Composing Good Photographs

CS 178, Spring 2012

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"There are no rules for good photographs,
there are only good photographs."

- Ansel Adams

Outline

- the pictorial elements of photography
  - line and form
  - pattern and texture
  - tone and color
- pictorial design,
  i.e. the design in the 2D picture frame
  - 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

© Marc Levoy

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
  - famous photographs are seldom accidents;
    the photographer thought about pictorial design
  - most useful if you've also tried the same thing yourself

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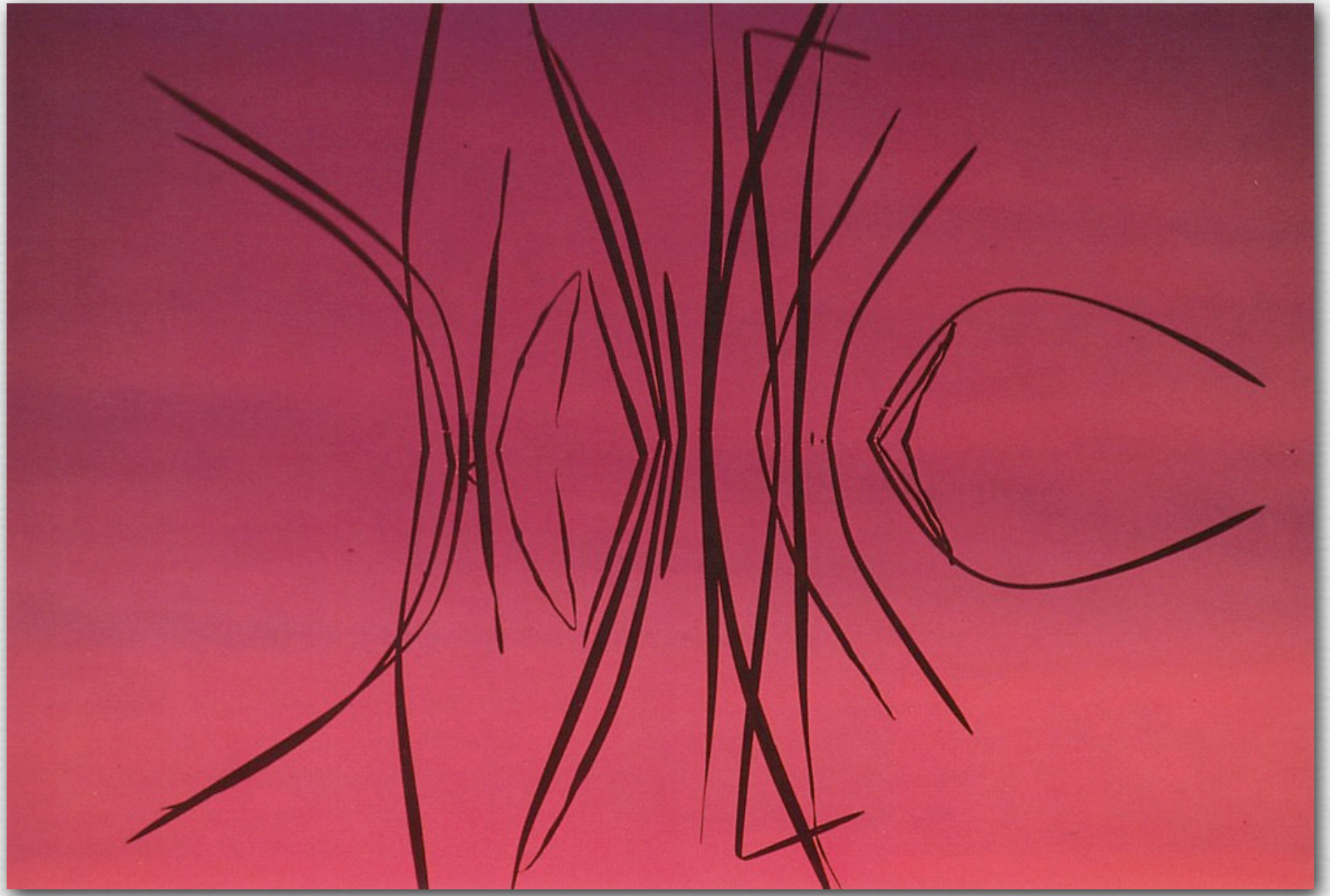
Lines as a pictorial element

Ansel Adams,
Aspens, 1958

© Marc Levoy

Arrangement of lines



(Freeman Patterson)

© Marc Levoy

Lines as a decorative element

(Howard@photodelusions.wordpress.com)

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Lines that lead your eye to the subject

(Freeman Patterson)

© Marc Levoy

Lines that lead your eye to the subject

(London)

Hiromu Kira, The Thinker, 1930

© Marc Levoy

Lines that lead your eye to the subject

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

(Bryan Peterson)

© Marc Levoy

Raphael,
Galatea, 1513

(Gardner)

Form - lines with meaning

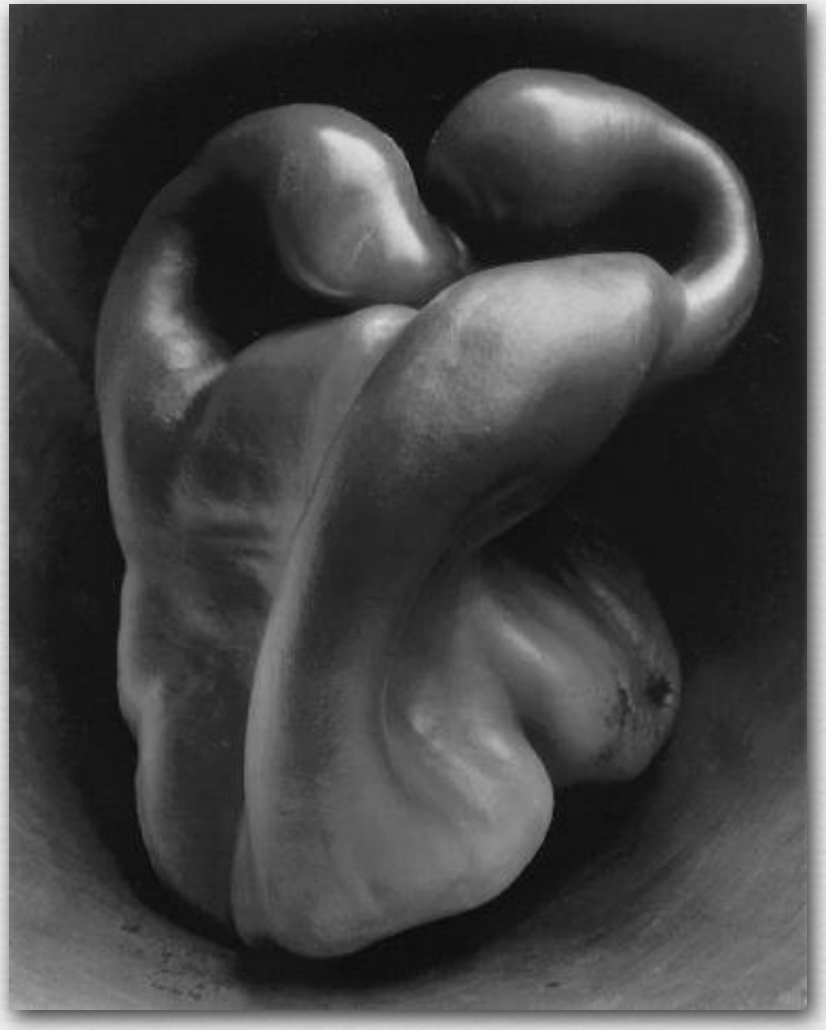
(Bryan Peterson)

first shot

second shot

©Marc Levoy

Form - lines with meaning



Edward Weston, Pepper No. 30, 1930

© Marc Levoy

Georgia O'Keeffe,
Grey Line, 1923

Shape - readily identifiable form

- backlighting draws attention to shape

(Bryan Peterson)

©Marc Levoy

Shape - readily identifiable form

© Marc Levoy

Pattern - repeated forms

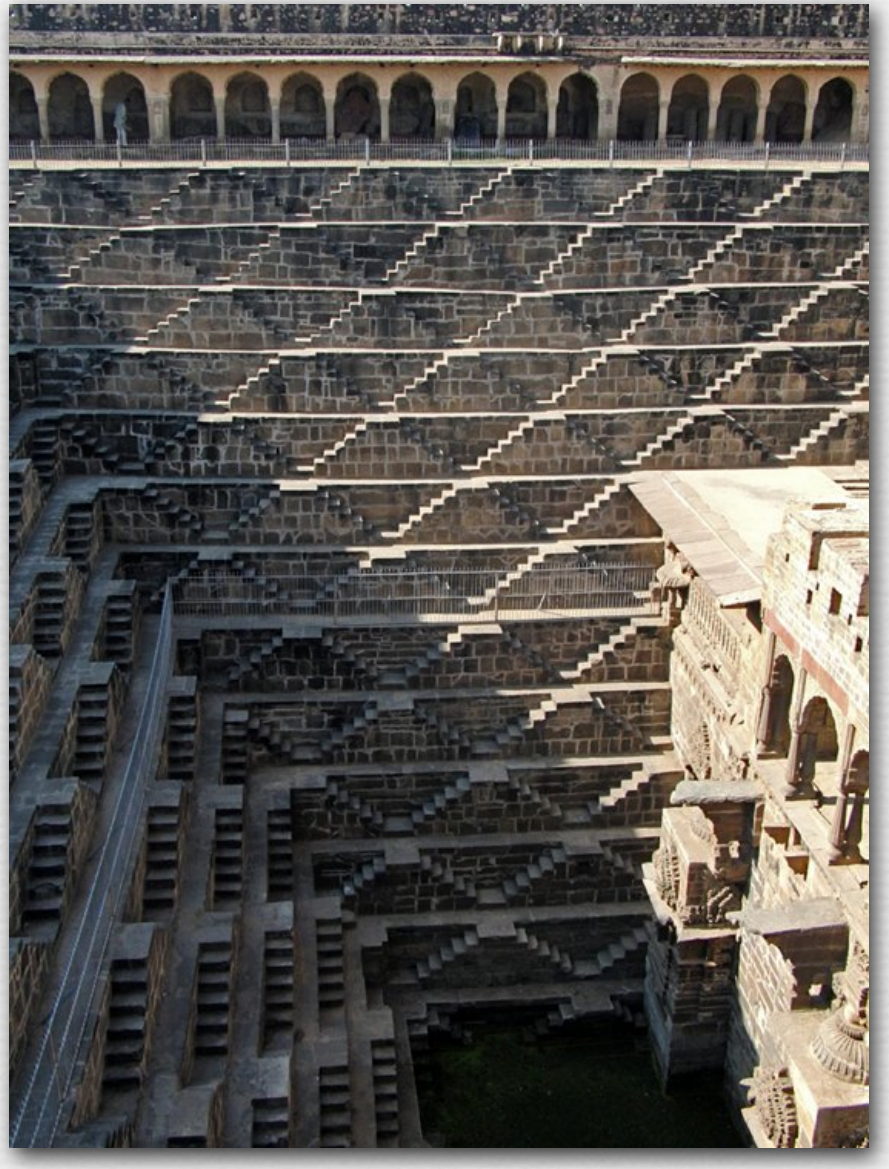
(Bryan Peterson)

