

Metaphor offers insight into discovering the symbolic content of art photography, which creates a deeper appreciation that is not at first apparent. Early 20th century photographers who looked beneath the surface of daily life are featured.

Metaphor:
The Universal Language of Photography A Search for Meaning
By Dean Shaffer and Tammy Stefan Shaffer

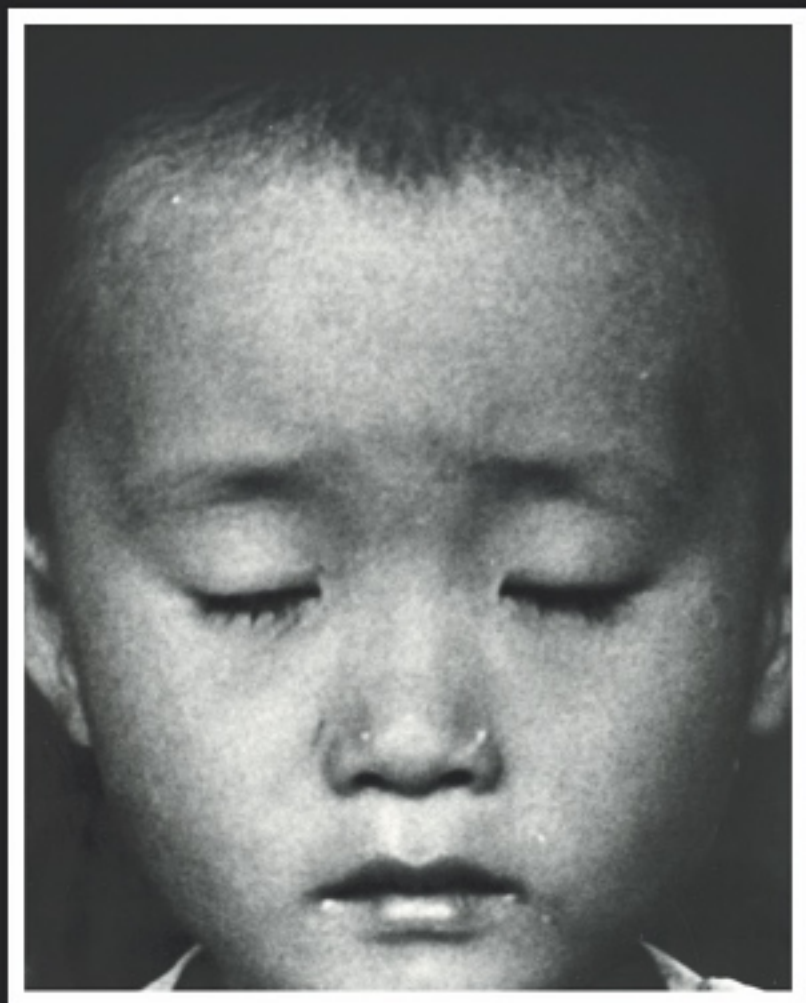
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METAPHOR

THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE OF PHOTOGRAPHY



A Search for Meaning

DEAN SHAFFER & TAMMY STEFAN SHAFFER

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CHAPTER 1

Components of Visual Art in Photography

Seeing

The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera.

—Dorothea Lange

Have you ever looked at a photograph and at first glance wondered what it was about, or what the photographer was trying to communicate? For example, image #1 taken by Henri Cartier-Bresson raises at least two questions: How did he capture this photograph at precisely the moment just before the man's foot touched ground, and what is its significance?

Most of us would probably attempt to view it from a technical perspective, but that would lead down a path distracting us from an exploration towards a possible meaning. To record this very specific moment in time required more than good technical skill. It required an instinctual vision, a sense of visual poetry seen through his lens. What could have brought Cartier-Bresson to record an image that demanded such precise timing and discipline?

When examining the photograph for its essential content, we see that the center of interest, the space between the heel of a man's foot and his reflection in the puddle, required remarkable timing. A very specific moment was captured. A moment that was a fraction of a second before the foot made contact with the water. Several background objects also relate to time—a clocktower, a sign for the train station, and a poster with a leaping dancer that mirrors the man jumping the puddle. All are symbols that relate to our experience of time and its passage. The space between the man's heel and his reflection existed only momentarily. It is symbolic of a "slice of life," a snapshot of "now." This composition is based on the ability to recognize the coincidence of these elements and make an image of them. This was Cartier-Bresson's forte and is the metaphor expressed in this image.



Title: *FRANCE. Paris. Place de l'Europe. Gare Saint Lazare. 1932*
Photographer: *Henri Cartier-Bresson*
Credit: *Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos*

The center of interest, the space, is a visual link between the actual man and his reflection, a symbolic connection between the real and the illusory—a distortion of real. Although the distance is small, the man and his reflection do not touch, and stated through the image as recorded, they never touch.

That every moment in time is unique, fleeting, and never to be repeated is evident in the study of Cartier-Bresson's work. His photographs indeed convey his direct experience of a specific time and place. He felt that the ephemeral is the very essence of life.¹ To recognize and capture these moments, however, requires a quiet mind and keen attention, a sensitivity to the flow of life as it unfolds. Life is constantly changing. In fact it is truly a continuous stream of fleeting moments.

Henri Cartier-Bresson was a photographer who possessed the gift of vision. He prolifically demonstrated the art of seeing life as it is, and this is how he put it: "My passion has never been for photography 'in itself,' but for the possibility—through forgetting yourself—of recording in a fraction of a second the emotion of the subject, and the beauty of the form; that is, a geometry

awakened by what's offered."⁵ He believed that the experience of our inner world must be balanced with our experience of the world outside of us, and that reciprocal process results in the two coming together. It was this union that he believed was important to communicate in his photography¹.

That union, which Cartier-Bresson felt was the very essence of life, is what Alfred Stieglitz saw as a moment of truth.^{1,2} Stieglitz felt that art, at its most meaningful level, represented a symbolic equivalent of man's most profound and acute power to see.² To him, photography was a "philosophy of living."²

His famous photograph *The Flatiron Building* is one example. Stieglitz loved the winter season, and one day while walking in a snowstorm he "suddenly saw the building."² He described the moment as such: "But that particular day, with the trees of Madison Square all covered with snow—fresh snow—I suddenly saw the building as I never saw it before."² One can almost feel, through his words, his profound experience of being deeply present to that moment, and this experience inspired him to photograph the building. In Stieglitz's own words, this is the essence of his photography: "I want solely to make an image of what I have seen, not of what it means to me. It is only after I have created an equivalent of what has moved me that I can begin to think about its significance."² In fact, Stieglitz's photography was so much about his inner experiences that he felt only his original images would convey what he experienced, for any reproduction would not possess the quality of *touch* inherent in his original photographs.² To Stieglitz, reproductions would not possess that living quality—they would feel dead.

Paul Strand (a colleague of Alfred Stieglitz) was another photographer who strived to capture his innermost experiences. He once told a group of students: "If you are alive, it will mean something to you, and if you know how to use it, you will want to photograph that meaningfulness."³

Many photographers spent their lives struggling in similar ways to capture that ephemeral moment of clarity, an inner vision of reality. They spent their lives honing the art of seeing and photographing. To them, the only meaningful work was that which captured direct and impersonal experiences—those experiences occurring in a moment of freedom from thought and personal judgment.

We viewers can better appreciate meaningful photographs by asking ourselves what could be the greater vision behind what is superficially apparent. Remembering the "art of seeing" and recognizing symbolic content and what it may be expressing is a process in itself. The effort is worth the discovery and enjoyment.

Beauty is the universal seen.

