

Sample



Mastering

Alain Briot

Photographic Composition,  
Creativity,  
and Personal Style

## **Mastering Photographic Composition, Creativity, and Personal Style**



# **Mastering Photographic Composition, Creativity, and Personal Style**

**Alain Briot**

rocky**nook**

Mastering Photographic Composition, Creativity, and Personal Style  
by Alain Briot ([www.beautiful-landscape.com](http://www.beautiful-landscape.com))

Editor: Gerhard Rossbach  
Copyeditor: Tonya Crandall  
Production Editor: Joan Dixon  
Proof Reader: Sarah Castellanos  
Layout and Type: Almute Kraus, [www.exclam.de](http://www.exclam.de)  
Cover design: Helmut Kraus, [www.exclam.de](http://www.exclam.de)  
Cover photos: Alain Briot  
Printer: Tara TPS Co., Ltd. through Four Colour Print Group  
Printed in Korea  
ISBN 978-1-933952-22-2

1st Edition (2nd Printing, January 2010)  
© 2009 Alain Briot  
Rocky Nook, Inc.  
26 West Mission Street, Ste 3  
Santa Barbara, CA 93101-2432

[www.rockynook.com](http://www.rockynook.com)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Briot, Alain.

Mastering photographic composition, creativity, and personal style / Alain Briot. --  
1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-933952-22-2 (alk. paper)

1. Composition (Photography) I. Title.

TR179.B75 2009

771--dc22

2009003899

Distributed by O'Reilly Media  
1005 Gravenstein Highway North  
Sebastapool, CA 95472

All product names and services identified throughout this book are trademarks or registered trademarks of their respective companies. They are used throughout this book in editorial fashion only. No such uses, or the use of any trade name, are intended to convey endorsement or other affiliation with the book. No part of the material protected by this copyright notice may be reproduced or utilized in any form, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission of the copyright owner. While reasonable care has been exercised in the preparation of this book, the publisher and authors assume no responsibility for errors or omissions, or for damages resulting from the use of the information contained herein.

This book is printed on acid-free paper.



# Table of Contents

**xiv Foreword**

**xvi Preface**

**1**



## **2 About Composition**

- 3 Art, Facts, and Landscape Photography
- 5 The Differences Between Composing Factual and Artistic Photographs
- 6 Photography is Not Dead

## **Section A: The Differences Between What We See and What the Camera Sees**

**2**



## **12 Learning to See Like a Camera**

- 13 Of Cameras and Art
- 13 Good Cameras Equal Good Photographs
- 13 A Matter of Filters
- 14 Modifying What the Camera Captures
- 15 Differences in Print Quality
- 18 It's the Print, Silly
- 18 I Should Have Known
- 19 The Artist and His Tools
- 21 It's Only a Matter of Time

**3**



## **22 The Eye and the Camera**

- 23 The Difference Between Photography and Reality
- 23 Two Categories of Differences
- 23 What the Camera Captures that the Eye Never Sees
- 32 The Soul of Photography
- 36 Conclusion

## Section B: New Rules of Composition

### 40 Composing with Light

- 41 Essential Elements
- 42 Light and Composition
- 43 Finding the Best Light
- 47 Finding Sunrise and Sunset Times
- 63 Using Natural Light
- 71 Changing Light Quality
- 100 Skill Enhancement Exercises
- 101 Conclusion



### 102 Composing with Color

- 103 Color Vision
- 104 The Three Variables of Color
- 104 The Munsell Color System
- 108 Controlling Color in Photoshop
- 109 Color Balance
- 111 Color Palette
- 116 Saturation
- 119 Color Seeing Aides
- 126 Taking Notes in the Field
- 128 Composing with Color: Examples
- 137 Skills Enhancement Exercises
- 139 Conclusion



### 140 Composing in Black and White

- 141 Introduction
- 141 Black and White Is Color with One Variable
- 141 Seeing the World without Color
- 142 Black and White and Art
- 143 Black and White and Manipulation
- 146 Color vs. Black and White
- 150 Seeing in Black and White
- 155 Examples of Composing in Black and White
- 164 Skills Enhancement Exercises
- 165 Conclusion



# 7

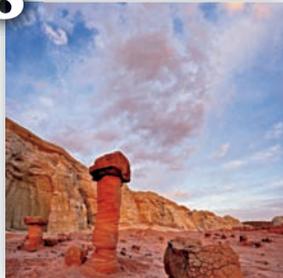


## 166 Important Elements of a Strong Composition

- 167 Introduction
- 167 Strong Compositions Checklist
- 172 Example 1—Superimposing Objects: *Monument Valley*
- 174 Example 2—Creating Visual Metaphors:  
*Manzanar Monument*
- 176 Example 3—Leading Lines: *Sand Dunes at Sunrise*
- 178 Example 4—Near-Far Compositions:  
*Brown's Hole, Dinosaur National Monument*
- 179 Example 5—Near-Far Compositions:  
Vertical and Horizontal
- 183 Example 6—Careful Cropping Between Objects:  
*Navajoland Cloudscape*
- 185 Example 7—Cropping and Borders:  
*Escalante Canyon*

## Section C: The Creative Process

# 8



## 190 Finding Inspiration

- 191 Introduction
- 191 Inspiration, Creativity, Vision, and Personal Style
- 193 Example 1: Location as a Source of Inspiration
- 193 The Muses
- 195 A Lifestyle
- 196 Example 2: Remoteness as Source of Inspiration
- 197 New Equipment, Supplies, and Software: New Possibilities
- 198 Example 3: Mood as a Source of Inspiration
- 198 Become an Expert
- 200 External and Internal Inspiration
- 201 Inspiration Is Asking Why not How
- 201 Example 4: Repeat Visits to Favorite Places for Inspiration
- 202 Memories of What I Have Seen and Experienced
- 205 Skills Enhancement Exercises:  
How to Invite the Muses and Bring Out Your Creativity
- 206 Conclusion

**208 Exercising Creativity**

- 209 Introduction
- 209 The Difference Between Inspiration and Creativity
- 210 Do Not Delay Creativity
- 211 We All Have the Potential to Be Creative
- 212 Liberating Our Creativity
- 212 Fear of Failure
- 214 Moving Out of Your Comfort Zone
- 215 Overcoming Creative Fear
- 216 Fear of Critique
- 218 Everything Has Already Been Done
- 219 Nobody Cares About Your Work
- 221 Skills Enhancement Exercises
- 225 Conclusion



**226 Developing Your Vision**

- 227 Introduction
- 227 What Is Vision?
- 228 Making Your Vision Reality
- 228 Critical Thinking
- 230 Going Back
- 233 Your Personality
- 234 Making Your Vision Reality
- 236 Doing the Work
- 237 Do Not Lose Your Vision
- 238 Skills Enhancement Exercises
- 241 Conclusion



