

# **Principals of Composition**

**Space Division**, Unity, Emphasis

- The **Principles of Design or Composition** are the **Form** of the Photograph. The Form of the photograph is how it looks, where the subject is placed. The **Content** of the Photograph is what the photograph is about, the subject matter.
- The Composition is built out of the Elements of Design. Again these are basic guidelines to help us look at what we see around us with an objective, more informed view and help us to decide how to shoot good photographs.

There are three **Principles of Design**

- Space Division (symmetry, asymmetry, radial, rule of thirds)
- Unity (repetition, variety, rhythm)
- Emphasis (contrast)

The *principles* are **how** the elements or components of a photograph are used or composed. They are considered guidelines only because all these elements can be combined in millions of ways and still be a good photograph. There is no right or wrong—only photographs that work well and those that do not. If the photograph is successful all the parts will work together as one total form and will attract and affect the viewer as the photographer intended.

# Space Division

- As soon as you hold up a camera and look through the viewfinder or at the LCD monitor you are dividing or breaking up the frame by what is in the viewer.
- In looking at a photograph the human brain has a need for order and balance. If a photograph is not balanced our eye will want to slide off the page and we will not feel comfortable looking at the image. If we draw a line down the middle of a photograph our eye or brain likes to see equal visual weight on the two halves.
- We can use any or all the elements of design to create balance.
- There are five basic ways to divide the frame.
  1. Symmetrical
  2. Asymmetrical
  3. Radial
  4. Rule of Thirds
  5. Frame within a Frame

# **Symmetrical Division**

- When we divide our space with that implied vertical axis and divide our space equally into halves, the easiest and most common balance system to employ is symmetrical or formal balance. Symmetrical balance has the exact identical weight on both sides of the implied axis.

In this photograph by Robert Adams the frame is divided **symmetrically**. If you draw a line down the center of the image the door is centered in the frame. The door is also centered in the **one-point perspective**. Also notice the use of **Value Contrast** to bring your eye to the door.





This photograph by William Eggleston also uses symmetry for its composition. The subject is in the center of the frame. The photographer has used contrasting patterns and textures to create this visually overwhelming image.





Emmet Gowin has created a very complicated portrait in this shot. The composition uses symmetry to divide the space and keep the eye centered even though the high contrast areas are to either side of the subject and work to pull the eye away.





# **Asymmetry Division or Balance**

- The second most common type of balance system is asymmetrical, or informal balance. In this system, the space may be divided in unequal parts and, therefore, the elements must be placed with care to distribute the weight and create the needed balance. The visual weight is equal but not identical.
- In photography this is more difficult to achieve but can create a much more dynamic shot.

There is absolutely no symmetry in this photo by Robert Adams. The picture is balanced by the various little elements placed across the image.





This is a very complicated image structurally. The photographer Andre Kertesz centered the figure of the woman but she is not the primary focus of the shot. Our eye is drawn to the four geese to the right because of the high Value contrast between the white of the geese and the ground behind them. The woman's face is lost in the shadows of the tree. Also notice that background is not symmetrical at all.





In this photograph by Sebastiao Salgado the figure and the space division are asymmetrical. In many asymmetrical photographs the **Rule of Thirds** is employed.