—Alfred Stieglitz

Composition: *The Coming Together of Elements*

A well-composed photograph utilizes at least one element or principle of composition, depending on the subject. While there are no absolute rules for their use, there are guidelines that help translate what is seen through the lens to the final image. Also, because what is seen through the camera lens is divorced from the actual view, the photographer must select the composition relative to the outside edge of the format.

The use of compositional guidelines can set the foundation on which a metaphor or story is built. Intentional opposition or violation of certain principles can help create an image with a sense of mystique, or that something is amiss and feels disturbing. In other words, a feeling or idea being communicated is accomplished through careful inclusion of compositional elements and use of principles. The following paragraph describes Henri Cartier-Bresson's wisdom regarding composition in photography and provides a wonderful example of the intuitive selection of composition as seen through the lens of a camera.

*In a photograph, composition is the result of a simultaneous coalition, the organic coordination of elements seen by the eye. One does not add composition as though it were an afterthought superimposed on the basic subject material, since it is impossible to separate content from form. Composition must have its own inevitability about it.*⁵

*The photographer's eye is perpetually evaluating. A photographer can bring coincidence of line simply by moving his head a fraction of a millimeter. He can modify perspective by a slight bending of the knees. By placing the camera closer to or farther from the subject, he draws a detail—and it can be subordinated, or he can be tyrannized by it. But he composes a picture in very nearly the same amount of time it takes to click the shutter, at the speed of a reflex action.*⁵

Sometimes it happens that you stall, delay, wait for something to happen. Sometimes you have the feeling that here are all the makings of a picture—except for just one thing that seems to be missing. But what one thing? Perhaps someone suddenly walks

*into your range of view. You follow his progress through the viewfinder. You wait and wait, and then finally you press the button—and you depart with the feeling (though you don't know why) that you've really got something. Later, to substantiate this, you can take a print of this picture, trace on it the geometric figures which come up under analysis, and you'll observe that, if the shutter was released at the decisive moment, you have instinctively fixed a geometric pattern without which the photograph would have been both formless and lifeless.*⁵

Listed here are several elements of composition: lines, shapes, mergers, simplicity, balance, framing, and the rule of thirds. These are not all-inclusive. Although these elements can exist in unlimited ways and combinations, here we provide only a brief discussion of each. In chapter 3, we provide examples of photographs that express a metaphor through predominantly one element, along with a discussion of each.

- **LINES** – Horizontal and vertical lines lend a sense of structure to a composition, owing to the fact that they run parallel to the outside edge of the image. All lines—curved, diagonal, vertical, and horizontal—have the capacity to lead the eye to the main subject or point of interest. They may also create a sense of direction, with various lines creating various movements. Lines that repeat in an ordered, regular way often create a pattern that the eye will follow, and may appear as a new form that expresses a metaphor.
- **SHAPES** – The photographer can use shapes to emphasize essential aspects of an image. Also, when photographers see geometry in nature, such as circles, triangles, rectangles, etc., these shapes are used to connect various elements of the image, creating a unified whole. A subject can be reduced to its basic shape, or geometric form, by eliminating detail with the use of backlighting. The reduction of objects to shapes and their relation in the image can be used as a metaphor.
- **MERGERS** – Mergers are created when objects in different planes are placed together to appear side by side, overlapped, or in one plane. Mergers can be used to create abstract or surreal images by using an object in one plane to emphasize a subject in another. They can be used to relate subjects in the background and foreground, or they can use objects in one plane to provide a statement about the subject in another.
- **BALANCE** – The element of balance is the arrangement of size, weight, and density (depth of gray tone) of objects depicted in the image, and balance is determined by their relationship to the edges of the format. A balanced composition invokes innate feelings of harmony, comfort, and trust. Symmetrical images are automatically balanced and can provide a spiritual or peaceful feeling to an image.

- **SIMPLICITY** – The element of simplicity is used to clarify the statement being expressed. Methods such as cropping, backlighting, shallow depth of field, and the choice of angle of view are some common techniques used to produce a simplistic but meaningful image.
- **RULE OF THIRDS** – The principle of the rule of thirds places the subject or point of interest at the intersection point of horizontal and vertical lines that divide the composition into thirds. When the rule of thirds is used in a composition, the viewer’s eye is encouraged to follow through the remaining areas of the photograph. In this case, the subject or point of interest is in the upper or lower third of the composition, and therefore the remaining two-thirds can be filled with related objects. The viewer’s eye naturally follows through to the remainder of the image, which most likely contains objects that are important to the meaning of the photograph. In contrast, when the point of interest is placed in the middle of the composition, the eye goes directly to the middle and stops.
- **FRAMING** – The element of framing in terms of composition is defined as something between the photographer and the main subject that defines the space between the two. Its function is to lead the eye into the space occupied by the main subject.

It’s reasonable to ask why these guidelines exist. Why do these principles have a fundamental effect on an image? For instance, why does a balanced composition “feel right” and an unbalanced composition “feel amiss”? These principles seem to be an innate aspect of our visual experience. So, could it be a function of our biology to accept an ordered and balanced environment, to feel a sense of trust and comfort when things in view are symmetrical or asymmetrically balanced? This question has been scientifically studied for many years, and as it turns out, the answer is “most likely true.”

Currently, scientists know that during the visual process, the human brain attempts to sort, filter, and simplify overwhelming visual input. Our brains try to create order through the reduction of complex visual stimuli to basic shapes, and these basic shapes are then processed via higher order functions involving memory and association.⁴ Connections to emotional centers in the brain ultimately result in a subjective experience.⁴

So, could it be that when viewing an image that possesses a particular arrangement of elements, feelings are evoked through innate biological processes that awaken unconscious feeling? This, indeed, is thought to be the underlying basis of communication between artist and viewer in primitive art, modern expressionism, and caricature.⁴ Meaningful photographs also communicate in this manner.

It is interesting that inclusion and placement of certain elements in a composition can poetically convey a photographer's vision. This indirect expression occurs from the choice of arrangement of subject and objects. Artists throughout history have spent their careers probing this inherent quality of visual communication.⁴ A photograph can record a combination of elements in a specific moment that represent something other than what appears directly. The image—expressing the artist's vision metaphorically—freezes the actual event in time.

Many of the early photographers, who we now consider masters, captured their images at moments when they spontaneously recognized certain elements together, occurring naturally in their environment, and were deeply moved by what they saw. These insightful moments are what we discussed in the section on “seeing.” These images were not fabricated from analysis of a particular scene or situation. The artist's “vision” or “seeing” is what makes the difference between a meaningful photograph and a snapshot. Snapshots record something for memory motivated by nostalgia, and are almost always without elements of composition, are personal and void of insight. Alfred Stieglitz's photograph *The Steerage* is a wonderful example of a meaningful photograph. It was the result of a sudden and profound vision he experienced while walking the deck of a steamship, and this is his description of that vision:

In June 1907, my wife, our daughter Kitty, and I sailed to Europe. My wife insisted on going on a large ship, fashionable at the time. Our initial destination was Paris. How distasteful I found the atmosphere of first class on that ship.

I sat in my steamer chair much of the time the first days out with closed eyes. In this way, I could avoid seeing faces that gave me the cold shivers. And those strident voices. Ye gods!

By the third day out I could stand it no longer. I walked as far forward as possible. The sky was clear and the sea not particularly rough, although a rather brisk wind was blowing.



Title: *The Steerage*

Photographer: Alfred Stieglitz

Credit: *The Steerage* by Alfred Stieglitz (American, Hoboken, New Jersey 1864–1946 New York) via The Metropolitan Museum of Art is licensed under [CC0 1.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Coming to the end of the deck I stood alone, looking down. There were men, women, and children on the lower level of the steerage. A narrow stairway led up to a small deck at the extreme bow of the steamer. A young man in a straw hat, the shape of which was round, gazed over the rail, watching a group beneath him. To the left was an inclining funnel. A gangway bridge, glistening with fresh white paint, led to the upper deck.

