

Composing Good Photographs

CS 178, Spring 2009



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“There are no rules for good photographs,
there are only good photographs.”

- Ansel Adams

Outline

- ◆ the pictorial elements of photography, i.e. the design in the 2D picture frame
 - line and form
 - pattern and texture
 - tone and color
- ◆ pictorial design
 - symmetry and balance
 - framing
 - common compositions
- ◆ things we won't talk about today
 - situation, storyline, viewpoint, field of view, focus, lighting, exposure, color balance, post-processing

Learning good composition

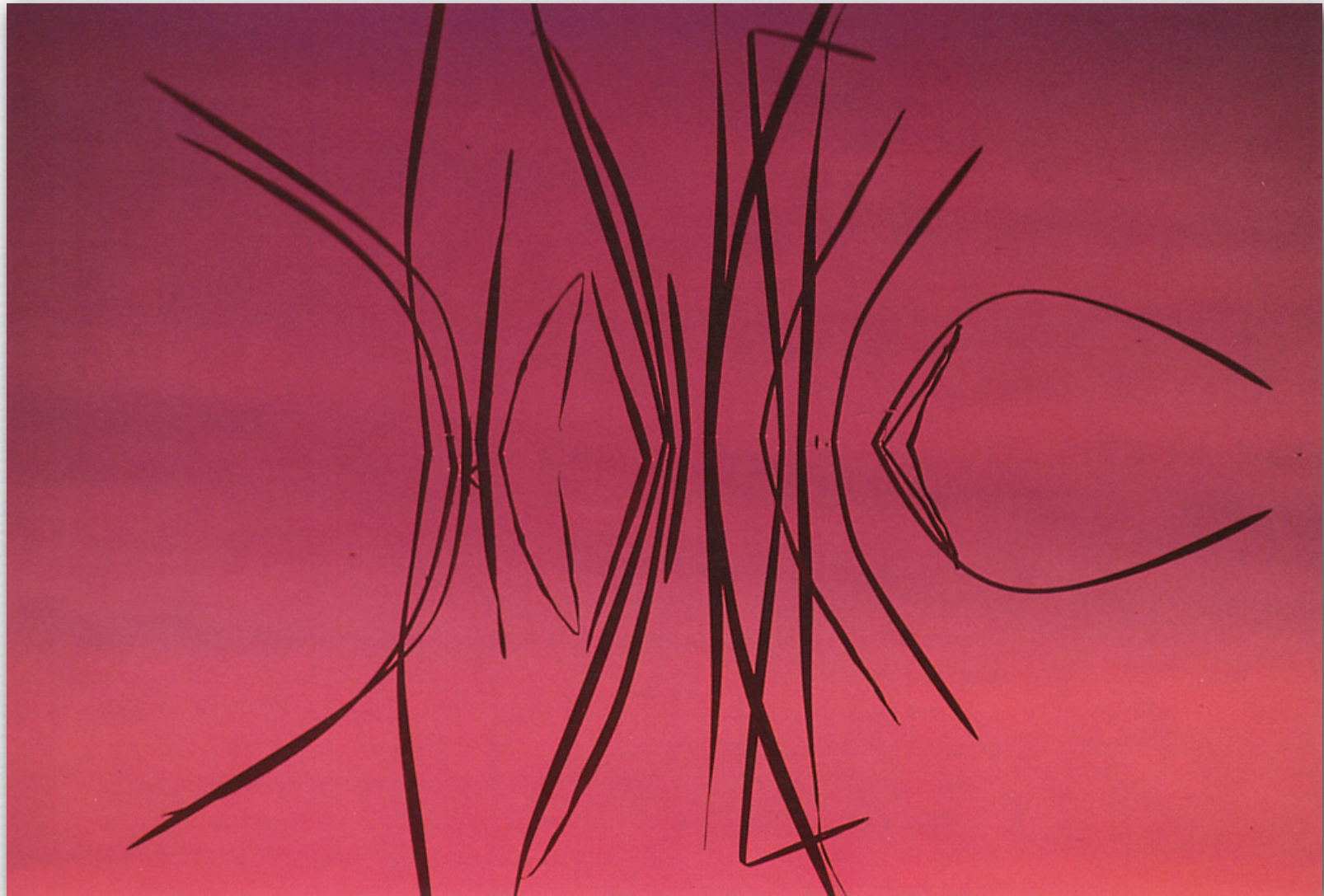
- ◆ there are no rules
 - there are only tools and heuristics
- ◆ like describing wine with words, they don't mean much
 - they merely give us a framework for thinking about issues
- ◆ the best way to learn is to take lots of pictures
 - think about the issues as you take them
 - critique your photographs, and have others critique them
- ◆ look at good photographs by others
 - most useful if you've also tried the same thing yourself

Lines as a pictorial element



Ansel Adams,
Aspens, 1958

Arrangement of lines



(Freeman Patterson)

Lines as a decorative element



(photodelusions.wordpress.com)

Lines that lead your eye to the subject



(London)

