Using the Elements of Art in Photography

Felicia Lee, PHS Photography

What are the Elements of Art?

- Line
- Shape
- Form
- Space

- Value
- Color
- Texture

Line:

Line can mean a few different things. Leading lines can move your viewer's eyes throughout a photograph – diagonals are great. Repeating lines that fade in to the background will bring the viewer's back in to the picture. Lines aren't always straight; the "line" of a model's body can create an "S" shape that will lead the viewer's eye all along her body.

Notice the "lines" or fingers in this fly fishing photograph all lead your eye straight to the subject.

Shape:

Objects in your photo such as a rectangular door, a round tree, or square tiles add "shape" to an image. These can be used as "frames" for your subject or just to add an interesting piece to your art.

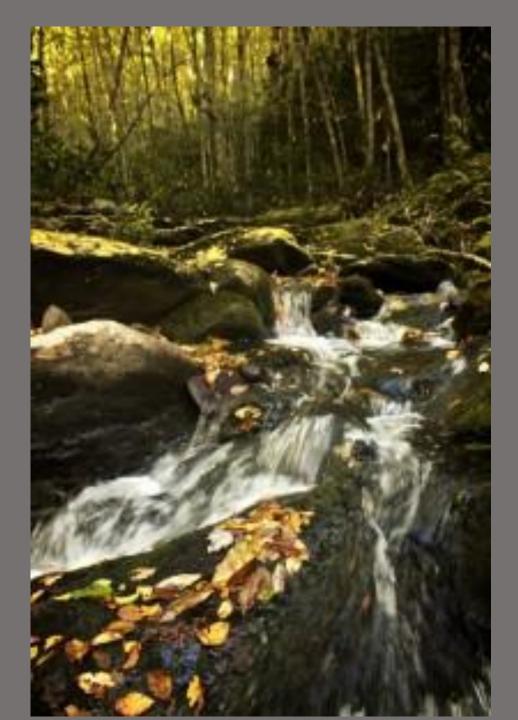The round shapes in the above photo are what make this image what it is.

Form

Form is what takes your two-dimensional photograph and makes it appear life-like and three-dimensional. This is usually achieved by controlling the light on your subject. There are many different lighting setups for portrait photography that will give form to your subjects in varying degrees or shape and intensity.

Using carefully placed lights will add light and shadow in the right places in order to give a three-dimensional appearance to the photo.

Space:

Space is another element that gives depth to your image. All images should have some kind of foreground, middle ground, and a background. This is a simple way to move your viewer's eye all around your image and even back in space. Space also can refer to a positive and negative space in your photo. Positive space is taken up by something such as your subject. Negative is an "empty" or "blank" space, which may still have something in it. Negative space is what is in between all the positive space.

Notice the distinct foreground of leaves, mid ground of the rocks, and background of the trees in this photograph of a creek.

Tone (Value):

Tone is using varying degrees of light and dark to add contrast and give liveliness to an image. Black and white photos rely completely on tone because of their lack of color. Tone can be used to make your subject stand out through contrast.

Don't be afraid to use tone to really isolate your subject, especially in a black and white image.

Color:

Color is a very basic element. The primary colors of red, blue, and yellow can be mixed together to create secondary and tertiary colors, eventually creating the "color wheel." Colors opposite each other on the color wheel are complementary and work well together. This is why you always see red with green (Christmas), blue with orange (sports team), and yellow with purple (Lakers).

The orange hair and the blue sweater in this portrait are complementary colors.

Texture:

Texture is pretty self-explanatory – finding things that have interesting textures and including them in your photograph. For portraits, a textured background such as a worn, rustic barn can make your subject stand out and give you an creative background. Textured skin adds character to interesting people, giving them a story.

The texture of the water in this photo makes it MUCH more interesting than just a photo of still water.