

Geometry in composition

In the previous Lessons, we've gone over some general principles about making photographs. The first lesson, the Rule of Thirds, introduced a widely usable principle that helps decide *where to put the subject*. The second one, Simplicity, was about taking out what's unnecessary and concentrating on the important. The third one, The Phony Subject, was about *adding* something to a picture to make it more interesting or dynamic.

The previous lessons have more or less taken the subject, or main interest, of the photograph as a given. This one is different: its purpose is to give ideas about "what to photograph," not in terms of subjects, but in terms of what to look for in subjects or compositions. To get beyond the three K's (that pictures with children, animals, or beautiful women will usually win out over pictures without them; ask Chuck what the K's stand for), we're staying at a somewhat abstract level.

We're going to look at geometrical elements, and how to use them in a composition.

What is it for?

Geometrical elements are rarely very good as subjects, primary or secondary. Instead, they serve an auxiliary role, helping pull the picture together. They have at least three common and very important uses:

1. The leading line

A leading line does what it says: it leads the eye from one part of the picture to another: from the foreground to the background, the secondary subject to the main subject (but very rarely the other way round). The leading line adds motion to an otherwise static picture and ties different elements in it together. Diagonals and arcs or other unclosed curves make good leading lines.

2. The spatial divider

A spatial divider divides the picture into discrete areas, which work together to make the composition. Not all pictures are based on areas, but sometimes areas can make for a strong composition even in the absence of clear points of interest. Triangles are particularly useful as spatial dividers, but other elements (diagonals, open curves) can perform the role as well.

3. The framing element

A framing element serves to focus attention on the main subject. It usually covers at least two edges of the picture and can intrude a good way into it, sometimes taking up most of the space in it. For this to work, the framing element has to have some interesting characteristics of its own: color, texture, or shape. Bold, geometric shapes can work very well as framing elements: triangles or arcs work especially well. Usually, framing elements should be lower-key and more muted than the main subject: they are not meant to distract, but to focus, even when the actual point of the picture is the framing element, such as with some of the Phony Subject examples.

What does it mean?

This isn't mathematics, so we're keeping it simple. Geometrical elements are simple, recognizable forms, such as squares, circles, triangles, lines, and curves. Compositionally some geometrical forms have more possibilities than others: squares and circles, for example, are more static and therefore less interesting than triangles or open curves.

Some geometrical shapes have especially great compositional potential:

- Diagonals
- Triangles
- Arcs
- S-curves

We're going to focus on these shapes and their uses.

The diagonal

A picture with a diagonal element is almost always more dynamic and stronger than the same picture without it. While verticals and horizontals usually divide the space into areas, diagonals connect. Indeed, one of the most common and effective uses for the diagonal is the *leading line* -- something that connects a main subject to a secondary subject, causing the eye to move inside the frame. In this role, diagonals can be strong components of perspective and depth, giving a picture three-dimensionality.

Here is a picture composed around diagonals used as leading lines and to create three-dimensionality:



The lines of the cast-iron railing, tramway track, and cables lead the eye from the statue to the approaching tramway. The sense of depth is accentuated by the shallow depth of field.

Here is a picture composed around a diagonal used as a leading line and a space-divider, but not primarily an indicator of perspective:



The simple diagonal is one of the most versatile geometric entities usable in compositions. Look for them, and make the best of them. However, since the diagonal is a line and often both enters and exits the picture, it's important to put something on it to stop the eye from running out of the frame. Using it as a leading line, from the main subject to the secondary one or the foreground to the background, for example, is a good way to arrange this.

The triangle

A triangle is a closed curve that incorporates at least one diagonal. Being closed, it won't lead the eye out of the frame. However, especially an equilateral triangle is a lot more static than a diagonal. By itself, and especially in the middle of the frame, it can lead to a static and boring composition. Sometimes triangular areas can make for unusual pictures, like this one, for example:



Actual triangles are somewhat rare to come by, however. Instead of looking for them, a triangle can be used more abstractly: to position your main and secondary subjects in the frame, or by using three subsidiary points of interest form a "frame" for your main subject. I had a lot of trouble figuring out what to leave in this picture and what to drop out of it, until I settled on this composition:



I found that the two big trays form a triangular frame for the cat, and it sort of "fell into place":



The arc

The arc can be a wonderful compositional element. Unclosed, it can serve as a leading line, pulling the eye towards the main subject (photo by Shosta Sulonen)...



...a spatial divider...



... or a framing element, focusing the attention on the main subject:



Especially if it's asymmetric, it can force a dynamic and interesting composition.

If you see an arc, study the scene carefully and find elements to balance out the (usually) asymmetric composition created by the arc, and try to find a way to make best use of the arc -- don't just include it, concentrate on it and its purpose in the composition: is it a leading line, a connector, a spatial divider, or a framing element?

The s-curve

The S-curve is, well, a curve shaped like an S. It is compositional gold. If you see one, you *know* that there's a good picture to be had. The S curve is just about the only geometrical shape that can stand alone as a main subject, but it can also be used as a leading line, framing element, or just about anything else.

Here are some lovely S-curve pictures, by Melanie (visit her at www.caughtintimephotography.com)

<http://www.caughtintimephotography.com/>). The first one is a rare find indeed: a double S-curve, with the curves slightly out of phase, too: in terms of compositional potential, this scene is 24-carat, and Melanie has refined every last bit of it:



and



Both pictures (c) Melanie Kipp. Used with permission.

Enough said. If you see an S curve, shoot like mad. You might have a competition-winner on your hands.

Assignment

Shoot three pictures, using the geometric forms described in this Lesson:

1. As a leading line
2. As a spatial divider
3. As a framing element

Present and discuss.

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