Hiromu Kira, The Thinker

Lines that lead your eye to the subject



- the lines don't need to be man-made, or smooth

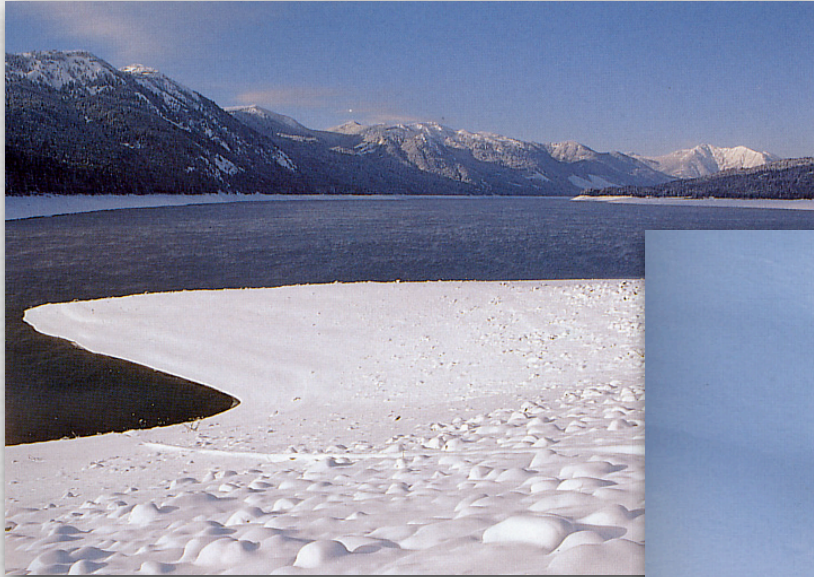
(Bryan Peterson)



Raphael,
Galatea, 1513

(Gardner)

Form - lines with meaning



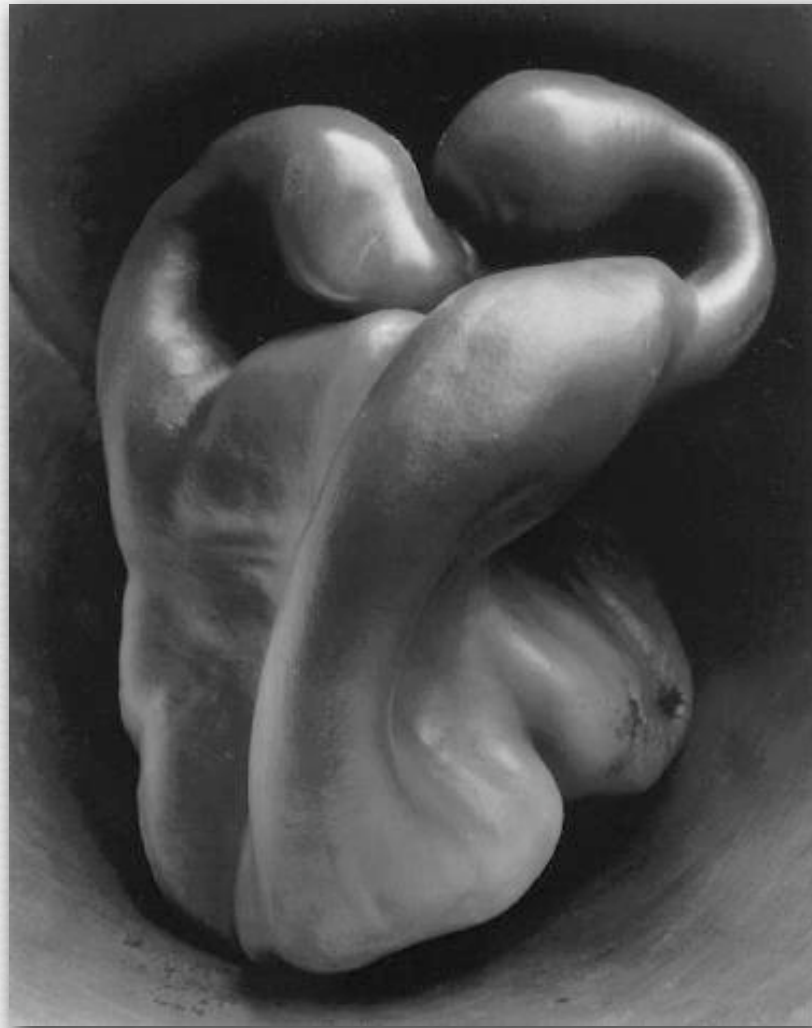
(Bryan Peterson)

first shot



second shot

Form - lines with meaning



Edward Weston, Pepper No. 30, 1930

Georgia O'Keefe,
Grey Line, 1923



Shape - readily identifiable form



- backlighting draws attention to shape

(Bryan Peterson)

