



### ▲ Bridge Foundation

This is an example of an image in which the edges are probably more important than the center.

some are good, some even admirable, but only a handful are wonderful.

With this limitation in mind, perhaps we can consider those elements that many great photographs do have in common.

Almost without exception, great images are strongly composed. The elements fall into patterns, which work to reinforce the message. Even great news photographs tend to be well composed, because in doing so, the images have a lot more impact, drawing your eyes to the important elements of the image, with the main subject often isolated from surrounding details to make it more powerful. Edward Weston said that, "Composition is the strongest way of seeing." When you think about it, why would you ever not want that to be true?

## Elements of a Great Photograph

If I could compile a list of the essential ingredients of a great photograph, you could simply assemble one, as from a kit. If there were a formula for attaining great photographs, you'd think that those who are clever enough to sometimes make them should be able to make all their photographs great. However, the truth is that even of the images they show us,



▲ **Bare Tree on Golf Course**

While ballooning, most people look horizontally, but the most interesting material was to be found looking down.



▲ **Fallen Leaves and Car**

Initially, I cropped out the car, but later decided that the vehicle provided a counterpoint to the rest of the image.

Great photographs almost universally surprise us. It might be showing us beauty in something we would normally consider ugly. It could be revealing something about a person that we didn't expect, such as the dignity of a beggar or the beauty of someone we would normally think old. A great sports picture shows us details of the game we would miss if we were simply viewing from the stands.

Almost without exception, great photographs are quite simple. By and large, complicated and complex compositions tend to be admired only by the photographer and seldom by others, as only the photographer holds the "key" to making sense of such apparently muddled, cluttered, and disorganized images.

Great images often trigger reactions in viewers. It might be nostalgia for small towns of the 1950's, as in David Plowden's images; wonder at the power created by dams; fear of dark streets and menacing, disenfranchised youth; or amazement at the incredible English cathedrals photographed by Bruce Barnbaum.

Many great images tell a story, even if it's nothing more than showing you the effects of millennia on a rocky foreshore.

Great images are often of subjects that happen to photograph well. I don't mean that they are simply pretty, but rather that the objects in the image give off wonderful tones, whether it's the subtle glow of the skin on a beautiful body, or the texture of rust in an old machine.

Great images often show objects or even people in relationships with the scene, which creates interest. Think of the ability of Cartier Bresson to place the people in the scene to absolute perfection through careful watching and perfect timing. Interesting relationships might be the way a log extends into water, the position of a shadow next to an object, or two