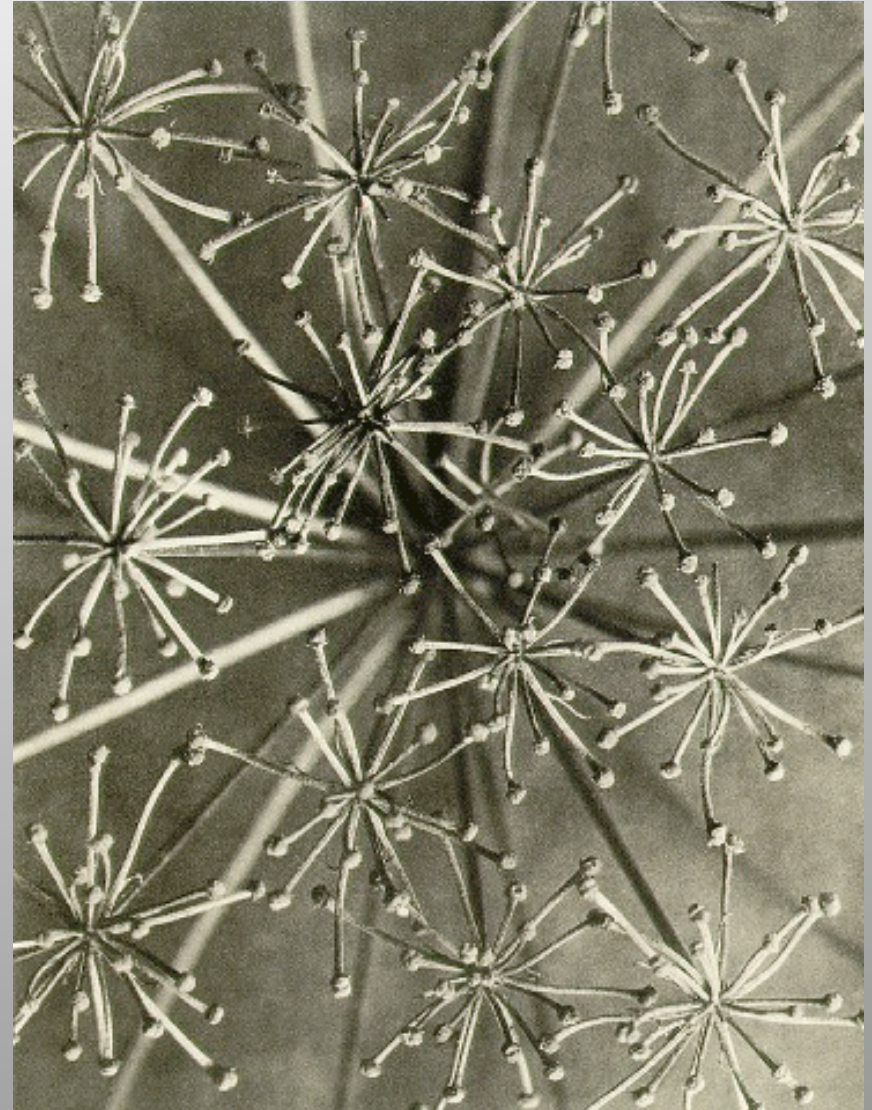
The Rule of Thirds is a very good way to balance an asymmetrical image.



# Radial Division

- Radial balance is created by repetitive equilibrium of elements radiating from a center point.

Photography by Karl Blossfeldt





# **Rule of Thirds**

- Based on the Golden Section devised by the ancient Greeks.
- An imaginary grid of two evenly spaced horizontal and vertical lines dividing a rectangle.
- The most important element or subject of the photograph is placed along the thirds markers.
- This division is used primarily in film and photography.

