Lines, Lines, Everywhere Lines

By Chuck Palmer

In this fourth article in a series on Photography Composition Tools and Concepts for remarkable photography, let's unpack one of the most important elements of photographic art. . . Lines. Lines are effective for many reasons. They help create a sense of depth. They can evoke mood and feeling. They can direct your viewer's eye through an image. And, they can even be the main subject of your composition.

Sources of Lines

While visual artists can create lines with their pencils, paint brushes, or software, photographers must first find them, then work them into a composition. Photographers must derive lines from one of three fundamental sources:

- Physical Objects that graphically appear as lines such as trees, rails, poles, rivers, or even people.

- Juxtaposition of contrasting tones, colors, or textures such as shadows, shorelines, stripes, or sun beams.

- Implied lines or conceptual lines that are not represented graphically. A greater discussion of implied lines follows but they can be formed by two or more objects aligned in a row, by a person looking at an object, or gestures, signs, or shapes pointing to an object.

Lines formed by contrasting tones and physical objects

Types of Lines

Let's explore five types of lines and the impact they can have on our composition so we can more effectively incorporate them into our images.

- Horizontal Lines – Some authors suggest the horizontal is the "baseline" in composition. There is a definite horizontal dynamic to the way we see the world. Our eyes usually scan from side to side, so it is probably not surprising that horizontal lines feel the most comfortable. The horizon is our fundamental reference that supports us on earth. So horizontal lines convey stability, calm, restfulness, and tranquility. And if we associate our composition with the actual horizon, we can suggest distance and breadth.

- Vertical Lines – A vertical line is the main component of a tree, a building column, and human form. The vertical tends to evoke feelings of strength and stability. If we incorporate a single vertical line in our composition, this can convey a sense of solidarity. Several vertical forms are often associated with a barrier (think fence), adding tension to a scene. It should be noted that vertical and horizontal lines in a photograph are compared by our eyes with the frame edges. For better or worse, even the slightest discrepancy is immediately noticed.

- Diagonal Lines – Of all lines, diagonals convey the most dynamics to our image frame. They bring action, motion, and energy because then represent unresolved tension. A diagonal is in an unstable position because it is in the process of falling. They have a remarkable power to grab our viewer's eye. What's more, converging horizontal or vertical lines become diagonal that convey a sense of depth and distance. From a practical standpoint, a horizontal or vertical line can be transformed into a diagonal line just by tilting our camera or changing our point of view. The resulting diagonal will introduce action and energy into our composition.

Converging Diagonals exaggerated with a wide-angle lens adds depth to the composition