first shot

second shot

©Marc Levoy

Pattern - repeated forms



Abhaneri Stepwell,
Rajasthan, India

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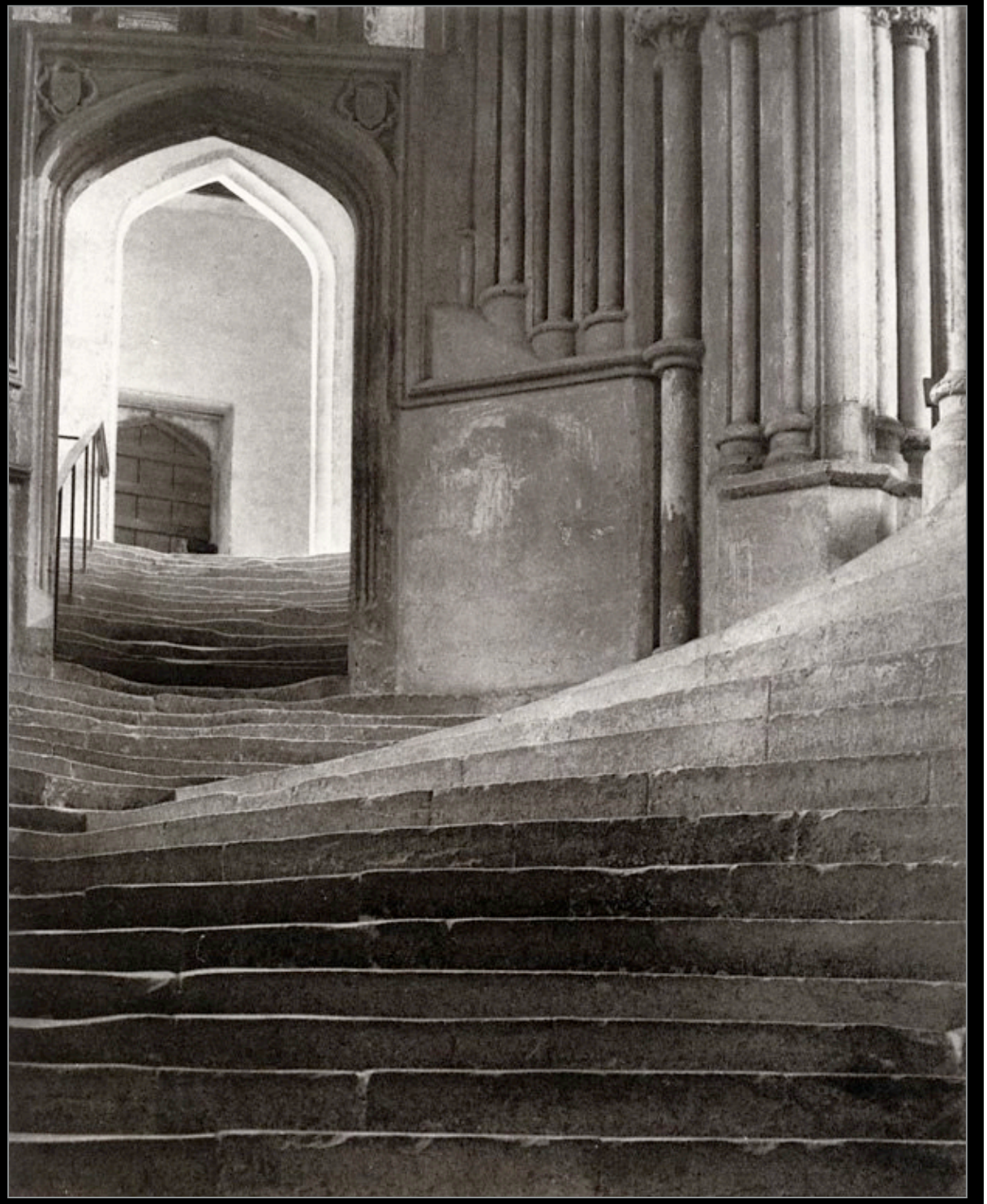
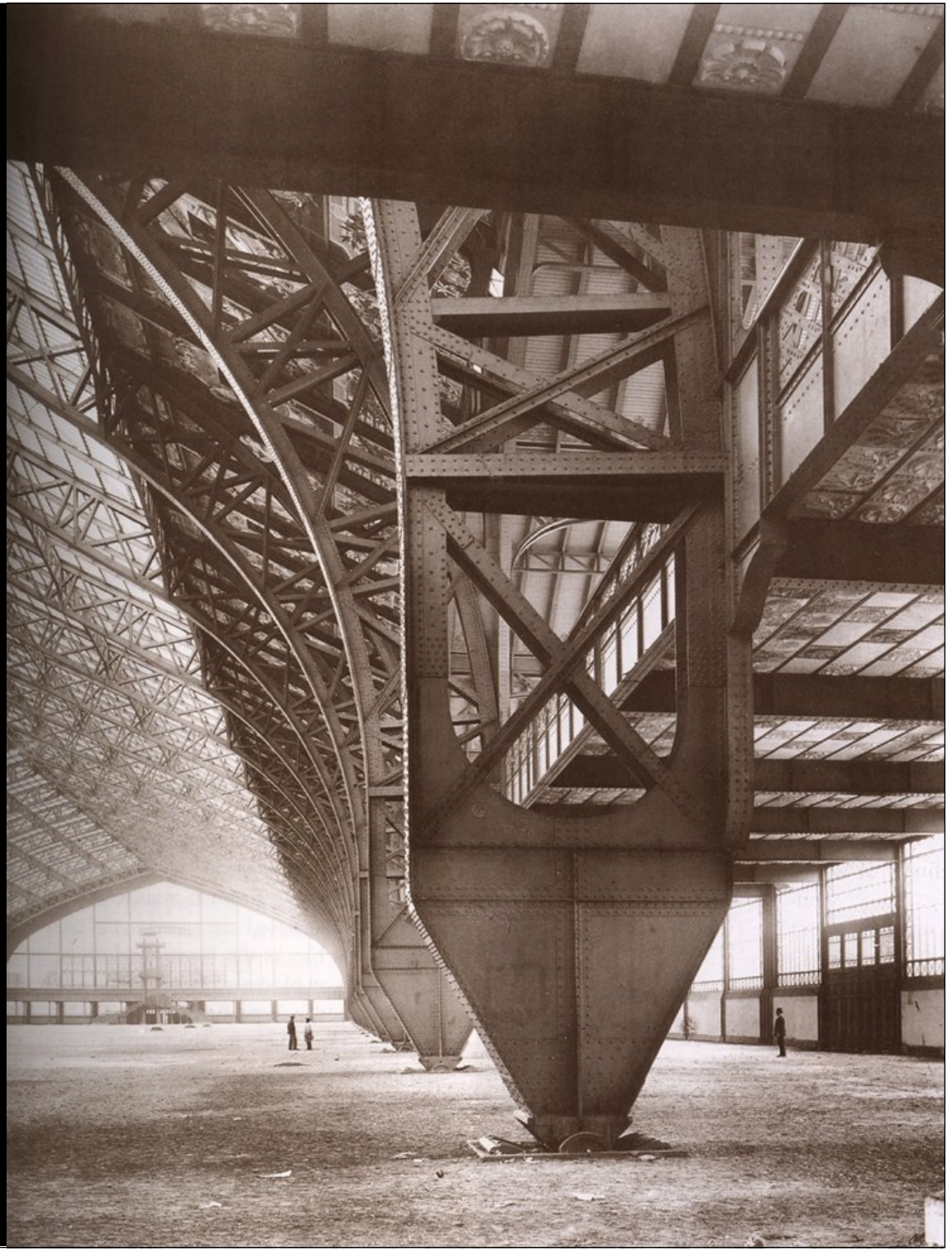


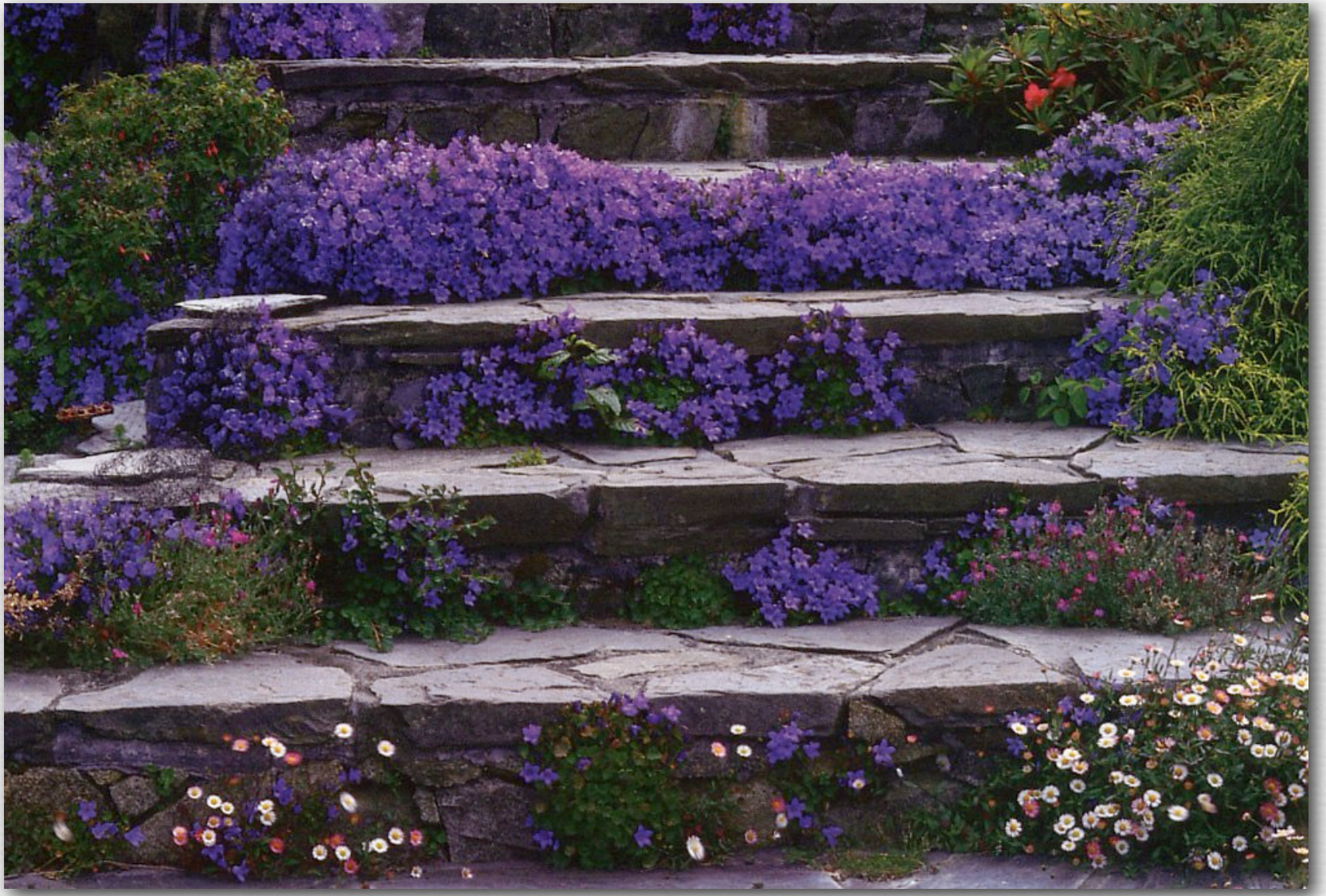
Frederick Evans,
The Sea of Steps -
Wells Cathedral, 1903

