Aspects of Composition

Mike Farley LRPS

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A Presentation in Three Parts

- Introduction
- Perception
- Image

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"... how you build a picture, what a picture consists of, how the shapes are related to each other, how spaces are filled, how the whole thing must have a kind of unity."

Paul Strand

American photographer and film maker

1890 - 1976

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What Judges Say

- “On a third”
- “Lead the eye into the image”
- “Diagonals”
- “Watch the edges for distracting highlights”
- “Red attracts the eye”
- “Triangles”
- “Check the background”

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“I see the thing. I feel thing. I make the thing.”

Andre Kertesz

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"If you, unknowing, are able to create masterpieces in colour, then unknowledge is your way. But if you are unable to create masterpieces in colour out of your unknowledge, then you ought to look for knowledge."

Johannes Itten

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Art and Photography

- Drawing or painting takes time
- Photography usually occurs in an instant
- Artists can adjust their composition
- Photography has to deal with the vernacular

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“But O, photography! as no art is,
Faithful and disappointing!”

Philip Larkin

"Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album”
1953 poem

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Art and Photography

- Painters and photographers face a common problem
- How to represent three dimensions on two?
- Many artistic composition solutions apply equally to photography

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“Photography has not changed since its origin except in its technical aspects which for me are not a major concern.”

Henri Cartier-Bresson

“I trust that the creative eye will continue to function, whatever the technological innovations may develop.”

Ansel Adams, 1983

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Pavement Artists

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Pavement Artists

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Perception

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Perception – Ganzfeld

- Imagine a scene without a visual point of reference, e.g. thick fog
- The observer becomes disorientated
- This is a homogenous visual field or Ganzfeld
- The mind requires a heterogeneous visual field
- Most scenes have a pair of distinguishable attributes – Figure and Ground

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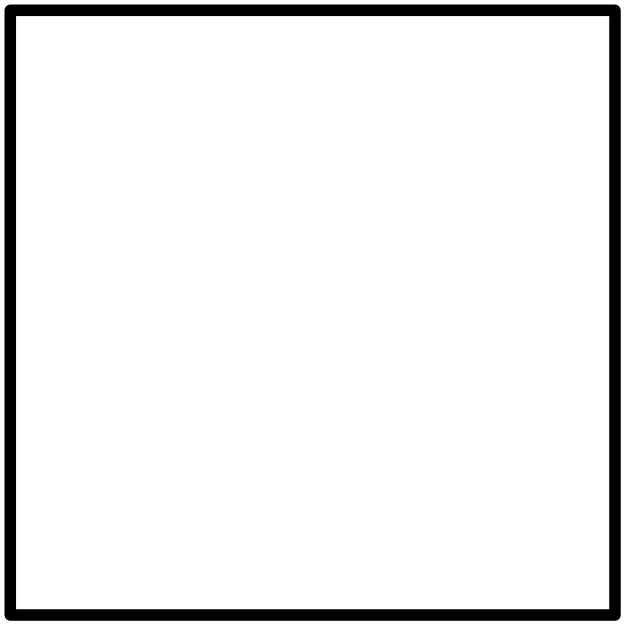
Perception: Figure – Ground



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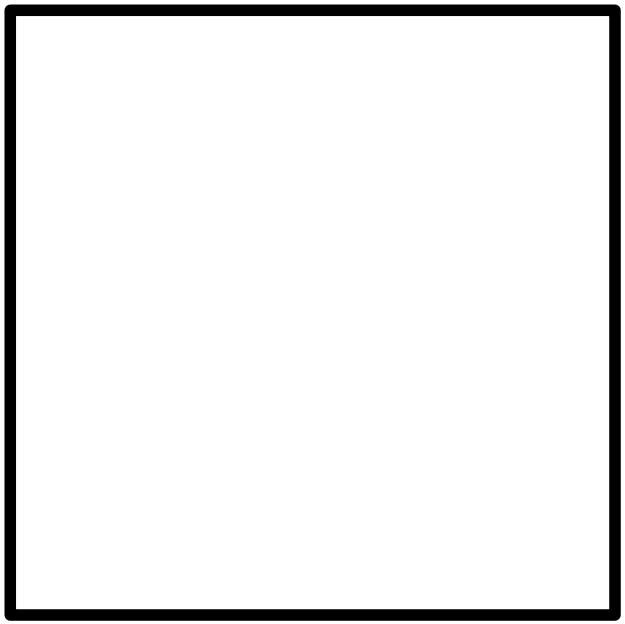
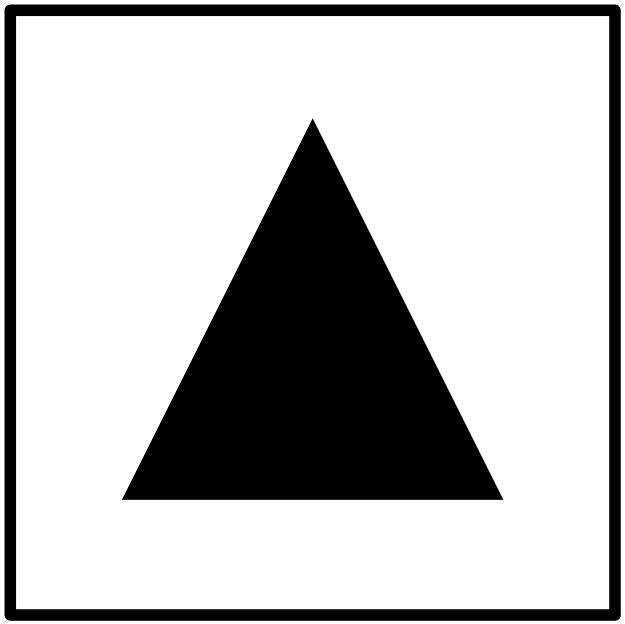
Perception: Figure – Ground





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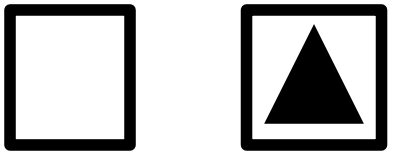
Perception: Figure – Ground

- Figure appears closer to the observer than Ground
- They cannot be seen simultaneously, only sequentially
- Figure normally occupies a smaller area
- Figure has a contour, ground does not
- The mind determines what is figure and what is ground according to its own priorities
- Distinction between figure and ground becomes more obvious in a two dimensional image
- Hence lampposts growing out of people's heads!



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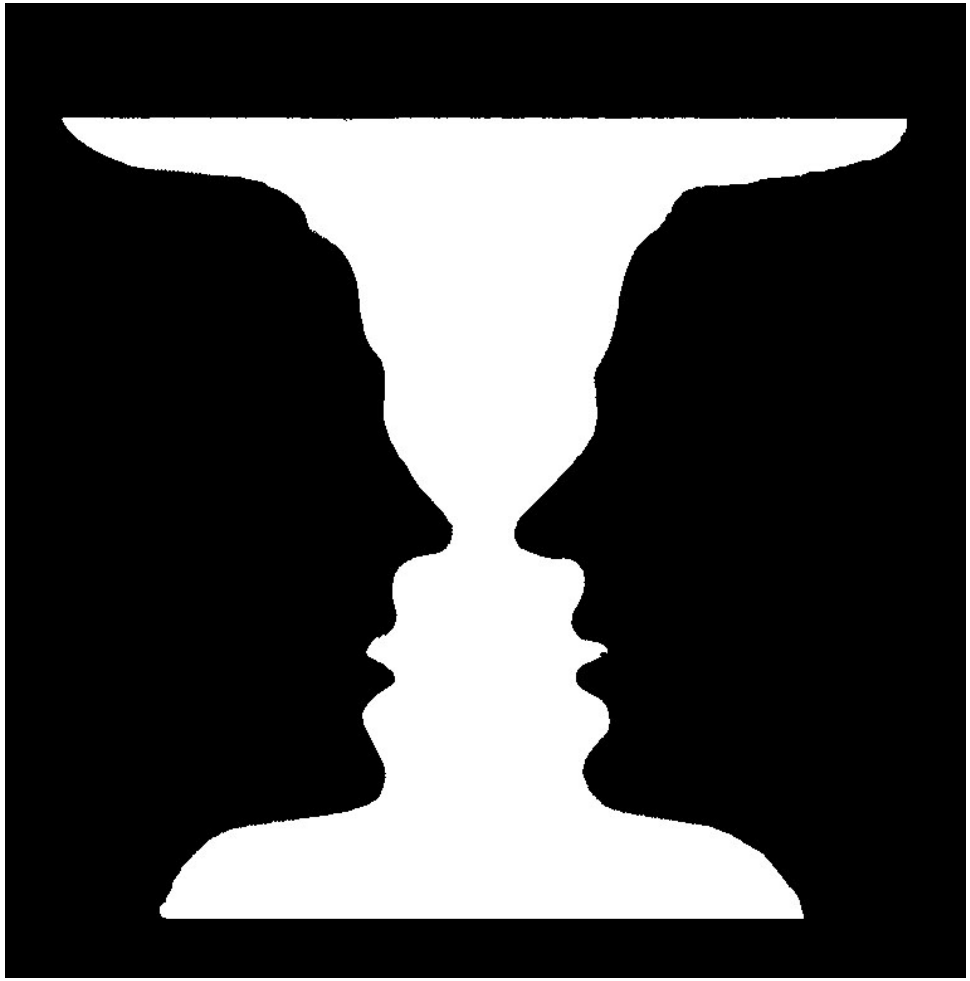
Perception: Figure – Ground