Pattern - repeated forms



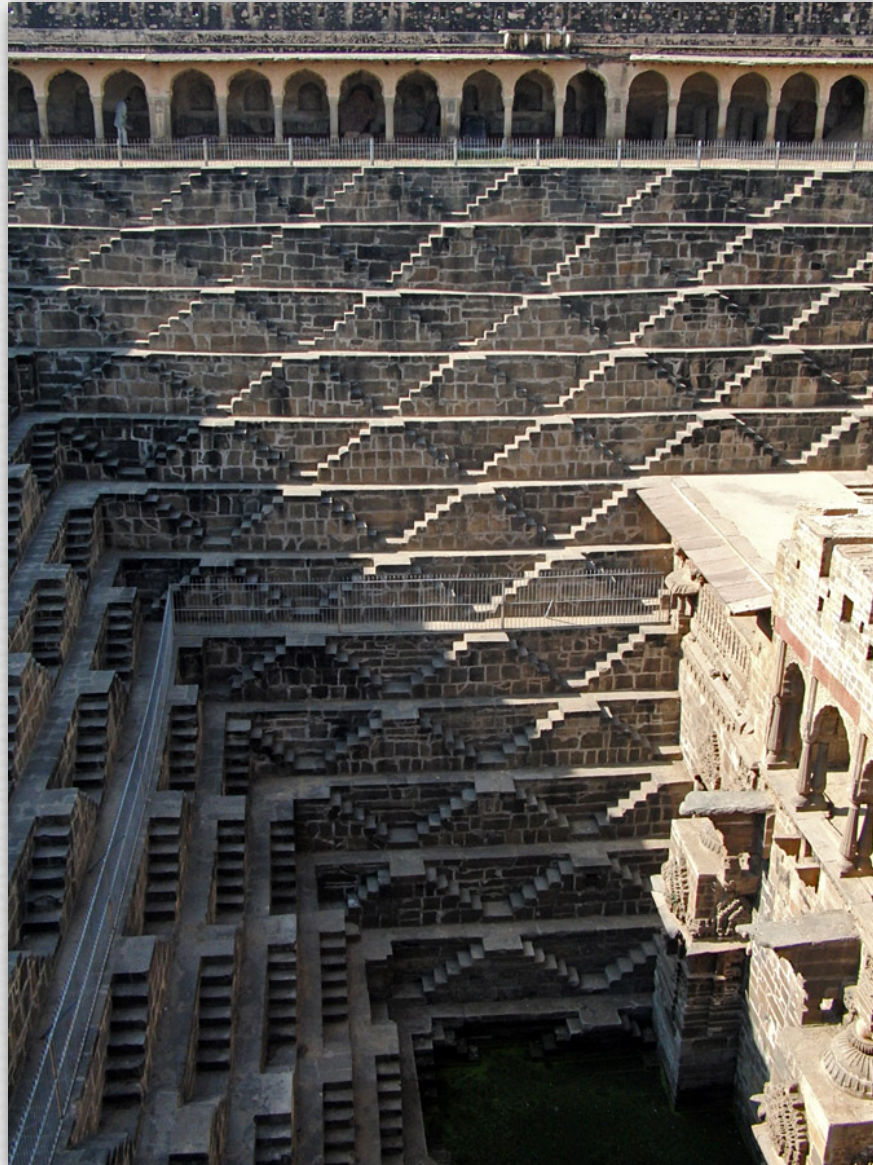
(Bryan Peterson)