Louis-Émile Durandelle,
Gallery of the Machines,
International Exhibition of
1889, Paris



Rhythm - a looser kind of pattern

(Freeman Paterson)



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Auguste Renoir, Le Moulin de la Galette, 1876

Texture: fine patterns

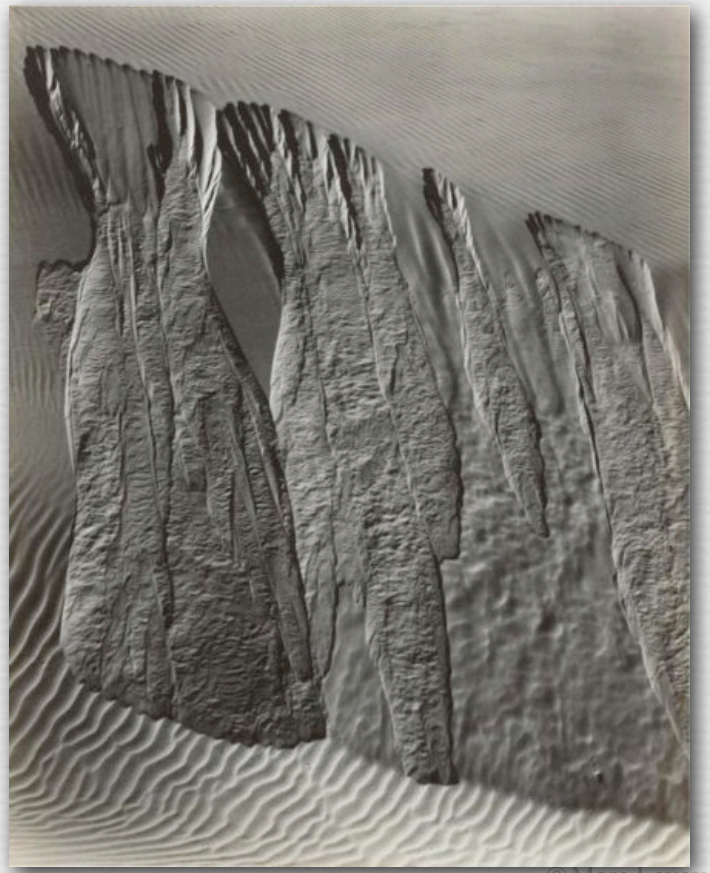
- early product of f/64 club
- sharp focus, smooth papers
- reaction against Pictorialists

Ansel Adams, Boards and Thistles, 1932

Texture

Edward Weston,
Dunes, Oceano, 1936

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



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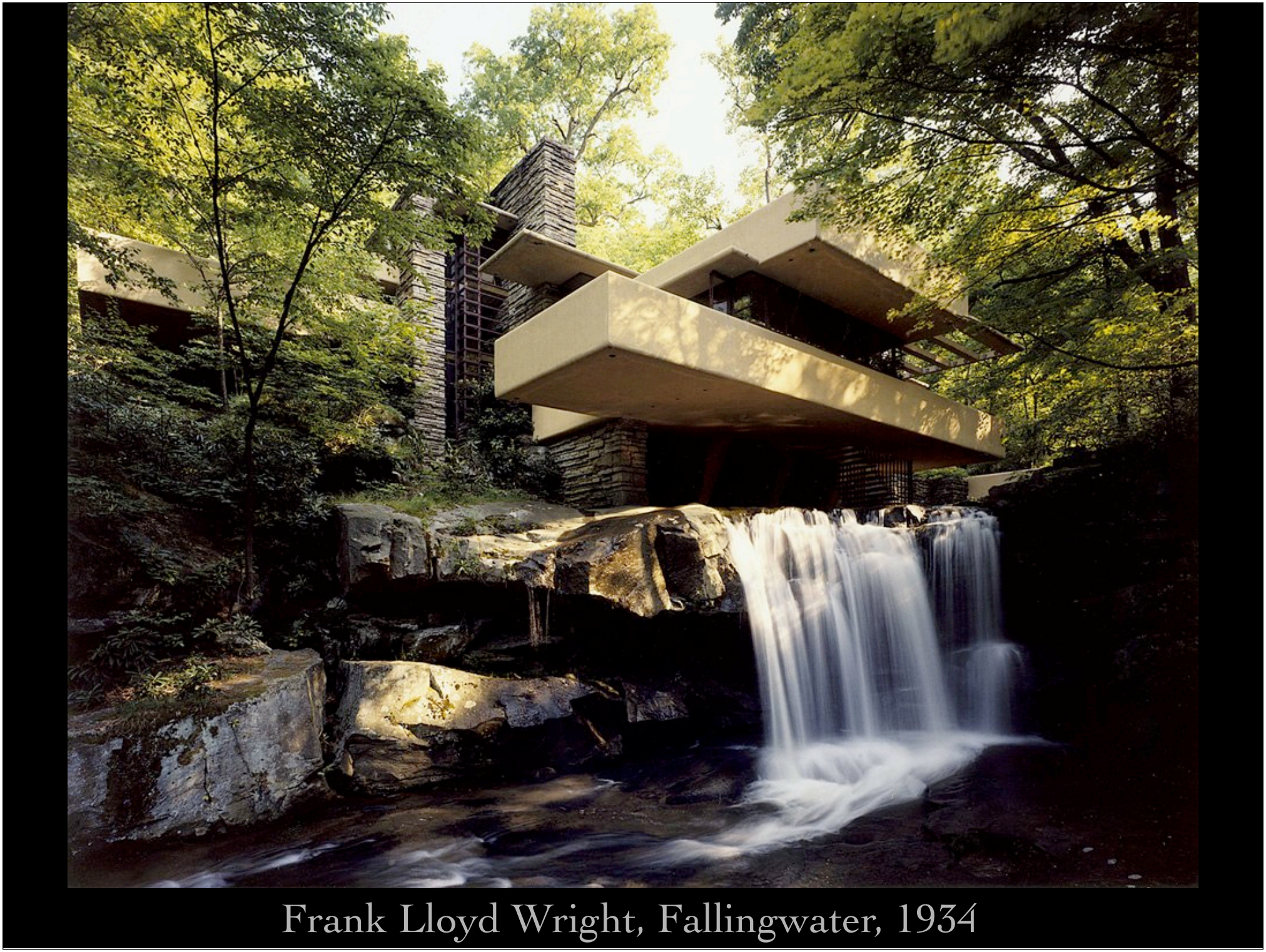
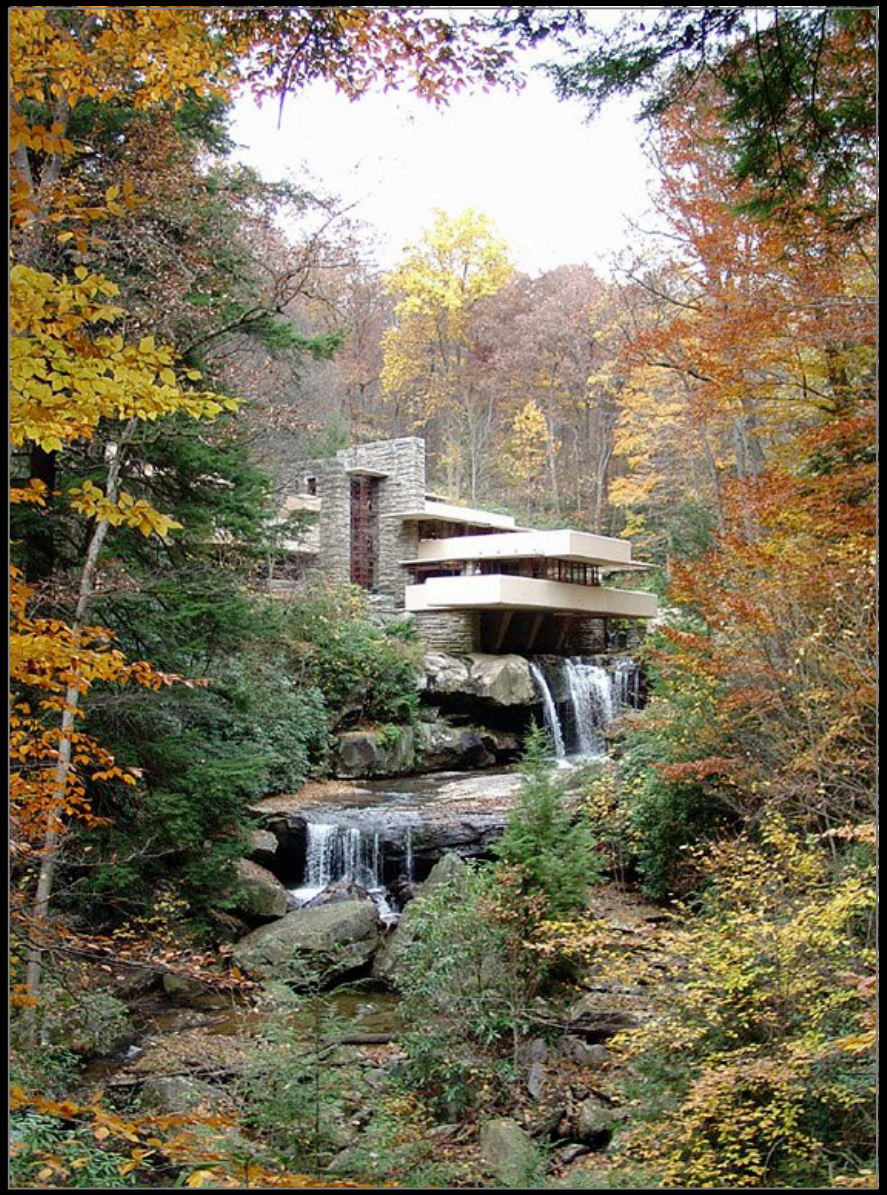