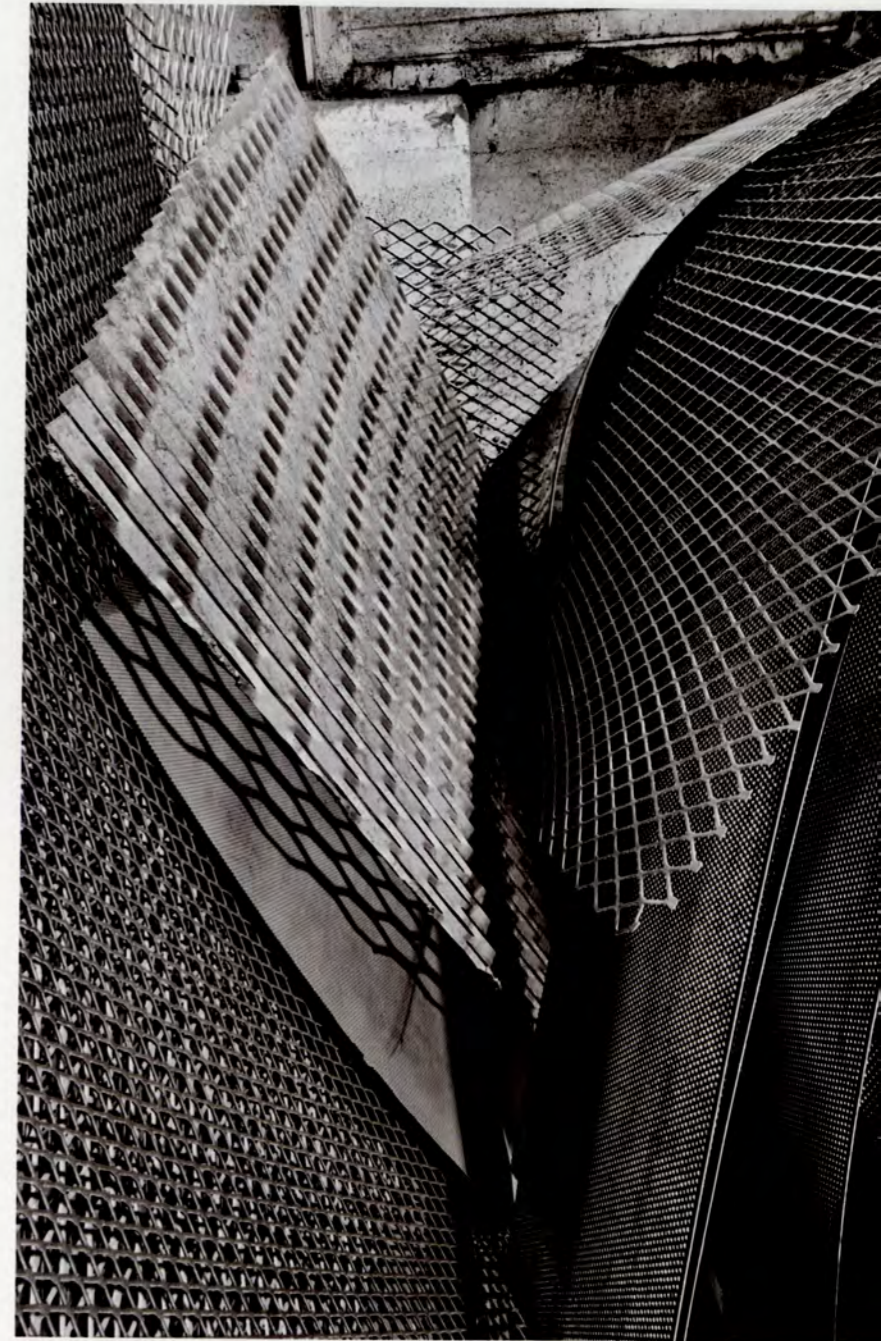
objects that would not normally be expected to "go together."

A great photograph stands on its own. That is, it isn't simply a memory marker for a special event, occasion, or location. Good images go beyond simple recording, and give viewers an experience they likely would not have had even if they were in the area at the time.

A good photograph is interesting. That may seem self evident, but I think there is something to be learned here. Can we agree that there are great photographs of mundane (dare I say uninteresting) subjects? Is it possible that the dirty underside of a railway bridge, something you might cycle past daily and not pay attention to, could actually be interesting? What about peppers, dead birds, rocks, weeds, grass, cracked roads, etc.? So somehow it would seem possible to make an interesting picture of an uninteresting subject. How is that done?

