

Shape it Up!

By Chuck Palmer

This is the fifth article in a series on Photography Composition Tools and Concepts. In previous articles we discussed the use of lines, frames, negative space, and the rule of thirds. Let's continue by exploring another important concept to consider for successful photography. . . shapes. Whether we are aware of it or not, shape is often the first thing that captures our attention when we are compelled to capture a scene. Almost everything we photograph has shape although we may take it for granted. We probably are not often composing our image with shape in mind. Many authors discuss the importance and complexity of shape in art and photography. However, at the risk of oversimplifying this complex compositional concept, let's break down shape into a few easy to understand parts so we can practice thinking about shapes when we compose our remarkable images.

What is Shape?

A shape in a photograph is a two-dimensional quality of an element captured. A shape does not have any appearance of depth. Often either front or back lighting is defining shape in a photograph. The key word here is two-dimensional. Form is the term we would use to describe an element's third dimension of depth. Typically forms appear to have depth through lighting that creates shadows. When we discuss shape, we are focused on the outline an element creates within our image. This outline is created by light, color, and/or textures. These outlines of contrast form lines which can impact the mood and feeling of an image as we discussed in a previous article.

The simplest example of the concept of shape in photography may be the silhouette. Photographing an object in front of a bright background such as a sunrise or brightly lit sky compels a viewer to focus only on the shape (outline) of the subject.



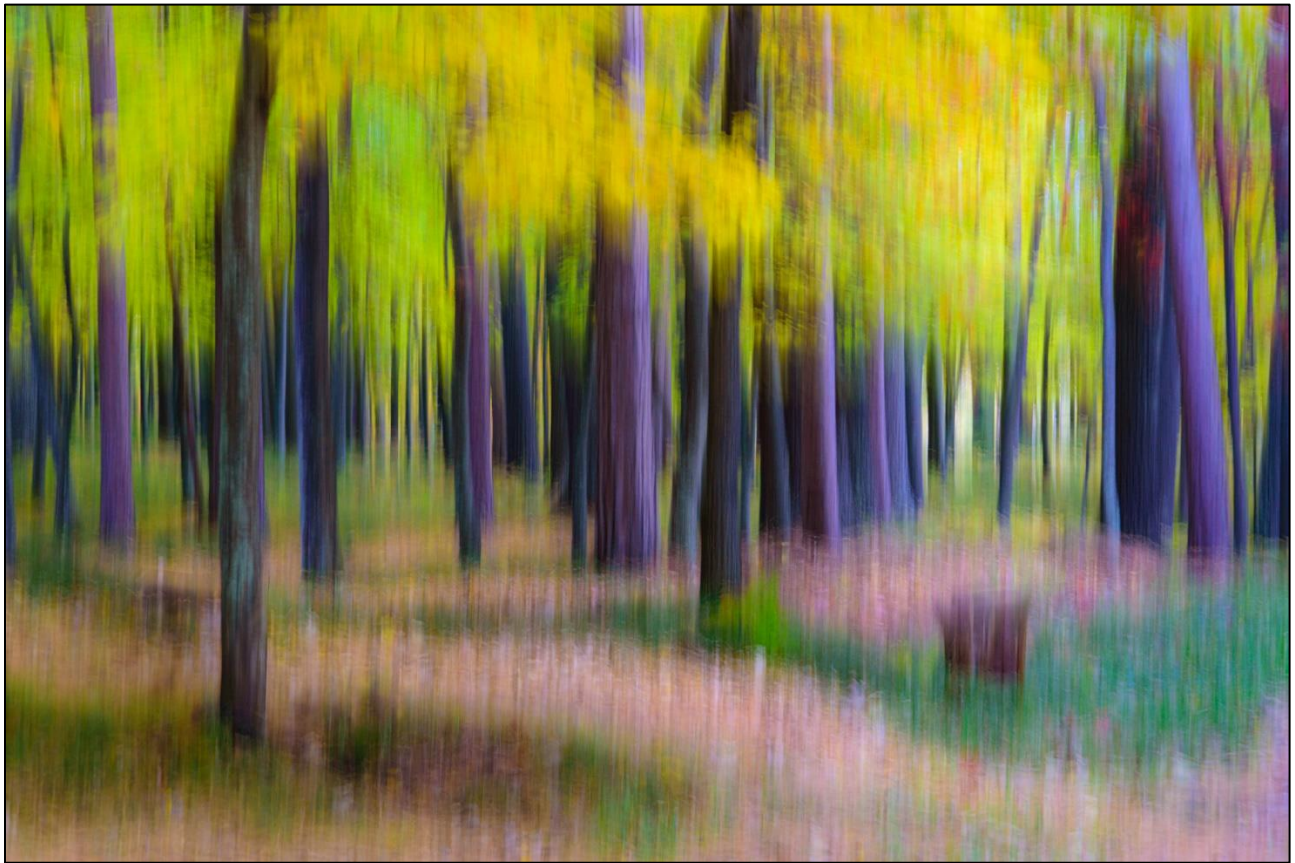
Shapes can be captured as positive shapes or negative shapes in an image. Positive shapes are created by capturing the outlines of physical subjects (objects) in the scene. A bird in the sky is a positive shape. Negative shapes are created by the outlines of the space surrounding our subject (object) in our image. The space surrounding the bird in the sky forms a negative shape. A negative shape is simply a design element created by the outlines that surround objects in our image.

