can work to essentially "*shrink*" your subject within the frame.

Next, we're going to discuss the potentially tricky benefits (and caveats) for making use of low perspective portrait photography.



A PLACE OF POWER

It bears mentioning again that your primary objective when shooting portraits is to provide your clients with photographs they will not only enjoy but also represent their individuality. As an operational guideline, you will be working to make their appearance as flattering as possible.

However, in some cases, you could be met with the need to impart a certain tone to your portrait, depending on your subject and environment.

You will likely encounter situations when you seek to display the stoic, powerful, or otherwise authoritative traits of your subject through compositional means. For example, common circumstances for this include portraits of business people, governmental figures, or other dignitaries. No matter what the case might be, your composition can add to or detract from the air of respectability you are attempting to convey through your portraits.

A great way to add to instant authoritative-ness to a portrait is by composing from a slightly lower perspective. That is, aiming your camera in an upward direction in relation to your subject. By assuming a lowered perspective, you visually

represent the subject of your portrait as larger or more imposing than the surrounding environment. Of course, this requires a great amount of personal judgment on your part to determine who and where this technique might best be suited.



On the left: Take note of the slightly upward angle of the camera. This camera placement makes the subject look slightly intimidating and works well with the overall posing and nature of this portrait.

Naturally, a fine line needs to be walked when approaching a portrait composition from a lowered perspective.

Of primary concern is the body type of your subject.

Shooting from a low angle can inherently enlarge portions of the body, making the person squatted, compressed, and otherwise lensing an unflattering representation of their true form.

The focal length of your lens must also be given careful consideration when shooting from below, perhaps even more so than when shooting from an elevated position.

Shorter focal length lenses will naturally record much more of the surroundings than a lens of longer focal length, which can make for some tricky situations depending on the background environment.

Wide-angle lenses will also wreak havoc on your subject's geometry should you choose to position them anywhere but in the center of your frame.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR SHOOTING FROM A LOW PERSPECTIVE

Subject matter and situational factors are wholly critical. Just as with elevated perspectives, shooting from a lower angle requires you to fully understand your subject and how you/they might wish to be portrayed. Careful consideration of the subject's personality and the overall intent/use of the final portrait is crucial.

Remember, your camera's angle in relation to your subject will optically enlarge, to one extent or another, whatever is closest to your lens. This can cause unflattering effects, especially if you are positioned quite close to your subject when using a wide-angle lens.

Lastly, know the characteristics of your lens. Lens distortion, edge softening, and other nasties can determine where you position the subject within your composition when shooting from a low perspective

(and any other time). Understanding how your lenses perform optically under varying conditions and how these unique traits affect your particular subject is extremely important.

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EPILOGUE

To understand the true mechanisms behind what makes a strong photograph, we must first understand what it means to express ourselves through a visual medium.

Simply put, what exactly is composition, and how do we know when a photograph is correctly composed? To approach the idea of photographic composition in this way is to, unfortunately, miss the point.

Suppose we believe that there exists some ultimate goal for our compositions. In that case, we are unknowingly blinding ourselves to what could very well be the real photographic nirvana that so many of us strive to obtain.

If only we could learn enough about photography or shoot enough with the right camera or spend enough money on the right lens.

If we could only place some righteous finger on what is standing in the way of whatever it is that we think our photography could be. If only...

The truth about photography, and thereby indirectly the truth about photographic composition,

is that there is no ethereal “perfect photo.”

No day exists where the cogs align just right and allow you to finally be able to churn out extraordinary photographs every time you pick up your camera.

Even though we have presented excellent compositional methods throughout this book that can set you on the path to making better photos more often, it’s incredibly important that the prevailing message held within these pages be completely and accurately understood and placed into their appropriate context. In this area, some photographers, intentionally or otherwise, can tend to be woefully misguided in their approaches to effective photographic composition.

So, what sets a well-made photograph apart from one that is poorly executed?

The answer is as profound as it is alarmingly simple and, in a way, could be somewhat uncomfortable for some to accept as it could very well contradict any number of strongly held beliefs about the nature of photography as an art.

THE LIGHTNING OR THE LIGHTNING BUG?

About 16,000 words ago, at the beginning of our journey together, I mentioned a lesser-known bit of wisdom from the prolific American author Samuel Langhorne Clemens, better known to the world as Mark Twain. The venerated wordsmith opined on the frighteningly thin veil, which sometimes separates success and failure based on choices made.

