

Brief :

The first article about the very important and complex subject of photographic composition. An introduction to the composition problem, the Rule of Thirds, and horizon placement. More articles on composition will follow.

Level :

Category :

BASICS

Introduction to Composition and the Rule of Thirds

One of the things that one notes the most when talking or reading about photography is "composition". In fact, composition is the key element of a photograph, for good composition is the start of the photographic process on the creative side: placing elements within the restriction of the frame of the photo.

To get a good picture, it is necessary to have the right subject or model, the right aperture, the right exposure, the right lens... but, in order to go to that special place and come back with really good images and not a disappointment, or to have booked a model session and not to be sad with the results, one must compose, arrange and simplify the elements into a certain order.

How you compose your subject depends on a great deal of factors. One must always bear in mind that, what works for one subject may – and most surely will – be wrong for another.

Fortunately, some basic rules apply to all subjects, and thus become what some like to call a "guideline" to bear in mind when you have something you wish to capture with a camera, remembering at all times that a pleasing and powerful image could be one that breaks all the rules. Yet, even more important: to correctly break a rule, one must know it well, to be aware of what is being done differently, and if it will come through in the final result.

A photograph can be divided in two main parts. First is the subject: what one takes a photo of. Second is treatment: how that subject is arranged within the frame.

The subject could be a person, a mountain, a car, a river, a house... as it could also be the interaction between a person and other elements, or elements between themselves.

Always remember simplicity. One can have several elements, but not scattered. A mob will only work if the idea can be understood quickly by the viewer, for example, protesters against the police (the "simple" idea: confrontation). Always aim at having but one center of interest.

The photographer should bear in mind what is the idea he wants to convey, and then choose the best way to do it.

Frame

A photograph can be in the shape of a rectangle or of a square. The rectangle can be horizontal (also referred as "landscape") or vertical (also referred as "portrait"), and these can be taken to extremes, to emphasize the characteristics of the format.

The rectangle is the most common format, and is the one that most cameras have. Being the way that our eyes see the world, the horizontal format is the most "natural", emphasizing horizontal lines and movement. The vertical format requires more conscious "effort", and it emphasizes vertical lines and elements.

Extreme horizontal and vertical formats further stress these characteristics.

The squared format (typical of twin lens cameras) is symmetrical, and there is no domain of either vertical or horizontal lines. It transmits a feeling of balance and order, but it has a higher risk of becoming less interesting and stimulating. However, if the subject fits a squared format well, do not hesitate to cut your photo, for a balanced photo is very serene and pleasant to look at.





Fig 1 – Horizontal format
The idea of movement is implied in this shot, leading the eye.



Extreme horizontal format – Fig 2
The space for movement is larger this way.

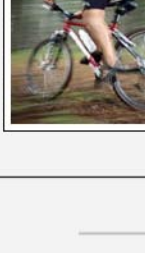
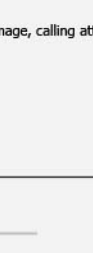


Fig 3 – Vertical format
The subject is stopped, but the background trees make this a very powerful image.



Extreme vertical format – Fig 4
Emphasizes the stunt and makes the image even more eye-catching.

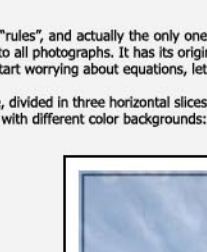


Fig 5 – Square format
In spite of the motion, the square balances the image, calling attention to the subject itself and not the movement.

Rule of Thirds

One of the basic "rules", and actually the only one to be referred as such, is the Rule of Thirds. It is perhaps the most important of all, because it can (and will) be applied to all photographs. It has its origin in a mathematical concept of a photograph, in order to establish a certain order.

But, before you start worrying about equations, let us start exemplifying it.