Frank Lloyd Wright, Fallingwater, 1934



(photographs by Galen Frysinger)

Frank Lloyd Wright, Fallingwater, 1934

Lighting as an aid to pictorial design

(London)

Fluor Garduño,
Basket of Light, Guatemala,
1989

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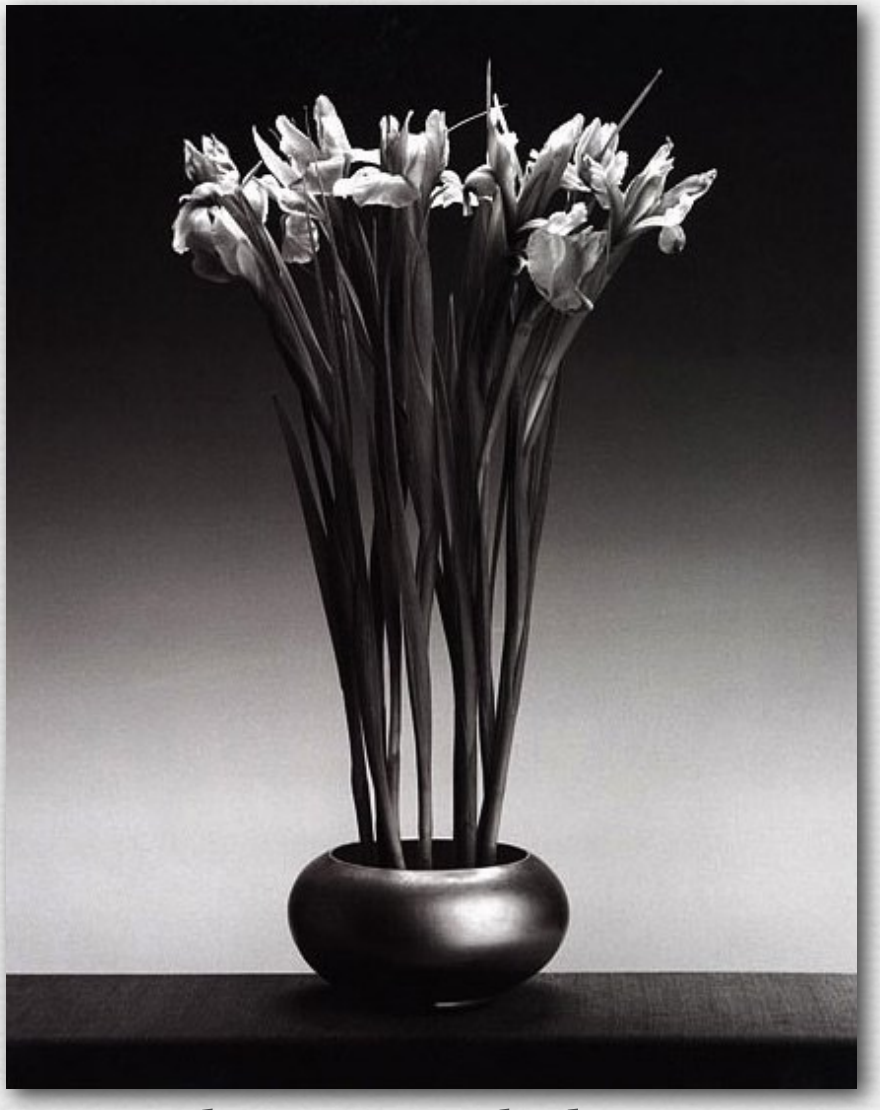
Yousuf Karsh,
Winston Churchill, 1941

Rembrandt van Rijn,
Self Portrait, 1660

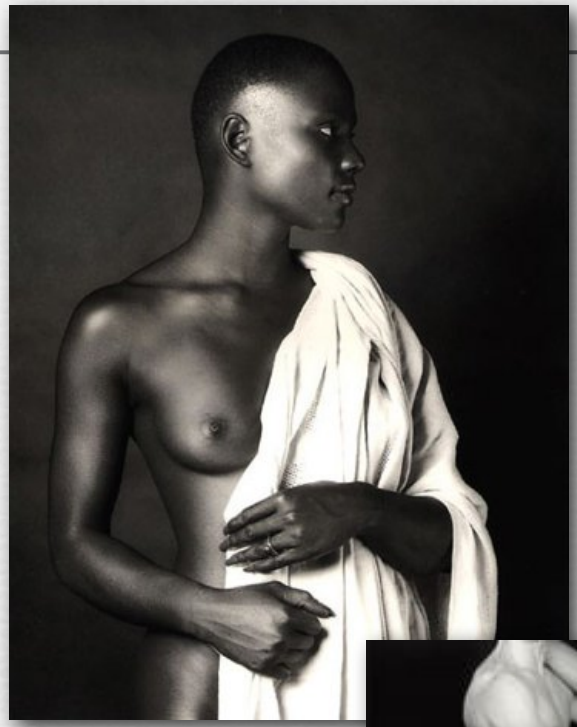
Yousuf Karsh,
Winston Churchill, 1941

Rembrandt van Rijn,
Portrait of Nicolaes Ruts, 1631

Tone as a pictorial element



Robert Mapplethorpe



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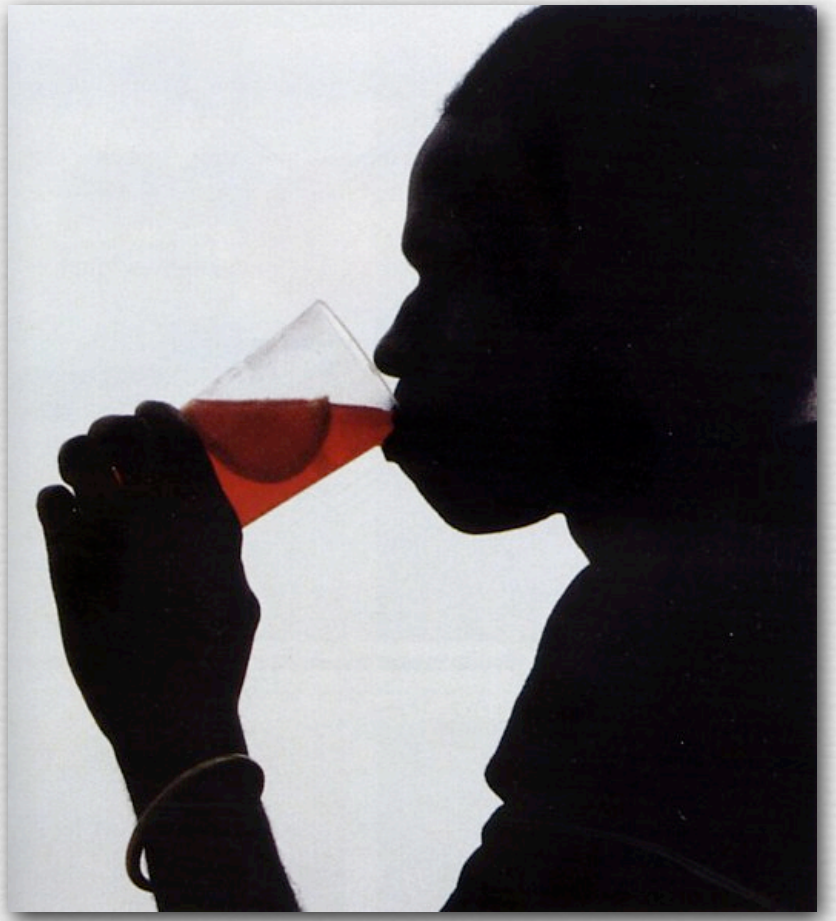
Color as a pictorial element

(London)

warm

cool

(Hedgecoe)



pictorial

© Marc Levoy

Color as an accent

(Hedgecoe)

©Marc Levoy

Encircled by color

(Hedgecoe)

© Marc Levoy

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

Color as rhythmic accent

(Hedgecoe)

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Peter Paul Rubens, The Judgement of Paris, 1636

Pictorial design

- symmetry and balance
- framing
- common compositions

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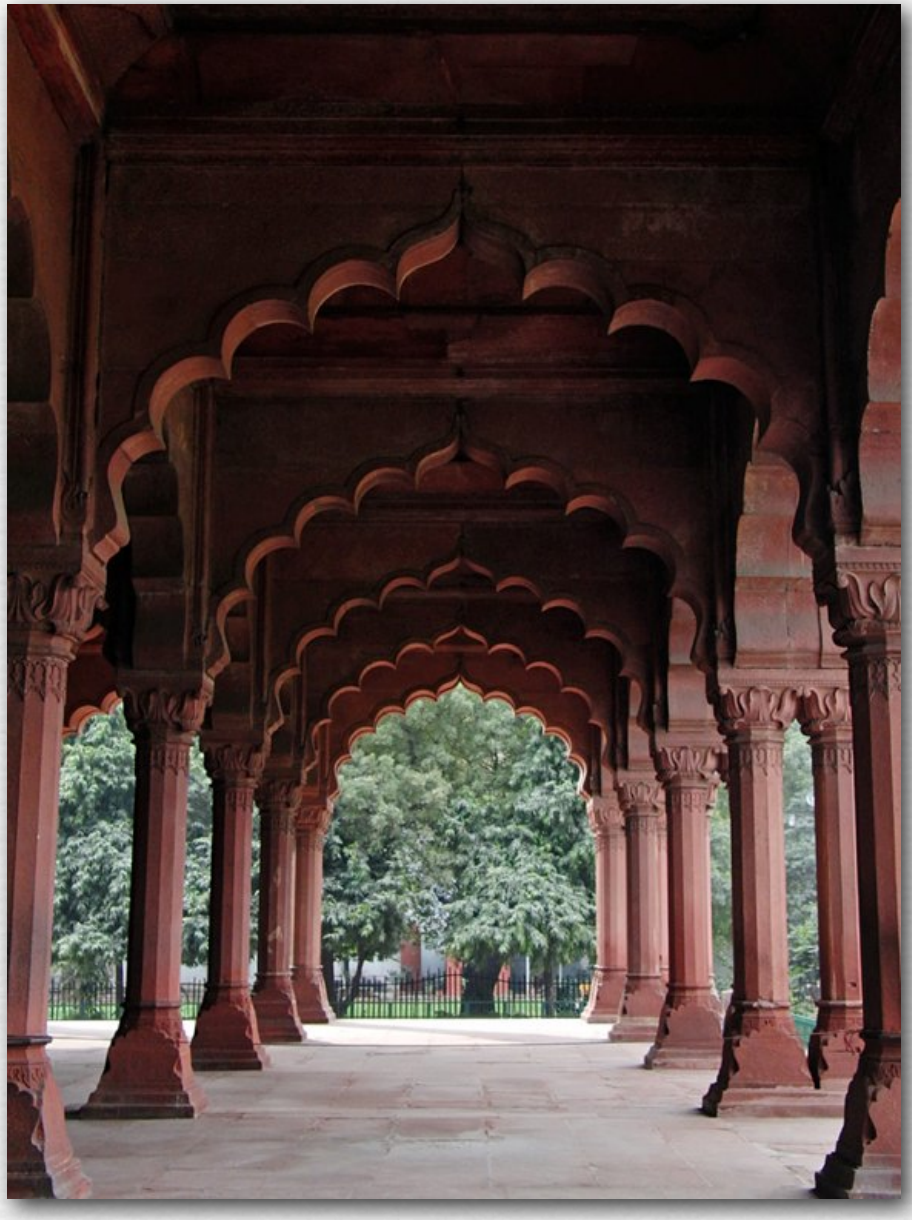
Symmetry



