# ELEMENTS OF ART DESIGN IN PHOTOGRAPHY

As photography is a visual art, the design elements in a photo are important aspects of the image. Photographers start with a full canvas and must decide which elements to include, which to exclude, and how to arrange and display those elements.

This forms the visual language by which an image's meaning or emotions are conveyed to its viewers. When used properly, these elements will draw viewers into the image and lead them to explore different parts of the photograph. Through placement of various elements and control of tones, depth is added back into the picture, where objects from the three-dimensional world had been compressed into two dimensions.

Elements of visual design can be applied in-camera through the composition of photos, while other elements can be adjusted with post-processing techniques.

This book covers 10 elements of visual art design and describes how each can be used in photography to create and add impact. Design elements that will be presented include lines, shapes, texture, patterns and rhythm, scale and size, positive and negative space, balance, colours, tonal contrast and gradation. The book is based on a series of my blog posts, supplemented with sample images from my portfolio for each of the 10 topics, and accompanied by explanatory text for application.
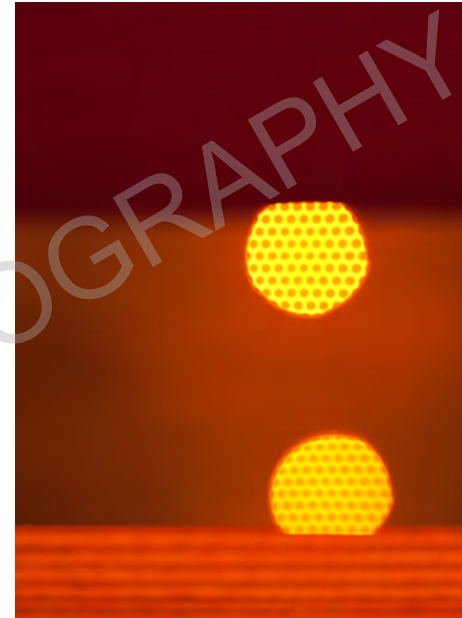
"Photography is more than a medium for factual communication of ideas. It is a creative art." - Ansel Adams

LINES

Starting with the most basic element of design - the line. We often visualize a line being straight as an arrow, but curves are also lines in this context. Lines can draw the eyes horizontally, vertically, or diagonally, or move the viewer's eyes around the frame such as S-curves. Horizon lines are the most common form of horizontal lines. They act as solid anchors when placed in the lower half of an image. Vertical lines will move the viewer's eye up and down the image, and are accentuated when a portrait orientation is used for the frame. Diagonal lines add energy to a photo, help to suggest perspective and give depth to a two-dimensional image.

"Strong lines make strong images."
- Valerie Jardin
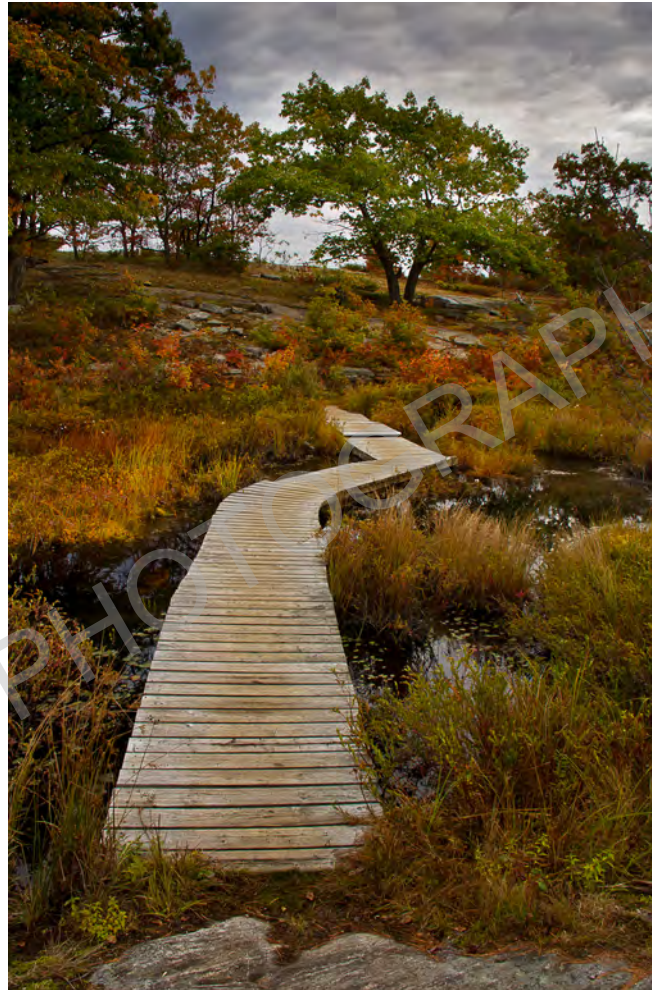
In "A Path Well Travelled", the well-worn boardwalk acts as a leading line in the photo, drawing viewers to the colourful bushes and trees beyond. The narrowing of this line element conveys depth, moving in from foreground to midground of the image. The portrait orientation of the frame further accentuates the vertical line.