Rubin's Goblet

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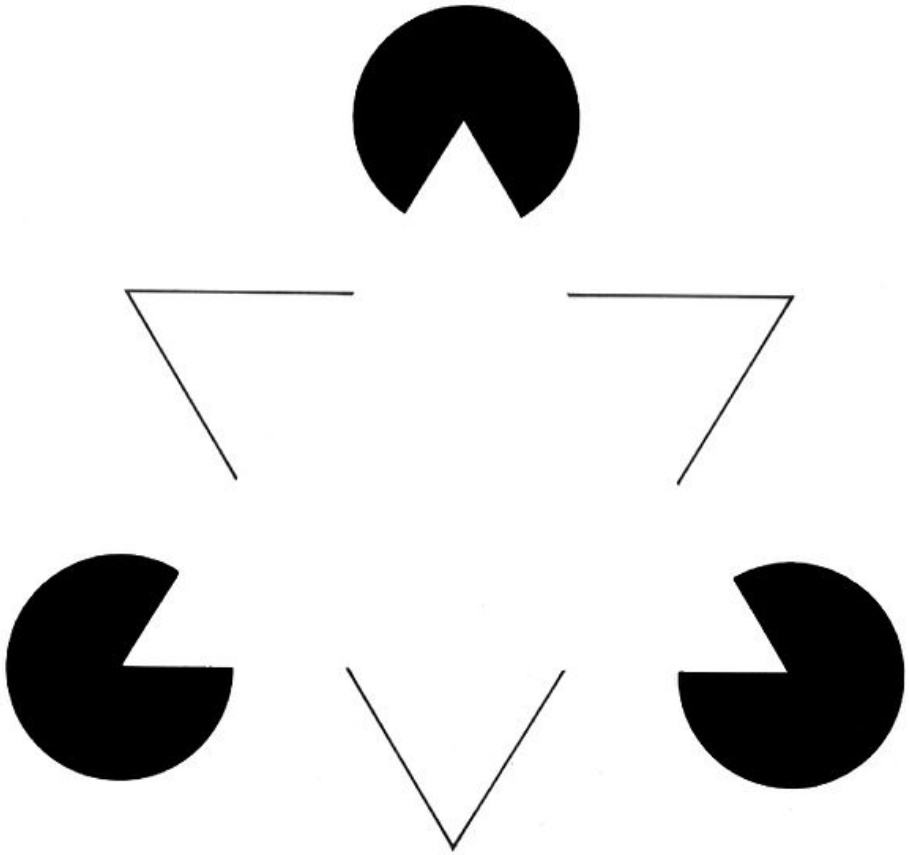
Perception – Kanisza's Triangle



How many triangles are in this image?

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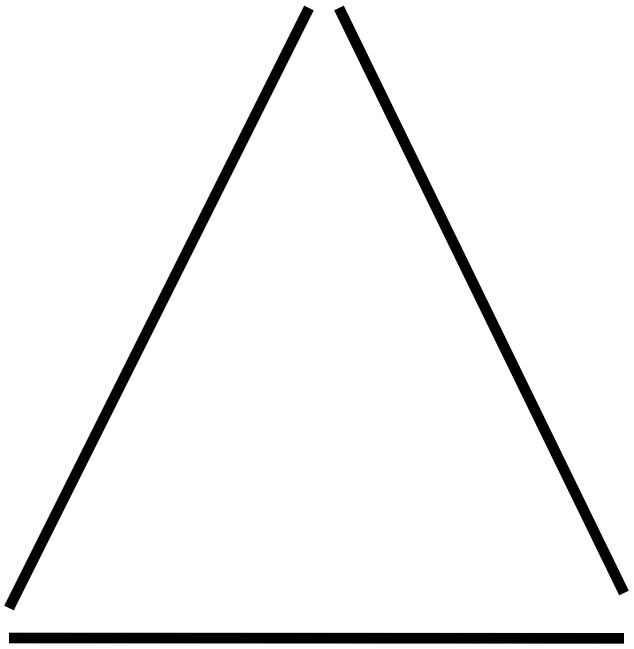
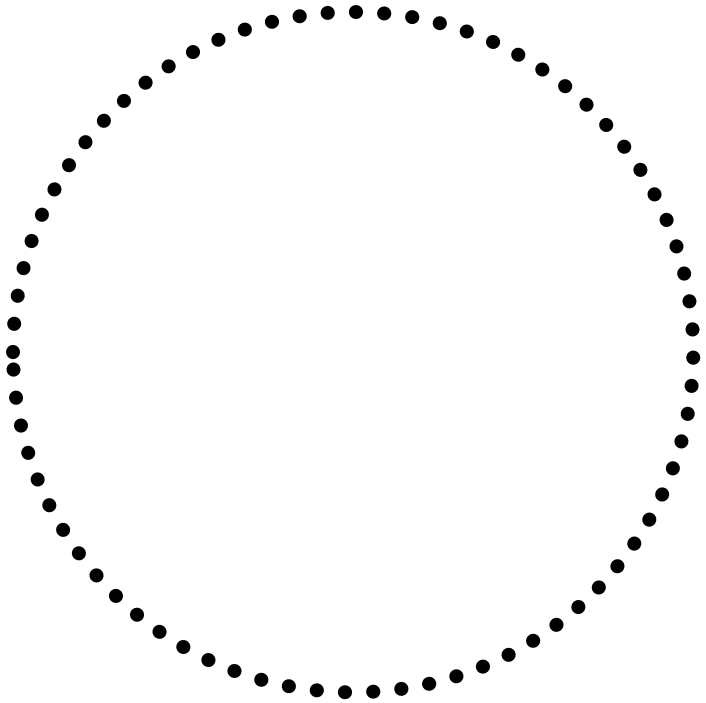
Perception – Closure





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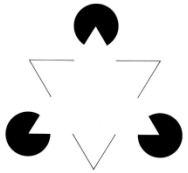
Perception – Closure

- Nearly complete and familiar shapes tend to be seen as complete
- Proximity and similarity facilitate a visual equilibrium – a balance or closure
- Applies to both sight and sound



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Perception

"The hardest thing to see is what is in front of your eyes."

Johann W. Goethe

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Perception – Gestalt

- Gestalt has no equivalent meaning in English
- Based on early 20th century German and Austrian psychology research
- Explains how the mind perceives
- Gestalt principles and laws of organisation have relevance to photography
- One example is closure
- An image is more than the sum of its parts
- Some other principles addressed in the talk

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“Actual vision constitutes a sampling, as though only certain points of the perceived figure were fixated while others were neglected.”

Jean Piaget

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Image

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Filling the Frame

- The image requires a principal subject
- How much information does the viewer need?
- Relationship between subject and surroundings?
- Is scale important?
- Impact on viewer
- Shape of subject in relationship to format
- Eyes need space to “see” into
- Bright areas at the edge of the frame distract

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Composition – Golden Ratio

- Golden section is1:1.618033989
- Similar to 3:2 for 35 mm (36 x 24) and APS-C
- Used to provide dynamic division
- Does not need to be applied precisely
- Basis for the “rule of thirds”
- Objects on a third or intersection provide a harmonious balance
- Other divisions are possible, e.g. Golden Third