Arcade in Red Fort, Delhi, 2008

(Marc Levoy)

© Marc Levoy

Symmetry

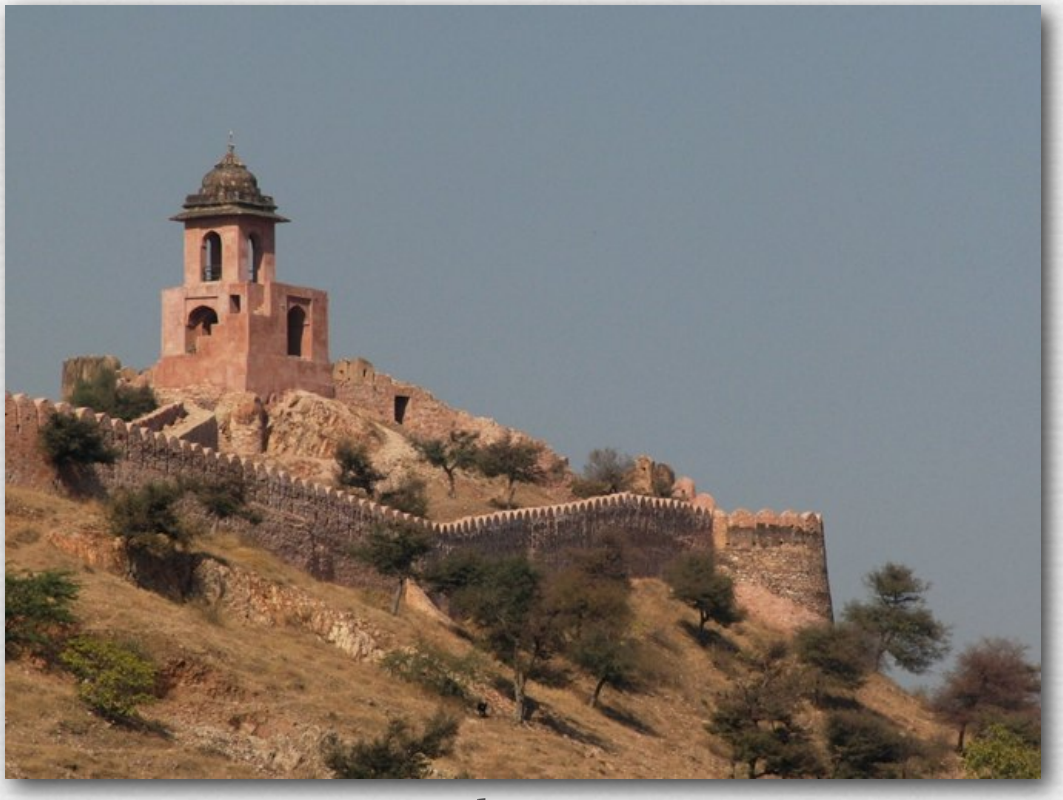
(Marc Levoy)

Place du Carrousel,
Paris, 2009

Asymmetry

Montmartre, 2009

(Marc Levoy)



Rajasthan, 2008

- off-center placement of main subject

underscores the asymmetry of the architecture

©Marc Levoy

Balance

- symmetrical background + dynamic, unbalanced foreground

(Freeman Paterson)

© Marc Levoy

Jacque-Louis David, Oath of the Horatii, 1784

Framing

(Marc Levoy)

© Marc Levoy

More dynamic framing

(London)

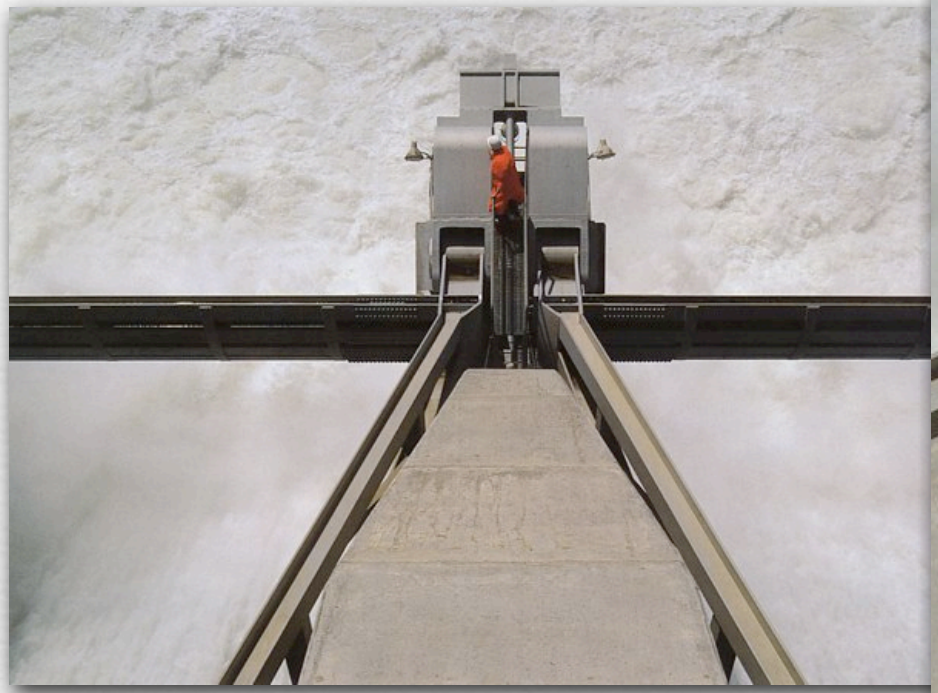
- shadow edges complete the frame
- slashing diagonals create tension

Dennis Stock, James Dean, 1955

© Marc Levoy

The picture frame

(Bryan Peterson)