SHAPES

Continuing from the basic element of lines, the next design element that adds interest to a photograph is shapes or forms. These are self-contained areas bound by lines, and can be regular, geometric shapes or irregular, organic forms. Shapes can also be seen as symbols - triangles with their sharp angles are more dynamic while smooth circles or arcs create a sense of peace and tranquility. Shapes, like lines, can also move the viewer's eyes around an image or keep them focused on the subject. Shapes can be used alone or in a group to design an impactful image. Elements can also be placed into a shape for an effective composition, such as three elements forming a triangle.

'I found I could say things with colour and shapes that I couldn't say any other way - things I had no words for." - Georgia O'Keeffe

A number of shapes arranged in an image becomes the composition, as in "Beach Houses". All the shapes of beach houses and their shadows are placed to move the viewer's eyes around the image - from the brown house in the foreground to the yellow one in the background, then to the red house in midground and circling back to the foreground shadow.

TEXTURE

Texture is an element of art that is often used in photography, whether it's physically existing in the object captured or added during post-processing. The tactile feeling is conveyed to the viewer through surface quality, whether it is rough, smooth, hard or soft. Textural effects such as wrinkled paper, cracked stone walls, etc. can be used as backgrounds for images, combining the main subject with the specific context for an aged or artistic look.

In "Tangled", the rough curly texture of the dried leaves is highlighted (by increasing contrast) as the image's main subject, giving a sense of depth to the two-dimensional picture.

"I search for the realness, the real feeling of a subject, all the texture around it... I always want to see the third dimension of something... I want to come alive with the object."
- Andrew Wyeth

PATTERNS & RHYTHM

Related to the previous topic about textures is that of visual texture, which includes patterns and rhythm. Patterns are made of elements repeating in a regular manner, while rhythm refers to items at a slightly irregular spacing. Patterns and rhythm are used in art and photography to create visual interest and provide cohesiveness. A repeated object can emphasize its importance, while a broken pattern will draw attention to that spot in the image. Regular patterns give a graphical look and can present a sense of order, whereas varied repetitions in rhythm add some spice to an image. Repetitions can take the form of lines, shapes or colours.

"Rhythm is as necessary in a picture as pigment; it is as much a part of painting as of music."
- Walter J. Phillips

In the image "Strawberry Corn", the three pieces of corn (three is a good number to use in visual design) are repeated in a row, forming an orderly array. The size of corn gets smaller the further back it is from the viewer, giving a sense of depth to the image. The colour treatment further enhanced the graphical feel of the picture.

SCALE & SIZE

In photographs, as in art, the scale and size of various elements can serve various purposes. For landscape or urban images, including an element of known size will help viewers make a relation or size reference to the objects in the photo. Also, the relative sizes of objects add depth and perspective to a two-dimensional image. Thirdly, the relative areas occupied by one shape to another can indicate major-minor relationships and show dominance of a subject.