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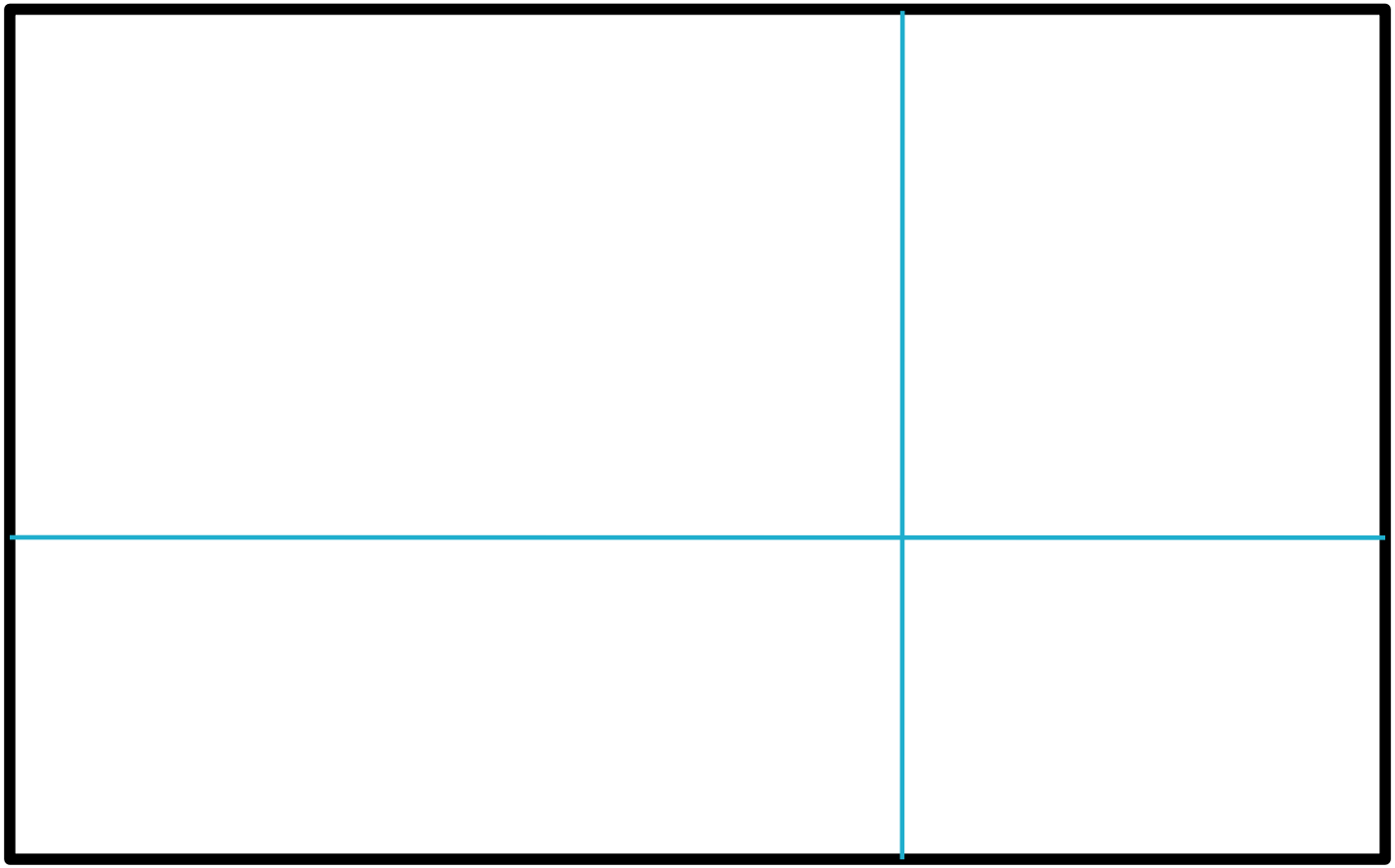
Composition – Geometrical Division



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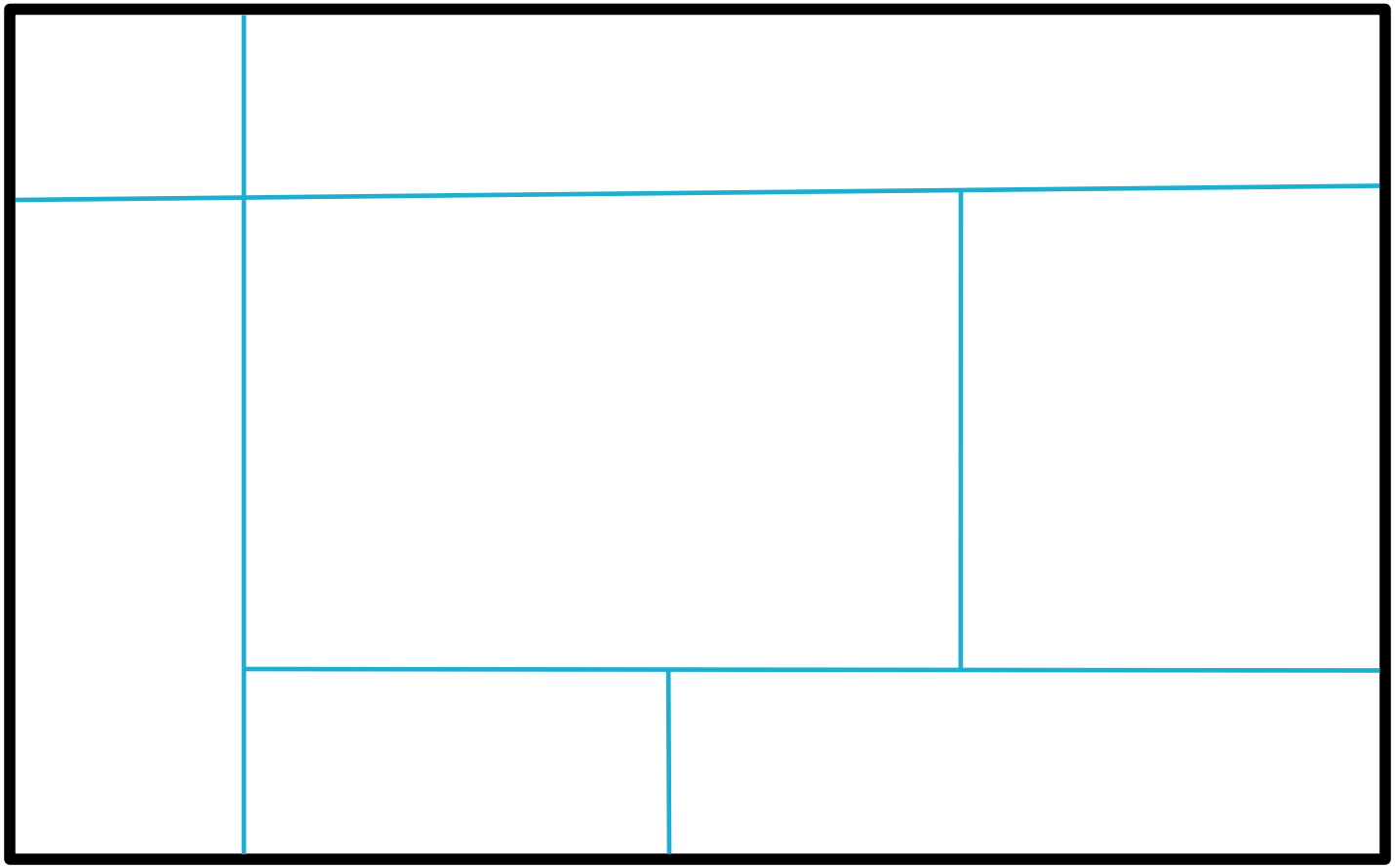
Composition – Fibonacci Divisions



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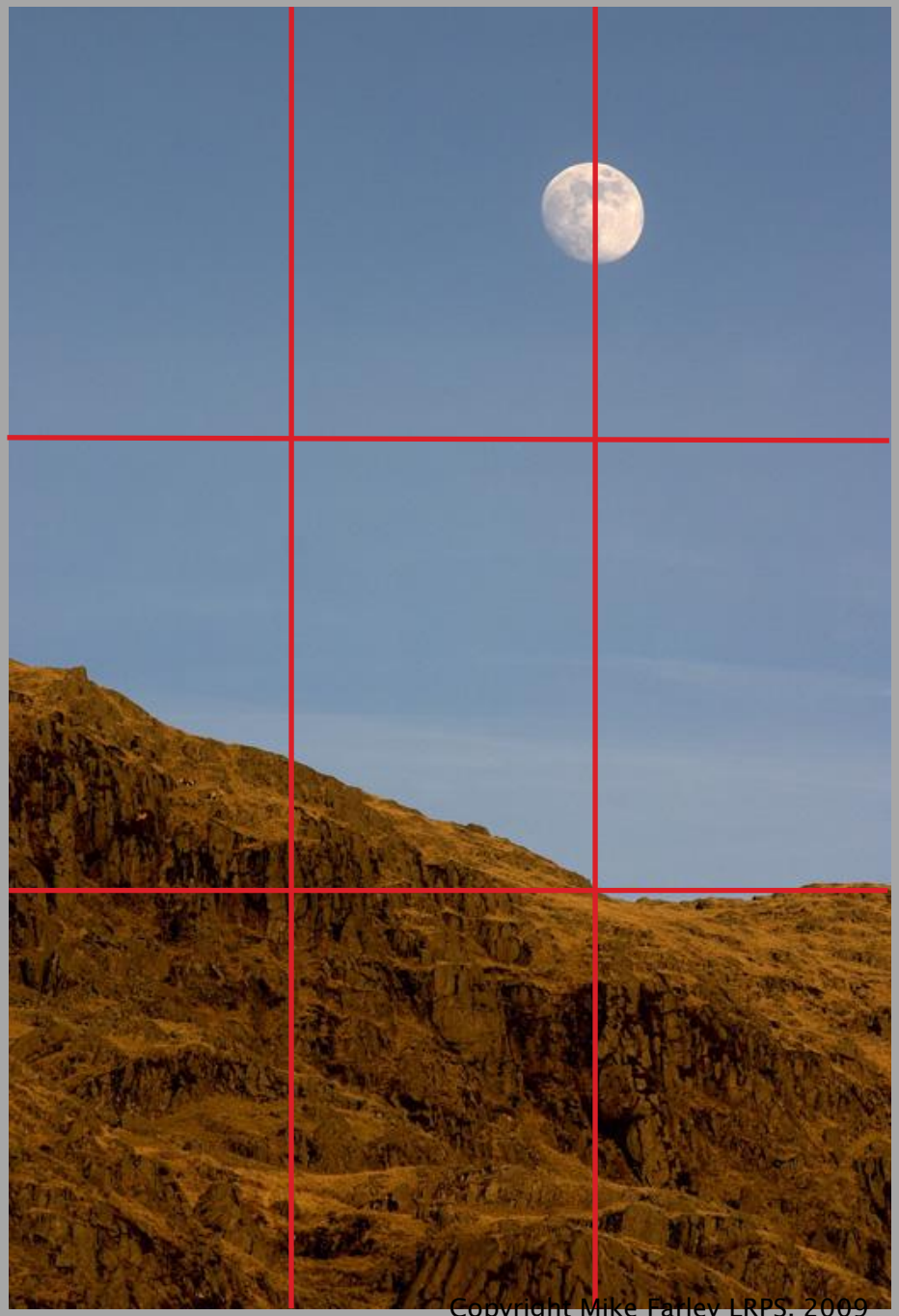