In Twain's case, he referred to the subtle distinctions between words and how those seemingly small differences can have huge implications for the outcome of a piece of writing. In our case, this same core recognition of the minor variances which can often make or break our photographs still rings true. A strongly composed picture is the sum of many different choices made by the photographer. Some of these choices are consciously selected, others not. It's the totaling of these elections which determines the outcome and popular appeal of our images.

Ultimately, we simultaneously wield both complete and incomplete control over the composition of our photographs. On the one hand,

we can physically control our exposure factors and the placement of our cameras. We can determine what lens is used, which way to point our cameras, and where to place our tripods. We can't determine all those little happenings that can occur organically during the process of making the photograph.

The feelings you have towards a scene or subject can change instantaneously depending on a look, a cloud, or a falling snowflake. As photographers, we react at times without thinking, out of instinct or out of some trained response... or a combination of the two. It could be said that true photographic intuition cannot be taught, and I would be inclined to agree with that statement. Somewhat paradoxically, that isn't to say that photographic intuition cannot be learned. The improvements I've observed in my own work over the years, as well as transformations I've seen take place in the careers of other photographers, I know prove this fact to be true.

A 10-degree change in camera angle, f/8 not f/11, 50mm instead of 35mm, or waiting that half-second longer to press the shutter, all of these small ripples can build into a great wave leading to the success

or failure of your compositions. Recognizing the surprising fragility of the foundations on which great photographs can be made will help you understand that every choice you make has a consequence. Strong compositions are born through the beautiful accumulation of right actions; small technical and creative decisions dictate the final form of the whole...

...the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.

A RULE IS A RULE IS A RULE

Photographic composition suffers from an image problem.

There seems to be an idea that there are certain “rules” for making a photograph, and when followed, these rules will result in a well-executed photo every time. In other words, some misguided souls lean towards the notion that photography is some formula to be deciphered, worked as a math problem, and ultimately solved.

Unfortunately, this is a common attitude some

(especially newcomers to the craft) seem to hold towards making photos.

I hope this book has worked to dispel this notion or, at the very least, does not further propagate this way of thinking while at the same time presenting practical information in a useful and constructive manner.

Standardized compositional techniques in photography are at most just educated guesses; a compilation of averages sampled from a long history of deconstructing popular photographs and noting what does and does not generally produce a “good” photo.

They are a means to an end, and this end can be reached in various ways.

There are no true rules for making great photographs, which, in a way, is quite comforting.

Although the word “rule” appears several times in this text, it’s important to understand the context. There are several definitions for the word itself, with the majority being linked to an air of prohibition, diminutive control, or procedural dogmas. “No running in the hallway!” “Stay off the grass.”

"Unicycles not permitted on the golf course."

These are the things we commonly view as rules. However, as it pertains to photography, a rule carries a more benign and helpful definition. Think of rules in photography as mechanisms for describing what is possible in a particular sphere of knowledge, not commands which tell you what not to do.

PARTING THOUGHTS ON HARMONY, NON-INTERVENTION, AND WU-WEI

As we approach our final valedictory, it becomes increasingly relevant to revisit the concepts we discussed in the earlier chapters of this book.

Namely, the importance of striving to reach harmony within your compositions and learning to not stand in the way of achieving your objectives.

To better describe this concept of non-intervention, we can borrow from the Taoist ideal of Wu-Wei, which translates to *"no force"* or *"not forcing."*

Granted, this Zen-like attitude can be applied to any aspect of life.

As it pertains to our photography, it becomes a way for us to remember that the strength of a photograph is held not within its technical perfection. Instead, a successful image is one that we allow to happen naturally with the input from us being minimal.

This relaxed approach towards your photography should not be confused with laziness.

Lazy photographers produce lazy photographs, which are most definitely not what we're talking about here.

I'll borrow from the venerable philosopher Alan Watts, who likened the notion of Wu-Wei to *"the art of sailing... not rowing."* Eliminate your compositional overthinking and allow yourself to follow your instincts.

These instincts are honed through practice and being actively knowledgeable in the core principles of photographic composition. Notice I said *"knowledgeable,"* which does not translate as *"bound by."*

Your photographs will always be your photographs.

Compose them based on your creative vision and experiences. The strength of a composition should be measured by the intensity of your satisfaction and graded by how closely it adheres to your honest intention.

There is no other way. And there never was.



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