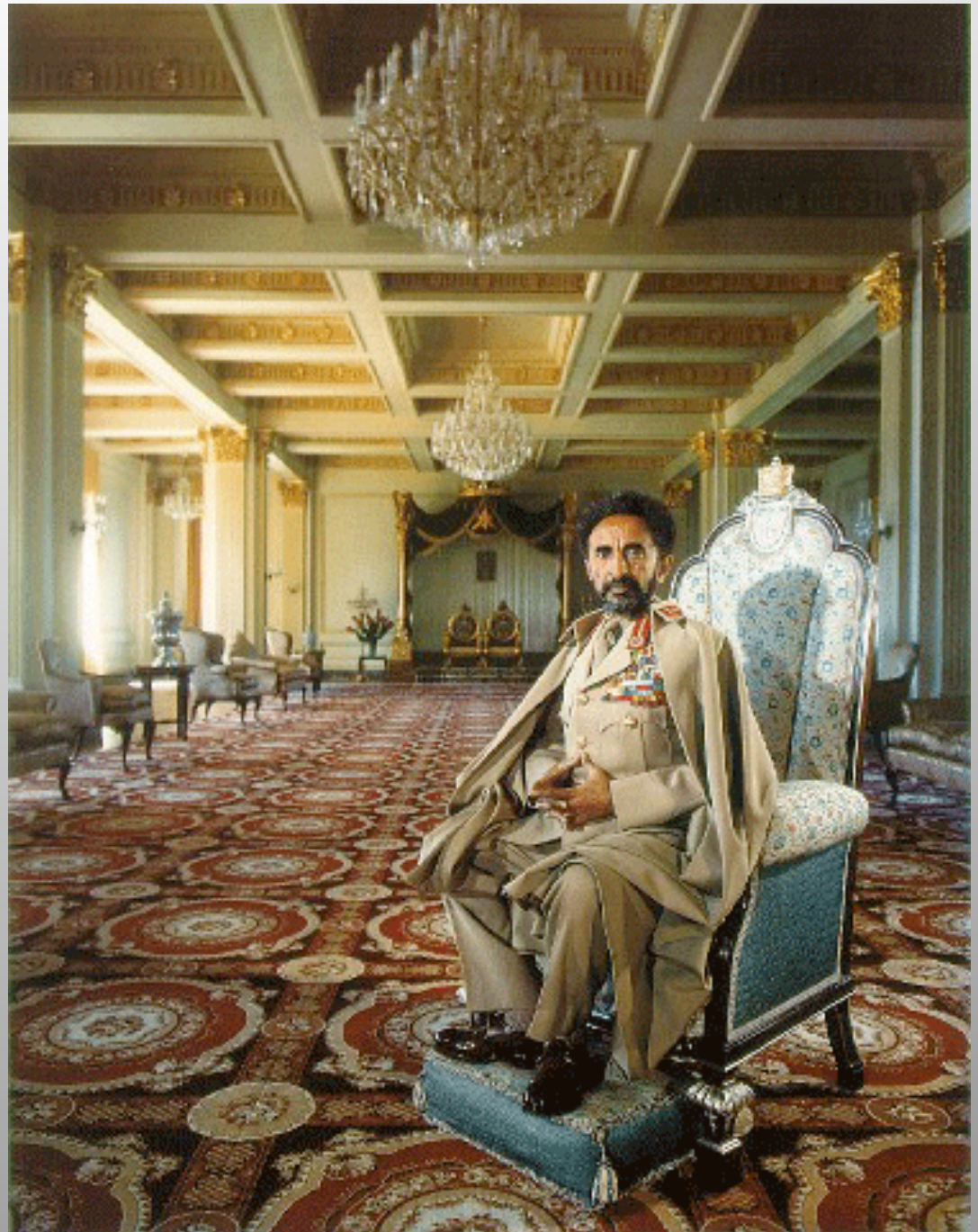


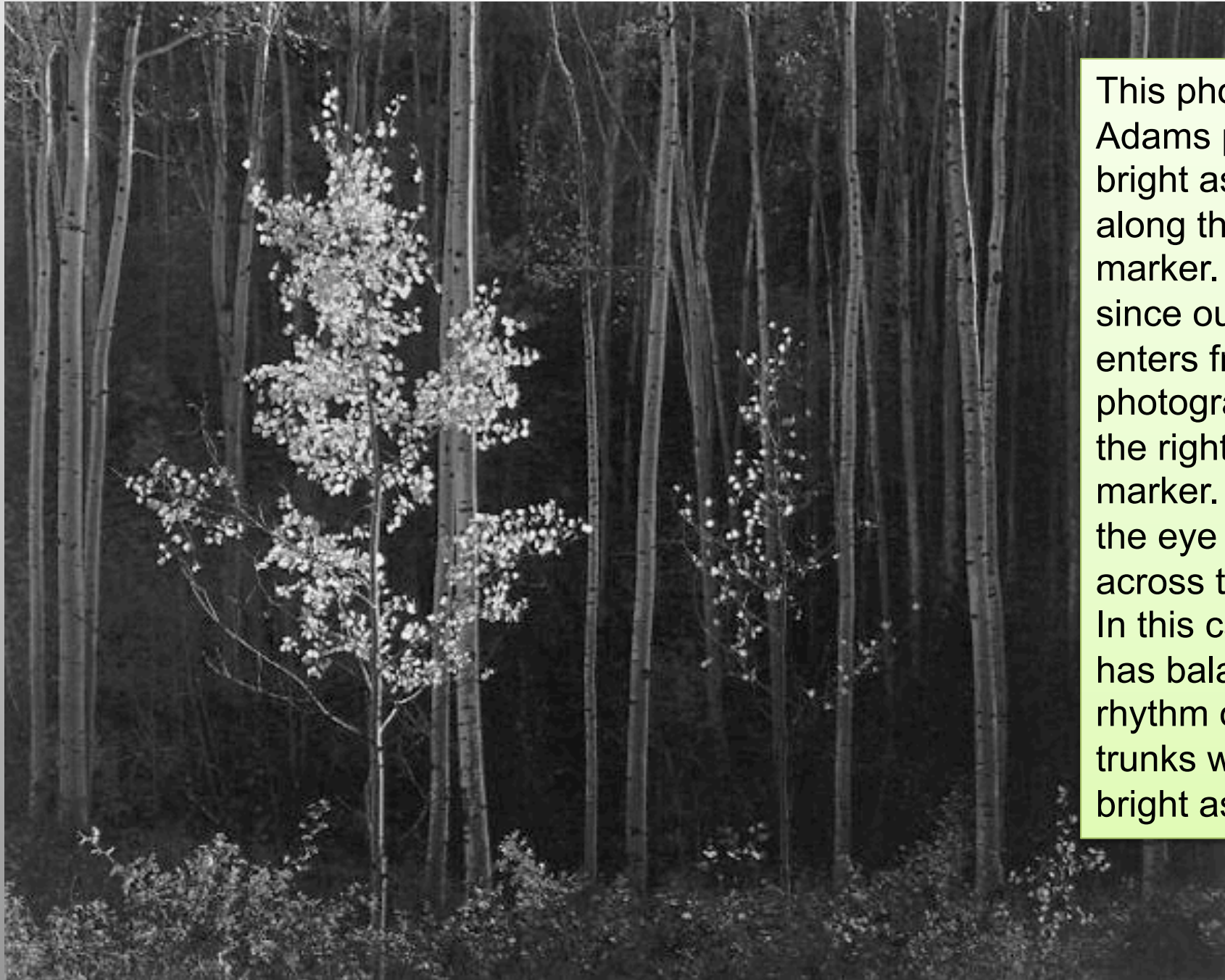
In this photograph by Bill Brandt the subject is placed on the right third marker. Also notice how the eye comes into the frame from the left and follows the movement of the girls body due to the high Value contrast of the girl's arms and face. The photograph creates a sort of visual circle.





In this portrait of Haile Salassie by Arnold Newman, the subject is placed on both the right third marker and the bottom third marker. Often only the vertical third marker is used.





This photo by Ansel Adams places the bright aspen tree along the left third marker. Generally since our eye enters from the left photographers use the right third marker. This allows the eye to travel across the image. In this case Adams has balanced the rhythm of the tree trunks with the bright aspen.