The scene fascinated me: a round straw hat; a funnel leaning left; the stairway leaning right; the white drawbridge, its railings made of chain; white suspenders crossed on the back of a man below; circular iron machinery; a mast that cut into the sky, completing a triangle. I stood spellbound. I saw shapes related to one another—a picture of shapes, and underlying it, a new vision that held me: simple people; the feeling of ship, ocean, sky; a sense of release that I was away from the mob called rich. Rembrandt came into my mind and I wondered, would he have felt as I did.

I raced to the main stairway of the steamer, chased down to my cabin, picked up my Graflex, raced back again, worrying whether or not the man with the straw hat had shifted his position. If he had, the picture I saw would no longer exist.

The man with the straw hat had not stirred an inch. Neither had the man in the crossed suspenders. The woman with the child in her lap remained on the floor, motionless.

In Stieglitz's vision and momentary "sense of release" from the wealthy crowd, he saw shapes rather than people. At that moment, his vision shifted to a perspective that enabled him to see the geometry of the natural space, and his "new vision" came with an emotional freedom from his attitude of what he described as "the mob called rich." Those in the steerage and on the upper deck were seen as one united view of shapes, visually and intuitively. In this brief moment, he saw no separation between the wealthy and the poor, a grand vision of humanity. Stieglitz's choice of composition in this image included the visual elements of shape and line that occurred naturally in that space, leading the viewer's eye around the image. These elements are what comprised Stieglitz's vision, and what he captured to express it. The composition is what creates the meaning of the photograph. Stieglitz later described the photograph as "a picture based on related shapes and deepest human feeling." "A step in my own evolution, a spontaneous discovery."² This is an example of one of the many photographs filled with compositional elements that are visually united in a way that expresses the essence of what great photographers spontaneously see and what inspires them to make an image.

In chapter 5, *The Metaphor*, we discuss the crucial compositional elements of thirteen photographs, and how those elements relate to the expression of the underlying metaphor.

CHAPTER 5

The Metaphor

Photographs and Discussions

The intuitive mind is a sacred gift, and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.

—Albert Einstein

Title: Korean Child, 1958
Photographer: Dorothea Lange

See photograph on cover

To begin this chapter on viewing photographs in search of a metaphor, we will emphasize two specific factors. First, we examine the overall composition, identify the elements, and ask how and why they all relate. We then consider the overall feel of the image and ask what idea is being expressed relating to experiences common to all humanity, or to the human condition. We allow a connection to be made to an idea greater than what is superficially apparent.

When viewing photographs with the intent to appreciate their deeper meaning, it is certainly helpful to be familiar with the photographer and their work. But the essence of a photograph can still be appreciated through recognition of its symbolic content, even without that background knowledge.

For example, Dorothea Lange used cropping in her image titled *The Korean Child* (photograph on cover) to eliminate the form of a child's face, leaving only the expression. She forces us to focus on this through the element of simplicity, a result of the cropping. But what is that expression?

This symmetrical composition, a formal method of balance, is used here to express the serenity evident in this child's face. If the photograph was off-center, asymmetrical, it would convey something different. There is nothing about this expression that indicates a reaction from the outside world. Instead, there is a sense of purity. These qualities are further emphasized by the closed eyes, showing us a peaceful inner state of being untouched by the demands that life imposes.

Lange was able to present the qualities she saw in this face through a composition that emphasizes them, and evokes a sense of the same in us. She shows us the cultural blank slate, the innocence in which we are born. From

this we are drawn in through a contrast between a sense of that inner peace and the state that we usually experience in daily life.

The image represents an outer expression of an unseen world and raises a question: What is going on inside this young life that has yet to be stamped by the outer world? In a very simple way, Lange confronts us with this question, awakening a sense of one of life's greatest mysteries!

Title: Foire à la Ferraille,
Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, 1952
Photographer: Henri Cartier-Bresson

See photograph on opposite page

Here, Cartier-Bresson piques curiosity in the viewer by photographing a crowd of people whose attention has been drawn to an event that he intentionally omitted from the image. His choice of composition enhances this, and creates a mirrored effect in the viewer.

The image is cropped in a way that draws our eye into the crowd and emphasizes their general expression of concern and curiosity. They all seem to be looking intensely at whatever it is that we, the viewer, cannot see.

Their faces create a line of direction within the composition, which is toward the event. Enhancing this is a tall structure seen behind the people that has a triangular-shaped object on top. The viewer's eye is drawn downward from there, toward the people, following the same triangular path and line of direction created by the faces. In the background, a row of trees seen just above the crowd creates an additional visual line that follows the same downward direction. These elements come together to visually encompass the people and comprise the structure of the composition. A focus is made on the crowd, their facial expressions, and their intense absorption on whatever has occurred.

The photograph arouses in us a curiosity of what it is that we cannot see. We are distracted by the crowd's reaction, a mirror of theirs, and at first do not see the one anomaly among them. But if we free our eye and look around the image, beyond the faces, we see a man toward the back left of the group who is not distracted. Instead, he is looking directly at the camera. He is a direct contrast to everyone else. Here, there is another question: Does everyone viewing this photograph see that man, or are they, too, taken by the reaction of the crowd just as the crowd is taken by the event? Could Cartier-Bresson be presenting us with a visual study of attention?



Title: *EUROPE. FRANCE. Paris. 1952*
Photographer: *Henri Cartier-Bresson*
Credit: *Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos*

Title: *GB. Eveleigh NASH (Mrs. Eveleigh Nash)*

Photographer: Inge Morath

See photograph on opposite page

This photograph appears as though it is composed of two separate images placed side by side. The edge of the vehicle's door, a prominent vertical black line, creates a separation of the left and right sides, establishing the appearance of two separate spaces. It seems as though Morath presented her two subjects in separate spaces, visually and metaphorically, through her choice of composition.

In the background, a pattern created by repeating elements (trees on the left, columns on the right) carries our eye far off into the distance. These repetitive elements naturally provide a sense of dimension, a metaphor for time.

An implied quadrant in the upper right of the image is created by the horizontal division between the vehicle's door and window. This acts as a window for the viewer, where we see the repeating columns of the building behind the woman. She is associated with this "portal" or window we are looking into, and the elements within. The building and the line element created by the columns suggest strength, structure, order, and time.

There is a symmetrical but different view on the opposite side of the image, behind the chauffeur. Again, there is a horizontal line to the left of the chauffeur's shoulder, created from a step in the walkway in the distance. The horizontal line creates the appearance of another quadrant to the upper left of the photograph, and presents another group of associations. Within that implied window, there are two rows of trees on either side of the street that continue to the horizon and follow the same line as the building. This parallel background imagery suggests the idea of a long-established order that is central to the image in the forefront: that these two people are connected, but in separate worlds, each with their own established social order.

Overall, the horizontal and vertical elements provide a balanced composition, conveying a sense of stability that substantiates the underlying idea.



Title: *GB. Eveleigh NASH*
Photographer: *Inge Morath*
Credit: *Inge Morath/Magnum Photos*

Title: *FRANCE. Paris. 1953 (A French Academician Arriving at Notre Dame)*

Photographer: Henri Cartier-Bresson

See photograph on opposite page

This photograph is divided into two parts: the vehicle and the scene outside of it. What is inside the vehicle is hidden by the reflected light on the windshield. Emerging from this hidden place is an old man dressed in a uniform from the past. The composition sets up an exploration by contrasting what is hidden and what is seen. The unknown and known are brought together.