first shot



second shot

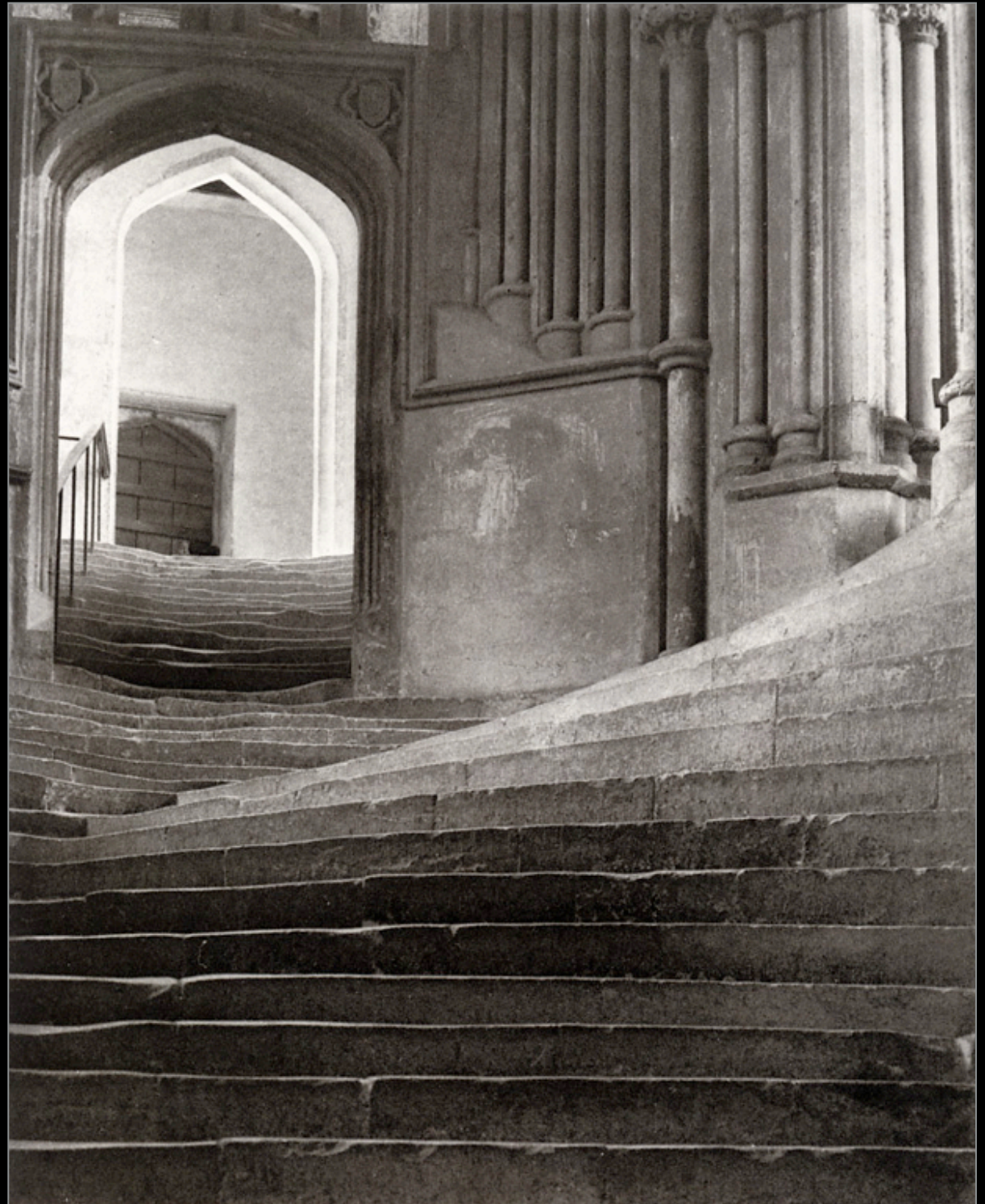
Pattern - repeated forms



Abhaneri Stepwell,
Rajasthan, India



Frederick Evans,
The Sea of Steps -
Wells Cathedral, 1903



Rhythm - a looser kind of pattern

(Freeman Paterson)





Auguste Renoir, *Le Moulin de la Galette*, 1876

Texture: fine patterns

- early product of f/64 club
- sharp focus, smooth papers
- reaction against Pictorialists

Ansel Adams,
Boards and
Thistles, 1932



Texture

- co-founder of f/64 club with Ansel Adams

Edward Weston,
Dunes, Oceano,
1936





Frank Lloyd Wright, Fallingwater, 1934

Lighting as an aid to pictorial design

(London)



Fluor Garduño,
Basket of Light, Guatemala,
1989



Yousuf Karsh,
Winston Churchill, 1941



Rembrandt van Rijn,
Self Portrait, 1660

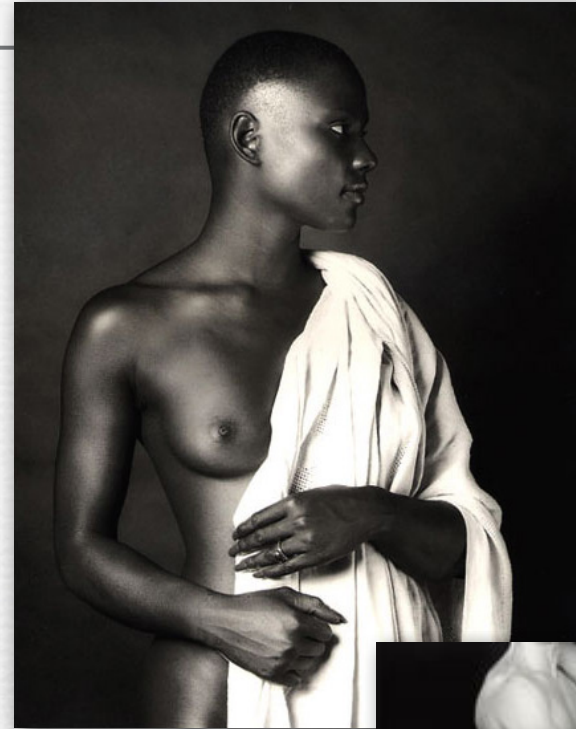


Yousuf Karsh,
Winston Churchill, 1941



Rembrandt van Rijn,
Portrait of Nicolaes Ruts, 1631

Tone as a pictorial element



Robert Mapplethorpe

Diego Velázquez,
Las Meninas, 1656



Color as a pictorial element

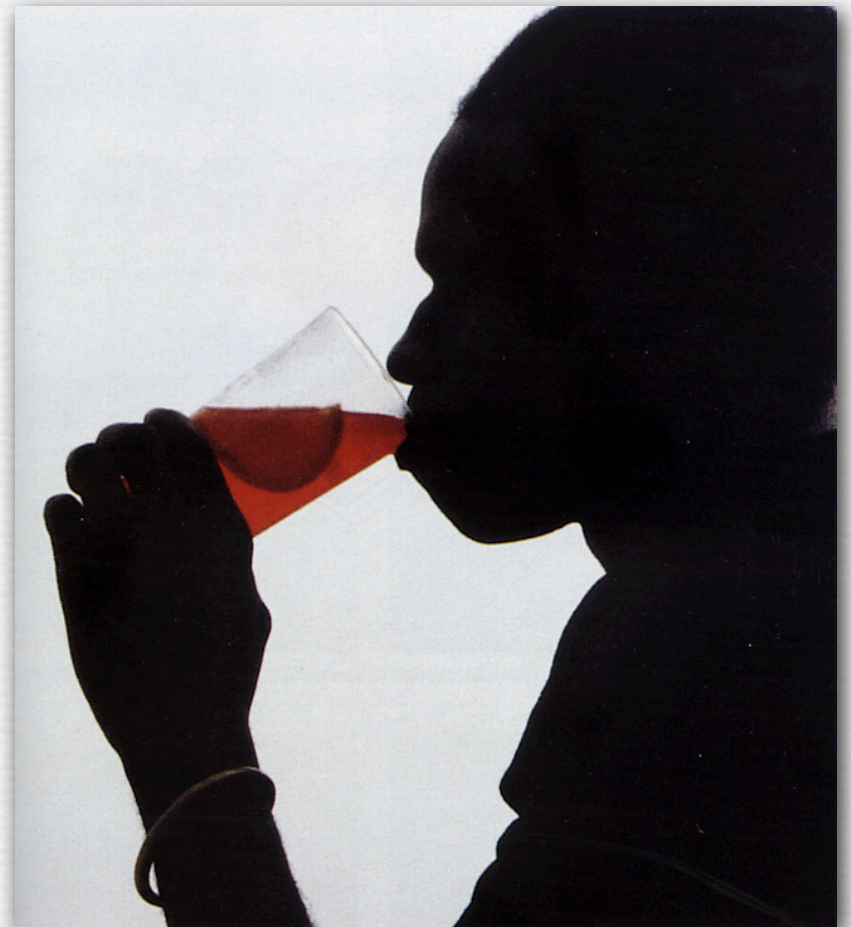


(London)

warm



cool



(Hedgecoe)

pictorial

Color as an accent

(Hedgecoe)