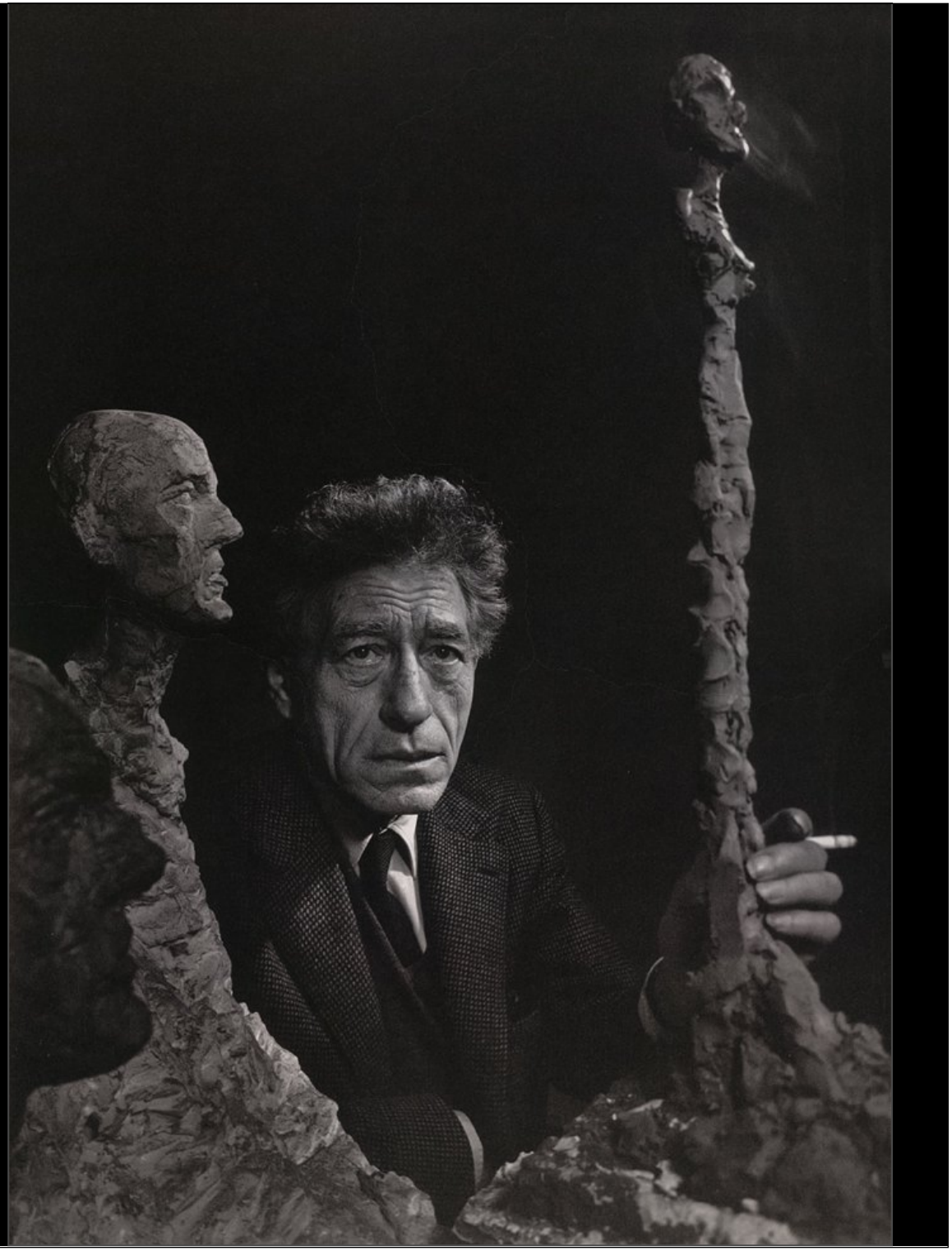


first shot

second shot

© Marc Levoy

Raphael, School of Athens, 1511



Yousuf Karsh,
Alberto Giacometti, 1965

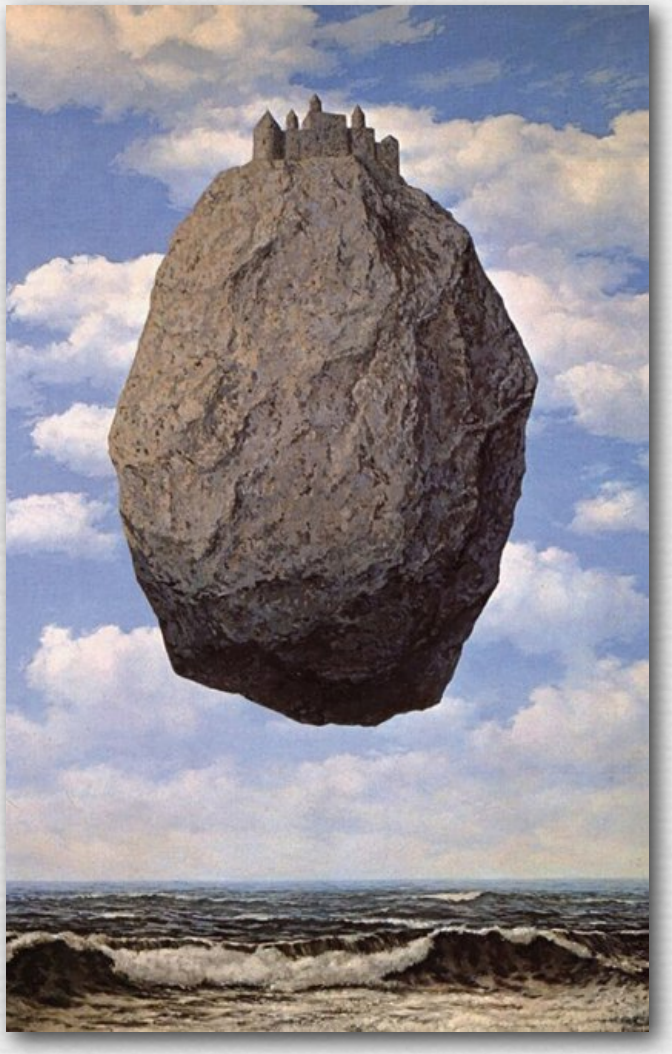
Filling the frame

Leonardo, Mona Lisa, 1506

Yousuf Karsh, Clark Gable. 1948

© Marc Levoy

or floating in space



Magritte,
The Castle of the Pyranees, 1959

Bernard Faucon,
The Room in Winter, 1986

© Marc Levoy

Common compositions

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

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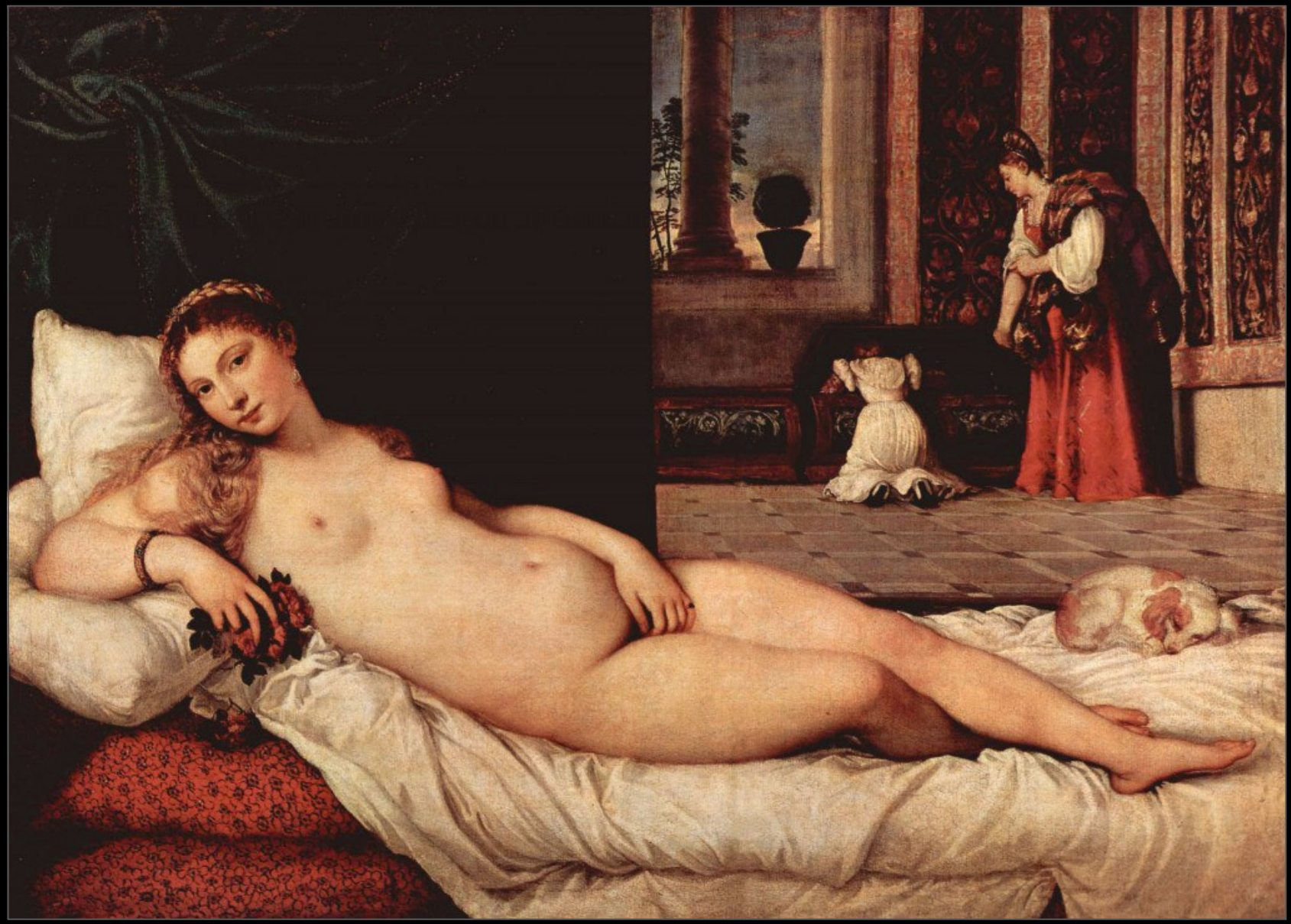
Raphael, Madonna with the Goldfinch, 1506

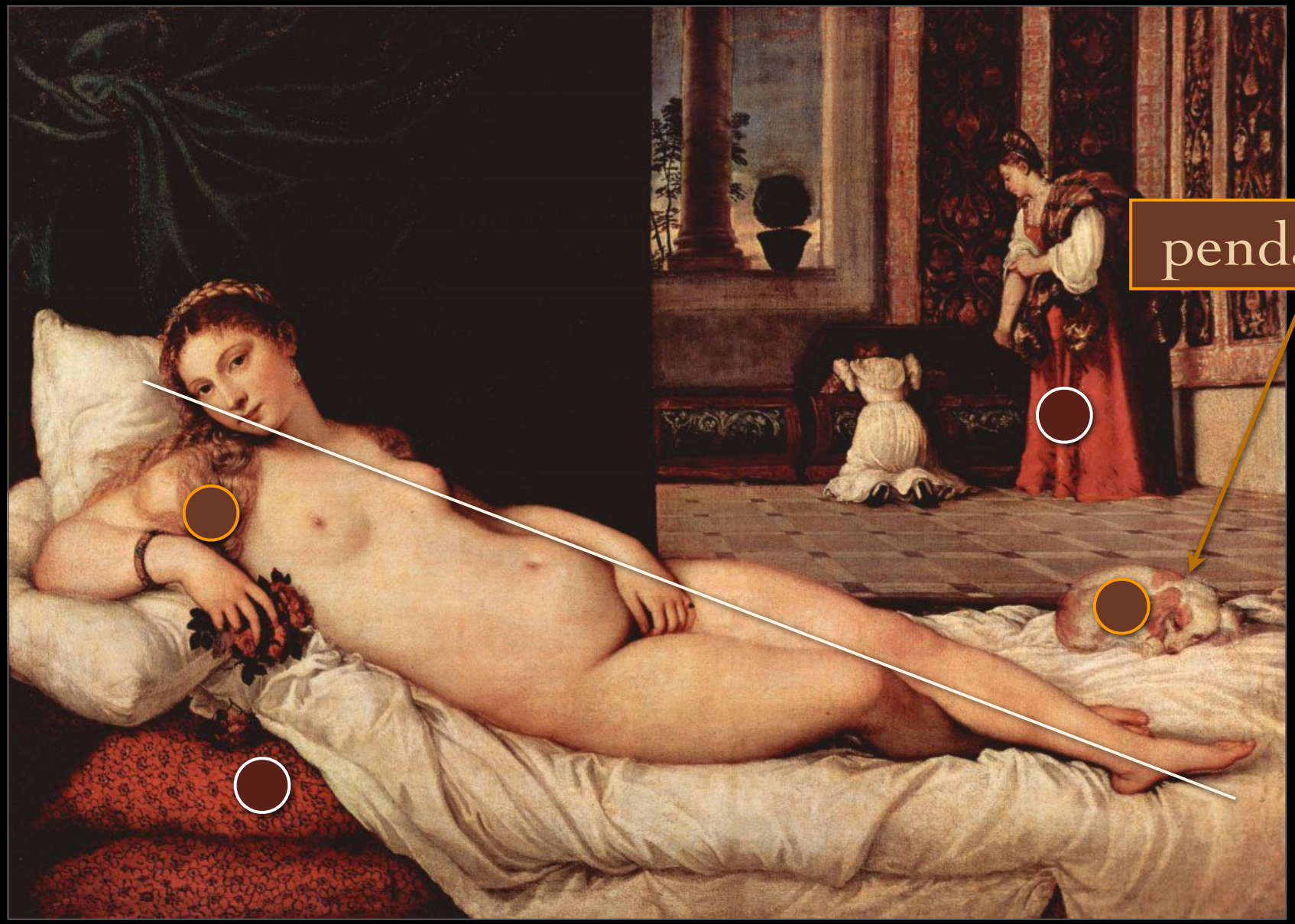
Titian, Madonna of the Pesaro Family, 1526

Raphael, Madonna with the Goldfinch, 1506

Titian, Madonna of the Pesaro Family, 1526



Titian, Venus of Urbino, 1538



Titian, Venus of Urbino, 1538

Photographic examples

Edward Weston, Charis Wilson Nude, 1936

© Marc Levoy

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

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Photographic examples

- diagonal leading to her eye
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Jimmy Sin

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S-curve

large collection of articles
about photographic composition

(photoinf.com)