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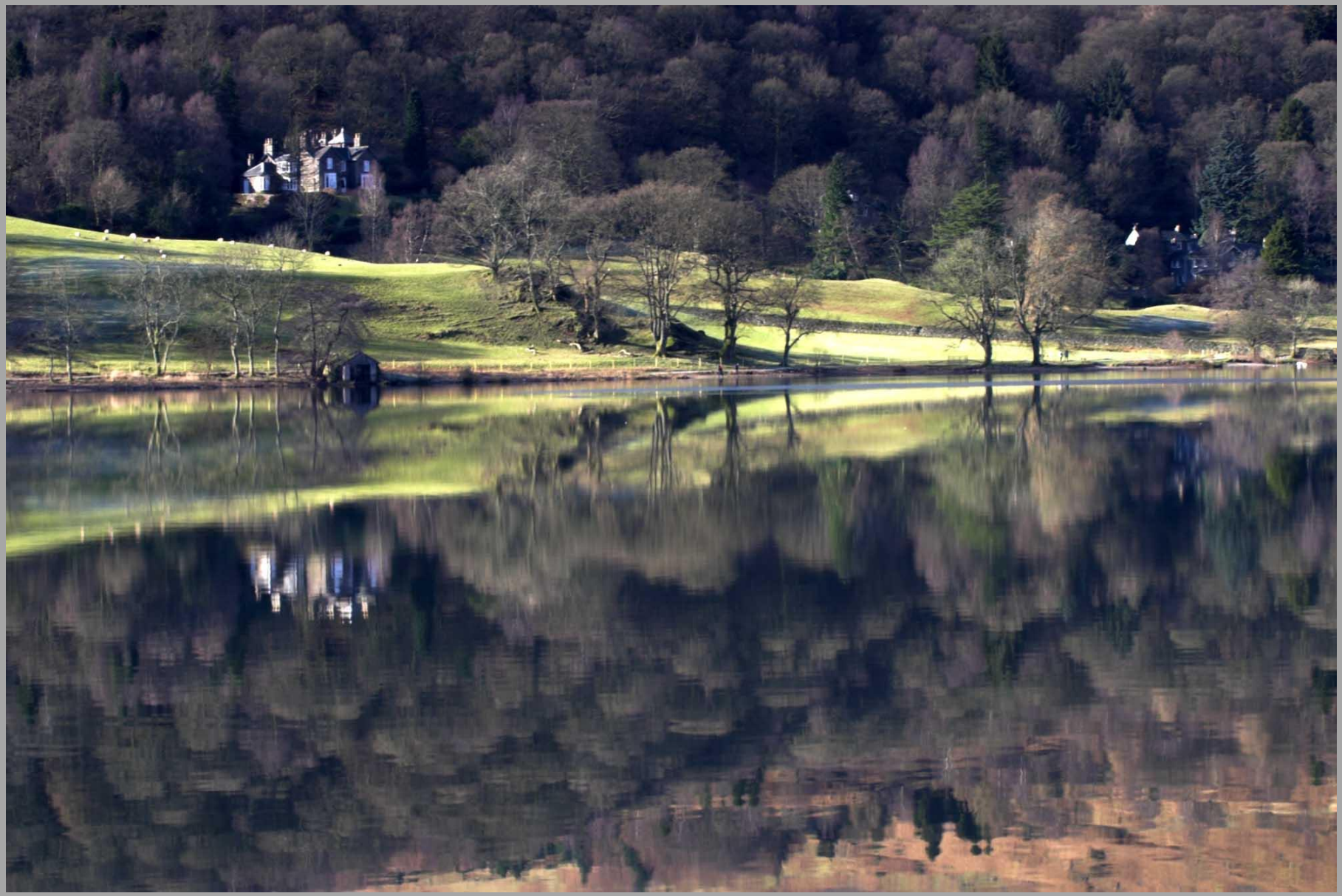

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Composition – Placement

- A variation on the Rule of Thirds
- Placing a strong element in a small section weights the image
- In the lower section for best effect
- Side weighting also works
- Top weighting is harder to pull off

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Composition – Contrast

- German design theory in the 1920s, principally the Bauhaus
- Johannes Itten's theory of composition based on contrasts
- Light / dark
- Shapes
- Colours
- Sensations

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Composition – Itten's Contrasts

Point / line	Plane / volume	Large / small
High / low	Long / short	Broad / narrow
Thick / thin	Light / dark	Black / white
Much / little	Straight / curved	Pointed / blunt
Horizontal / vertical	Diagonal / circular	Area / line
Area / body	Line / body	Smooth / rough
Hard / soft	Still / moving	Light / heavy
Transparent / opaque	Continuous / intermittent	Liquid / solid
Sweet / sour	Strong / weak	Loud / soft

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Hard / soft	Still / moving	Light / heavy
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Sweet / sour	Strong / weak	Loud / soft

Sharp / blurred could be added as a photographic contrast

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“Nothing is anything by itself, only in relation to other things.”

Robert Levers

“A curve does not exist in its full power until contrasted with a straight line.”

Robert Henri

“I organize the opposition between colours, lines and curves. I set curves against straight lines, patches of colour against plastic forms, pure colours against subtly nuanced shades of grey.”

Fernand Leger

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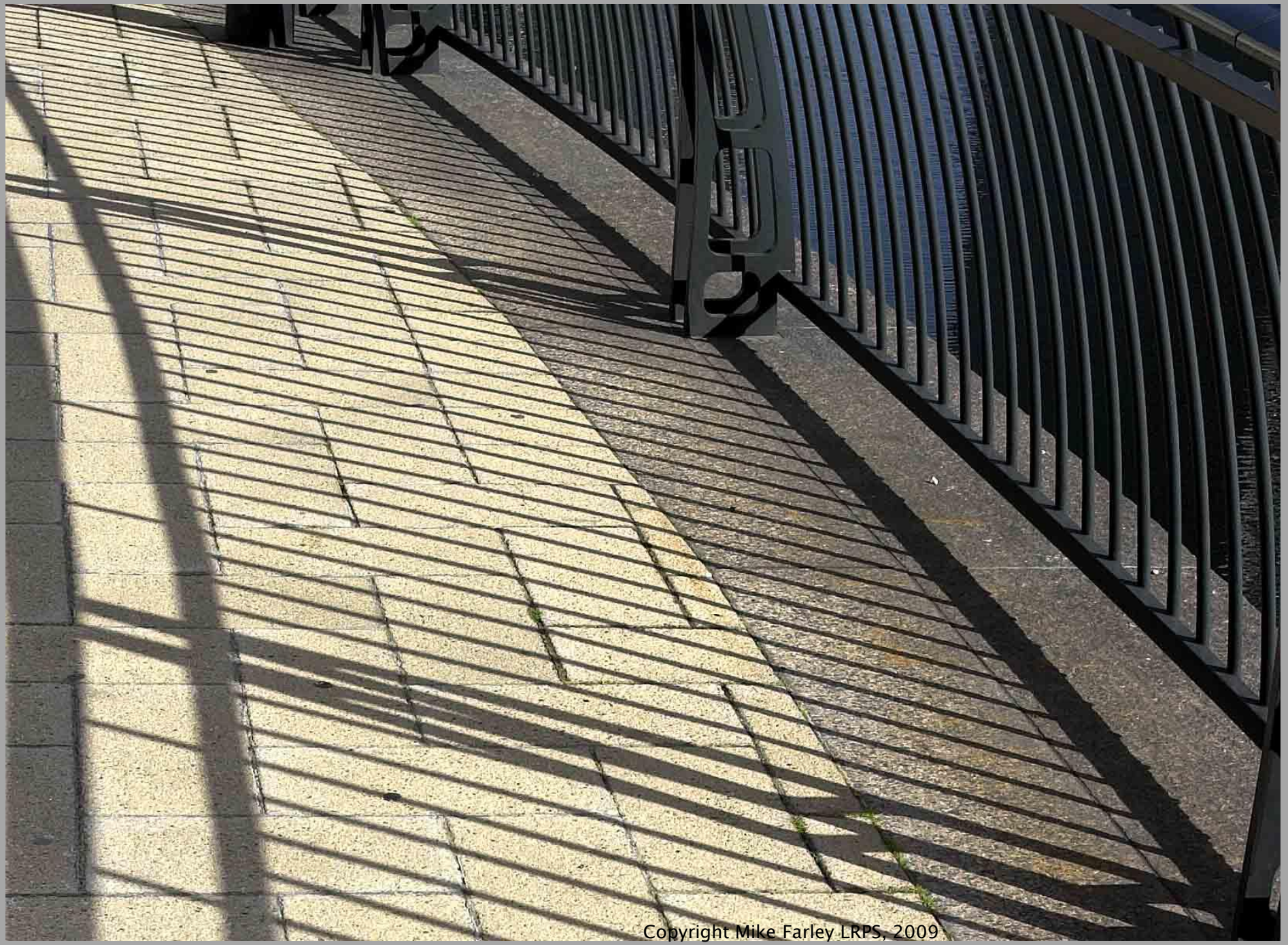
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Depth and Perspective