Encircled by color

(Hedgecoe)



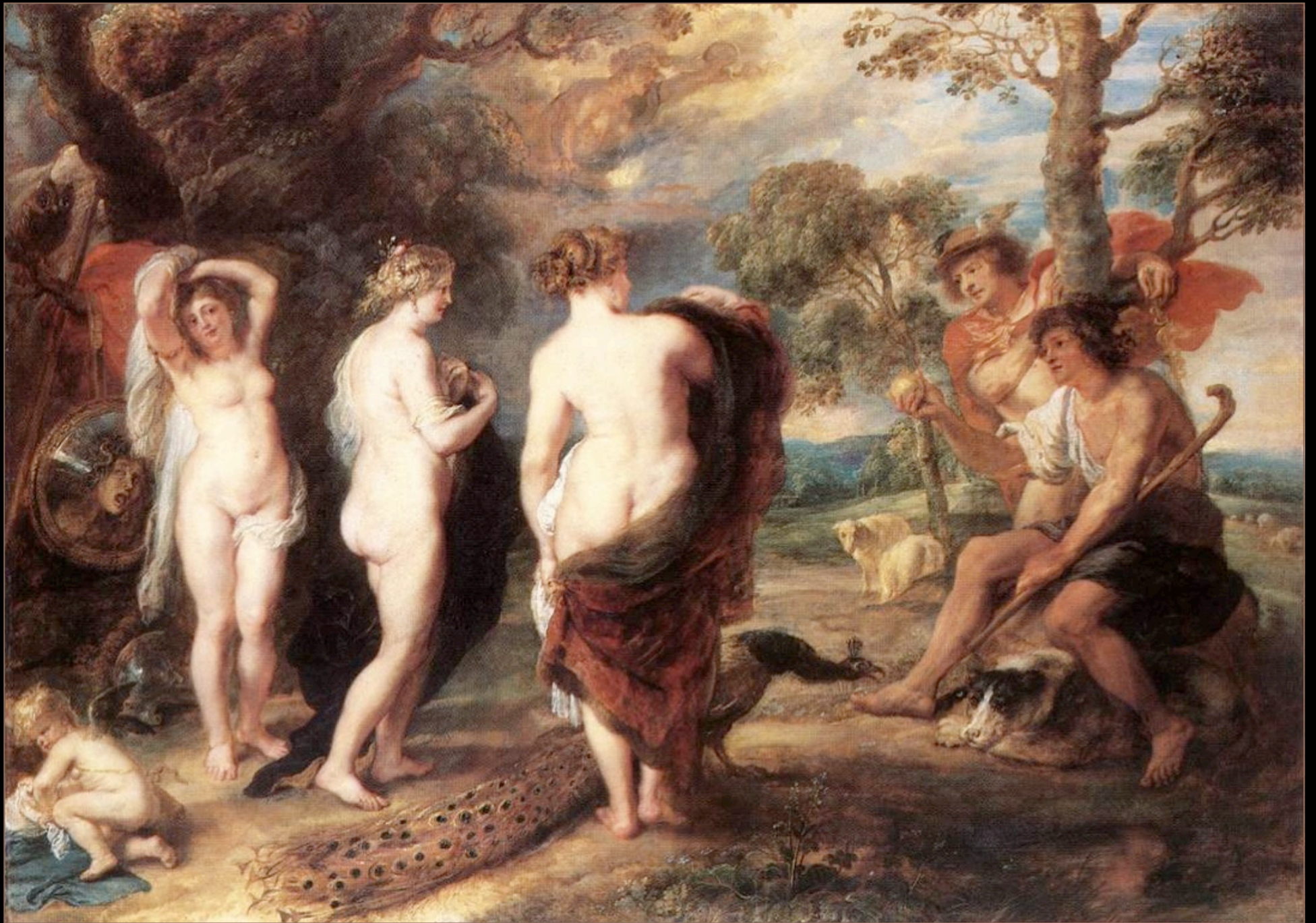
Giovanni Bellini, Altarpiece of
S. Zaccaria, Venice, 1505



Color as rhythmic accent

(Hedgecoe)