A unique characteristic of photography is that it can capture a moment in time, and here we see the older man in transition from one space to another, representing a connection of the past to the present. The present moment is seen, and the past is hidden.

Recording history is another unique characteristic of photography, and Cartier-Bresson has utilized it here. The photograph itself is in the past, as it is a record of something that occurred previously but is seen now by the viewer in this moment, setting up a parallel to what is being expressed. The open door bridges the two worlds. The window represents a symbol that expresses what the people on the street see through the window, and what is seen by the viewer of the photograph. The two are very different impressions.

The sense we get is of the gentleman “emerging” from the vehicle, partly seen from the street and the rest of him hidden. This being an expression of occupying two spaces, two worlds: the present, which is seen and recorded by the camera, and the past, which is not seen, but is represented by the uniform. There is a sign on the car with the word LIBRA (freedom). This “emerging” or release—could it be from the past into the present? This moment between, of transition, is an experience of two worlds together. By understanding the nature of the medium of photography, Cartier-Bresson is able to express these ideas in ways no other art form can.



Title: *FRANCE. Paris. 1953*
Photographer: *Henri Cartier-Bresson*
Credit: *Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos*

Title: Last West, Stoop Labor, June 1935
(Lettuce Cutters, Salinas Valley, 1935)

Photographer: Dorothea Lange

See photograph on opposite page

This extraordinary photograph illustrates Dorothea Lange's ability to convey meaning through a composition that utilizes several visual elements. Her deliberate choice of angle allows for the elimination of everything but the land and the workers and puts the viewer into the workers' space, inviting the viewer to empathize with the workers' situation. It also allows the composition to consist mostly of the lettuce field, which extends from the foreground to the horizon, creating a sense of endlessness to their work.

Here, the use of backlighting ties the workers together by visually reducing them to common, simple shapes, imagery that stresses the physical challenge they endure. And to further emphasize the harsh conditions, Lange included a walking path so we can see the cracked earth from the intensity of the sun and lack of rain.

In this photograph, Lange visually recorded and metaphorically conveyed the circumstances for many people at this unfortunate and difficult time in history. The era of the Great Depression and Dust Bowl was a time of great suffering for many, and Lange's gift of empathy, expressed through photography, enabled its documentation for those who were not there to see. Her work made a significant contribution to this important form of communication, and this photograph is just one example of many.



Title: Last West, Stoop Labor, June 1935

Photographer: Dorothea Lange

Credit: 467 137.38263.1

Dorothea Lange, Last West, Stoop Labor, June 1935 Photonegative, 2.25 x 2.25 in.

*@ The Dorothea Lange Collection, the Oakland Museum of California. Gift
of Paul S. Taylor.*

Title: Waiting Outside Relief Station, Urbana, Ohio
Photographer: Ben Shahn

See photograph on opposite page

This image is about contrasts. Two women standing side by side and looking in opposite directions is the focus of this closely cropped photograph. It sets up a contrast of the young and the old. Shahn has chosen to exclude what both women are looking at because it is not relevant to the meaning of the image. By selecting the composition in this manner, the focus is placed on the difference between their reactions. Their visual differences are emphasized through their clothing. The older woman is wearing a light-colored top and a white hat, while the younger woman is wearing a fashionable dress with a flower print. Her hair is dark in contrast to the white hat of the older woman.

What is most important here is their view. The young woman is looking outward; she is drawn to something occurring in her immediate surroundings, outside of herself. Her facial expression and body language appear active and alert, contrasting with the expression and body language of the older woman. The older woman, in contrast, appears contained, somewhat passive. Her hand at her mouth suggests that she is looking inward. The viewer is not able to see her eyes and mouth clearly, except that her mouth is closed, like a stop, and contrasts with the open mouth of the younger woman.

This photograph presents the viewer with a contrast of the nature between two women of different generations. It demonstrates that the compositional tools inherent in photography can create meaning separate from the actual event.



Title: Waiting outside relief station, Urbana, Ohio

Photographer: Ben Shahn

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*Collections: Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White
Negatives. Part of: Farm Security Administration – Office of War Information Photograph
Collection (Library of Congress).*

Title: Man Beside Wheelbarrow
Photographer: Dorothea Lange

See photograph on opposite page

The composition in this photograph employs the classic triangular form, encouraging the viewer to see a correlation between the wheelbarrow and the man. Specifically, there is a line from the wheelbarrow to the man that is established through the handle, and the wheel is echoed by the man's hat. His body language conveys a feeling of uselessness that is reinforced metaphorically by the uselessness of the upside-down wheelbarrow. The man's posture, which hides his face, makes him appear as much an "object" as the wheelbarrow. There's a visual message that this man's life has been turned upside down, expressed through the upside-down wheelbarrow.

Looking beyond the main subject, we see a stone wall behind the man, and barren dirt below his feet. There is no vegetation in the image. Essentially, we see no signs of life. The background and foreground are empty. Here, the use of the element of simplicity tells us that every element in the image is essential. The man, his upside-down wheelbarrow, and the lack of fertile land are only what we see, each being essential in communicating the essence of the image.



Title: Man Beside Wheelbarrow, 1934

Photographer: Dorothea Lange

Credit: A67.137.7623

Dorothea Lange, Man Beside Wheelbarrow. 1934. Photonegative, 2.25 x 2.25 in.

*@ The Dorothea Lange Collection, the Oakland Museum of California. Gift
of Paul S. Taylor.*

Title: CHINA. Beijing. December 1948

Photographer: Henri Cartier-Bresson

See photograph on opposite page

On first view of this photograph, we see an old man standing alone beside a line of soldiers who are all facing the same direction. He appears to be a monk, but is he? These two elements, the old man and the line of soldiers, set up a visual contrast. Why are they facing the same direction? The monk is looking at something the viewer of the photograph cannot see. The soldiers are lined up in the same direction. Other visual elements are purposely omitted that may explain why these people are seen together, but by leaving out the literal purpose for what the old man is looking at, and including the presence of the soldiers, we are left with visual elements that represent something other than what is actually occurring.

The soldiers, standing as though they are waiting, serve to represent an imposed order. This helps to define a relationship to the old man, who stands out independently. His posture and expression are remarkable when compared with the faces of the soldiers.

There is something related to the collective psyche that enables passivity of a certain kind, where movement through life goes unquestioned. Symbolically, the old man's presence offers a movement toward a different path, independent of the constraints of social order and the associated passivity. The composition encourages the viewer to observe two opposing traits of humankind, and what animates each is invisible to us.



Title: CHINA. Beijing. December 1948
Photographer: Henri Cartier-Bresson
Credit: Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos

Title: CHINA. “The Great Leap Forward,” 1958
Photographer: Henri Cartier-Bresson

See photograph on opposite page

Understanding what can be captured on film creates options for the photographer that would otherwise not be apparent. This photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson utilizes two characteristics unique to photography: capturing a moment in time, and stopping motion.

Suppose you were from another planet and this is the first image you encountered that represented humanity on Earth. Everyone we see is off the ground and appear as if they are flying. Thus, the impression is that humans can fly! So, it seems that Cartier-Bresson anticipated this moment. Even more remarkable is that almost directly in the middle of the scene, surrounded by all the “flying” people, is a pigeon, the only thing not in the air. There is a dichotomy expressed that contradicts what we know to be true and what the image implies.



Title: CHINA. "The Great Leap Forward"
Photographer: Henri Cartier-Bresson
Credit: Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos

Title: FRANCE. Paris. 1952
(The Foire du Trône Fair)

Photographer: Henri Cartier-Bresson

See photograph on opposite page

The idea of “wonder” is established immediately in this image primarily through two elements: a large question mark and facial expressions. The question mark is placed within the rule of thirds, encouraging our eye to flow in a triangular path around three visual elements of interest: the question mark, the man, and the two women. The question mark is symbolic of their expressions and creates the essence of the photograph.