- Aids visual acceptance of 2-D image
- Use foreground interest
- Direct lighting also enhances
- Wide angle lens close to nearest part of scene
- Warm hue subject, cool hue background
- Familiar sized objects at different distances
- Out of focus background

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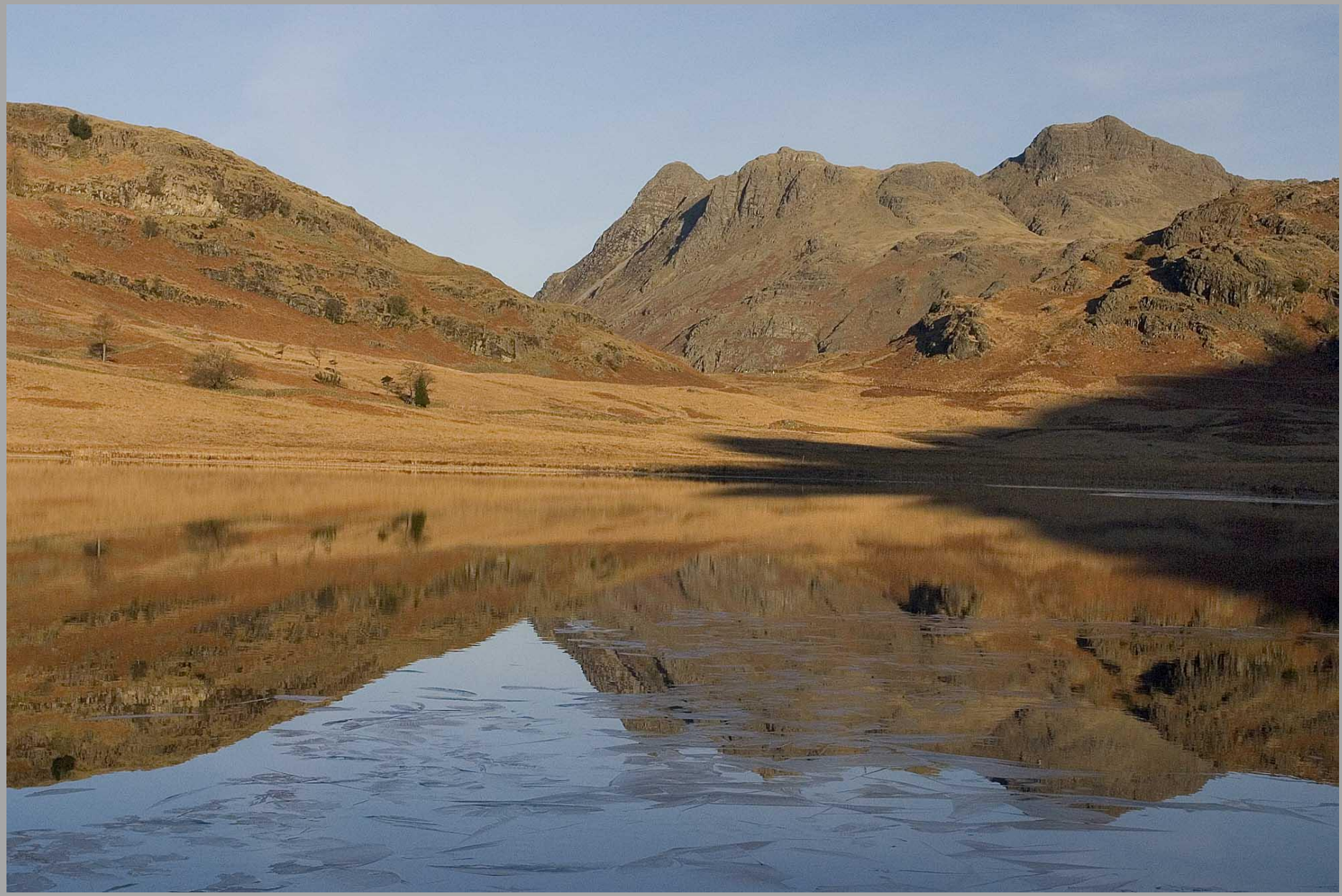

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The ancient Greeks and Romans made vertical columns such as those found in temples wider at the top than at the bottom to make them look parallel from ground level.

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Frames Within Frames

- Enhances depth and perspective
- Creates a boundary
- Provides context
- Draws the eye to the subject
- Use with care – avoid the cliché

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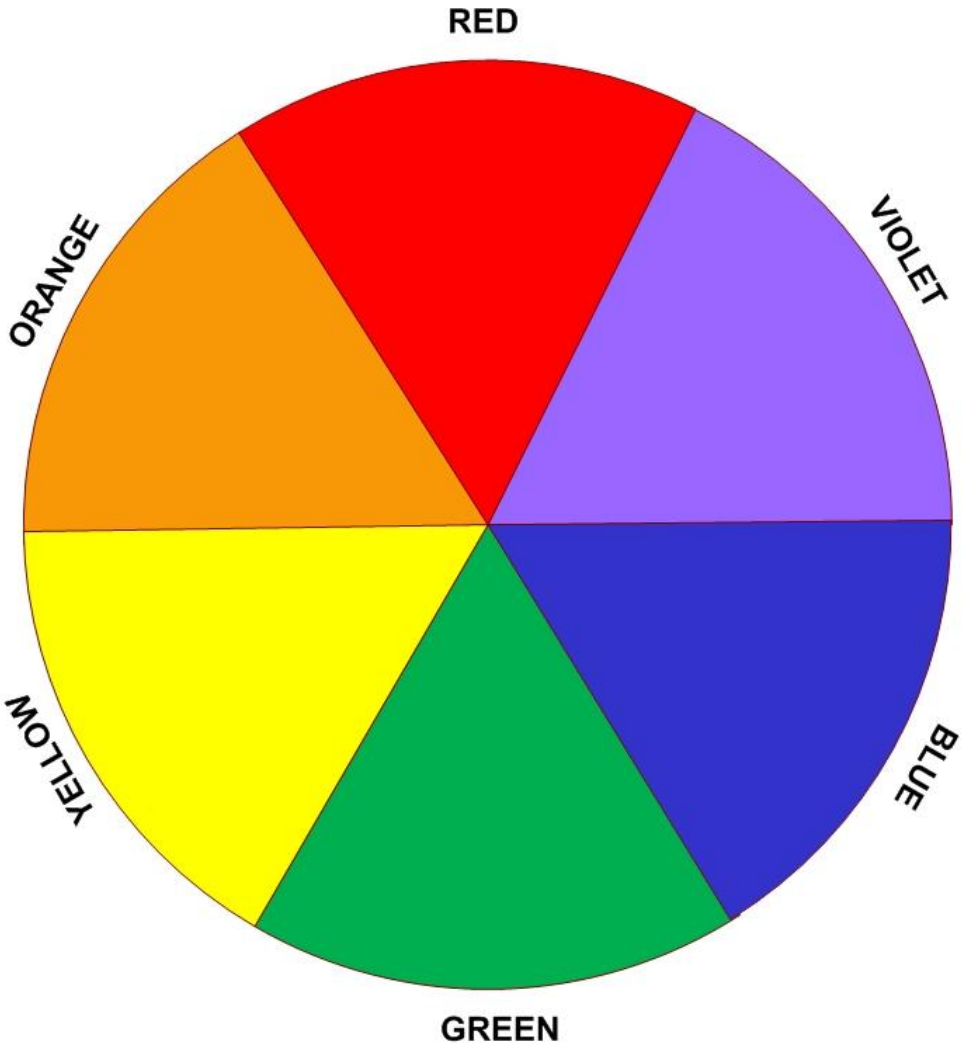
Composition – Colour Wheel

WARM



COOL

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Composition – Colour Wheel

- Primary colours – Red, Yellow and Blue
- Secondary colours created from the primaries
- All the other many hues are in between!
- Opposite colours are complementary
- Adjacent colours are harmonising
- Contrasting complementary colours for impact
- Adjacent colours for a gentle and restful image
- Warm tones grab the eye, cool tones don't
- A little bit of red goes a long way
- Warm tones morning/evening, cool midday

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"Reds, yellows and oranges conjure up sunlight and fire, while the blues and blue-greens evoke snow and ice, sea, sky and moonlight."

Anonymous

"All colours will agree in the dark."

Francis Bacon

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Symmetry and Asymmetry

- Strong balance of elements results in symmetry
- Asymmetry implies strong elemental discord
- Symmetric composition will allow the viewer to wander through the image
- Asymmetric composition tends to chaos and is harder to accomplish successfully
- Elements can be shapes, colours or edges

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“Simplicity of shape, especially symmetry, predisposes an area to function as figure.”

“A vertical axis produces more compelling visual symmetry than a horizontal one.”