Before we go on, it should be noted that three-dimensional objects (form) in our photography can display a clear outline. Therefore, our photos almost always contain one or more shapes. Shapes can be very beneficial in telling our story because they convey a significant amount of information to our viewers. Object identity, size, weight, proportions, interrelationships, and even emotions are all meaningful to photo viewers and can be conveyed by the shapes identified. This enables us an opportunity to create great images if we are aware of the ways we can incorporate shapes into our images. So, let's explore some ideas to use shape more thoughtfully and purposefully in our images.

Deliberate Exclusion – As we all know, shape often conveys the identity of a photographed object. As in the example above, a silhouette of a bicycle without fail conveys the existence of a bicycle. When photographing familiar shapes, an easy way to add visual interest is to deliberately exclude some or most of the object's shape from our viewer. This can be done by either cropping part of the object outside the edge of the image frame, or by partially obstructing the subject behind other elements within our composition. Either way, we are revealing only parts of our subject by altering its shape, giving our viewers the task of completing the shape in their mind's eye.



Selective Focus – The visual importance and attention-getting power of a subject in our photography is directly associated to how sharply focused the subject is within the frame. However, familiar shapes and subjects blurred or capturing them out of focus forces our viewers away from all the details while transferring attention to the shapes in the image to tell our story. We transform our subject from a literal representation to an abstract shape of the subject that once again engages our viewer's imagination to fill in the blanks.



Creative Lighting – Similar to selective focus, increasing or reducing the amount of light falling on our subject can transform it from a detailed representation to a more abstract but often recognizable shape. The most common is a basic silhouette where strong background light eliminates all subject detail. The key is to maintain outline definition by effectively separating our subject from its background.



Shadows – Much like creating a silhouette, capturing the shadow cast by one of more objects is a very easy way to transform a detailed subject into a simple yet pleasing shape. Capturing well-defined shadows are very easy in urban landscapes, beaches, and on other flat surfaces but a little harder to find in nature.



Manipulating Scale – One primary piece of information a shape can convey is size and scale. By adjusting our perspective and/or position relative to our subject, we can make something big look small, or we can control the amount of visual attention it commands in our composition. Since we are conveying scale with a two-dimensional shape of a three-dimensional world, including a reference shape effectively conveys scale in our image. Our reference object takes on great importance in conveying our primary subject's size and its visual weight in the image.



Focal Length Alteration – To emphasize shape in our composition, we can use extreme focal lengths to accentuate an object's outline and convey it in a unique way. Using a telephoto lens to compress distant objects effectively flattening them in the final image often creates outlines of distant subjects. Additionally, getting up very close with a wide-angle lens can distort an object's outline creating a fresh perspective to what would otherwise be a boring subject.



Metaphorical Representation – One of the most impactful ways to harness the power of shape, and maybe the most challenging is through metaphorical representation. This is where we make one object look like something else. A great example is capturing an image of an object that seems to take on human form.



Implied Shape – We can imply a shape in our photo without it being physically present. By playing with the composition of objects within negative space, we can create an implied shape. A good example of an implied shape we probably see many times on social media or advertisements is the creating of love heart shapes with fingers and thumbs. Below is another example with negative space forming a unique shape.



We've reviewed the compositional concept of shape, how they may be captured, and several ideas we might consider incorporating them in our photo. Being aware of the shapes we include in our compositions and the information shapes convey to our viewers enables us the opportunity to turn great photos into remarkable ones. You now have some ideas to use shape more thoughtfully and purposefully in your images but use your imagination. Always be open to the opportunities to combine the use of shapes with other composing tools and techniques. Playing with the possibilities can be the difference between an ordinary good image and an extraordinary one.

As always, keep shooting and may only the remarkable images be yours.

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Authors Note: This article is the fifth in a series on composition tools and principles. References for these articles include Composition Design Considerations, a series of articles in EV magazine by Angelo; Ioanides"; "Design Principles" by Robin Griggs Wood; The Photographer's Eye by Michael Freeman; Extraordinary Everyday Photography by Brenda Tharp and Jed Manwaring.