# 11



## **242 Achieving Your Personal Style**

- 243 Introduction
- 243 What is a Personal Style?
- 245 Finding Your Own Way of Seeing
- 247 Style Develops through Work
- 247 Your Personal Style Filter
- 248 Show Your Personal Style throughout Your Work
- 248 The Coherence of a Style
- 250 Projects, Goals, and Deadlines
- 251 Expect Ebb and Flow
- 252 Unlearning the Rules
- 253 Changing the Rules
- 255 Be Bold and Audacious
- 256 Don't Sell Your Soul
- 256 Don't Worry about Creating Masterpieces
- 258 Moving Out of Your Comfort Zone
- 259 Don't Try to Please Everyone
- 260 Expect Detractors
- 263 Skills Enhancement Exercises
- 266 Conclusion

## **Section D: You and Your Audience**

# 12

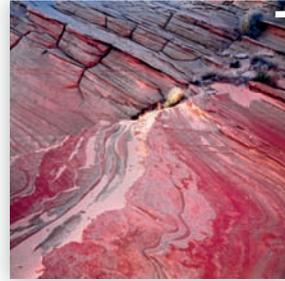


## **270 Just Say Yes**

- 271 Introduction
- 271 A Little Bit of History
- 272 The Art of Saying Yes
- 273 Drama
- 275 Technique Is Meant to Be Seen
- 276 Audience
- 276 In Closing

**278 Of Audiences and Bestsellers**

- 279 Introduction
- 279 Who Is Your Audience?
- 282 The Concept of Audience
- 282 Selling Out
- 284 Artists Seek a Response from and a Dialogue with the Audience
- 284 Of Bestsellers and Art
- 285 How to Create a Bestseller
- 288 Start a Discussion with Your Audience
- 288 How to Find an Audience
- 290 Skills Enhancement Exercises
- 290 Conclusion



**13**

**292 The Numbering Affair**

- 293 Introduction
- 293 Manipulation and Art
- 294 A Short History of Numbering in Photography
- 296 Of Quality and Quantity
- 297 The Problem
- 299 The Conflict
- 300 The Art Show Conundrum
- 301 To Limit or Not to Limit?
- 302 Conclusion



**14**

**Section E: The Relationship Between the Technical and Artistic Aspects of Photography**

**306 Technical and Creative Field Checklist for Fine Art Photography**

- 307 Introduction
- 307 A Few Notes about this Checklist
- 308 Field Checklist



**15**

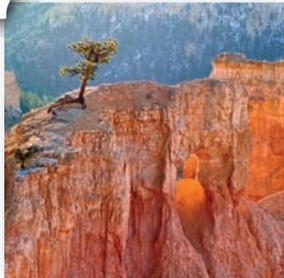
# 16



## 312 Image Maladies

- 313 Introduction
- 313 Heavily Cropping Images
- 315 Images Affected by Edge Maladies
- 317 Globally Oversaturated Images
- 317 Locally Oversaturated Images
- 320 Images with a Global Color Cast
- 321 Images with a Local Color Cast
- 324 Images without Black and White Points
- 325 Images without a Gray Point
- 327 Images with Clipped Black and White Points
- 328 Images with Too Much Global Contrast
- 330 Images without Enough Global Contrast
- 331 Images with Too Much Local Contrast
- 333 Images Converted (or Saved) to a Small Color Space
- 335 Image Density
- 336 Land and Sky
- 337 A Challenging Endeavor
- 338 Skills Enhancement Exercises
- 338 Conclusion

# 17



## 340 Memories of What I Have Seen

- 341 Introduction
- 341 Reality?
- 342 Five Senses
- 344 Conclusion

**346 Conclusion**

- 347 Art and Technique
- 347 The Creative and Critical Modes
- 348 Vision and Composition
- 350 Your Journey
- 350 Briot Workshops
- 351 A New Beginning

**352 Prologue**



**18**

# Foreword

After a decade of leapfrogging technological advances and increasingly expensive high-end digital cameras, we have reached a plateau of sorts. Of course, there will continue to be advances in digital cameras, but the large leaps will be replaced with finer and more precise upgrades. Professional quality DSLRs can produce top quality files for any use, from stock images to fine art prints. But, just having the right equipment and software does not an artist make. Many photographers are great at getting compelling imagery and are marginal at software optimization. Conversely, some average photographers are practically software gurus, relying on their software expertise to create and output outstanding final images. I know only a handful of photographers who are as equally skilled at making great images as they are in bringing the image to fruition through software expertise.

Alain Briot is a masterful landscape photographer as well as an expert in using Photoshop to optimize his fine art prints. Alain lives in the moment, creating consistently compelling landscape imagery. He also has an astronomer's knowledge of the skies, a mathematician's ability to determine where and when the

sun/moon will appear based on sophisticated calculation tables, a graphic artist's computer/software/design skills, and an artist's detailed eye for composition and color: a rare combination indeed.

The care and expertise applied to every aspect of Alain's work—from planning for the picture, to the final software optimization, and to the final print—is apparent upon viewing his work. Every image is bold, compelling, simple, capturing a moment, and perfectly optimized.

Teaching with Alain made me aware of his humility and generosity in sharing knowledge with students. This book is an extension of that propensity for sharing. Like all of you, I look forward to delving into the wealth of information that is contained herein.

Tony Sweet  
June 2009



# Preface

*When subject matter is forced to fit into preconceived patterns, there can be no freshness of vision. Following rules of composition can only lead to a tedious repetition of pictorial clichés.*

EDWARD WESTON

This book is about composition as I see it and as I practice it when I create my photographs. It is not about what I call the *traditional* approach to composition. Instead, it is about composition as I use it in my work; about what I call a new approach to composition. In this sense this book is about how I compose my images.

If you want to learn how I compose my images, then this book is for you. My goal when writing it was that it would open doors to new ways of seeing and composing images, doors that other books have not opened.

This book does not reiterate many of the compositional rules presented in books that approach composition from a more traditional perspective. I see no need to repeat what has already been said. Instead, I see a need to say what has not been said; a need to present a new approach to composition. In doing so, I see my purpose as enlarging the field of photographic composition to include subjects that have not, traditionally, been associated with composition. These subjects include how to compose images with color, with black and white, and with light; how to consider your future audience while creating a photograph; taking your color palette into account, and the nuances of grays you want to use; doing all this, and more, both while capturing a photo-

graph in the field and while processing your photographs in the studio.

In this book I cover taking notes in the field about the colors of the elements in your image, as well as the contrast, the light, and all the other visual elements so that you can later draw on your memory to recreate the emotions you experienced while in the field. Also covered are how color works and how the three variables of color—saturation, hue, and lightness—interact so that you can control the colors in your photographs as if you were a painter in control of your color palette rather than a photographer at the mercy of the camera. Finally, I explain how these elements of composition will help you develop a personal style. All in all, the subjects in this book include learning to control all the elements that have a visual effect in the photograph.

My approach to composition, while specifically addressing photography, comes from my study and practice of painting. In other words, my experience as a painter shapes my approach to photography and to composition. If this approach strikes a chord with you, and if learning to approach photographic composition with the freedom and knowledge of an artist appeals to you, then this book will be a delight. It is my sincerest hope that such is the case.