Peter Paul Rubens, *The Judgement of Paris*, 1636

Diego Velázquez,
Las Meninas, 1656



Pictorial design

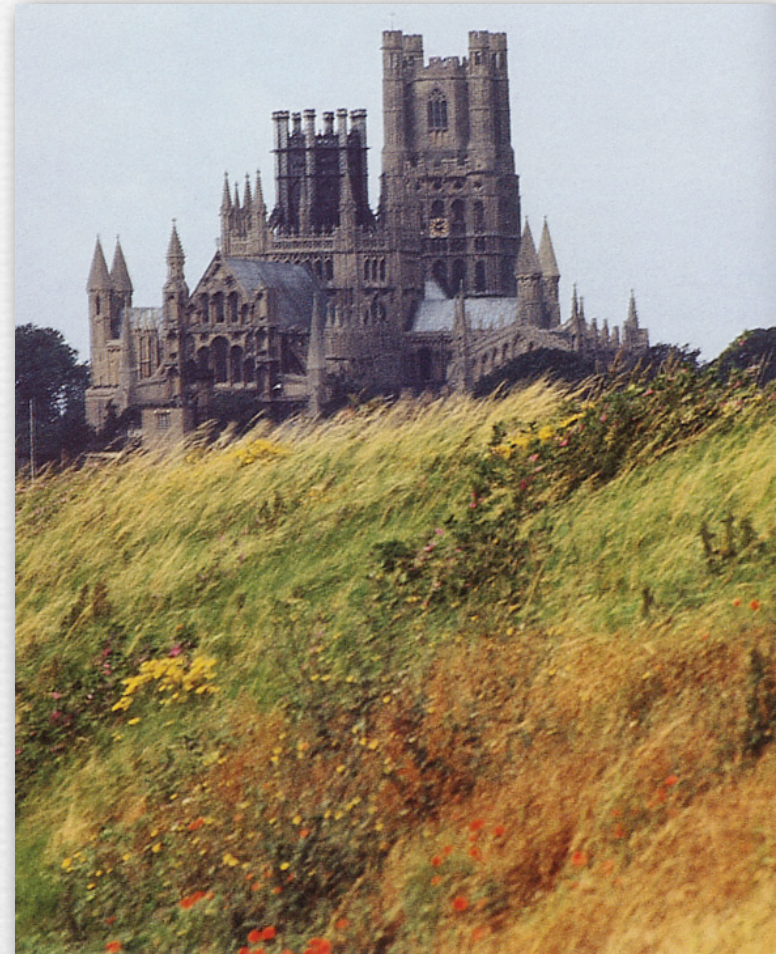
- ◆ symmetry and balance
- ◆ framing
- ◆ common compositions

Symmetry

(John Hedgecoe)



- deliberate symmetry



- off-center placement of main subject underscores the asymmetry of the architecture