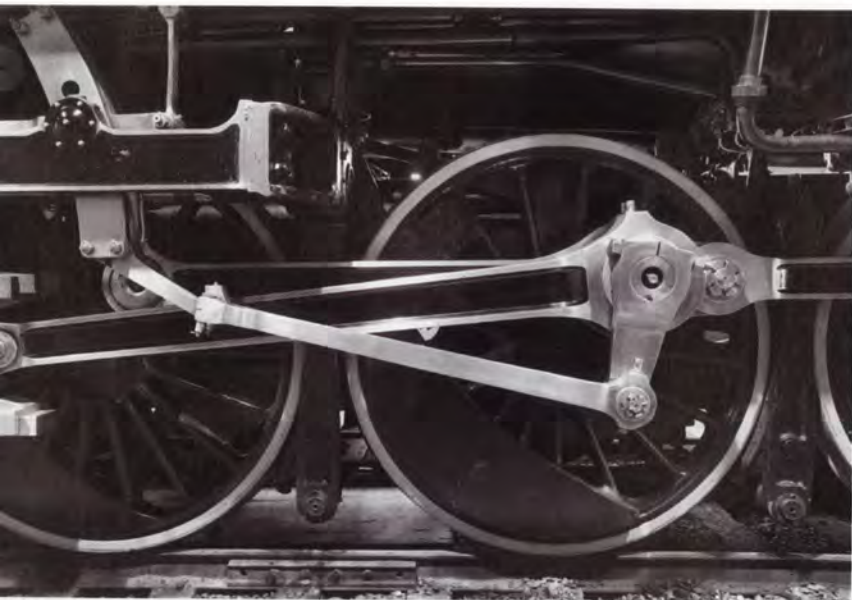
Think of portraits. A picture of a beautiful woman or drop-dead gorgeous man merits a quick look, but usually most adults don't give it much time, don't tear it out of a magazine, and don't frame it. Yet, there are portraits that cause us to do all of those things. *Migrant Mother* by Dorothea Lange is a beautiful portrait and one could say that the woman shows a special kind of beauty; but really it is a picture of a tired, worn out woman who's given up hope, yet has the strength to struggle on. It is such a striking image that the photograph is beautiful even if the person photographed may not be. Karsh's image of Winston Churchill is hardly beautiful, but Karsh captured such a sense of power and determination in the man that you can see how he pulled a nation through a war.

A news photograph might not be considered beautiful at all, but a good one is certainly



▲ **Perforated Steel Sheets (Abstract)**

On my first visit to this location I hadn't even noticed this wonderful composition. On my second visit, I shot from the side. But, on my third visit, ah...



#### ▲ Drivers

This subject is hardly original, yet was rewarding to photograph nevertheless. Old steam locomotives offer many possible compositions, and those polished rods photograph so well!

interesting—interesting because it has a message or is so representative of the issue at hand that it serves as an icon for our feelings about a situation say war, a natural disaster, politics, or whatever.

In the end though, the magic of a great photograph, which probably can't be explained, comes from the genius of the photographer. This may not even be understood by him, and can't be called forth on demand, but rather crops up now and again because the photographer was ready. He was ready due to years spent practicing, looking at images, being alert to the possibilities, and being organized to catch the image the moment it presented itself.

### What Photographs Well?

Some objects, materials, and surfaces photograph particularly well. They do so because of their textures and the way they reflect light. You might as well take advantage of this knowledge.