Composition is a vast subject. Unfortunately, this subject is too often narrowed down to what is referred to as “the rules of composition”. Certainly, rules are important. But to limit the entire subject of composition to a set of rules is to limit what composition is as a whole. These rules may also limit how photographers (both newcomers and experienced practitioners) perceive what the field of composition encompasses.

For this reason I prefer to refer to the subject as the *field of composition* rather than as just *composition*. The word “field” implies that there are multiple dimensions to the subject of composition and that, implicitly, composition is not limited only to a set of rules.

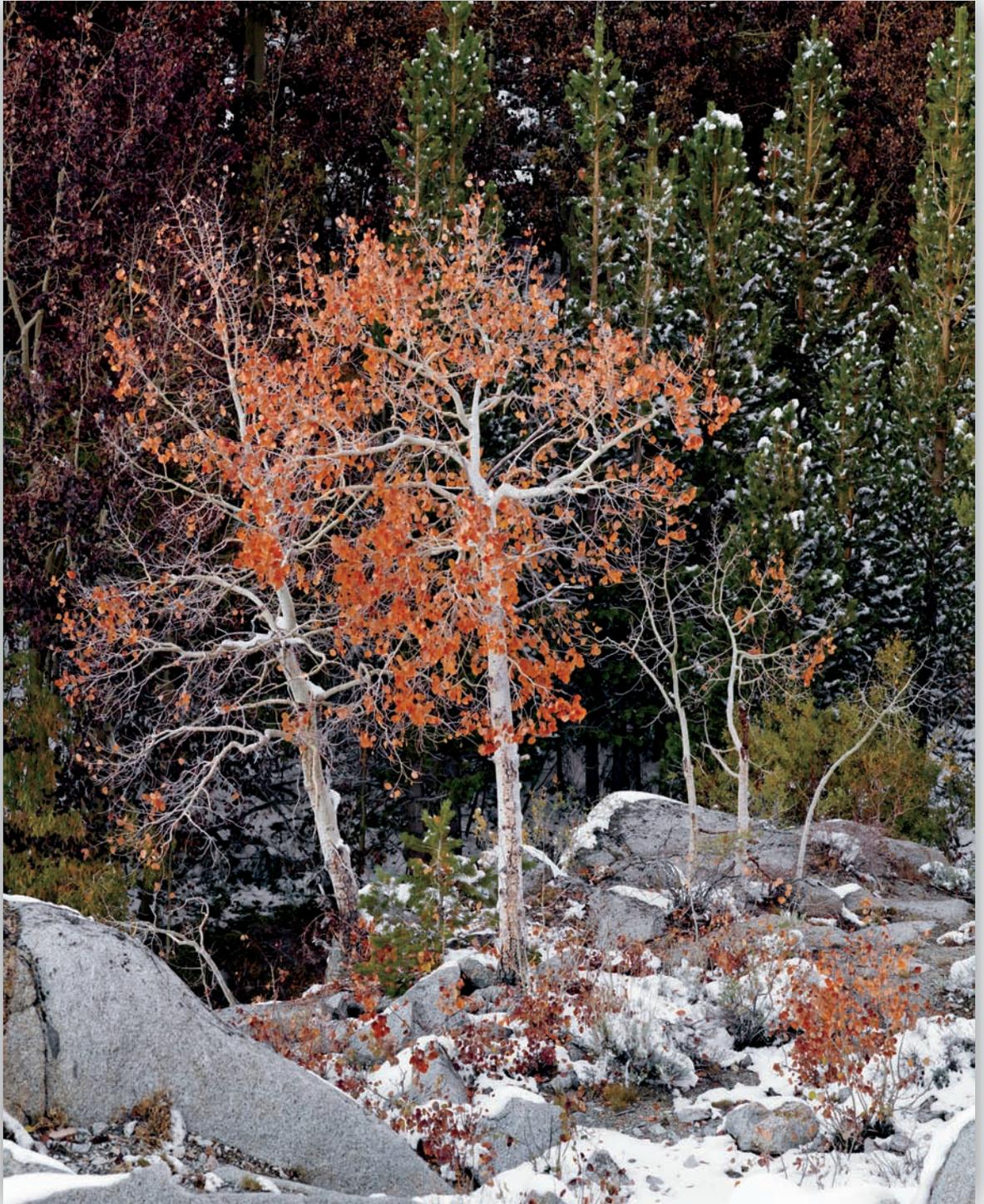
Composition is about much more than a set of rules. Composition is about how each photographer uses light, color, and contrast. It is about how each photographer sees the world and how each photographer wants to represent this world to his or her audience. In short, composition—when approached from an individual perspective—is about your way of seeing the world. It is about your way of sharing what you see with your audience; sharing what you see with those that will look at, study, and admire (or criticize) your work.

# 1

## About Composition

*Photography is more than a medium for factual communication of ideas.  
It is a creative art.*

ANSEL ADAMS



## Art, Facts, and Landscape Photography

In this book I approach photography as an art form. This book is written for people who desire to practice photography as an art form, and who either consider themselves artists or have the desire to become artists. I consider this to be an important statement because photography, like any medium of communication and representation, is not necessarily an art form. Painting, music, sculpture, or any other medium is not imbued with the ability to create art *a priori*. Any medium can have multiple uses. The thing that makes a medium an art form is not the medium itself but the intent of the practitioner who uses this medium.

Photography can have many uses. Photographs can be used to record scenes or events. Photographs can be used to create visual documents for future study or research. Photographs can be used as forensic evidence. Photographs can be used on passports, ID cards, and for other administrative purposes. Photographs can be used to document news articles. Photographs can be taken for record keeping, for insurance purposes, as souvenirs, and for many other uses.

Hardly any of these uses can be considered art. Why? Because the photographer did not intend to express an emotional response to the subjects being photographed. Instead, the goal of the photographer was to record a place, an event, a person, or an object.

Art is not concerned with record keeping. Art is concerned with expressing emotions, feelings, and opinions. Record keeping is based on facts, and is concerned with capturing reality and recording things as they are. Art is non-factual and is concerned with interpreting reality rather than with capturing reality as-is.

Record keeping is a necessity. We use photographs to document forensic analysis, legal evidence, research findings, and news reports, for example. We use images of our belongings and of ourselves for insurance purposes, for official identification, and for many other purposes.

Art is not a necessity. Art is something we want, not something we need. Artists create art because they want to, not because they have to. Similarly, collectors purchase art because they want to, not because they have to. We all can live without making or collecting art. Arguably, our lives may be less enjoyable and less meaningful without art, but without it we would not perish the way we would if we did not have food, clothing, or shelter.

These two different goals—factual and artistic representations—result in two drastically different approaches to photography. While factual representation is concerned with documenting facts, artistic representation is concerned with expressing emotions.

When capturing facts one must be careful not to distort reality so as not to modify the facts being recorded. The value of a factual photograph lies in how accurately it depicts the scene, the object, the people, or the event represented in the image. A factual photograph is about the subject of the photograph, not about the person who took the photograph. As such, the person taking the photograph must be careful not to allow his emotions to become mixed with the facts being recorded. In many ways the factual photographer must remove himself from the process so as to become “invisible” to those seeing the photograph. His presence or personality must not be felt when looking at the photograph.