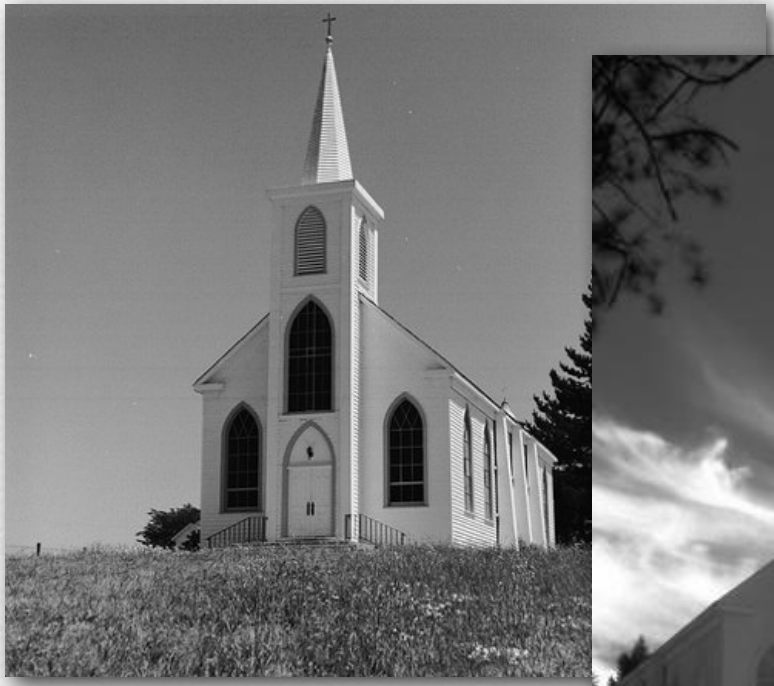
© Marc Levoy

S-curve

Ansel Adams,
Tetons and
Snake River,
1942

© Marc Levoy

Pictorial design



(John Shappell)

(Samuel Schulenburg)

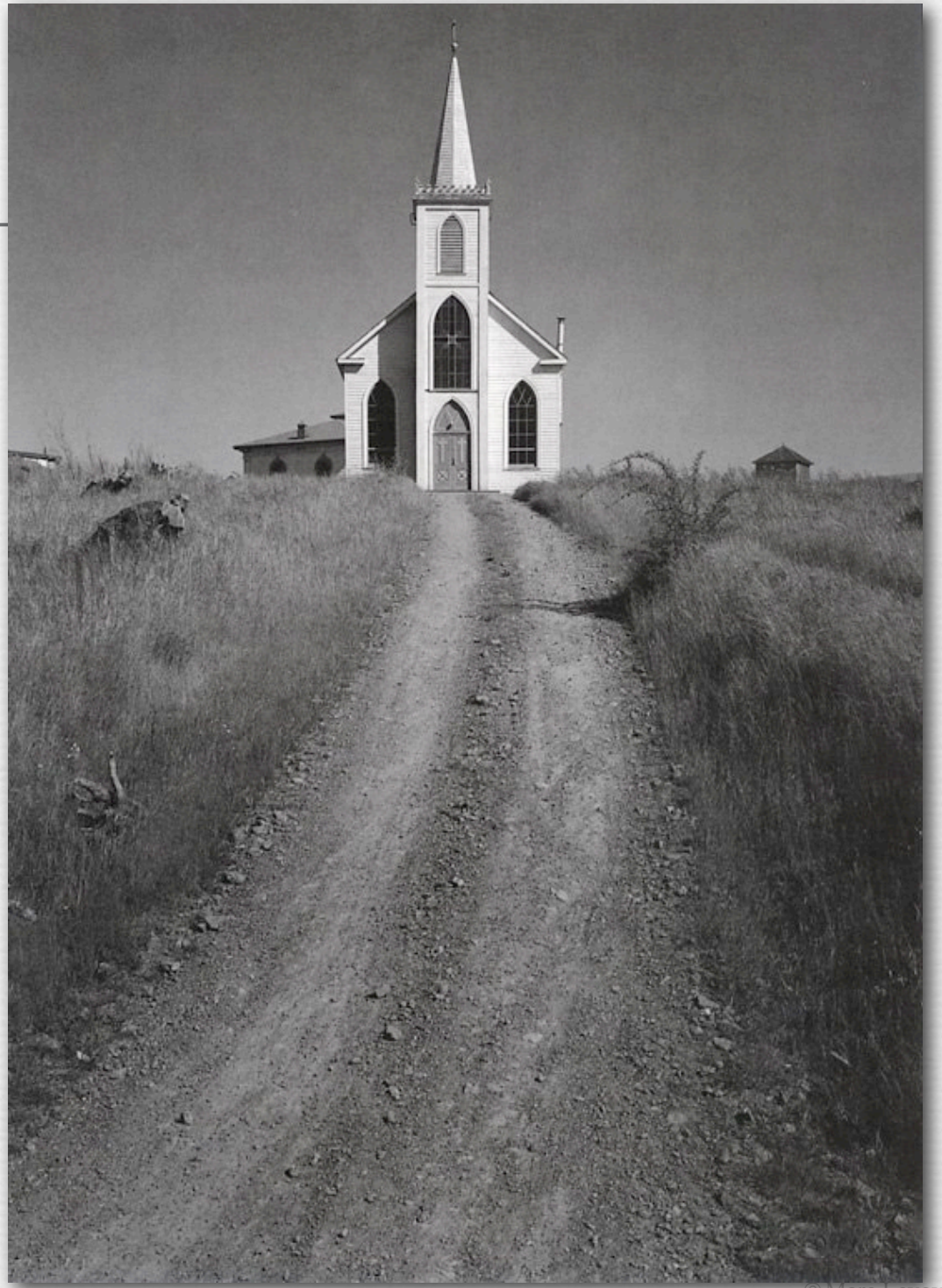
(Jay Bergeson - converted to B&W)

St. Teresa's Church,
Bodega, California

©Marc Levoy

Pictorial design

(John Shappell)



Ansel Adams,
1953

© Marc Levoy

Alfred Hitchcock, The Birds (1963)

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

© Marc Levoy

Parting thoughts (from Fredo Durand)

- simplify your picture
  - avoid cluttered backgrounds

- reposition yourself

© Marc Levoy

Parting thoughts

- simplify your picture
  - avoid cluttered backgrounds

(Marc Levoy)

- use a shallow depth of field

©Marc Levoy

Parting thoughts

- simplify your picture
  - avoid cluttered backgrounds

- fix it in Photoshop

©Marc Levoy

Parting thoughts

- simplify your picture
  - avoid cluttered backgrounds

- or leave it there!

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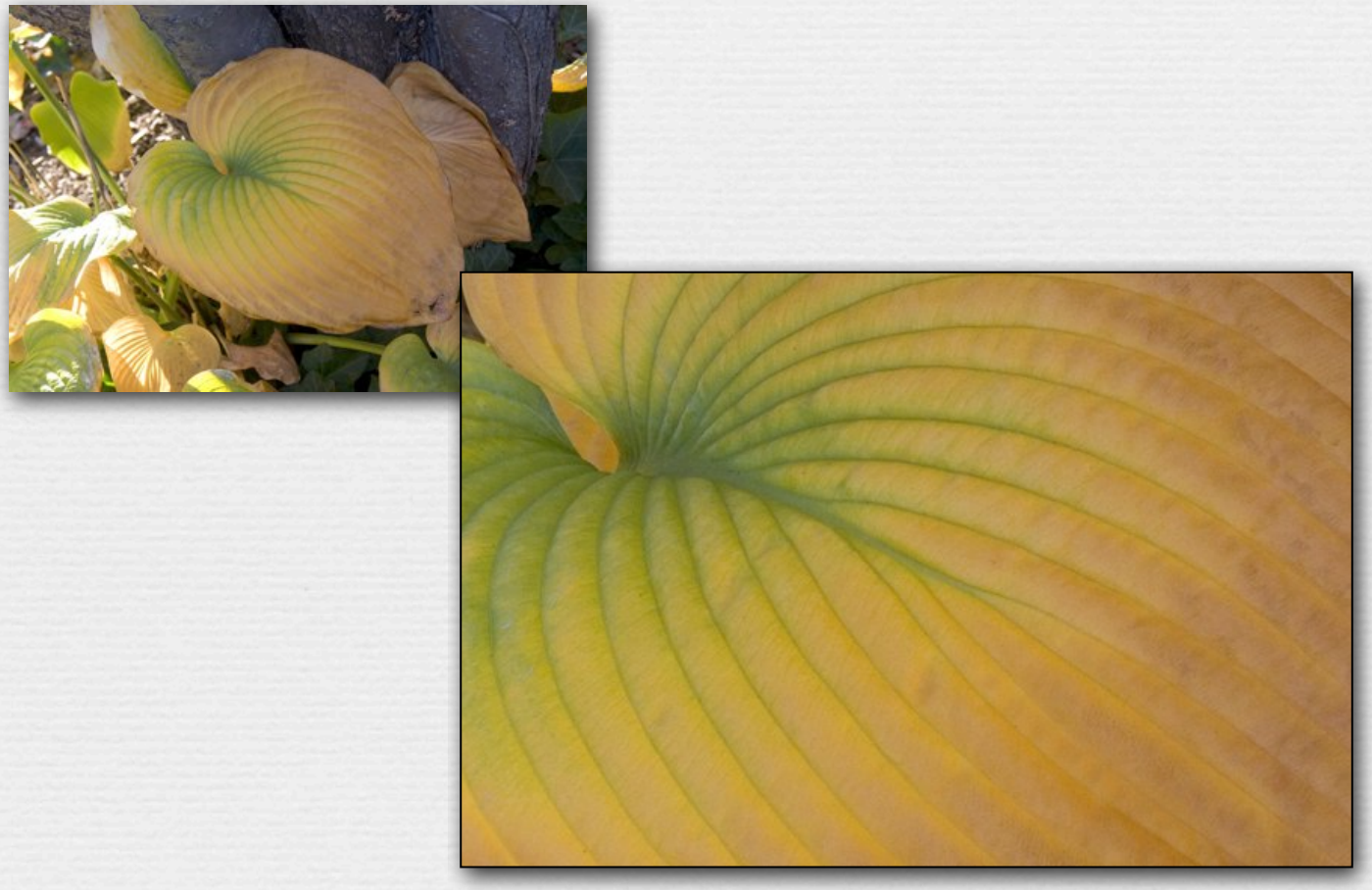
Parting thoughts

- simplify your picture
  - avoid cluttered backgrounds
  - get close to your subject



© Marc Levoy

Parting thoughts

- simplify your picture
  - avoid cluttered backgrounds
  - get close to your subject
  - fill the frame

(Bryan Peterson)