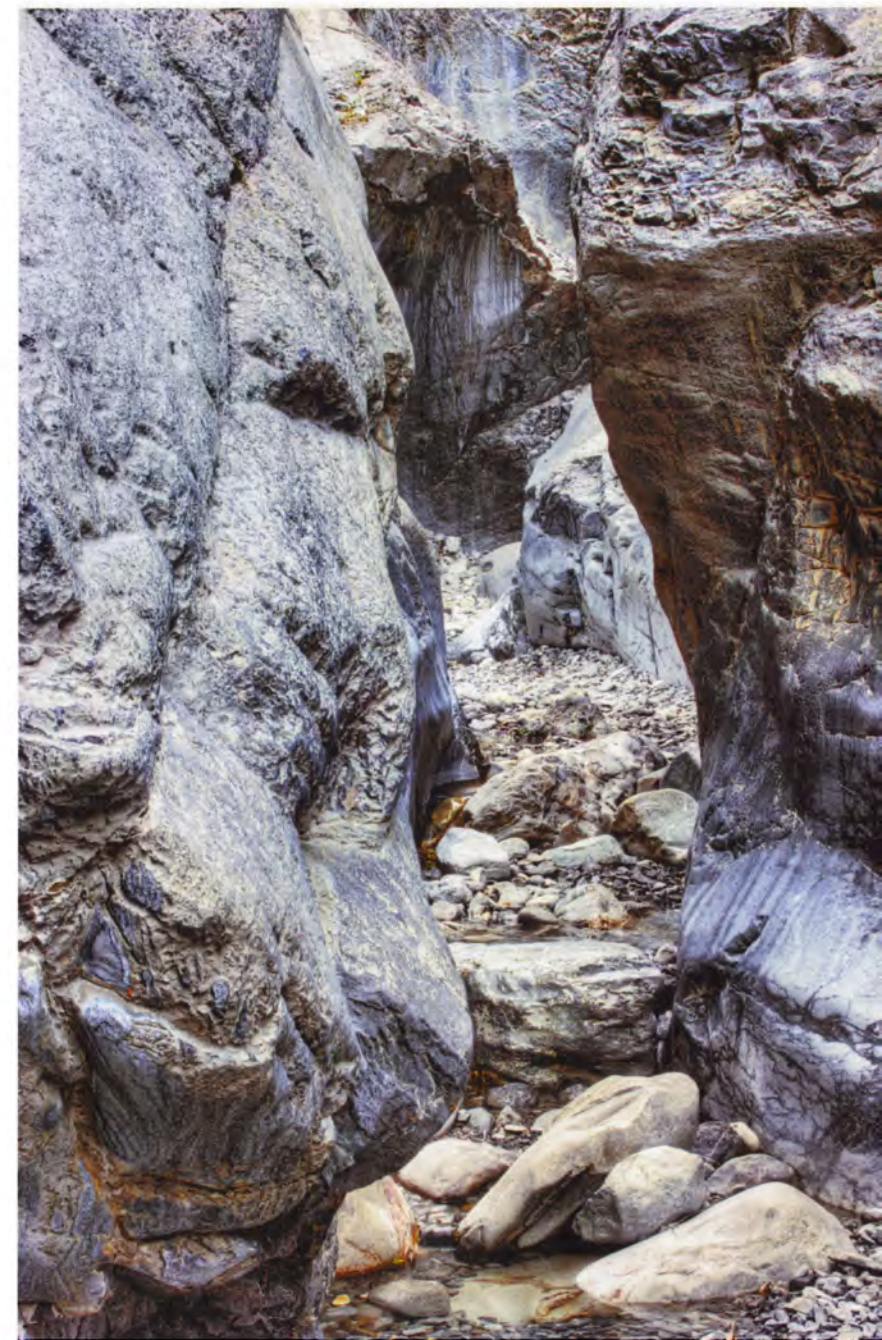
Have you ever thought about whether dark subjects photograph better than light ones, or the other way round? Do gradations have to be smooth or can they be harsh? Do patterned objects photograph OK? How shiny must a surface be to have interesting tonalities; can it be too shiny?

I can spout off about my own theories, but it would be more instructive to analyze the great photographs and see if there are any patterns. I'm going to make some observations from my own experience of looking at good photography.

Below is a list of what photographs well based on my own observations. I strongly encourage you to compose your own list.

1. Light objects are much more important than dark ones. Think of *Moonrise over Hernandez*: It is the light buildings, the gravestones, and the clouds that make the image. In *Pepper #30*, the silvery highlights are what make the image, not the dark tones. Far more good images have the light tone as the focus of the image. There are exceptions, but if you were a betting man... Remember that the actual brightness of white photographic paper compared to black is not much different as measured with a light meter. If you want light areas to glow, they need to be surrounded by dark tones, in which case they will appear brighter than plain white paper because of the contrast.

2. Gradual changes in tone photograph better than sudden changes, other than to define a pattern. Think of the way in which water photographs, or driftwood, peppers, skin, or round objects... Of course, this also means photographing rounded objects in soft light to maintain the appearance of roundness.
3. Triangles photograph better than squares, though keep in mind that a square viewed from an angle tapers into the distance and therefore may appear as a triangle. What counts is the apparent shape on the print.
4. Skin is wonderful in photographs—whether it's the special glow in a Weston nude or the lined face of a Chinese octogenarian, it works wonderfully well. One wonders if we would think so if we were feathered birds; would we still shoot human nudes? Regardless of our affinity to human skin (including our own), it does photograph well. Like other wet surfaces, oiled skin takes on particularly powerful tones. It doesn't seem to matter whether it's the pale skin of someone who sees little sun, the freckles of a true redhead, or the various shades of "black" skin, which has great contrasting highlights: They all seem to photograph well.
5. Diagonal lines generally look better than horizontal lines, and they do a better job keeping your eye in the picture. They add energy to an image. Diagonal lines can be parallel, they can radiate out from a single point, or they can be perpendicular to each other. Randomly angled diagonal lines often don't work well. Repetitive diagonal lines of the same angle to the edge of the image can really strengthen an image, pulling it together because of their consistency.