Figure 1-2: *Trees in Fall Colors* – Zion National Park, Utah

When capturing emotions one must be sure to take into account one's feelings about the scene, the object, the people, or the event being photographed. An artistic photograph is about the response of the photographer to the subject of the photograph. It is first about the person who takes the photograph, and then it

is about the subject of the photograph. In fact, the more a photograph veers in the direction of art, the more it becomes an image about the photographer and less an image about the subject itself. The personality of the photographer must be present in the image for an artistic photograph to have value.

## The Differences Between Composing Factual and Artistic Photographs

*What I am seeking is not the real and not the unreal but rather the unconscious, the mystery of the instinctive in the human race.*

AMEDEO MODIGLIANI

Composing a factual photograph is entirely different than composing an artistic photograph. Both the techniques used and the mindset of the photographer must be different. A factual photograph is concerned with showing the subject in a realistic manner; therefore, seeing the details of this subject is very important. For example, in portrait photographs taken for US Immigration purposes, there are many requirements such as a full-face view, the subject looking straight at the camera, a white background, etc. Similarly, photographs taken to record scenes, events, or objects must be detailed enough so that the subject is clearly visible.

Often, factual photographs will be taken using a flash when ambient light is insufficient. This is done to guarantee even lighting across the subject and that the subject will appear as sharp as possible. The goal here is not to have the most pleasing lighting but rather to have enough light to guarantee that the subject will be clearly visible, and the same light quality is used from one photograph to the next to guarantee a level of consistency. Finally, colors are balanced to match the original subject as closely as possible.

Composition in factual photographs is concerned with showing either the entire subject or a selected part of the subject that is of interest. The goal is not to dramatize how this subject is located in the frame, nor to emphasize one aspect over another, nor to use a rule

of composition aimed at furthering the creativity of the photographer. The goal is not to take a creative photograph. Instead, the goal is simply to take an *accurate* photograph; a photograph that can be relied upon as evidence by the intended audience.

On the other hand, artistic photographs are rarely concerned with showing the entire subject. Instead, they often rely on the fact that *less is more*, and following this credo, the artist seeks to eliminate all elements that do not contribute to making the image stronger. In keeping with this rule, certain important elements may be cropped so that only parts of these elements show in the image. Or, elements that may be deemed absolutely necessary in a factual photograph may be removed entirely, with the reasoning that the absence of these elements makes the image either stronger or more intriguing.

Similarly, light is used creatively in artistic photographs. While some artists may prefer soft and even lighting, others may favor more dramatic types of lighting such as *contre-jour* (backlight) or *chiaroscuro* (the contrast between light and dark areas of a scene). Some artists may use both types of light alternatively depending on their mood and the effect they seek to create.

None of these types of lighting are prone to revealing the essential details of a scene in a realistic fashion. While the former reduces contrast, the latter exaggerates it. Neither are concerned with “the truth”, whatever that truth may be. Instead, artists using either types of light are concerned with expressing their feelings toward a particular scene. Their goal is to use light as a way to share their emotional response to the subject with their audience.

The artist is concerned with aspects of composition that the factual recorder, or the “scientist” I should say, has little or no concern for. The scientist is concerned with showing the subject objectively and accurately, and asks himself if the photograph is a faithful representation of this subject.

The artist, on the other hand, asks himself a totally different set of questions. For example, the artist may wonder if elements in the picture agree or disagree in their artistic form; he may be concerned with how negative space contrasts with positive space; or he may question whether unity is achieved or if the image is out of balance.

As you can see, the motivations of the factual recorder and the artist are poles apart. Still, both of them use the same medium: photographs, to capture the subject they are interested in. It’s no wonder that many practitioners of various skill levels and involvement question whether or not photography is art. The answer is that photography can be both. It can be art or it can be a factual form of visual recording, depending on how it is used, and depending on the intent and the goals of the photographer.

In this book we are going to study how to create artistic compositions. This is not to say that factual compositions do not need to be studied. Rather, this is simply to say that our focus will be on learning how to compose expressive images with the purpose of sharing our emotional response to the subject with our audience. As we will see, achieving this purpose is a multi-step process that starts with analyzing the differences between what we see and what the camera captures, continues through the study of the possible approaches to composition, and culminates in developing a personal style.

In the following chapters we will explore the process through which inspiration leads to creativity, vision, and eventually, personal style. Also, we will study how composition can help us express our creativity and our personal style.

## Photography is Not Dead

*When I am finishing a picture, I hold some God-made object up to it—a rock, a flower, the branch of a tree or my hand—as a final test. If the painting stands up beside a thing man cannot make, the painting is authentic. If there’s a clash between the two, it is bad art.*

MARC CHAGALL

The case has been made in magazine articles, online forums, and other media that “photography is dead”. I always raise an eyebrow anytime such a sweeping statement is made about any field of human activity. Certainly, such a statement is guaranteed to generate reader curiosity. However, such statements are usually more provocative than accurate.

In this case the point that is usually made is that digital photography, with its many automatic functions, has killed photography because now just about anyone can create good photographs. All it takes to create a good photograph, or so the argument goes, is the ownership of a good camera and the knowledge of how to use Photoshop or other image processing software. The hardware and the software will do the job; placing talent, hard work, and years of study in the closet and labeling them as passé and unnecessary.

In the past, or so the argument continues, artists used to study, work hard, and use their talent to express their emotions through their

art. Today, all they need to do is buy a digital camera and Photoshop. Times have changed. The old is out and the new is in. We just need to get used to this situation.

Or so the belief goes. And it is a belief and nothing else. Automatization is not a replacement for talent, hard work, and study. Automatization simply means that certain tasks that were formerly completed manually are now automatic. What are these tasks?

- **Focusing:** Focusing is hardly a creative or challenging endeavor, *except* when selective focusing is desired or when maximum depth of field is desired. Both are areas where the hardware is unable to perform automatically and where the practitioner is required to step in and make choices and decisions.
- **Exposure:** Exposure can be automatically set, *except* when a specific type of exposure is required; one that differs from the exposure calculated by the camera. In this case, the photographer has to step in and modify the settings manually.
- **Color Balance:** Color balance can be automated, *except* when color balance as chosen by the camera is unpleasing to the photographer, and a different color balance has to be manually chosen, usually during RAW conversion or post-processing of the image.
- **Contrast Control:** Contrast may be set to automatic, *except* when a certain type of contrast is desired by the photographer or when the contrast of specific areas of an image have to be controlled individually.