The idea of “wonder” is further substantiated by omission of the distracting event that created the response in the man. This, in turn, causes a natural reaction in the viewer as well. He seems to be unaware of the women standing in front of him or the camera that just captured his image, implying that he is momentarily drawn into a world of his own, a world that the viewer cannot know. It remains a mystery for us.

Likewise, the two women are also immersed in their own private affair, something they see in the cards. The function of the man and the cards is to help uncover that which is yet hidden, and here is the source of their intrigue. It has drawn them into their own world of mystery and wonderment, as we see by their body language and expressions.

Other symbolism—the cupid, the coins and cards, and the bride and groom—represents curiosity for outcomes in life that lie in the future. All symbolic of what we want to know, but yet can't. Cartier-Bresson puts the viewer in question, as are the subjects of the photograph. Because we don't know the cause of his subjects' attraction, we are unable to view the photograph literally. We are left with a question.

As a viewer, there is another angle from which we can probe: what significance would this photograph have if the man were looking down? The answer could be explored by viewing a different photograph of this scene that is also available (with the same title).



Title: FRANCE. Paris. 1952
Photographer: Henri Cartier-Bresson
Credit: Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos

Title: New York World's Fair, 1963

Photographer: Garry Winogrand

See photograph on opposite page

As a street photographer, Garry Winogrand was interested in photographing people involved in ordinary life activities. His image *New York World's Fair* is just one example. Here, eight people are sharing the same space defined by the bench, but are separated into small groups unaware of one another. It is as though each group is in its own separate world.

To the far left of the bench, we see a woman who is intensely involved in a conversation with a male companion and is very animated; her mouth is open and her hand is up in the air. They are drawn into their conversation and are unaware of anything around them, as if they were alone. To their right, two girls are huddled in conversation and are comforting their friend, whose head is down. They, too, are absorbed in their situation and not aware of what is around them. The two women next to them are distracted by something occurring at a distance, while the man to their right is absorbed in his newspaper.

The image as composed focuses on these four groups of people and excludes all else. The viewer is forced to question what is presented. The scene as a whole expresses the idea of individual worlds within one larger. Winogrand shows us a little slice of life, but one with deep implications. The photograph essentially mirrors a characteristic of our daily lives, our degree of limited awareness of the life occurring outside our own particular sphere. We exist together and yet there is an apparent division. A question is presented: what is the nature of this separation?



Title: World's Fair, New York, 1964

Photographer: Garry Winogrand

Credit: @The Estate of Garry Winogrand, Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

Title: Lovers in a Small Café, Paris,
Quartier Italie, 1932
Photographer: Brassai

See photograph on opposite page

This photograph presents a couple engaged in a romantic moment. They are centered in the composition and partially surrounded by mirrors that show the viewer their individual reflections.

The frames of the mirrors are visual line elements that lead our eye to the center of interest, the couple. The mirrors allow us to see five views occurring at any given time. The actual, central to the image, and two views in each mirror. The woman's hand reveals a specific moment frozen, and an expression of it. We cannot see the man's expression directly, but we see it in two mirrors—different aspects of that moment.

We see that their body language and facial expressions are quite different, and seeing them separately suggests they each have their own perception of the situation. Their reflections have a dreamlike quality from the haze created by the diffuse reflected light, suggesting that we are seeing her world and his world, and the two are quite different.



Title: *Couple d'amoureux dans un petit café Parisien, quartier Italie, ca. 1932*

Photographer: Brassai

Credit: Brassai (Gyula Halasz), @estate Brassai – RMN – Grand Palais,
Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resources, NY

Title: Parade, Hoboken, New Jersey
Photographer: Robert Frank

Photograph not included

Robert Frank was a Swiss-born photographer who observed unpleasant characteristics of the American culture as he toured the country in the 1950s. He expressed his insight with visual imagery in his book *The Americans*—aspects of the culture that Americans themselves were unaware of but which he saw as an outsider. This is how he described what he saw and documented in his photography: “I had never traveled through the country. I saw something that was hidden and threatening. It is important to see what is invisible to others. You felt no tenderness.”⁶

In Frank’s photograph titled *The Parade*, we are prompted to ask how the imagery is expressing this very insight. The image is strange and feels somewhat uncomfortable. Why does he choose to closely crop this image to include only the side of a brick building, two windows, and an American flag? He filled the image so fully with these few elements that part of the flag and the window to the right are cropped out, creating an unbalanced composition with a sense that something is amiss. There is nothing innately aesthetic about the image.

It’s simple, capturing only what is meaningful and drawing focus to the four main elements: the two windows with a woman standing in each, the flag, and the side of the building. The center of the image prominently puts the building directly to the viewer, creating the sense of a barrier. As seen, it separates the two women and gives the viewer the impression that they are isolated. We see them inside dark rooms, looking out, as though they are in a prison cell. From the title, *The Parade*, we think of a community event, but here we see two spectators who are alone.

The faces of these women are concealed, eliminating their individual identity. Why did Frank eliminate a personal connection in this image by presenting the only people in the photograph with their faces mostly hidden?

Perhaps they are meant to be symbolic of the American public, something that could be inferred since they are presented in an impersonal way and juxtaposed with the flag. Or, are we to think of isolation and loneliness? Perhaps the implication here is both, and even more.

Each viewer will take away their own thoughts, but in general the photograph has a cold and mysterious atmosphere associated with imagery that connects what is uniquely American (the flag) and the separation of people.

Title: *London Street*

Photographer: Robert Frank

Photograph not included

In this photograph, Robert Frank captured a unique moment in time that juxtaposes the ideas of life and death. This image is composed so that the larger portion is filled with a streetscape containing many elements of lines and perspective that merge to a point in the distance. A child is running down the street toward the merging point, creating a movement that follows the lines of the street, sidewalk, and buildings. At the end of the street where the line elements merge, there is a bright, hazy area of the photograph that appears to be illuminated by the sun. We get a sense of time, of the future, from this imagery.

Conversely, in the right foreground, a hearse is occupying a much smaller, darker portion of the image. The door is open, and we see an adult through the window, suggesting the idea of the cycle of life: the adult is closer to the hearse, and the child is running in the opposite direction. She is running inexorably toward the light—life.

We see the two differently, the adult through a window and the child directly, connecting us with the fact that we know life directly through experience, but there is a barrier (the window) that renders our view of death as remote. The child is running toward the light, she is in the movement of life, she's active, contrasted with the stationary hearse and the adult. The door is open, but the inside is unseen and therefore unknown. The imagery is suggestive of a passageway. Together, the two express the unity of the cycle.

Title: *Shadows, Paris 1931 (Series of 3)*

Photographer: André Kertész

Photograph not included

Surrealist photographers challenge our ordinary visual perspective. They may do so by changing the point of view, which can also function as a means of simplifying an image. We often see this method employed by André Kertész, and *Shadows, Paris 1931* is a good example.

By changing the angle of view, Kertész chose (found) the shadows cast by these people, rather than the actual people, to be the significant aspect of the image. The physical space they occupy within the field of view is minimal. And without a direct view of them, there is limited detail of their appearance. Apparently, their purpose for inclusion in the photograph lies only in the shadows they cast.