Richard Arnheim

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Diagonal Lines

- More dynamic than horizontal or vertical lines
- Converging diagonals can enhance perspective
- Parallel diagonals reinforce each other
- Form a stronger angle with longest edge of frame for best effect
- Maximum 45 degrees to longest edge
- Variety of diagonals can give greatest energy
- Does not have to be a physical line – closure

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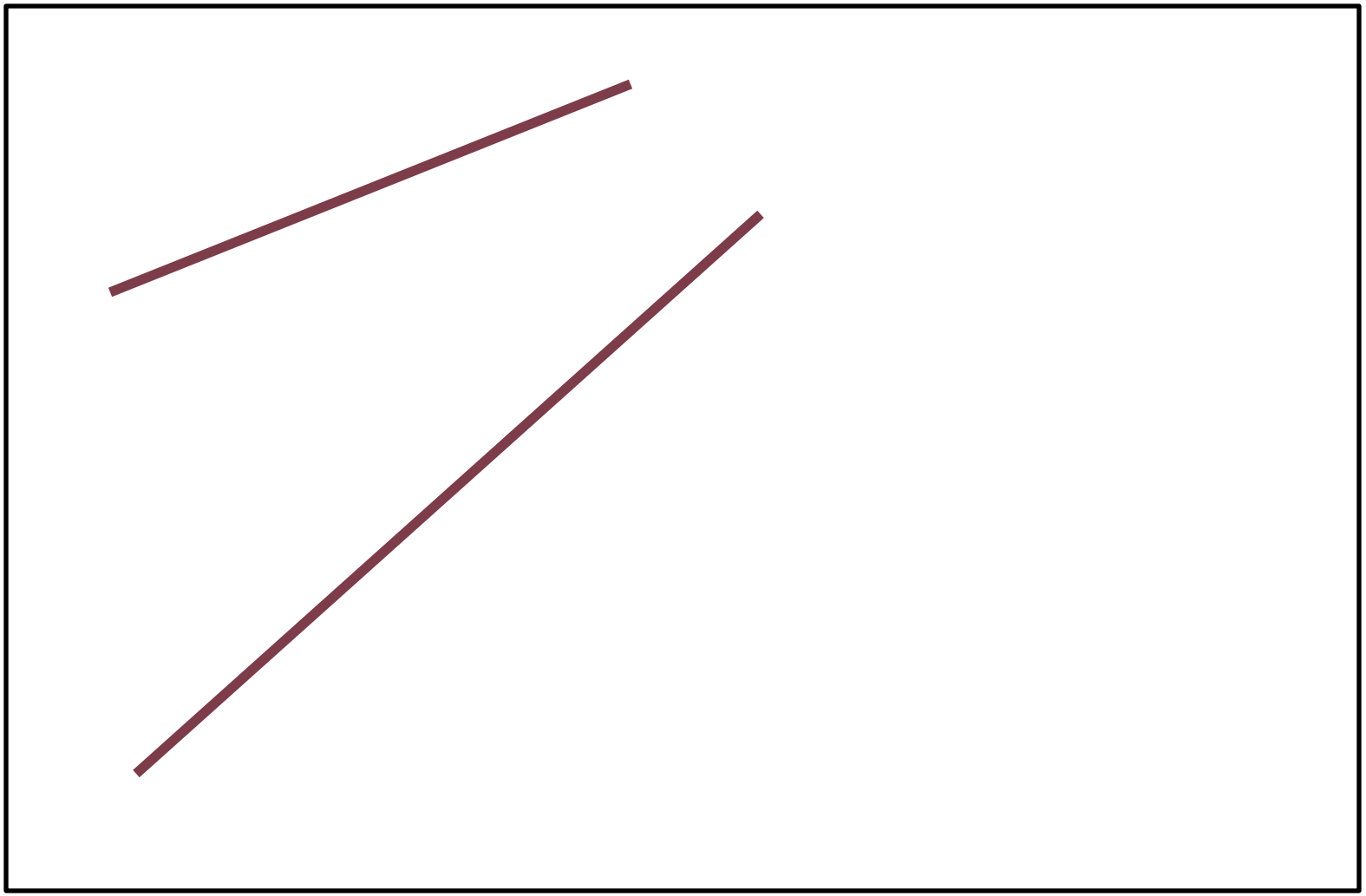
Diagonal Dynamics



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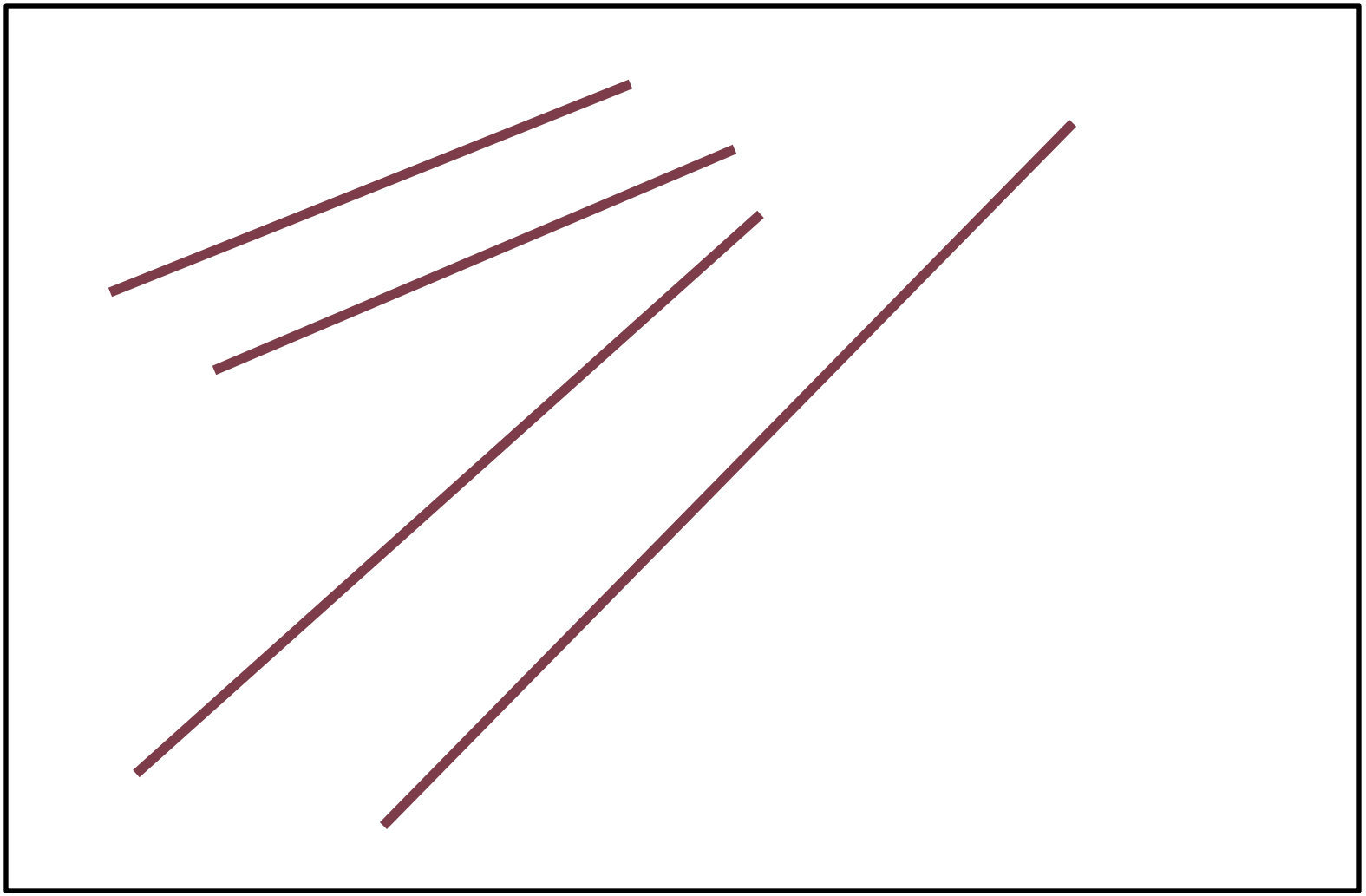
Diagonal Dynamics