The list goes on and on. What remains constant is the pattern that emerges from this list: the camera or the software chooses and the photographer needs to step in when the automatic choices aren't satisfying. In other

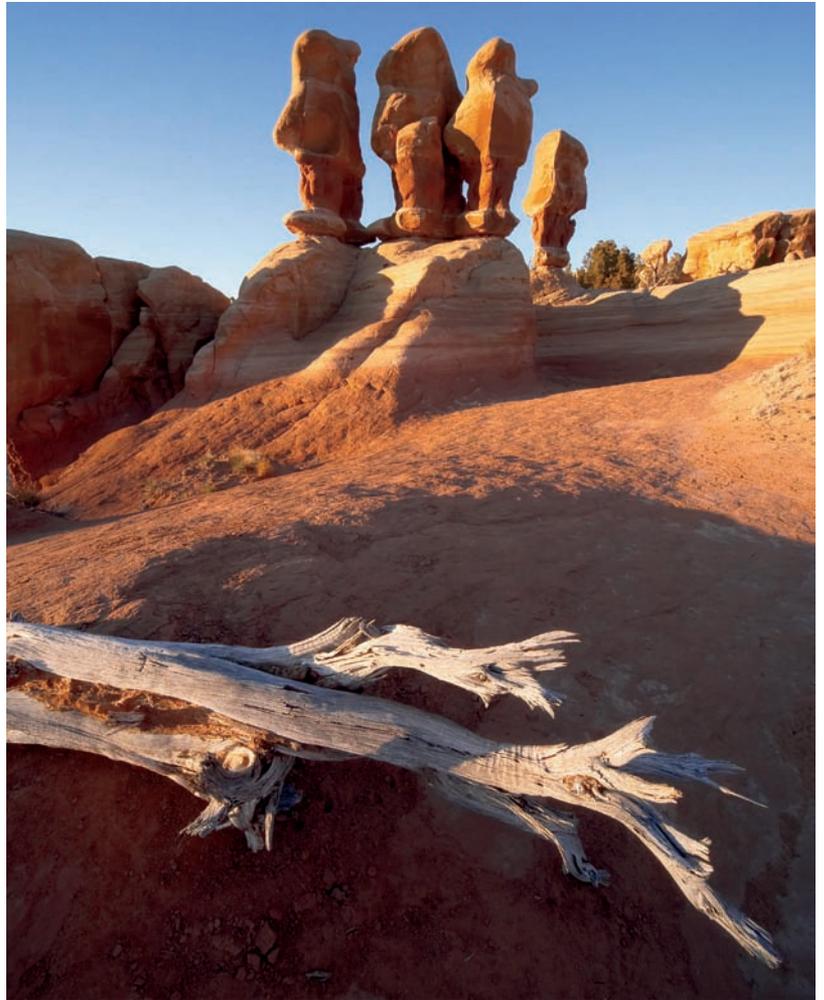


Figure 1-3: *Garden of the Gods* – Escalante Grand Staircase, Utah

words, the photographer has to make choices and decisions.

And on what basis are these choices and decisions made? On the basis of talent, study, and hard work. Only these three factors will give us the experience we need to make difficult choices that the hardware and the software alone cannot make. Why can't hardware and software make these decisions? Because

it requires thinking and because, above all, it requires artistic decisions; decisions that cannot be programmed, although, further down the road, software and hardware may have the ability to “think”.

The decisions the photographer must make are based on the basis of feelings and emotions—decisions that are aimed at expressing our emotional response to a scene, our perception of the subject we desire to photograph, and our personal artistic approach. All of these represent individual choices that we are usually unaware of until we find ourselves in the act of capturing a specific subject with a lens and a camera. Consequently, this process prevents camera designers and software engineers to program either the hardware or the software to automatically express our response to the subject.

So what am I getting at in this explanation? I am getting at the fact that no matter how advanced and automatized the equipment and the software we use, there is no substitute for individual input and expression.

What I am also getting at is the fact that the field of endeavor, where this individual input is best expressed, is the field of composition. Why? First, because composition is about personal choices: very few, if any, aspects of composition can be automatized. Second, because composition is a field of endeavor composed of multiple facets and not just a set of rules. If composition were just a set of rules, it would, in theory, be possible to think that these rules could be embedded in camera or computer software and that such software could have the ability to “compose” photographs based on these rules, or in the very least, our equipment could have the ability to give us directions aimed at helping us compose images in a specific way. The rule of thirds, for example,

could be implemented in such a way that the camera would tell us when the image is divided into three equally spaced areas. Or, with the help of a software-controlled, 3-way mechanized ballhead operated by servomotors, the camera could conceivably find this composition itself, making the photographer little more than a passive observer of his cutting-edge hardware. In such a scenario, which right now may seem a little ahead of its time but which very well may become a reality in a short while, the photographer’s skill would be limited to purchasing the proper equipment and then finding the location to set up such a camera.

But would this camera, if it existed, be able to express the inner feelings of the photographer? Would it be able to know the emotional response of the photographer to the scene he or she is photographing? Would this equipment be able to include, in the moment captured by the camera and in the print later made by the photographer, the complexity of emotions and the many possible ways of seeing this scene?

And if such a camera existed and was made widely available so that the limiting factor of ownership would be cost rather than availability, wouldn’t such a system create images that would be representative of the system’s designers and engineers ways of seeing, rather than the photographer’s way of seeing? And wouldn’t the photographer be little more than a “mule”; a carrier of equipment designed to express the equipment makers’ view of the world, rather than the individual photographer’s view of the world? As such, wouldn’t the owner of such equipment be furthering the cause of the machine that he is using rather than his own cause by expressing the vision of the manufacturer rather than his



Figure 1-4: *Sunrise* – Colorado Plateau, Southern Utah

own vision? My answer to these questions is “of course”, and my solution is to write the book you are reading. Through this book, and through the description of the many aspects of the field of composition, I want to share my belief that composition cannot be automated because composition is the way through which an individual expresses his or her vision of the world.

I have already explored the field of photography in my first book, *Mastering Landscape Photography*. In this second book I want to explore, specifically, how I approach

photographic composition and how composition is related to the differences between what we see and what the camera captures. I also want to explore the relationship between composition and light, color, and more. Finally, I want to study how art interacts with technique, allowing us to express our inspiration and, eventually, to develop a personal style.

So, without further delay, let us embark on this exciting journey of learning and discovery.

Section A:

*The Differences Between  
What We See and  
What the Camera Sees*



# 2

## Learning to See Like a Camera

*Each problem that I solved became a rule which served afterwards to solve other problems.*

RENE DESCARTES



## Of Cameras and Art

I hear it regularly at art shows: “Your photographs are amazing. You must have a very good camera”. I often hear, “Your colors are beautiful, you must use filters”. And finally, I also hear, “Your images are fantastic! You must use Photoshop”. These statements come in different variations, but the message is essentially the same: for a certain audience, the reason why my work is beautiful is not due to my artistic skills but to the equipment I use.

At first I was dumfounded. Later on I was insulted. After talking to other photographers and learning that they received the same comments, I started wondering why people think this. I now believe I have the answer.