Here, the perspective results in a unique dimension that makes everything look flat and unreal. The brick street, the sidewalk, the shadows all look like parallel vertical elements within the same plane. The shadows project details of the people that we do not see directly. They provide indirect evidence about them, and from this we know that some are men and some are women, all standing on a sidewalk next to a brick street. Our minds automatically adjust for the assumptions without our questioning. Although the photograph presents us with a distorted, abstract view of people in ordinary street life, it doesn't matter because our minds make assumptions regardless. These elements express the metaphor by emphasizing aspects of the visual world we typically take for granted and by eliminating the necessary details of the people that we would normally identify with.

Here, Kertész also puts us in the mind-set of looking down at a horizontal surface, giving the sense that we are looking down when viewing the image, when we are in fact looking at it straight on in the vertical plane. Kertész prompts us to question our usual visual perception. Here, he reveals an automaticity that is fundamental to the nature of our visual perception by changing the usual perspective.

Title: *Yale Commencement, New Haven Green,
New Haven, Connecticut*

Photographer: Robert Frank

Photograph not included

Robert Frank's photographs tend to have the appearance of a quick snapshot, with little meaning for others not involved in some way with the situation being depicted. Closer examination makes it clear that the actual meaning of the photograph is, in fact, different from the actual event itself.

Two distinct elements appear in this photograph: an older man, and a group of young men who are lined up for graduation. Thus, there is an active element juxtaposed with a passive element. The young men are standing in a line and moving in a specific direction, some with their heads cropped by the photographer, thereby visually crowding the space. In contrast, the older man is sitting, leaning on his arm with a folded newspaper in his lap. The color of his hat is bright, which contrasts with the dark hats of the graduates. He is looking in the opposite direction that the young men are moving. We cannot see his eyes, but only what is expressed by his posture. It is as though he is looking back, as the young men are moving forward. The meaning of the photograph can only be understood when we see the two elements together, and feel what these two stages in life represent.

Title: *Old English Class*
Photographer: Robert Frank

Photograph not included

This photograph has a distinct division through the middle established by several elements that create the metaphor. On the right, we see three men walking in line, one behind the other. Their erect postures and tall hats are visual elements of verticality. Behind them is a tall building with repeating columns that also lend elements of verticality and provide a natural framing for the men. Collectively, these elements send a message of strength and stability. A strong visual perspective is established through the imagery created by the three men and the building. This perspective, beginning in the foreground and extending to a point in the center of the image, provides a sense of distance and leads the eye to the center. Here, the exposure settings were optimal for the people in the foreground, but overexposed for the background, the center of the image, where the eye is led by the row of men and the building. The overexposure provides a haziness, giving the appearance of distance, symbolic of the past. There is a visual unity that includes the men, the building, and the light. They look as though they are emerging from the light, which is significant to the division of the image.

In contrast, the man and his load to the left are presented with a slight tilt, giving this side of the image a sense of instability, or being off-balance. Further, the entire left side of the image appears awkward, including the activity of the man. His body language speaks of struggle, in contrast to the businessmen, whose body language speaks of confidence and control. The diagonal line expressed through his activity contrasts with the verticality of the line elements of the opposite side, emphasizing the division of the two worlds.

Overall, the image was composed with a distinction between the left and right sides. Visually, the sides are so different they appear as though they

don't belong together; it's as though they are two different photographs pasted together. The men on the right and the man on the left do not acknowledge each other—they show no connection. They are seemingly unaware of each other. This photograph shows us two distinct lifestyles with a division and lack of acknowledgment of the other.

Title: *Candy Store, New York City*

Photographer: Robert Frank

Photograph not included

There is a casual approach to this photograph that makes it easy to dismiss as a mere snapshot. A lot of cropping and a slight tilt of the camera suggests it was taken quickly, without thought. However, when studied, this photograph awards our time spent with it.

First, notice the arrow pointing to the face of the young man. He appears to be looking away. Our eye travels around the composition to find a relationship with the others. We see that there are two other boys, one standing and the other sitting, who are looking at the one looking away. There is an awkwardness to the situation: the close proximity emphasized by the cropping, the body language between the boys, and the fact that there is nowhere to hide, to become invisible. This is alluded to by the sign in the back, "Made BLINDS." A triangle is established by the three boys, two looking in the direction of the arrow with the other trying not to acknowledge their presence.

It can also be seen that the foreground is dominated by young men, and in the background, we see three women separated by the others. This sets up a relationship that draws attention to the distinction between male and female cultural situations.

Title: *Restaurant, US 1 Leaving Columbia,
South Carolina*

Photographer: Robert Frank

Photograph not included

The composition of this photograph employs the rule of thirds. The center of interest, the television, is positioned in the top left corner, establishing its importance within the photograph. This also encourages the viewer's eye to flow around the remainder of the image, telling us that the television and the rest of the image are related.

From this, we see an empty diner illuminated by two light sources, a window and a television. The window provides a natural source of illumination to the extent that it casts a glow in the room and a glare of reflection on the tabletop. Its visual weight—or importance within the overall composition—is balanced with the other light source, the television, which supplies dim, unnatural light derived from human invention. It is as though the image is divided in half. One side is bright, illuminous, and the other is dim, absorptive. The remainder of the photograph shows us a clean, tidy, almost sterile diner prepared to serve patrons. But where are they?

Visually the two sides are balanced, but there is a subtle friction in their contrast. Their visual equality implies that what they represent compete with one another. Four things are brought together with this imagery: warmth and vibrancy of the natural sunlight, passivity of the television's artificial light, the contrast between the two, and the absence of people and the social activity they represent. These contrasts provide observations related to the culture depicted—what's valued and an expression, emptiness, the result of what is offered.

Title: *Ballerinas*
Photographer: André Kertész

Photograph not included

This photograph shows us the quintessential uniqueness of the ability of a camera to capture a fleeting sliver of time in the course of our lives. In short, the camera can freeze time and record that specific moment. In life, moments like this cannot be seen for their significance because they occur much faster than our minds can process. André Kertész's extraordinary insight and attention enabled him to capture these ballerinas in midair, presenting the viewer with an image that appears like a dream.

Above and behind the ballerinas on the wall is a mural of children by a sea. Along the bottom of the wall we see drawings of grass, and to the right of the last ballerina, we see a man, all a part of the mural. At that moment, Kertész saw what appeared as a real-life fantasy with people looking on.

The photograph stops time, linking the dancers to the motionless mural. A sense of poetry is created when the two are seen together. The postures of the dancers express a quality of feeling through the body, and their weightlessness reinforces the sense of an apparition. The sense of wonder expressed from the entire scene, from all the elements taken together, is reinforced through the body language of those who are observing.

Title: *Metropolitan Life Insurance Building*

Photographer: Robert Frank

Photograph not included

What's so striking about this image is that it's visually unsettling. The composition is chaotic, and the angle at which it was taken isn't natural. The image is cropped to exclude all but the magazine stand and the large building behind it. In fact, the magazine stand is cut out of the image at the bottom and left side, bringing it so closely into view that it fills the entire bottom third of the photograph. The same is true for the building: It overwhelms the top two-thirds and is cut off at the top and left side. This cropping eliminates all other visual interests that could compete with these two subjects and presents them, and their relationship, boldly to the viewer.

The connection between the two is further enhanced through the street-light just behind and to the right of the magazines—a prominent vertical element that visually connects the two. Further, the globe at the top is placed within the rule of thirds, and it catches our eye because its round shape is contrasted with the rectangular shapes of the building's windows that we see behind. How would we see the image without this light?

The tone of the image has been established partially through its unusual perspective and angle. Our view of the magazine stand appears to be looking upward. The tiered nature of the stand makes it look as though our angle of view is different from our angle of view of the building behind, which is unnatural. The angle and the cropping at the top make the building look flat. It dominates the upper visual space.