© Marc Levoy

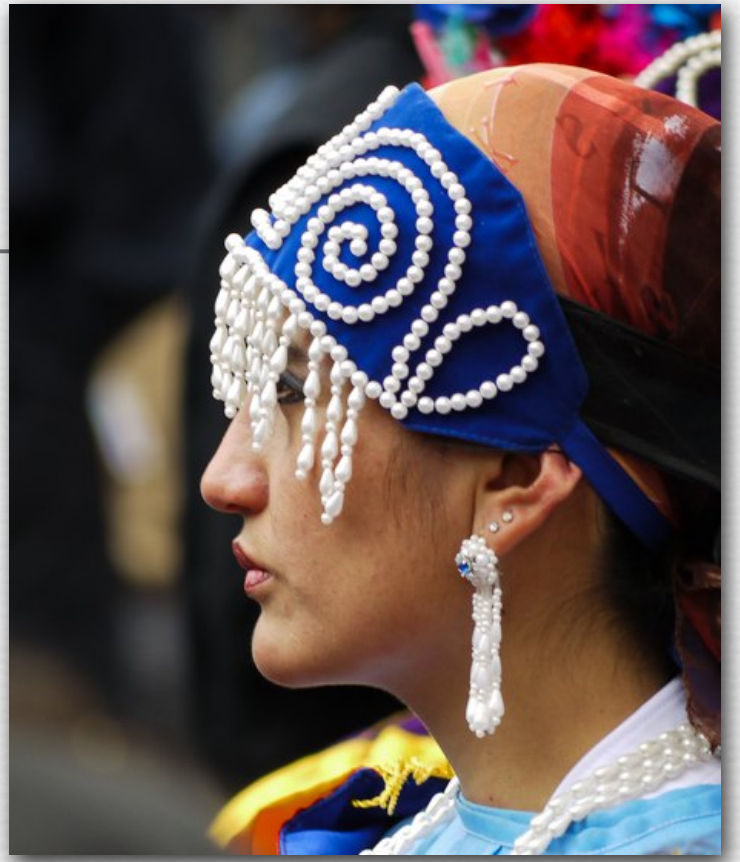
Parting thoughts

- simplif
  - avoi
  - get c
  - fill the frame

After class, a student commented that for each example I showed today, one could easily find counter-examples. This is certainly true. My goal is not to lay down a set of rules, but to present a set of issues you should think about as you compose photographs. Feel free to break these rules. But do so consciously and with a plan.

- avoid compositional errors
  - don't center objects needlessly

(Marc Levoy)



(John Shaw)

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Parting thoughts

- simplify your picture
  - avoid cluttered backgrounds
  - get close to your subject
  - fill the frame
- avoid compositional errors
  - don't center objects needlessly
  - keep the horizonal level, or make it wildly unlevel

(http://www.fotofinish.com/resources/centers/photo/takingpictures.htm)

© Marc Levoy

Parting thoughts

- simplify your picture
  - avoid cluttered backgrounds
  - get close to your subject
  - fill the frame
- avoid compositional errors
  - don't center objects needlessly
  - keep the horizonal level, or make it wildly unlevel
  - avoid accidental alignments

(http://www.fotofinish.com/resources/centers/photo/takingpictures.htm)

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Parting thoughts

- simplify your picture
  - avoid cluttered back
  - get close to your sub
  - fill the frame
- avoid compositional e
  - don't center objects
  - keep the horizonal le
  - avoid accidental alig
  - sweep the frame to check for trouble
    - cropped element, distracting object, non-parallel line

(Fredo Durand)

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Fredo Durand (MIT)

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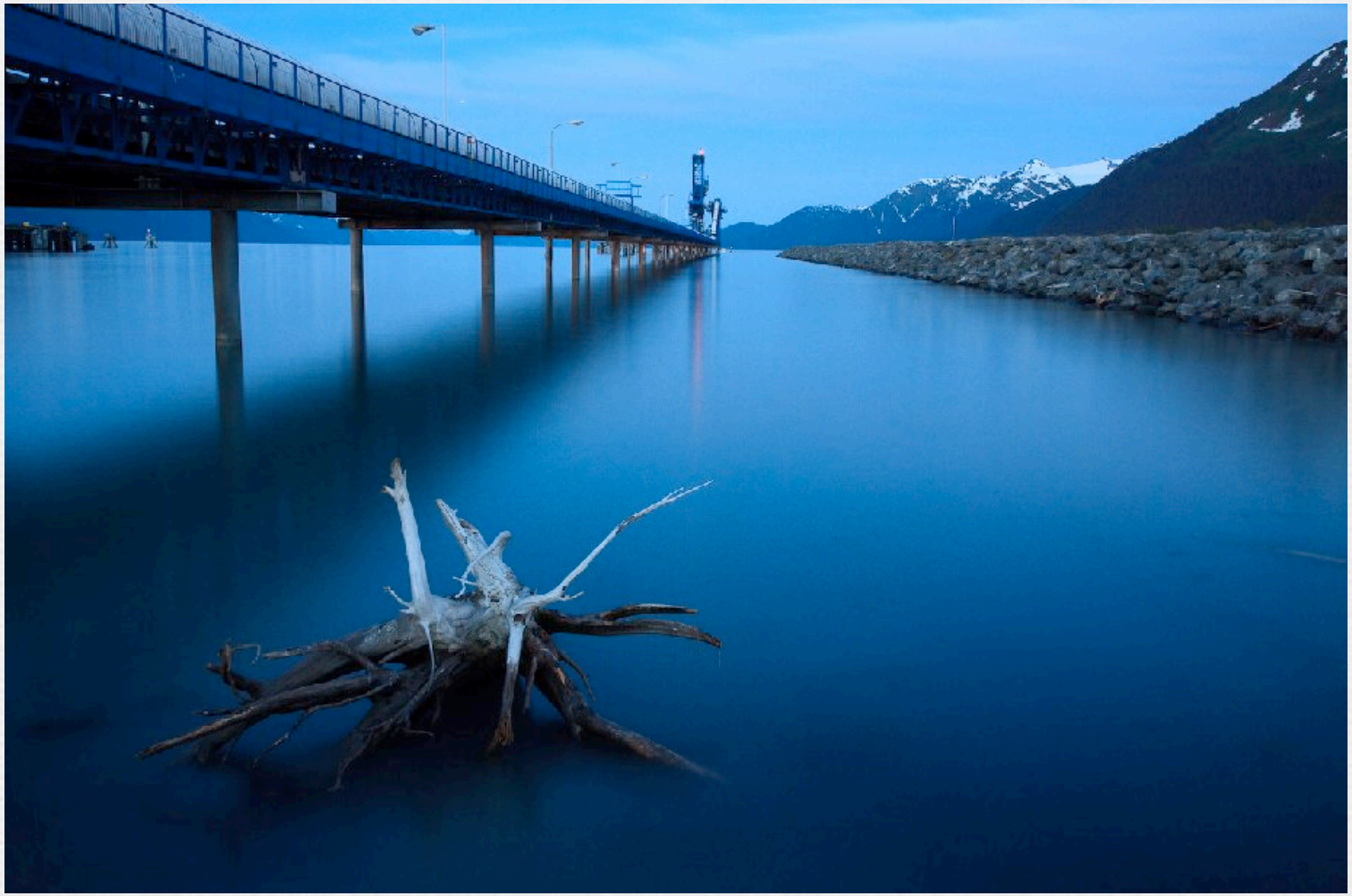

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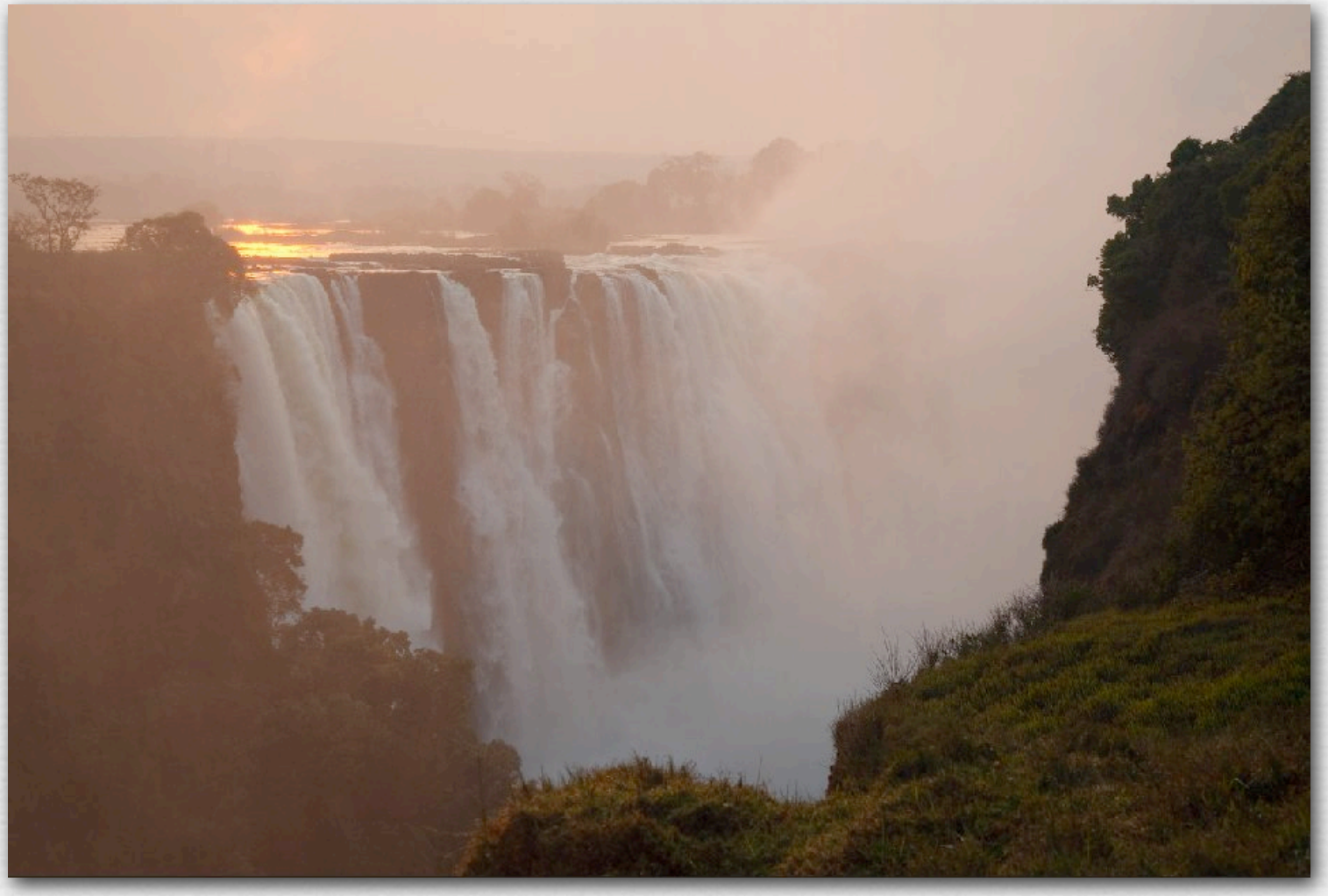

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Matthew Scott (Stanford Dev Biology),
Snowy Egret, Palo Alto Baylands

Susan McConnell (Stanford Biology),
Bull Elephant Seals, Año Neuvo State Park

Slide credits

- Fredo Durand

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