## Good Cameras Equal Good Photographs

The fact that part of the public believes that the camera is responsible for the quality of my work left me dumbfounded at first. How could they believe that? After all, the camera is but a tool, a mechanical recording device and nothing more. The comments kept coming under different guises, some commenting on how good my camera must be, others commenting on how bad theirs was, resulting in the consensus that my photos were better than theirs only because I owned a better camera. This left me feeling insulted, so I argued that years of work and study, and not simply ownership of a good camera, were responsible for the work I had on display. I also argued that my early photographs, some of which are on display at my shows, were not taken with that great of a camera because I could not afford one when

I started. All this explaining was to no avail. While some believed me, most left the show still convinced that a good camera was the key to getting good photographs and that if they had the camera I had, they would get good photographs too.

The fact that they did not have the camera I had made them revel in the fact that their theory, which really was an entrenched belief, was at no risk of being challenged. I could have loaned them my camera, told them to take a couple of photographs with it, but unless I followed them home, waited for them to get their film developed and their photos printed, I would not be in a position to make my point. What point? That their photos were not as good as mine even though they were using the same camera? And how do you compare? By putting a print made at the local drugstore next to a print made by a master printer, both from transparencies taken with the same camera?

Suspensions in the public at large about the veracity of photographs and about potential reasons for cameras delivering results that are significantly superior to those of the general public have been around for a long time. To follow my theory that the non-initiated public believes that everything happens in the camera, let me bring up the matter of filters.

## A Matter of Filters

If at a show of my work someone doesn't tell me that I must have a good camera, chances are that someone will ask which filters I used. The assumption is that professional photographers use filters to magically turn an average scene into a stunning photograph. With this belief, the audience follows the same logic as

I discussed previously, that the quality of a printed photograph was determined when the shutter was released. The photographer may have used an excellent camera, he may have used filters, or he may have used both: a good camera and filters. How can an amateur compete with such equipment? It is simply not fair, and for part of the audience, it explains everything in regard to the quality of my work.

Well, this is simply not the case. We all know that filters can have some effect on photographs—for example, polarizing filters darken the sky or remove reflections, gradual density filters reduce contrast, and colored filters either balance the color of a scene or introduce a noticeable color cast—but to my personal chagrin, a filter that has the ability to turn a scene that is remarkable for its banality into a stunning image, a filter that can create beautiful photographs at will, simply does not exist.

### **Modifying What the Camera Captures**

*A problem well stated is a problem half solved.*

CHARLES F. KETTERING

Let's now look at the problem the same audience I just described has with Photoshop. Here is an application whose purpose is to modify what the camera captured. According to the general public, Photoshop serves one purpose and one purpose only: to manipulate the photograph. Since a great photograph comes out of a great camera without any additional work required, why would anyone take that photograph into Photoshop? Nothing needs to be done to this photograph! The belief is that there can be only one reason to use

Photoshop: to manipulate the photograph, to do things to it in order to deceive the audience into thinking that what is in the photograph is real when it really isn't.

This belief on the part of the audience is strengthened by photographers who claim that they do not manipulate their photographs in any way, shape, or form: photographers who claim that their efforts stop when they press the shutter; photographers who claim that the negative, transparency, or RAW file is printed without any changes to the appearance of the original whatsoever; photographers who explain that they “do not use digital”. Now, I have no doubt that some, if not all, of these photographers are speaking the truth. But the fact is that they still have to work with a master printer, or be master printers themselves, in order to get a fine art print. But to get a fine art print, countless things have to be done to the original, whether the process is digital or chemical. By the time the multitude of things has been done, the look of the printed photograph is different from the look of the original negative or transparency. The amount of difference varies from photographer to photographer, but different it is. There isn't a single print in existence that is an exact representation of the negative, transparency, or RAW file.

## Differences in Print Quality

*It might help to have a name for the problem.*

NINA ALLEN FREEMAN

A photograph is only as good as the print one makes from it. Without really knowing it at the time, it was really the difference in print quality I was arguing about when I was attempting to defend the practice of image manipulation.. That was the key to explaining the frustration I was experiencing when hearing remarks about my camera being better than the cameras most people have.

What I came to understand is this: many people believe that, by the time the shutter is triggered, the appearance of a photograph is sealed. In other words, the prints that they see framed at my shows, prints which are the result of days and days of work adjusting contrast, color saturation, and countless other details, are believed to be the direct reproduction of the negative or transparency I exposed in my camera, or of the RAW file created by the camera's digital sensor.

The fact that each photographic film and sensor has a specific color palette, contrast ratio, and resolution, as well as grain or noise structure, is of no consequence to people who are skeptical about the use of Photoshop. They assume that the capture device is a neutral variable. They assume that all films and all sensors are created equal, and that whether we use negative film or transparencies, low or high color saturation, slow or high ISO, or small or large sensors, it makes no difference whatsoever as far as the resulting photograph is concerned.

Similarly, the fact that a RAW file has a very low saturation and contrast level when in its original state, and that virtually no RAW files are printed without some amount of saturation and contrast adjustments, is equally of no concern to the audience.

The fact that, until a few years ago, the general public used low-color-saturation negative films, and had their prints made at the local drugstore or other mechanized photo printing service, and the fact that the resulting images did not look like mine, was blindly believed to be due to their camera not being as good as mine and not to the mass-production processing labs that they used to process and print their work.

The fact that the general public now uses digicams and shoots JPEGs, which are processed in-camera and to which saturation and contrast control are applied "invisibly", and the fact that the public either takes their CF cards to the local drugstore or prints their JPEGs themselves without further image processing, changes little to this situation. It does, however, raise the issue of "manipulation" which I will address shortly.