Imagine a picture, divided in three horizontal slices, all the same. These are the thirds. Now, try to fill one of the thirds with the subject and the rest sky, or the different slices with different color backgrounds:

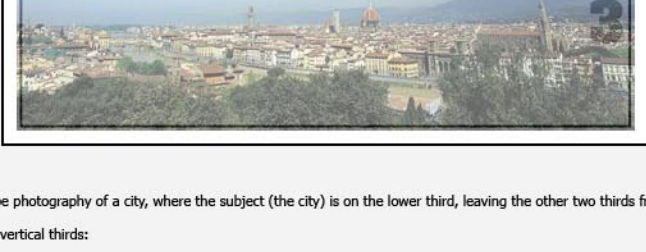


Fig 6

In here we have a landscape photography of a city, where the subject (the city) is on the lower third, leaving the other two thirds free to the sky.

This can also be done with vertical thirds:



Fig 7

This is a far more complex use of thirds. In this example (fig. 7), each third has a different element, all combining to make the subject (in this case it would be "work") more clear to the viewer.

As a reminder, avoid placing strong, lonely subjects in the middle third – you should always avoid the "bulls-eye syndrome": Placing the subject in the center of the photo. This will tend to make the image less interesting, or also oppressive.

The use of thirds works also (or maybe even in a stronger way) if you place the subject on top of a third line:




Fig 8




Fig 9




Fig 10




Fig 11

Obviously, a photographer should enrich his photo by combining elements (what could be referred to as "enriching" the composition). In these examples we have the use of subjects on both third lines (figs. 8/10), or of filling thirds with background and placing the subject on the third line (figs. 9/11). Being able to add elements and still keep the image's simplicity often helps in taking great photographs.

However, the most important element in the rule of thirds is a combination of both vertical and horizontal thirds.

When you combine the two, you'll see that one ends up with 9 different spaces and... four points where the horizontal and vertical lines cross. Those four spots will be the strongest points of the picture, and a photographer should aim to get his subject placed upon one of these points, on what are referred to as the centers of interest.

Here is an example with one of my photos:

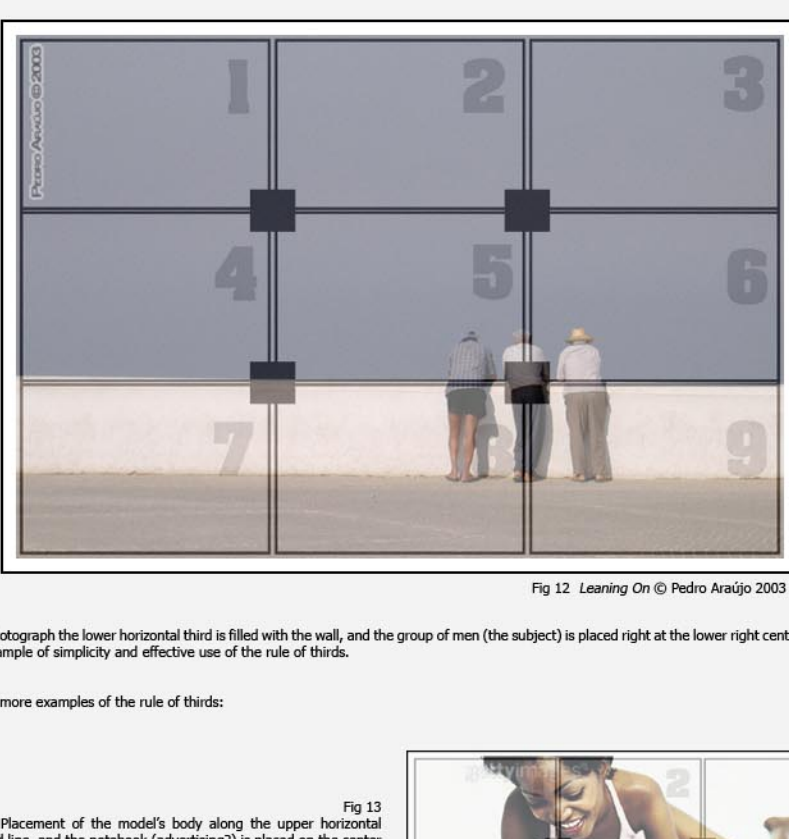


Fig 12 *Leaning On* © Pedro Araújo 2003

In this photograph the lower horizontal third is filled with the wall, and the group of men (the subject) is placed right at the lower right center of interest. It is a fair example of simplicity and effective use of the rule of thirds.