#### ▲ Canyon 1

Soft light allows you to increase contrast and bring out detail. Depth of field was obtained here with multiple images blended in Helicon Focus.



#### ▲ Driftwood Arrow

I intended to photograph rocky shores and crashing waves, but made do with what was found... and started a new portfolio.



#### ▲ My Feet

Even in the bath I am aware of light and shadow, form and composition; so off I went, dripping, to find my camera. Seeing begins with looking.

6. Wet objects photograph better than dry ones. It makes you wonder why we all scurry indoors when it starts to rain. Surfaces such as slate and other dark rocks and roads come alive when wet.
7. Long, soft shadows are generally better than short, sharp, deep ones. The low setting or just rising sun creates both long and luminous shadows. Remember though that you can have long shadows at noon if you are photographing a vertical surface.
8. Partial sun is better than full sun. Those who take snapshots head out in good weather, but the real photographers head out in bad weather.
9. Uneven cloud coverage is better than completely even cloud coverage. A completely overcast sky creates flat lighting, which makes it difficult to achieve much tonal variety unless there are objects that overhang, and thus shadow others.
10. Patchy sunlight (as in a forest at noon) is very hard to photograph.



#### ▲ Algonquin Cliffs

In the pouring rain, no one else bothered to get out of the car. Their loss!

11. Light colored rocks photograph better than dark ones. On the east coast we had lovely, slick granite; on the west coast we had dull, almost black rock covered in white bits (not all of which was bird poop). Guess which rocks photographed better. The west coast rock simply got darker when wet, but they didn't reflect more light because of their rough surface. The east coast granite was the winner!
12. Age photographs better than new (except in people, and sometimes then too if you aren't trying to please the subject). The patina of old surfaces tends to photograph well, though some new surfaces can also photograph well. I'm thinking of some of John Sexton's power plant images in which brushed aluminum appears to glow in the prints. The shiny, new Guggenheim Bilbao Museum and the Walt Disney Concert Hall photograph wonderfully.
13. Tidy scenes photograph better than clutter, unless there is a pattern to the clutter.



#### ▲ Wire Forms

I took advantage of a rise from which I was able to look down into this concrete plant and capture the reinforcing wire. While circular in themselves, the overlapping shapes combine to create an S-bend.



▲ **Under Glenmore Trail**  
A very wide lens and parallel lines result in bold triangles.

14. Circles photograph well. When viewed off to one side the same circular shapes appear as ovals, which are even better.
15. S-bends are solid gold! Whether this is opposite curves in a road, the patterns in a grain field or the sweep of a stream, it photographs well.
16. Receding parallel lines take on a triangular shape, which looks good. Think of roads, railways, bridge beams, etc.
17. Leaves look better in the spring than the summer, by which time they have a sameness in overall color and brightness which is not as appealing. Wind turns leaves inside out, supplying some variety in tonality.
18. Objects blurred by movement often look good in a photograph, which kind of makes you wonder why we all stand waiting, sometimes for hours, for the wind to die down to capture our images. Though to be fair, slight movement is not as good as a lot of movement, and movement in only a small part of an image doesn't look right when the rest is still.
19. Most objects look better with a plain background. The world's worst background is a forest with patches of bright sky showing through.
20. An image that is just a little out of focus isn't attractive, but very out of focus can be lovely.

This list is at best only a start to describing the surfaces that photograph well. Rather than carrying such a list into the field, you'd benefit more after reading it to simply pay attention to surfaces and how they deal with light so that you can apply this knowledge whether photographing food, sports equipment, machinery, or landscape.



◀ **Driftwood Reaching (before blurring)**

I forgot to take into consideration the effect of stopping down while trying keep all the wood in focus, which resulted in a very distracting background.