Symmetry



- approximate symmetry



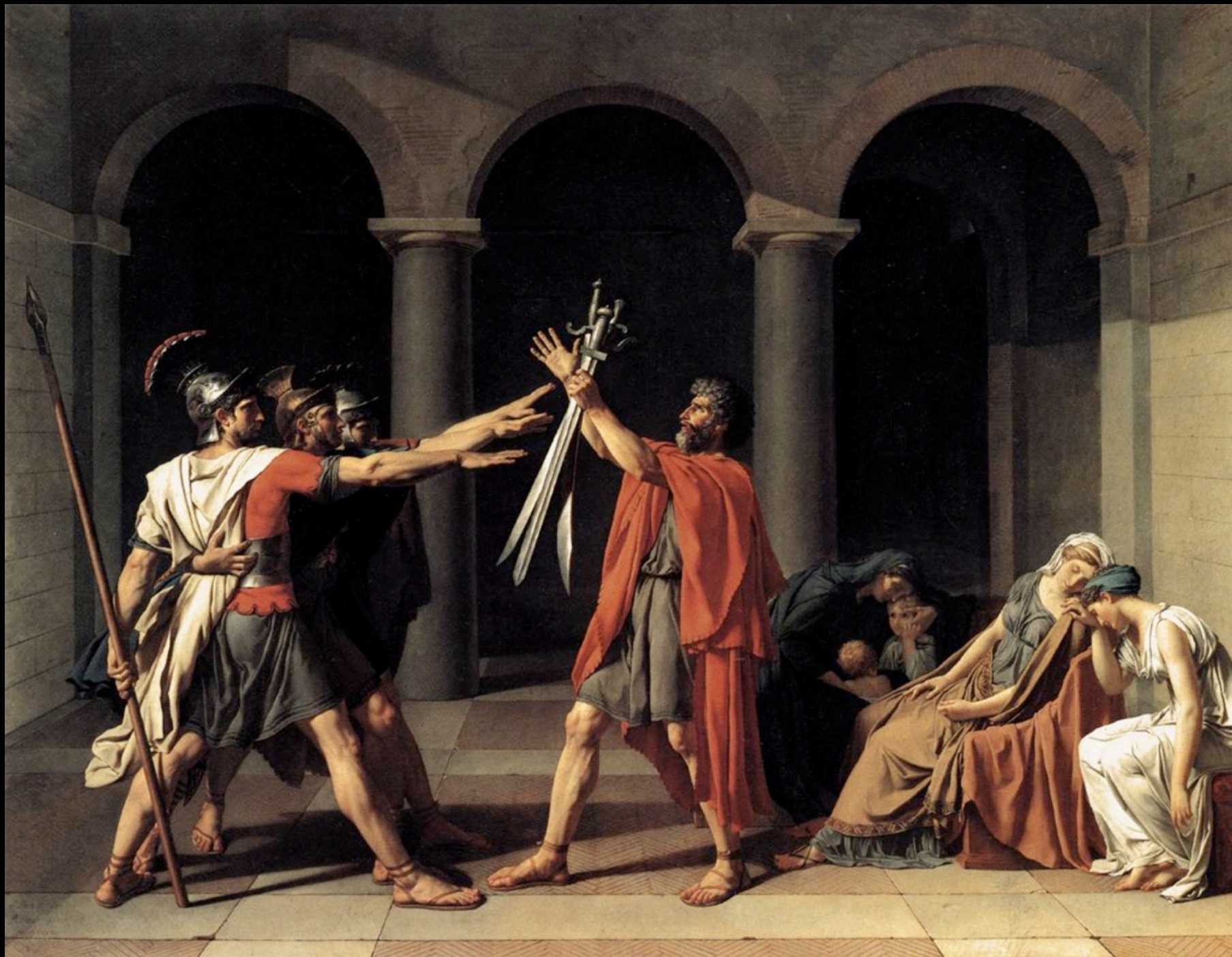
- symmetry with off-center accent

Balance

- symmetrical background + dynamic, unbalanced foreground



(Freeman Paterson)



Jacque-Louis David, Oath of the Horatii, 1784

Framing

(Marc Levoy)



More dynamic framing

(London)

- shadow edges complete the frame
- slashing diagonals create tension



Dennis Stock,
James Dean,
1955

The picture frame

(Bryan Peterson)



first shot



second shot



Raphael, School of Athens, 1511

Common compositions

- ◆ upright equilateral triangle
 - calm stability, power
- ◆ diagonal
 - tension, discord, dynamism
- ◆ S-curve
 - motion, sensuality
 - eye flow
- ◆ rule of thirds



Raphael, *Madonna with the Goldfinch*, 1506

Titian, *Madonna of the Pesaro Family*, 1526





Raphael, *Madonna with the Goldfinch*, 1506

Titian, *Madonna of the Pesaro Family*, 1526





Titian, Venus of Urbino, 1538



pendant

Titian, Venus of Urbino, 1538

Photographic examples



Edward Weston, Charis Wilson Nude, 1936

Photographic examples

- diagonal leading to her eye
- eye and shoulder use rule of thirds
- stems create frame within a frame
- partially hidden face creates mystery

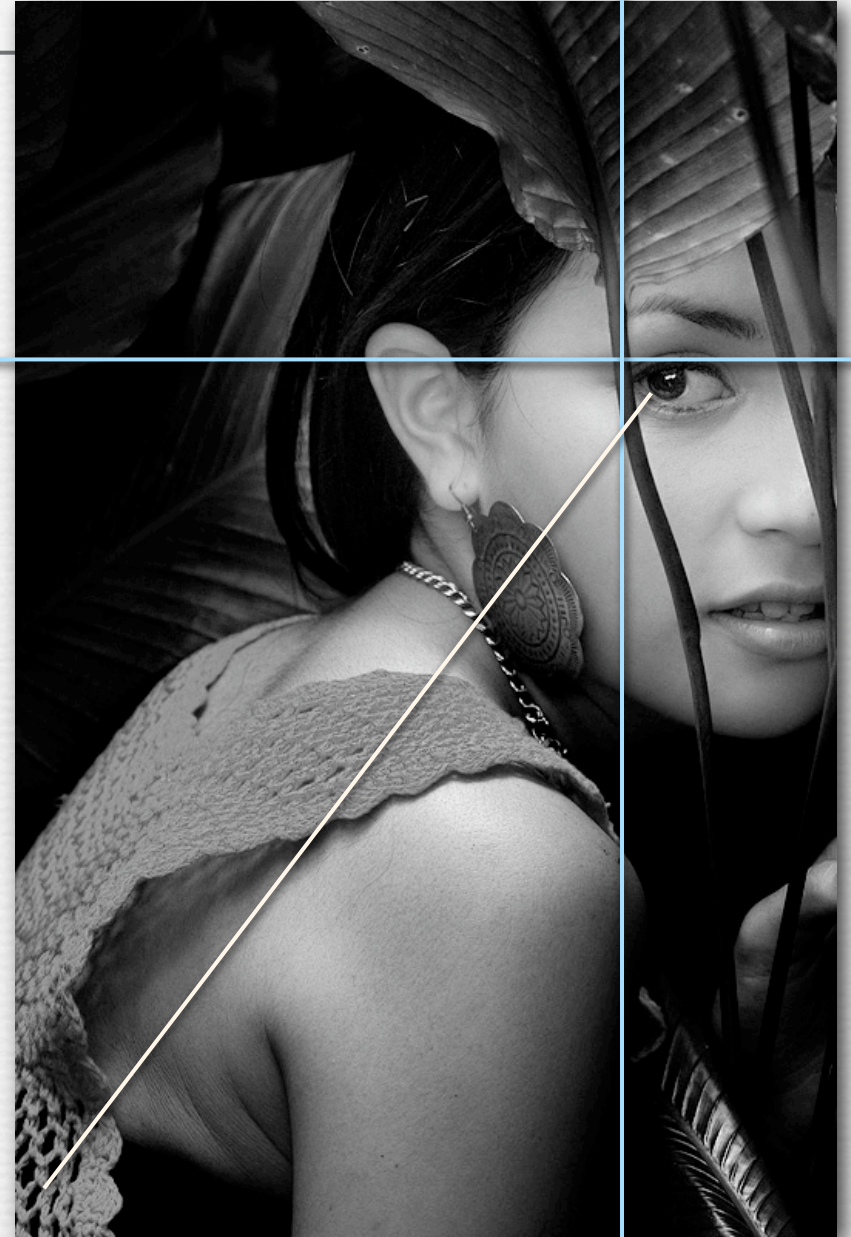


Jimmy Sin

http://www.pbase.com/aloha_lavina/librodo_workshop_malaysia

Photographic examples

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Jimmy Sin

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S-curve

large collection of articles
about photographic composition



(photoinf.com)