In "Frozen Lake of the Rising Sun", the inclusion of the couple walking their dog gives a scale reference, showing the immense height of the ice built-up on the lake's surface.

"Even in front of nature one must compose." - Edgar Degas

In "Fantasy Flight", the difference in size between the large wing tip and the smaller airplane near the bottom of the image depicts the relative distance between them.

COLOURS

Aside from black and white photos, colour is of major importance in photography. Usually it is the colours in an image that give the first impression. Colours evoke different emotions - blue and green are calming while orange and yellow evoke happiness. The colour wheel and colour theory can be applied, including the use of analogous colours, complementary colours and triadic colours. These colour theories can be applied when you are capturing images, waiting for the light to change the colours in a landscape, or adjusting hues in post-processing software to design fine art photos.

"Crimson and Gold" is an example of using analogous colours. These are any three hues that are side by side on the colour wheel. In this image, the three hues of red, orange and orange-yellow are present, creating a harmonious feel.

"The right use of color can make any composition work."
- Fairfield Porter

TONAL CONTRAST

A common way to add impact or direct viewers' attention to the main subject in an image is through the use of tonal contrast. This refers to the difference between dark and light areas in a photograph. The greater the difference, the more attention that area attracts. Varying the tonal contrast in an image can be done locally to focus on the centre of attention, or applied to the entire image for adding overall impact. Look for areas of high contrast when you're photographing, or add tonal contrast with lighting sources or in post-processing. On the other hand, low contrast can be used effectively to create a soft mood in images.

*"Tonal hierarchy prevents visual anarchy."* - Paul Newton

Initially, the photo "Towards the Light" in colour looked fairly bland, but once it was converted into black and white, the tonal contrast became more apparent. By contrasting the light shapes against the darker areas, the geometry of the stairwell is accentuated and directs the viewer towards the light.

GRADATION

Gradation is a slow transition between opposites - whether it be darkness slowly changing to light, small objects growing larger, or one colour turning into another. Any visual element that can be contrasted can also be gradated: shape, size, direction, value, hue, texture or temperature. Gradation creates a sense of harmony between things that would otherwise be competing with each other. Often, some degree of gradation occur naturally. But at other times, photographers can make use of this design principle to create impactful artwork.

"Gradations serve to lift the subject off the two-dimensionality of the canvas. They are an essential abstract convention."
- Robert Genn
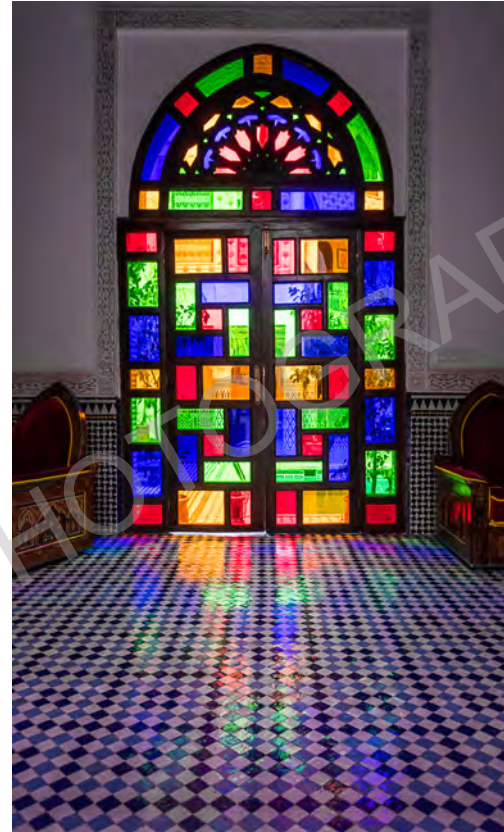
In "Riad Art", the brightly lit stained glass door is complemented by its dimmed reflection, before transitioning to the dark surrounding. A vignette was added to direct focus onto the beautifully designed geometric pattern.