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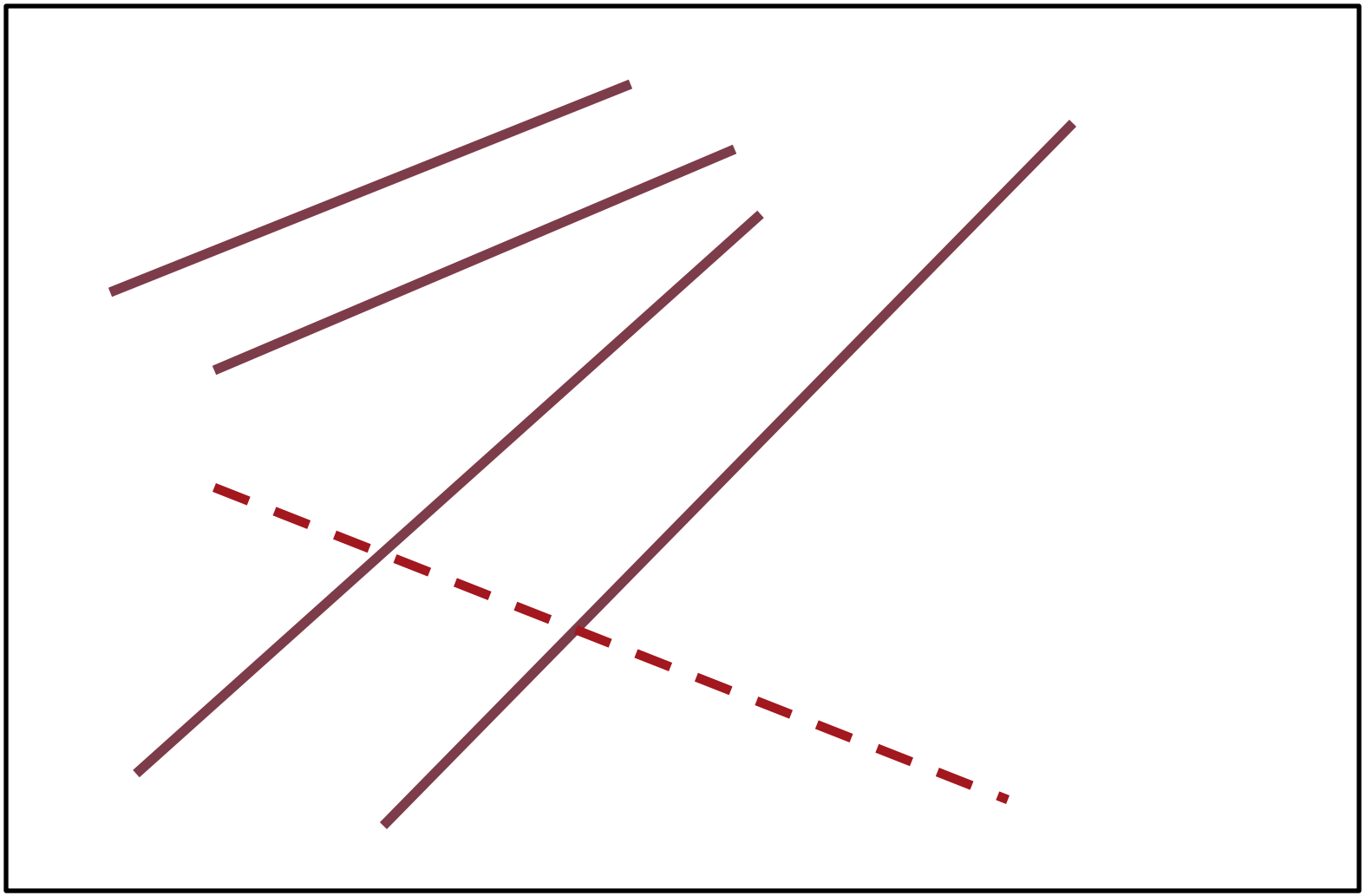
Diagonal Dynamics



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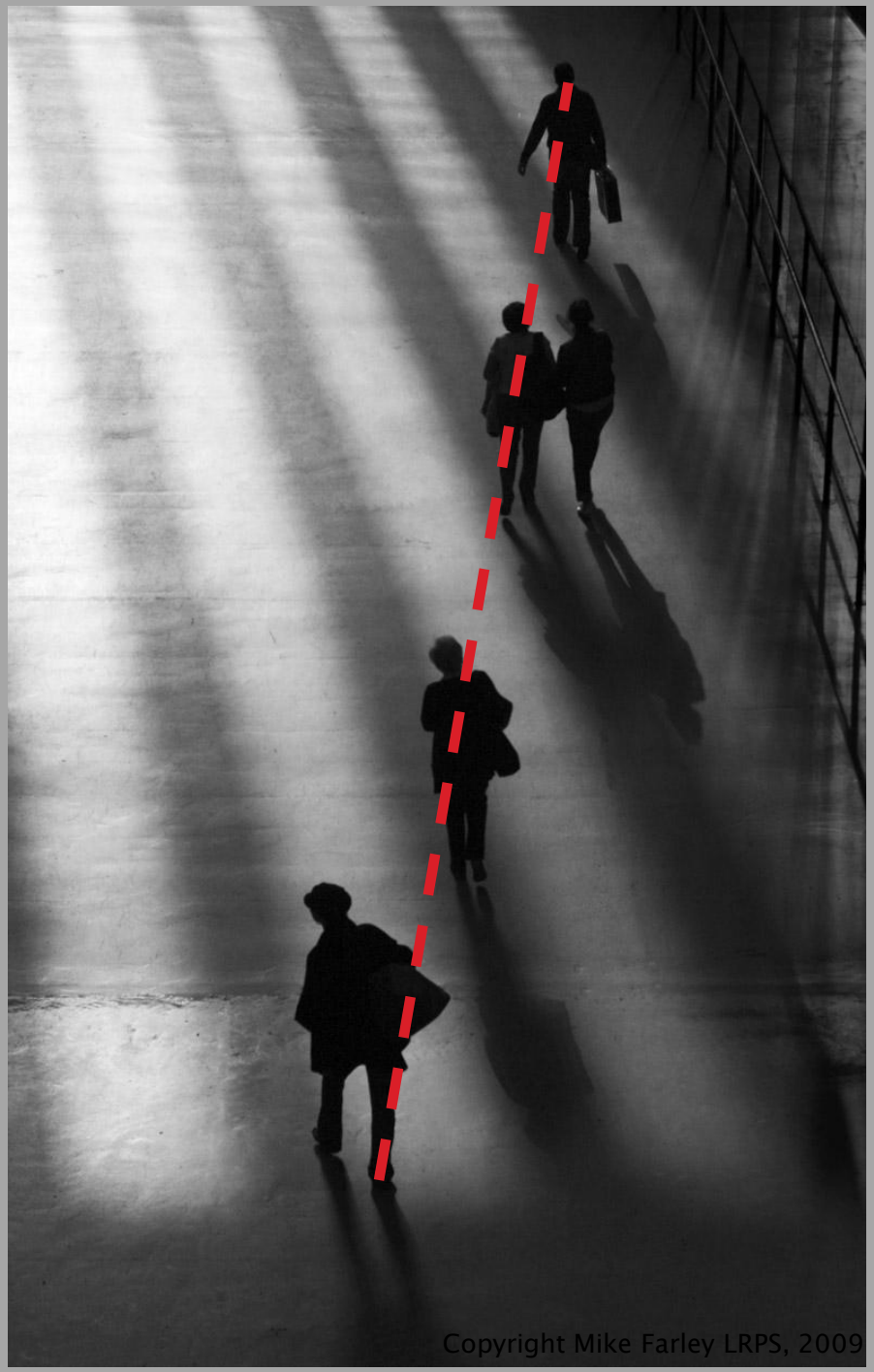
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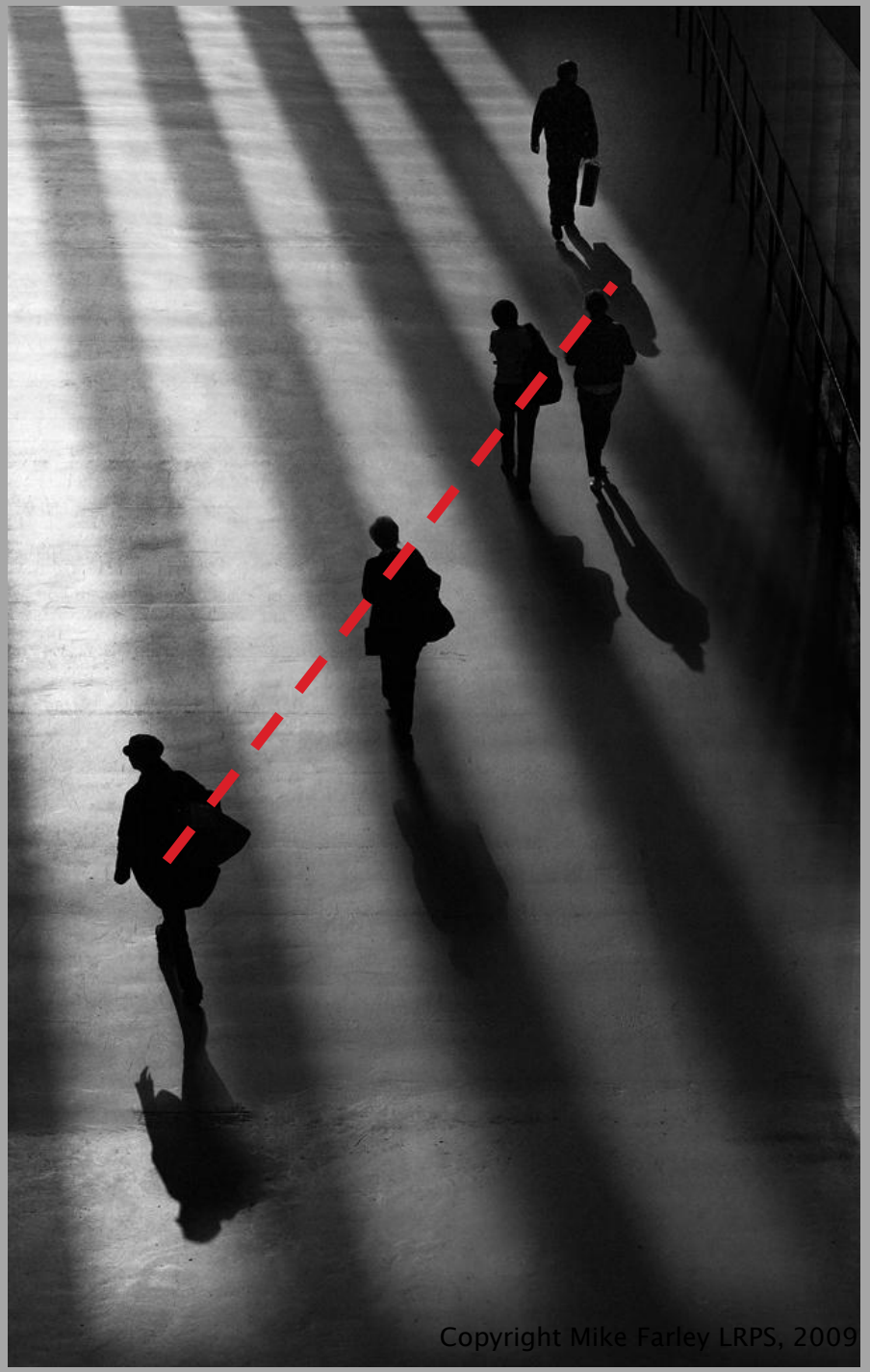
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Triangles