◀ **Driftwood Reaching (after blurring)**

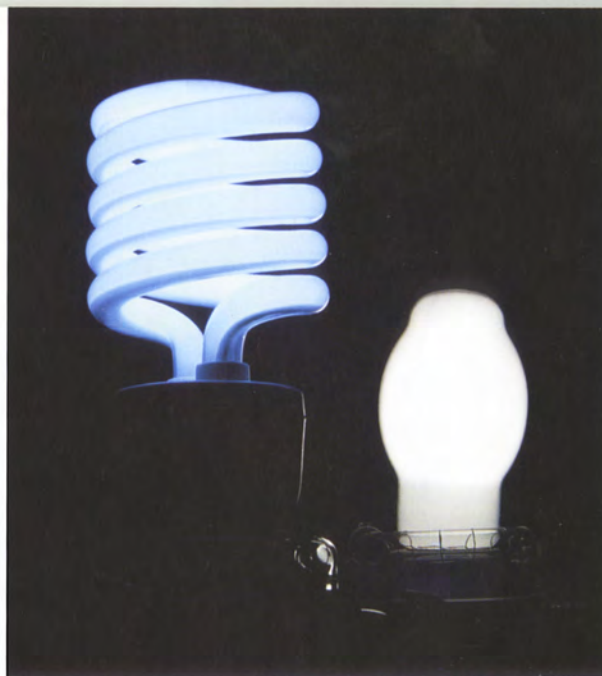
It would have been best had I shot this correctly at the scene, but considerable work in Photoshop rescued the image. Think ahead!

## White Balance

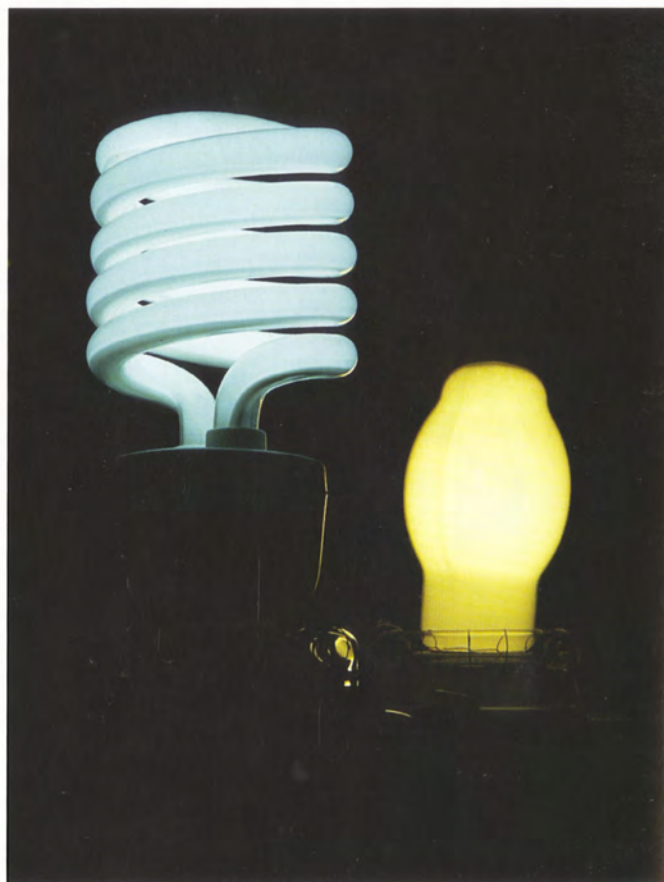
The camera's white balance system adjusts your camera for the color of the light source so that whites will be rendered neutrally and colors will be rendered accurately. White balance makes a white surface white in the picture, eliminating color cast. If the white is white, all other colors will be accurate too.



In each photo of this series, the lamp on the left is a coiled day-light-balanced fluorescent, while the right bulb is a standard tungsten lamp that produces a warmer, yellow-red light. With the camera's white balance set for daylight, the fluorescent records as white, while the tungsten is yellowish.



When the camera's white balance is switched to Tungsten, the fluorescent lamp records blue and the tungsten light is rendered as white.



In this photo, the white balance is set to Auto (AWB). Note that neither light is white because this is a compromise setting that doesn't correctly balance either light.