S-curve



Ansel Adams,
Tetons and
Snake River,
1942

Pictorial design



(John Shappell)

(Samuel Schulenburg)



St. Teresa's Church,
Bodega, California



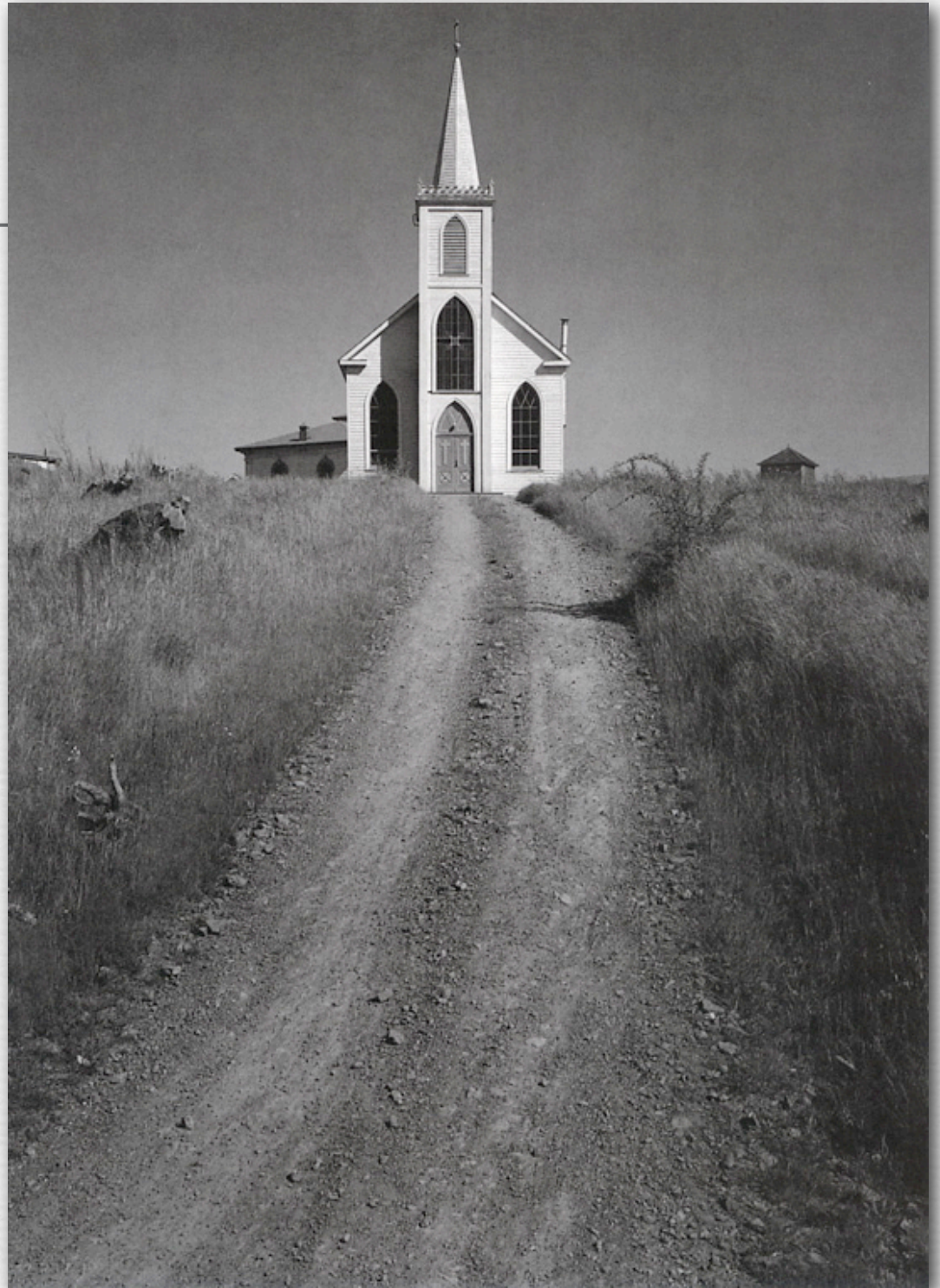
(Jay Bergeson - converted to B&W)

Pictorial design



(John Shappell)

Ansel Adams,
1953



Alfred Hitchcock, The Birds (1963)



Potter's Schoolhouse and
St. Teresa's Church, Bodega



Slide credits

◆ Fredo Durand

- ◆ London, Stone, and Upton, *Photography* (ninth edition), Prentice Hall, 2008.
- ◆ Peterson, B., *Learning to See Creatively*, Watson-Guptill, 1988.
- ◆ Peterson, B., *Understanding Exposure*, Watson-Guptill, 2004.
- ◆ Peterson, B., *Understanding Digital Photography*, Watson-Guptill, 2005.
- ◆ Patterson, F., *Photographing the World Around You*, Key Porter Books, 1994.
- ◆ Adams, A., *Examples: The Making of 40 Photographs*, Little, Brown, and Co., 1983.
- ◆ Hedgecoe, J., *The New Manual of Photography*, Doris Kindersley, 2003.
- ◆ Tanser and Kleiner, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages* (10th ed.), Harcourt Brace, 1996.