- Form a strong shape
- Implicit joining of three points of interest
- Two physical sides, assume third – closure again!
- Apex at top is most stable configuration
- Apex at bottom – introduces tension
- Brings order to the image

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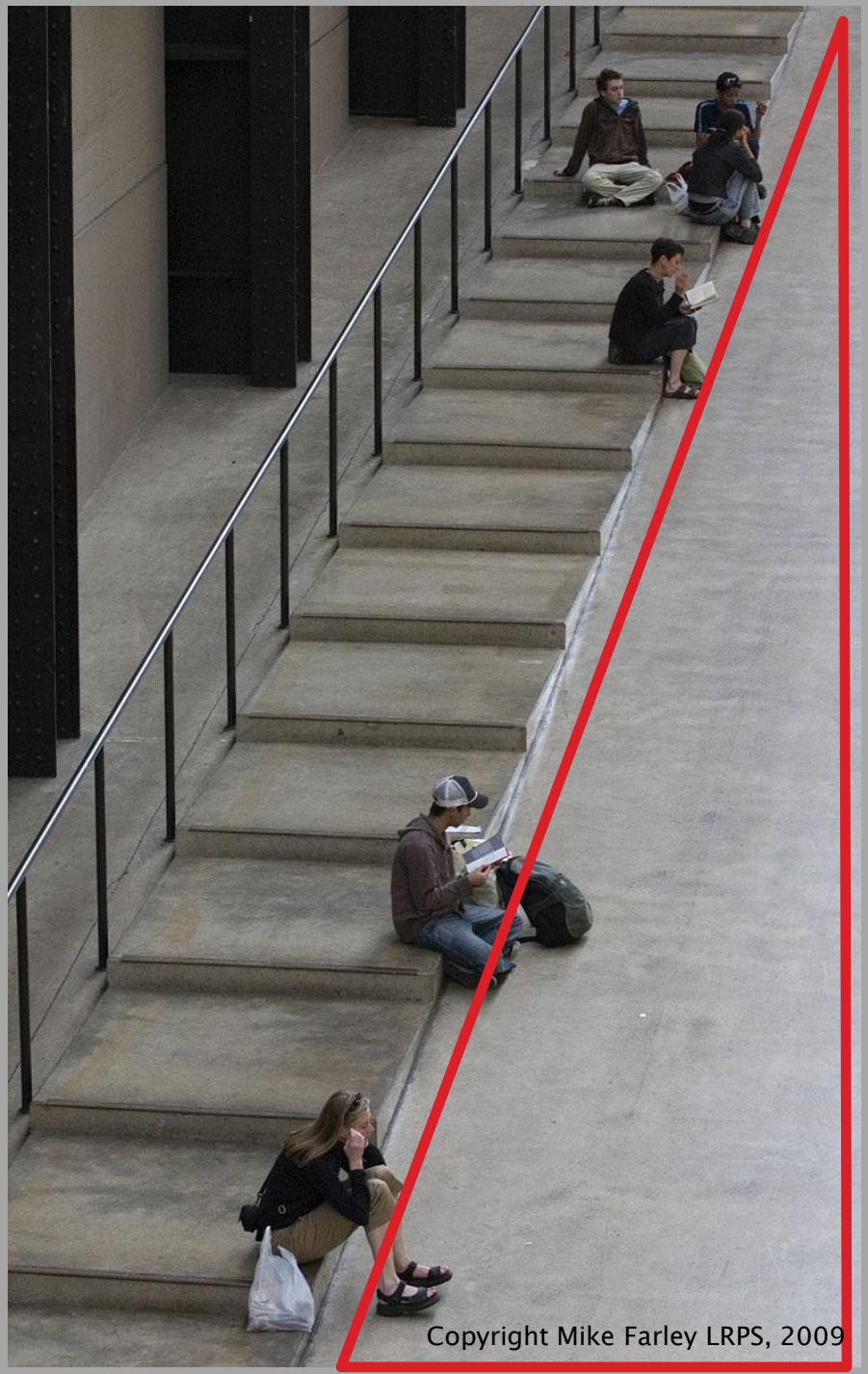
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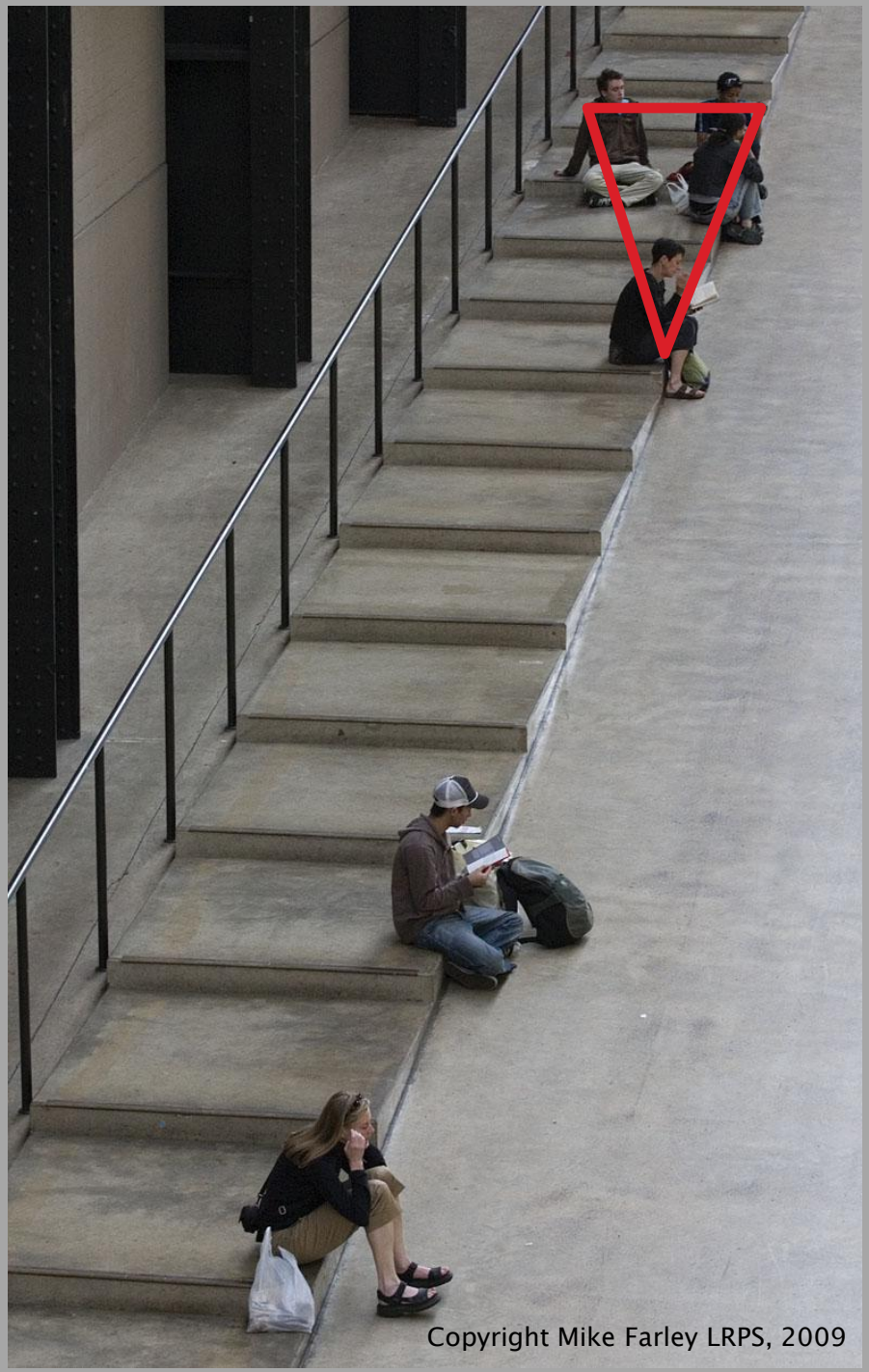
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Finally

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“There is no ‘must’ in art, because art is free.”

Wassily Kandinsky

“There is an old standard saying about the arts. ‘You need to learn all the rules and then forget them.’”

Joseph Campbell

“Trifles make perfection and perfection is no trifle.”

Michelangelo

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