

## *Simplification*

*Thanks to Chuck Gardner for suggesting a different approach to these lessons.*

The subject for today's lesson is "Simplification". In my opinion, it's the most fundamental "rule" of composition, and good photography in general. There's a reason I didn't choose it for my first lesson, though: in order to simplify successfully, you need some sort of framework to use for the simplification: just focusing on a detail of a scene while forgetting about the rest of the composition usually doesn't work. The Rule of Thirds is one such a framework.

Simplification is about finding the salient thing about the picture about to be taken, taking out distracting details, and putting it into context. Decide what in the picture you want to be the main point of interest, and build the picture around that, removing or suppressing everything that would compete for attention with the point of interest.

### *Eye-catchers*

When thinking about simplification and selecting your primary subject or focus of interest, it can be helpful to consider some of the ways we tend to perceive and "notice" things. Any of the following things are usually attention-catchers, and suitable as a focus for simplification, arranged roughly according to their strength:

- Eyes
- Faces
- The human form in general
- Animals
- Light colored objects (against a dark background)
- Dark objects (against a light background)
- Warm-colored objects (against cool-colored or desaturated backgrounds: red on green, red on gray)
- Objects with strong contrast

By "strength" I mean that a "stronger" attention-grabber tends to win out over a "weaker" one, in case of competition. The attention-grabbers can also be combined to great effect. For example, in a photograph of a group of people dressed in grayish clothes and looking away, an individual in bright-colored or white clothing and looking into the camera will stand out. Find some interesting way of positioning her, and you could have a pretty good picture!

### *Techniques and pitfalls*

There are a quite a number of practical things you can do to simplify a picture, once you know what you're trying to do. You can:

- Zoom (or walk) in, to remove distracting detail from the frame
- Zoom (or walk) out, to have distracting detail fade into a texture and let the big structure of the scene stand out
- Pan
- Walk left or right, kneel, lie down, climb up on an object, or raise the camera over your head, to remove distracting objects from the background
- Use a large aperture for shallow depth of field, to blur a distracting background (unfortunately there's not much room for this with small-sensor digicams)

Things to watch out for (to avoid):

- Joins -- having an in-focus background object merge with your subject, e.g., a tree "growing out of" your subject's head
- Competing focuses of attention -- for example, two people both looking at the camera, but positioned so that they don't form a pair (a single compositional element)
- Chaotic backgrounds -- a background with lots of detail and contrast tends to swamp your subject (the "zoom out" or shallow depth of field techniques work particularly well for this situation)
- Truncations -- half-people or half-objects generally don't work well. If you want to include only part of a person in the frame, try not to crop at one of the joints -- cropping at half-thigh is much better than the knee or the hip, for example

### *Many ways to simplify*

To illustrate the principle of simplification, I'll use some pictures I took in Tyre over the holidays. There are two huge areas of ancient ruins and excavations in the city, one by the ancient port, and another inland. Both are absolutely spectacular sites -- but not at all obvious to photograph, because of the sheer amount of stuff in there.

There are many ideas for simplification. Some examples:

The simplest is picking a detail of the scene and composing the picture around it:



or



Another technique is finding an area in the subject that is less cluttered or presents interesting shapes or patterns, and compose the picture around the area:



Yet another way is to do the opposite of zooming in on detail -- use a wide-angle lens or move further off so that the chaotic detail disappears and the "big picture" emerges:



or... (this one is not from Tyre):



## *Assignments*

1. Select a picture among the ones you've taken recently. Examine it, and try to remember the scene. Present the picture as you had shot it, and:

(a) Crop it differently, based on the principle of simplification (and, if you like, some other "rules" of composition). Explain why you chose to crop it that way. Don't worry about losing pixels or technical quality: crop as much as you need for compositional purposes.

(b) Describe a different way you could have composed and shot the picture in the first place.

2. Take a picture, applying the simplification principle. Present it, and explain

(a) why you chose to simplify it in the way you did, and

(b) what did you do to make the simplification work.

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