- Curves – Unique to a curved line is that it contains a progressive change in direction and avoids direct comparison to the horizontal and vertical edges of the image frame. Curves give the feeling of being gentle, smooth flowing, graceful, and elegant. Curves are also interesting to most people especially when they undulate. Curves are harder to introduce in a composition than diagonals. They must be introduced by including elements with real curves.
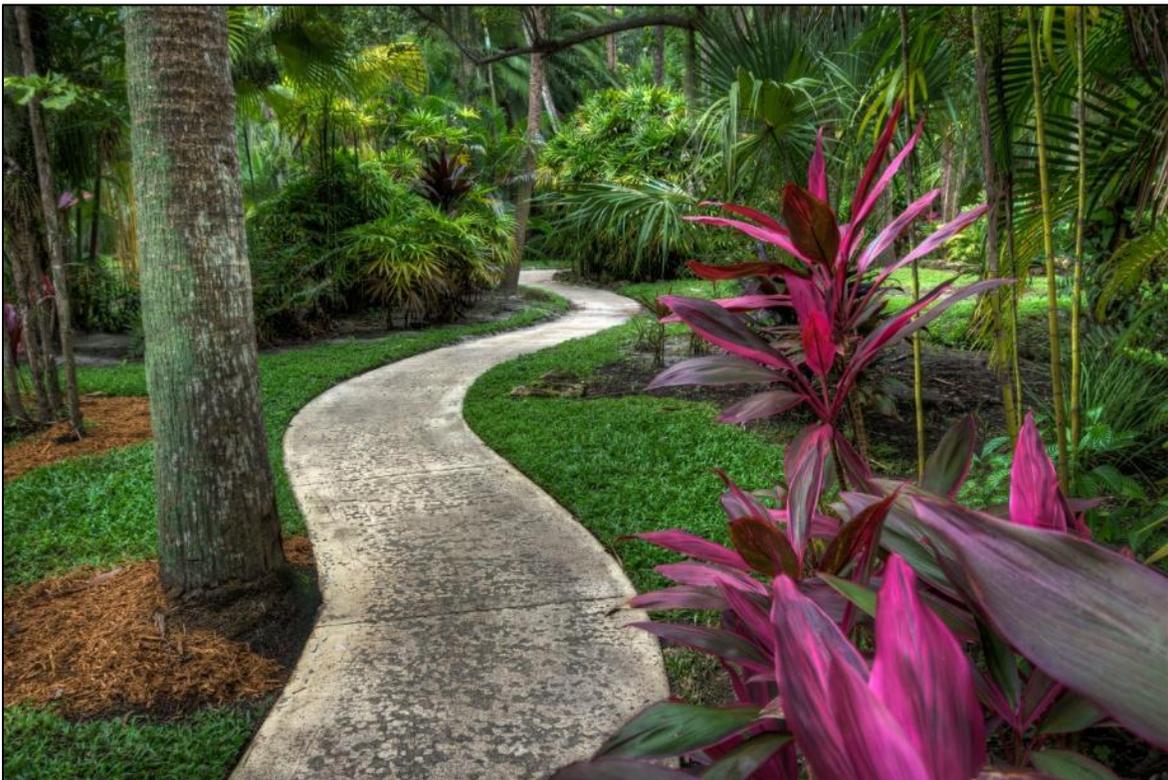
- Implied Lines – Lines that are conceptual or implied are not represented graphically. Instead, a line is represented in one of two principal ways: First, lines can be implied by the alignment of two or more elements in the image frame. An example may be a photo of several birds in flight aligned along an implied diagonal line. Viewers will connect the dots and therefore see the diagonal in their minds eye and feel the implied energy in the image. The second way to imply a line may be the most valuable that can be used in designing a composition. We humans are so strongly attracted to other humans, a person looking at something will form a strong implied line our viewers' will certainly follow. It is simply normal curiosity to look where the eyes are looking. Whenever these "eyelines" occur, they carry significant importance in the composition of an image. Furthermore, if the eyeline is looking outside the image frame, our viewer will wonder. . . "What are they looking at?". This creates a sense of mystery in our viewer's mind.

Pelicans form an Implied Diagonal Line

"Eyeline" begs the question; What is she looking at?

We have discussed different types of lines and how they can impact the mood and feeling of our photographic art. However, lines may have the most compositional power when they are used to direct our viewer's attention.

Leading Lines

A leading line that directs our viewer's eye to the specific subject or object within the frame will make that part of the image stand out. If our leading line points beyond the image frame, we tend to create a sense of mystery in our viewer's mind. However, more often we'll use leading lines to point to our main subject within the image frame. Although, like all compositional tools and techniques, there are no hard rules. . . effective leading lines terminate at our main subject instead of continuing, directing our viewer's attention beyond our primary point of interest.

When it comes to leading lines there is probably only one important question, we need to ask ourselves. "Where do I want my leading lines to direct my viewer's eye?" If they confuse or point to an undesired place, we need to recompose our image.

Leading lines can't be used in every image we make, but they can make a significant impact on the "interestingness" of our images. Finding leading lines is not usually easy. However, changing our point of view of the scene can be an effective way to uncover them. Move closer. Move farther away. Get down low and look up. Get up high and look down. Exploring the scene in this way uncovers hidden leading lines that can turn a good photo into a remarkable one.

We've reviewed several sources and types of lines we can incorporate in our photo composition. We have also discussed how leading lines can impact how viewers are guided through our image. Featuring lines can make our photography significantly more remarkable and interesting. You now have some ideas to experiment with lines but use your imagination and be open to opportunities to combine the use of lines with other composing 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.

Chuck

Authors Note: This article is the fourth 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.