The image appears to have a distinct upper and lower half. The building's architecture provides a strong vertical element in the upper half, and the magazine arrangement creates a horizontal element in the lower. Close cropping enhances this visual separation because it excludes any other elements that could create balance. The two halves seen adjacent impart a sense of discord. There is a feeling of tension.

The image presents us with a view of two subjects that are symbolic of human activity, but it does not include a direct human connection. This is a street scene without people, suggesting that the relationship of these two subjects, the building and the magazines, is of a materialistic nature. The viewer understands this through the feeling conveyed by the imagery.

Title: *Trolley, New Orleans*
Photographer: Robert Frank

Photograph not included

This structurally symmetrical photograph presents a series of images separated by the vertical bars of the windows. It has the appearance of a strip of film with individual exposures that invite the eye to make comparisons among the sections.

The people are in the same space but, as presented, are separated, as if existing in their own worlds. On the side of the trolley, above and below the people, we see distorted reflections of the world outside of the bus, suggesting an alternate reality of the outer world.

The structure of this composition leads the viewer to make visual connections and infer meaning from looking at one person, or thing, to another.

Title: *Levittown, 1962*
Photographer: Diane Arbus

Photograph not included

What did Diane Arbus really photograph in this image? Did she create a pleasant picture of a nicely decorated Christmas tree? Or, was she expressing an idea of warmth and togetherness that the Christmas holiday represents? If this is so, then where are the people? The human factor is missing.

Here Arbus shows us a tidy living room with a Christmas tree in the center and an abundance of gifts underneath. This imagery reminds us of the “magic” that many have come to associate with this holiday season. However, although the image visually presents these symbolic elements, its overall feeling conveys something quite different. Rather, it has an immediate sense of coldness. A feeling of emptiness is conveyed through the inclusion of both the ceiling and the floor in the composition, making the room look like a box. The open, empty space in the middle—void of furniture—further contributes to this feeling.

Arbus was sensitive to what she saw as a “hollowness” at the root of many American lives, the conflict between expectations of the American dream and the reality of everyday life. She expresses this by contrasting the material things we expect to bring us happiness and fulfillment with the opposite that instead is often experienced. She shows us the outer covering that masks inner emptiness.

Title: *Woods Series, Redding, Connecticut, 1968*

Photographer: Paul Caponigro

Photograph not included

This photograph by Paul Caponigro presents the viewer with more than a visual abstraction of the surface of a river, made possible by isolating a portion and presenting it without a frame of reference. Seeing a small part of the surface out of context brings focus to the symbolic elements that comprise the metaphor.

These symbolic elements—still water, turbulent water, reflections seen clearly in the still, but seen poorly or distorted in the turbulence and directional and circular flow—are what we see on the surface, not below or above. Although they represent types of energy, directional and circular, it is as though the entire image represents a reflection of something else. What we see looks flat and dimensionless, like a screen that is projecting a reflection. If we close our eyes and look inward and ponder—what has the properties of clarity in stillness, non-clarity in turbulence, is abstract because our depth of vision is limited, and possesses different kinds of energies—then we will have given ourselves the opportunity to find something beyond a simple image of water.

A Comparison

Here we provide a comparison of two photographs of people waiting in a food line during the Great Depression. They were made by two photographers hired by the United States Farm Administration to document the suffering of the unemployed and to convey the severity of their situation to the American public.

Top (page 121)

Title: *White Angel Breadline, San Francisco, 1933*

Bottom (page 121)

Title: *Mealtime, Forrest City, Arkansas*

In these two photographs, both Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans expressed empathy toward humanity through carefully composed but very different compositions. Lange's composition is complex, while Evans expressed his view simplistically. Neither photographer focused on the character of their subject, avoiding a direct view of their faces, particularly their eyes, keeping the image impersonal and thereby expressing a vision of humanity.

White Angel Breadline was taken by Dorothea Lange. Her close cropping created a composition that is filled with elements, the men and their hats, making them appear as though they are packed into the space. The fence we see in the bottom portion of the image was deliberately placed to create a visual separation symbolic of boundaries, which has a significant relation to the crowd of men. Here, Lange allots a disproportionately larger space within the photograph to present the men who congregated for a free meal.

The lone man facing away from the crowd is flanked by the backs of two others, causing him to stand out, and drawing our attention to him. His body language, appearing as though he is looking away to escape the present, naturally attracts our eye. His hat connects us with the hats of the others. The fact that he is one of the crowd but facing the opposite direction suggests that he is looking out and away from his current situation. It is as though he is confined.

To further emphasize this sense of confinement, Lange placed this man in the center of the image and chose an angle of view that hides his eyes behind the brim of his hat, forcing the viewer to connect with his body posture rather than his facial expression. His posture—clasped hands, downward look, and outward gaze—suggests an attitude akin to “anywhere but here,” a form of mental escape. His hidden eyes and the visual connection to the other men through his hat tell us that his situation is not his alone, that he represents the others. The center of interest, his food cup, is cradled between his arms at his chest, conveying the dilemma of hunger he and the other men bear.

In comparison, *Mealttime*, taken by Walker Evans, shows a very different compositional approach to express the same dilemma. Here, Evans chose to focus on the subject, empty plates in the hands of people. He chose to place the hands and plates directly in the center of the composition, keeping it simple by including only what is necessary to convey the message of “hunger.” Further, he shows them standing in a single-file line without sign of movement, giving us the impression that they are waiting. As in Lange’s image, there is a feeling of restriction; but here there is an added sense of dependency and submission from the close cropping that fills the entire photograph with this linear imagery. Similar to Lange, Evans shows that this dilemma belongs to many people by avoiding a direct view of faces, thereby eliminating a personal connection.



Title: *White Angel Breadline*, 1933

Photographer: Dorothea Lange

Credit: A67 137.33001.1

Photonegative, 4.25 x 3.25 in. @ The Dorothea Lange Collection, the Oakland Museum of California. Gift of Paul S. Taylor.

Dorothea Lange, *White Angel Breadline*, 1933. Gelatin silver print 12 ¼ x 10 1/8 (31.12 x 25.72 cm), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Henry Swift Collection, gift of Florence Alston Swift.



Title: *Mealtime*, Forrest City, Arkansas

Photographer: Walker Evans

Credit:

Reproduction Number: LC-DIG-ppmsca-15611 (digital file from original)
LC-USF3301-009217-M3 (b&w film dup. neg.) LC-USF331-009217-M3 (b&w film copy
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Repository: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540
USA <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc/pp/pp.print>

Collections: Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White
Negatives. Part of: Farm Security Administration – Office of War Information Photograph
Collection (Library of Congress)

CHAPTER 7

A Sense of Place

What is of greatest importance is to hold a moment, to record something so completely that those who see it will relive an equivalent of what has been expressed.²

—Alfred Stieglitz

There are many among us who have tried unsuccessfully to capture an image of a place that stirred a deep passion within us—the final print never quite recording and communicating the passion we experienced during that moment. Yet there are some photographs that somehow convey that sense of aliveness, and they clearly possess a special quality. Over the years, as photography became more popular in the public realm, serious photographers who were able to capture that passion and convey their emotional experience in the final print considered their work fine art. They captured images of what they felt was extraordinary in what we see as ordinary. The ability to communicate those extraordinary moments of seeing through photography is what ultimately gave the medium its significance in the world of fine art. That special quality inherent in certain photographs set them apart from a casual snapshot. In the early twentieth century, when George Eastman introduced his Brownie camera to the public, Alvin Langdon Coburn—a master photographer from the period—complained that “now every nipper has a Brownie” and “a photograph is as common as a box of matches.”⁷ He wrote that making a picture had become “too simple in a superficial way, and in consequence is treated slightly.” “What we need is more respect for our medium.”⁷ During that time, the desire for respect of photography as an art form started to gain acceptance thanks to Alfred Stieglitz. He promoted the medium alongside many new artists in his New York gallery, known as “291.” As a result of Stieglitz’s efforts, the study of the relation of the inner and outer experiences that artists attempted to express for centuries was becoming recognized in photography.