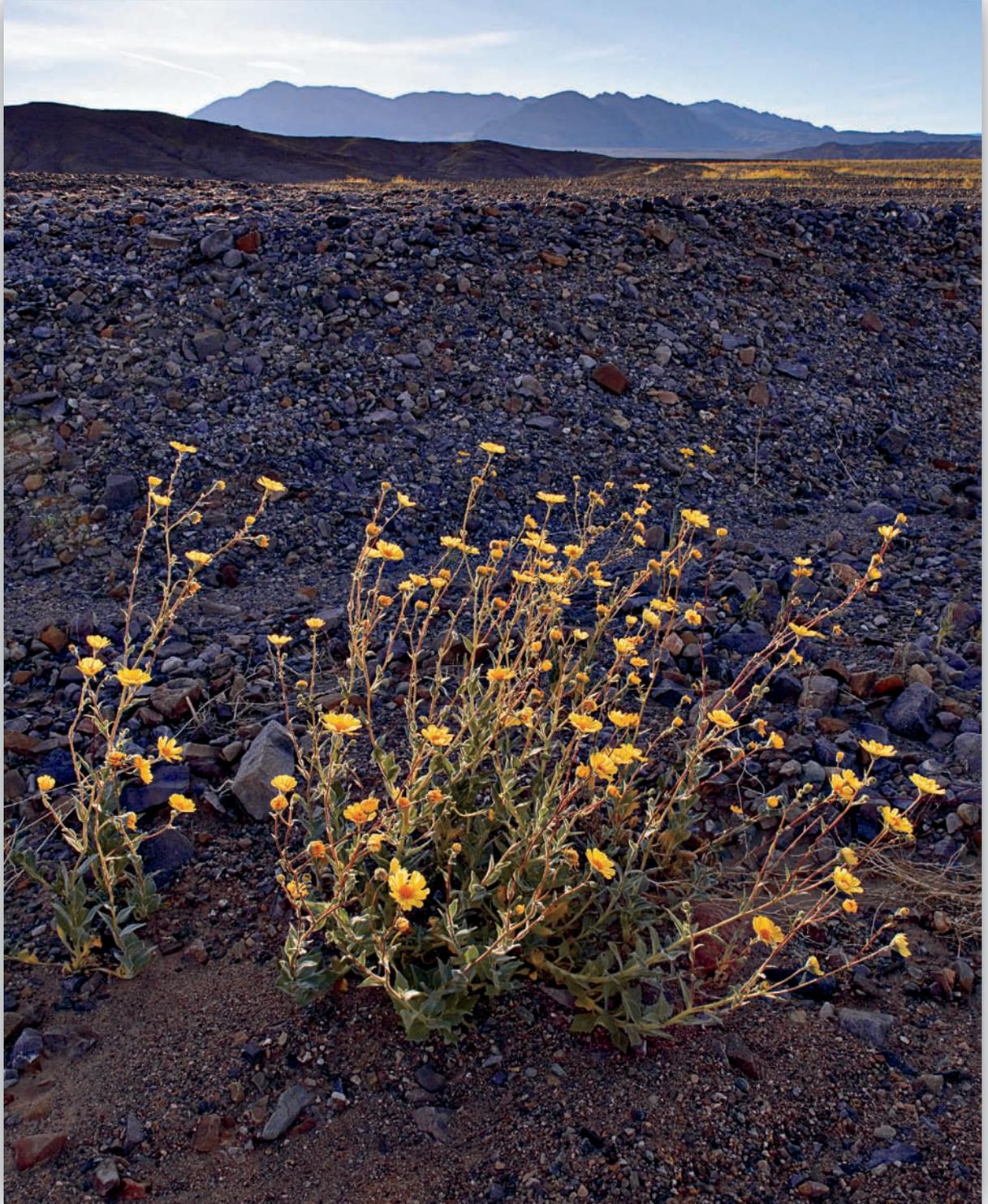
Such is the logic at work. Somehow, my camera has magical properties that theirs does not have, and no amount of explaining on my part will cause them to think otherwise. For this audience, the photographic process is something that involves a camera and a camera only. This is the only part of the process they are familiar with. And because of that, the camera, and specifically the quality of the camera, is the only thing they consider when trying to determine how a good photograph was created.

# 18

## Conclusion

*Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life.*

PABLO PICASSO



## Art and Technique

*Art is the most intense mode of individualism that the world has ever known.*

OSCAR WILDE

We are now at the end of this book. It has been a long journey, but I believe a fun and an enlightening one as well. At this time I want to bring up some points that I find to be particularly important when looking at composition, personal style, and inspiration from a certain distance; both from the perspective of a practitioner and of an observer.

Fine art photography is a technique-hungry medium, a medium in which improving your technical skills will bring visible improvement to your work. However, one cannot make progress through technique alone. One must also address the other essential aspect of fine art photography, and that is the artistic aspect. This second aspect addresses you, the photographer, the artist, directly and personally. Why? Simply because while technique comes out of a set of learned skills, art comes out of your personality. Your artistic preferences define who you are, and in turn, they define your personal style. It is because we are all different, because we all have different preferences, that each of us has a personal style.

In the end, fine art photography is a combination of art and technique. I like to say that a masterpiece is an equal combination of both: the masterful use of technique to express a powerful message. The universality of this message—how well people from all walks of life can relate to it—defines how successful the work will be. Of course, commercial success or failure, as well as exposure, play a role

in the success of a work of art. However, this is a matter of marketing, something that I am not looking at in this book, but do teach in other tutorials.

## The Creative and Critical Modes

*Great things are done by a series of small things brought together.*

VINCENT VAN GOGH

For an artist, creativity is often in conflict with critical evaluation. Unfortunately, the two do not work well together. In fact, they dislike one another and are best called upon individually, one at a time.

When working in the field, I recommend that the creation of a photograph be considered creative time, and that the selection of the best photographs from a shoot be considered critical time. I also recommend that the two be done separately. That is, I recommend that you do not select your best photographs while you are photographing. Instead, photograph to your heart's content, making sure you consider both artistic and technical aspects, and later, either in the evening or when you are back in your studio, decide what worked and what did not work, as well as which images you want to convert and optimize and which ones you want to reject.

When working in the studio, converting and optimizing your photographs, I recommend you follow a similar “separation of the tasks”, so to speak. Here too, when working on the photographs you previously selected, convert them to your heart's content and experiment with different conversion settings, different color balances, contrast, saturation, or preset

effects. Similarly, when optimizing your photographs in Photoshop, use adjustment layers to try different options and effects. Afterward, when your creativity starts to wane, put on your critical hat and decide which version you like the most. At that time, look at the images not from a creative perspective, but from a critical perspective and ask yourself which ones are the most successful, from both a technical and from an artistic standpoint.

If you are constantly critical, you will never be creative. And if you are constantly creative, you will never be critical. The creative and critical aspects work hand in hand with the artistic and the technical aspects. In order to create work that is both artistically inspired and technically excellent, you have to be creative and critical in your work. However, you cannot be both at the same time.

By keeping the creative and the critical separate, you are preventing the two from clashing and competing with each other. It is difficult to be creative if you critique your photographs while you are creating them. Similarly, it is difficult to be critical if you create new images while critiquing them. Critique and creativity are both indispensable and inherent aspects of the artistic process. However, by keeping them separated you will save yourself from being subjected to the stress of having to deal with both at the same time. This stressful situation affects many artists who try to do both at once.

## Vision and Composition

*A work of art which did not begin in emotion is not art.*

PAUL CEZANNE

The original inspiration and vision we have for an image, while capturing the photograph in the field, is our guide throughout the process of converting and optimizing the photograph. We need, in the composition and the optimization of the image, to find a way to return to the original vision that our eyes gave us, and somehow overcome the differences in seeing that the camera introduces.

Eventually, composition is an interpretation of the scene you want to photograph and of the subject that inspires you. This interpretation is by nature personal to the photographer—to you—and because of this, it will vary greatly from one photographer to the next. When creating fine art images (which is our sole focus of this book) we have the freedom of altering the “real” scene, of interpreting the original subject matter.

This interpretation is based on your personal vision and your personal vision is based on your source of inspiration—on what motivates you to photograph in the first place. In turn, your inspiration is motivated by your creativity. Finally, your level of creativity is dependent on your ability to step out of your comfort zone. Because of the complexity of this process, understanding how your inspiration, creativity, and vision interact and dovetail into each other is very important.

Of equal importance is the necessity to know what this personal vision is. Many ask themselves if they have a personal vision. My opinion is that the answer to this question is



Figure 18-2: Alain photographing at sunrise in California  
(Photograph by Bill Hankins)

yes. Yes, we all have a personal vision of the world. However, the most important question is what does this personal vision consist of? What is it about? How do you describe it? Finding the answer to this second question is what really matters. Often, the answer will come to you while you work at your art, while you create new photographs.