Here are more examples of the rule of thirds:

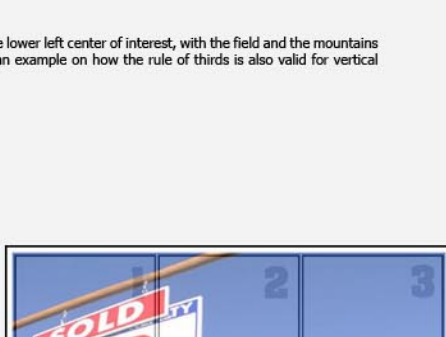


Fig 13
Placement of the model's body along the upper horizontal third line, and the notebook (advertising?) is placed on the center of interest of this photograph.



Fig 14
The subject is placed on the lower left center of interest, with the field and the mountains balancing the sky. This is an example on how the rule of thirds is also valid for vertical format photographs.



Fig 15
This picture is a good example of a commercial photo. Each of the important items (the house and the card) are on a center of interest, and thus the message is clear.




Fig 16
A good example on how holiday photos can become really interesting photographs, with the correct arrangement of the elements.



Fig 17
Using negative space to balance the model, yet making her stand out more, being less oppressive than if it were a centered picture.




Fig 18
A fine example of correct placement for a photograph, with the boy being in the center of interest, inside two frames that define and draw attention to the subject.

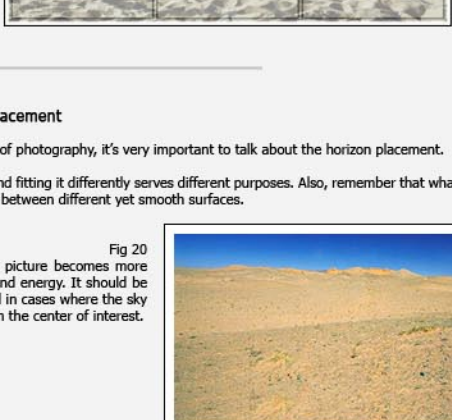


Fig 19
A well balanced and original composition, with the subject placed in an unexpected center of interest, thus making the photo more interesting. The tree plays an important role, leading the eye to the subject.

Horizon Placement

Something important regarding what one could call geometrical composing of photography, it's very important to talk about the horizon placement.

Often the horizon becomes the main line of division in an open landscape, and fitting it differently serves different purposes. Also, remember that what works for the horizon is also valid for a road and a wall, and other straight lines between different yet smooth surfaces.

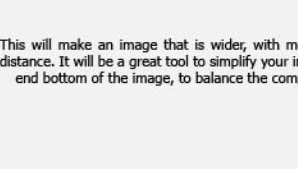


Fig 20
Using a high horizon makes it so that the foreground of the picture becomes more important, and that can have a strong suggestion for movement and energy. It should be avoided when the foreground is dull or unimportant. It can be used in cases where the sky could cause the attention to drift from the center of interest.




Fig 21
Something to be avoided in most cases.. It can create an image of symmetry and quietness, but it will probably disperse the attention of the main center of interest

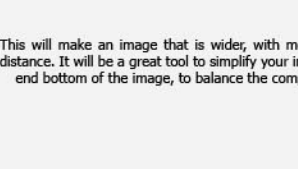


Fig 22
This will make an image that is wider, with more space to wander, and giving a feeling of greater distance. It will be a great tool to simplify your image, but do not forget to leave sufficient space in the end bottom of the image, to balance the composition; otherwise the sky might become oppressive.




Fig 23

Conclusion

Our first conclusion is that composition is a large and complex issue, one that combines many elements. We will attempt to discuss the majority of those elements in subsequent composition articles.