To see the outer world from a deeper place within—that is, to experience something visual with all of ourselves, from a moment free of thought and judgment—leaves us with an intense, indelible impression of life. These profound experiences are a mystery that science has been extensively probing. Current thought is that we may experience through our unconscious mind innate universal laws of aesthetics.⁴ There is evidence that visually derived emotional experiences may not be entirely subjective, and that there are inherent visual cues in our environment, such as symmetry, balance, and repetition of line and shape, that trigger emotional responses.⁴ These innate processes, occurring in our unconscious mind, may have evolved for social interaction and, ultimately, survival.⁴ All of this is going on behind the scenes with little awareness. It is a wonder as to why we do not consciously experience these feelings more often. Perhaps the answer lies in the degree of attention and sensitivity to our inner experiences. Unofficial observations over centuries have indicated that a greater inner sensitivity is needed by an artist for an awareness of these deeper, unconscious feelings. Further, much has been said over the years by artists and photographers that links inner silence and a heightened sense of overall awareness to these experiences. Perhaps then, the same is required from the viewer in order to receive what an artist attempts to communicate.

Those in the world of art know that certain visual elements, when placed in a specific way within a composition, are necessary in order to evoke feelings in the viewer. As stated previously, much evidence points to the fact that we are biologically wired to respond to visual elements within a composition, like symmetrical and asymmetrical balance, shapes, repetition, and angle of view, to name a few.⁴ And when photographing specific places in extreme weather (snow and fog) or extreme lighting conditions (backlighting, dusk, streetlights), an intensity of feeling can be imparted in the final print. Note, the angle of view which the following photographs were taken were at the level of the photographer, providing for the viewer a realistic perspective that may contribute to a sense of being there.

Early in Paul Strand's career, he photographed abstractions of pottery bowls and porch shadows. He felt it was a vital step in his development and stated: "From it I learned how to build a picture, what a picture consists of, how shapes are related to each other, how spaces are filled, how the whole must have a kind of unity."³ Strand photographed life as it was, a unique moment in time, and mastering the recognition of natural elements before him opened him to creating great photographs.³

In photography, having a sensitivity to naturally occurring elements in a setting is key to feeling and capturing the essence of a place. In fact, it is known that most of the great photographers intuitively recognized their image prior to recording. Although their choice of composition dictated the emotion felt by the viewer, it could not be determined by thought and deliberation. This awareness occurring through feeling rather than thought was expressed as such by Henri Cartier-Bresson:

Manufactured or staged photography does not concern me. And if I make a judgment, it can only be on a psychological or sociological level. There are those who take photographs arranged beforehand and those who go out to discover the image and seize it. For me, the camera is a sketchbook, an instrument of intuition and spontaneity, the master of the instant—in visual terms—questions and decides simultaneously. In order to “give a meaning” to the world, one has to feel oneself involved in what he frames through the viewfinder. This attitude requires concentration, a discipline of mind, sensitivity, and a sense of geometry. It is by great economy of means that one arrives at simplicity of expression. One must always take photos with the greatest respect for the subject and oneself.

To take photographs is to hold one’s breath when all faculties converge in the face of fleeting reality. It is at that moment that mastering an image becomes a great physical and intellectual joy.

To take photographs means to recognize—simultaneously and within a fraction of a second—both the fact itself and the rigorous organization of visually perceived forms that give it meaning. It is putting one’s head, one’s eye, and one’s heart on the same axis.

As far as I am concerned, taking photographs is a means of understanding which cannot be separated from other means of visual expression. It is a way of shouting, of freeing oneself, not of proving or asserting one’s own originality. It is a way of life.

If only each will permit himself to be free to recognize the living moment when it occurs, and to let it flower, without preconceived ideas of what it should be. And if the moment is not permitted to live — I know the consequences.²

—Alfred Stieglitz

Examples of a Sense of Place



Title: *A Wet Day on the Boulevard, Paris*. 1894

Photographer: Alfred Stieglitz

Credit: *The Museum of Modern Art, Digital Image @ The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resources, NY*



Title: *The Terminal*, 1892

Photographer: Alfred Stieglitz

Credit: *The Museum of Modern Art, Digital Image @ The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resources, NY*



Title: *Saint-Cloud, etange 9 h. matin, avril 1926*

Photographer: Eugene Atget

Credit: *The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, USA, Digital Image @ The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resources, NY*



Title: *Aisle to Altar, St. Bartholomew the Great, Smithfield, London*

Photographer: Frederick Evans

Credit: *date created/published: 1912, platinum print; 9 3/4 x 7 in. (24.8 x 17.9 cm.), Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540 USA <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>*



Title: *Ancient Crypt Cellars in Provins, France*

Photographer: *Frederick Evans*

Credit: *date created/published: 1910, platinum print; 4 x 5 1/4 in. (12 x 13.3 cm), Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540 USA <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>*



Title: *The Thames*

Photographer: *Alvin Langdon Coburn*

Credit: *Date Created/Published: c1905. 1 photographic print : platinum. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540 USA <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>*

Suggested Additional Examples (Images Found Online)

Title: *Autumn, Yosemite National Park*
Photographer: Ansel Adams

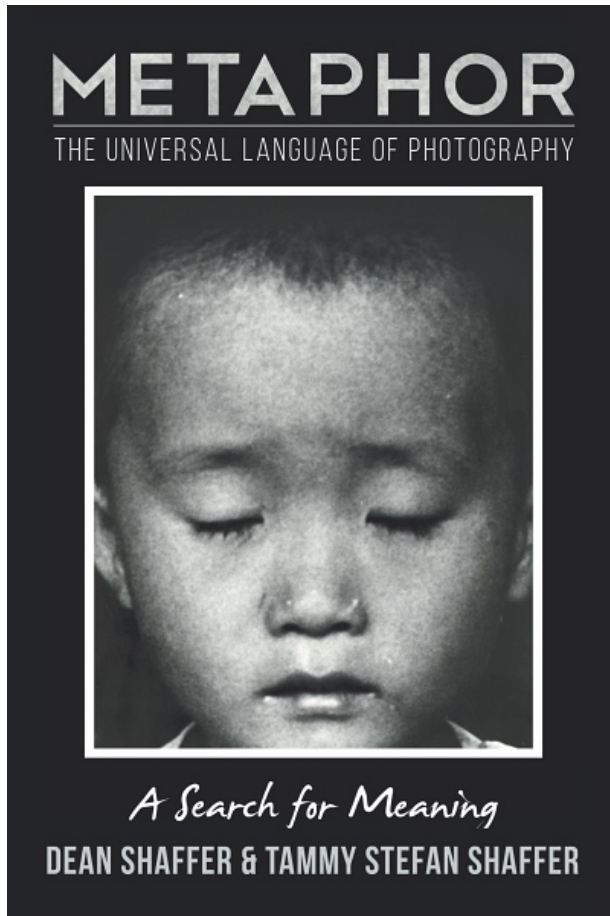
Title: *Bar de Cabaret*
Photographer: Eugene Atget

Title: All images from the *Woods Series, Redding, Connecticut, 1968*
Photographer: Paul Caponigro

Title: *Café de la Paix, Audierne, Finistere, France 1950*
Photographer: Paul Strand

Title: *Village, Gaspé 1936*
Photographer: Paul Strand

Title: *Hazy Day in Budapest, 1920*
Photographer: André Kertész



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