The process of describing your personal vision is neither simple nor facile. However, there are ways to make this process easier.

One way to make this process less daunting is to work under the guidance of a photographer who has successfully completed this process. This is the exact approach we follow in my workshops and seminars. In my workshops, students work on finding out what their personal vision is and on writing down a description of this vision. Students also work on developing a detailed list of upcoming work, with the goal of refining their personal vision and making it a reality.

## Your Journey

*It's on the strength of observation that one finds a way. So we must dig and delve unceasingly.*

CLAUDE MONET

There can be many levels of interest in a photographic image, both technical and artistic. These levels of interest range from how the image was processed and optimized; to the selection of color palettes, light, contrast, and tone; to the creation of visual metaphors, intriguing contents, and more.

All these make the possibilities offered by composition, as we studied it in this book, virtually endless. Faced with this multitude of possibilities, finding what you like, what you want to do, and how you want to use these possibilities becomes a very important priority.

Your guiding light should be your original inspiration, as I described in the chapter devoted to inspiration (chapter 8). Doing the exercises provided at the end of each chapter will be extremely helpful. These exercises were designed to focus your efforts upon the most important aspects of each area of composition, creativity, and personal style, and completing them is a requirement if you want to get the maximum out of this book.

However, no matter how helpful all these materials might be, there may come a time when working alone is not enough. You may need help from someone else, or you may need to be part of a group working in a similar direction and on similar projects. At that time you may find that joining a photography club, or working with other photographers in your area, is the way to go. Or you may choose to attend a workshop held by a professional photographer.

## Briot Workshops

Similarly, you may find that attending one of our own field workshops, or one of our seminars, is the next step in your photographic journey. Our workshops and seminars are designed around the concepts outlined in this book and in my first book, *Mastering Landscape Photography*. In other words, if you enjoyed reading this book, you will enjoy attending our workshops. I say “our” because the workshops are taught by myself and by my wife, Natalie. Natalie is trained as an art teacher and offers her own perspective and approach to our students.

Our workshops build upon the concepts outlined in this book. However, they go further than this book by providing you with personal feedback and comments upon your work and your photographs. Often, there comes a time when it is necessary to know exactly where we stand in regard to our work. There comes a time when it is necessary to ask someone who has the knowledge we want to acquire, how well we are doing and how we can reach the next step with our work. This is something that we offer in each of our workshops, and if this is what you need and are looking for, I recommend you contact us directly by phone or email. Our contact information is on my website at [www.beautiful-landscape.com](http://www.beautiful-landscape.com).

## A New Beginning

We have now come to the end of this journey, to the end of a book that took me a very long time to research and write.

Art is a journey, not a destination. Therefore, make sure you enjoy this journey every step of the way. Understandably, there will be rewarding times and challenging times. As you go down the path, there will be moments of joy and moments of restrained enthusiasm. There will be elation and there will be difficulties. These are all part of life and they have to be expected even though we would prefer that things be more level and constant.

As you embark in this journey, keep in mind that art, in the end, is a positive endeavor and that difficulties that arise with art can be solved with art. The solution, more often than not, is to go back and try again. It is amazing what not giving up can do. Success, in the end, is a matter of not giving up. Finally, keep in mind that difficulties with the technical aspects of photography can surface as well. Both aspects—technical and artistic—offer rewards and challenges.

Having reached the end of this book I wish you success in your artistic and your technical journeys in the world of fine art photography. If I can help you make this journey more rewarding, more enriching—better—please don't hesitate to contact me.

# Prologue

Originally from Paris, France, I have lived in the United States since 1986. I live in Arizona and my favorite photographic locations include Navajoland, where I lived for seven years, as well as the rugged canyonland wilderness of Southern Utah and Northern Arizona.

I currently work with a Linhof large format 4 x 5, a medium format Hasselblad with a Phase One P45 digital Back, and a Canon Digital 35mm. The choice of which camera I use is based on my vision for each image.

My goal is to create the most exciting photographs possible. My equipment, be it cameras, software, printers, etc. is chosen for its ability to make this possible. My vision of the landscape is of a place of beauty, a place where we can experience a direct contact with nature, a place where we can find respite from the pressures and stresses of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and a place where I can find inspiration and freedom of expression.

I started studying photography in 1980 in Paris. Prior to that, I studied painting and drawing at the Academie des Beaux Arts, also in Paris. In the United States I received my Bachelor and Master Degrees from Northern Arizona University, in Flagstaff, and then I worked on my PhD at Michigan Technological University, in Houghton, Michigan.

Today, I consider myself not just a practitioner and a professional, but also a student of photography. I write extensively about photography both from a technical and from an artistic perspective. My writings are inspired by my work, my teachings, my research, and my study of photography. My essays are available on my website, [www.beautiful-landscape.com](http://www.beautiful-landscape.com), on many other websites on the Internet,

in print, and in my first book *Mastering Landscape Photography*.

I approach photography as a fine art. I do not approach photography as a form of scientific or forensic recording. Therefore, I feel totally free to interpret my subjects as I like and to modify colors, elements and other aspects of the image. My work is the result of what I capture in the field and what I do to the image in the studio afterwards. I expand on this concept in my essays.

I make my living selling fine art prints and teaching workshops and seminars. I also offer tutorials on CDs and DVDs. All these are available on my website at [www.beautiful-landscape.com](http://www.beautiful-landscape.com). My teaching covers every aspect of photography including fieldwork, studio work, matting, framing, marketing, etc.

I welcome your comments and questions. Feel free to email me at [alain@beautiful-landscape.com](mailto:alain@beautiful-landscape.com). I look forward to hearing from you.

Alain Briot  
Vistancia, Arizona  
June 2009



rockynook

# Mastering Photographic Composition, Creativity, and Personal Style

Alain Briot

Alain Briot states, "The personality of the photographer must be present in the image for an artistic photograph to have value". And in this book he sets out to teach what is essential in achieving this goal.

Following his successful first book, *Mastering Landscape Photography*, Briot goes beyond the conventional rules of composition and takes on a fresh, new approach to teaching the art of photography. Based on his personal experiences as an artist, teacher, and photographer, he opens new doors to the reader—doors leading to new ways of seeing and composing images.

Briot approaches fine art photography as being a combination of art and technique, and in this book he addresses both. On the artistic side, Briot introduces artistic concepts that have been rarely, if ever, associated with photography. On

the technical side, he presents numerous tools that can help you learn to create better photographs and he provides technical solutions to common photographic problems.

The author practices photography as a fine art. What matters most to him is how photography can be used to express feelings and emotions. For Briot, a good photograph must be both artistically inspired and technically excellent. To have just one of these two elements is not enough for a fine art photograph to be successful.

Topics include:

- How to compose with color, with black and white, and with light
- Why you need to consider your audience while composing a photograph
- Why you should recreate the emotions you felt when you captured your photographs