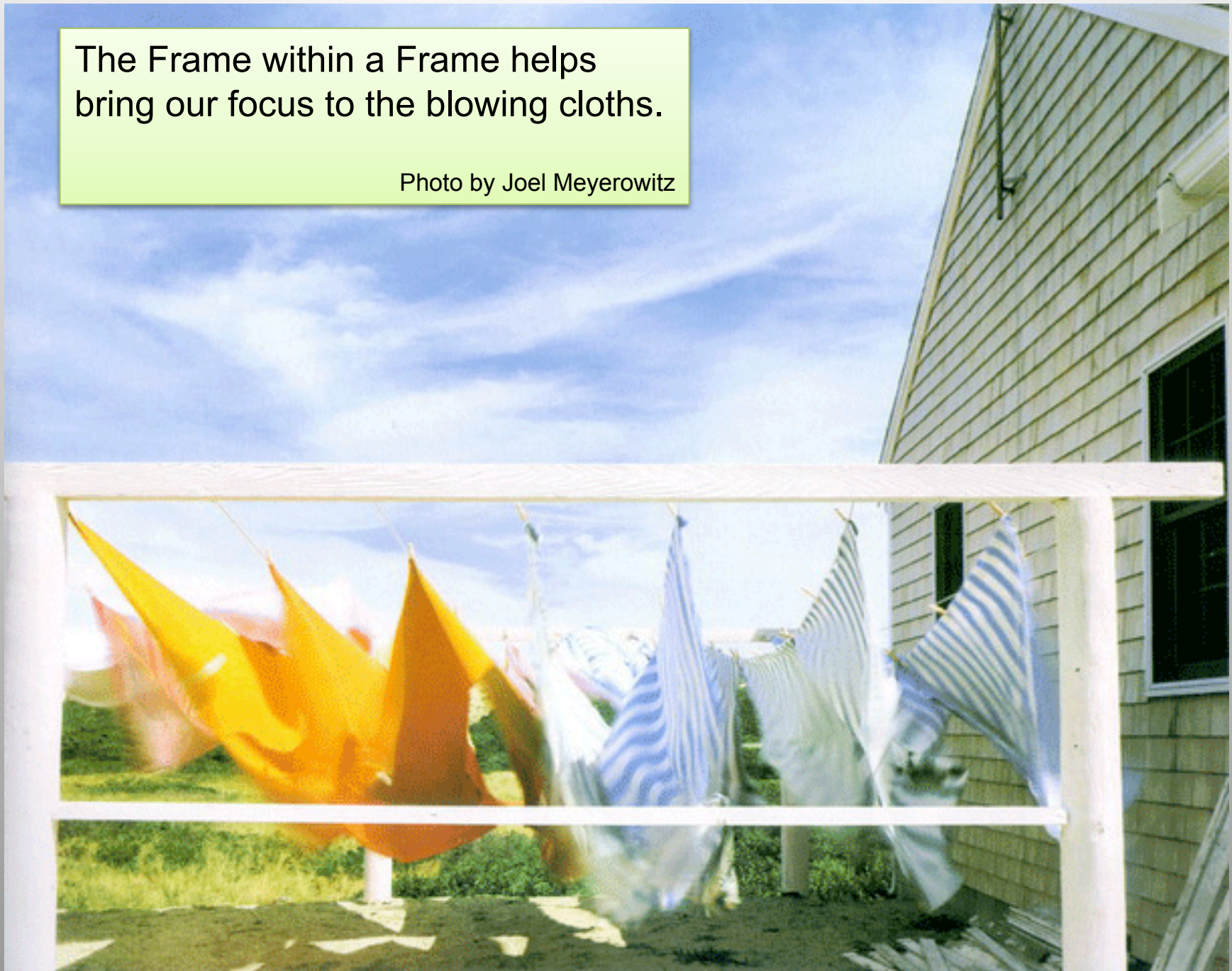


# **Frame within a Frame**

- A Frame within a Frame is when something in the foreground “frames” the subject in the background.
- This is a really good way to bring the eye to the subject of the photograph.

The Frame within a Frame helps  
bring our focus to the blowing cloths.

Photo by Joel Meyerowitz



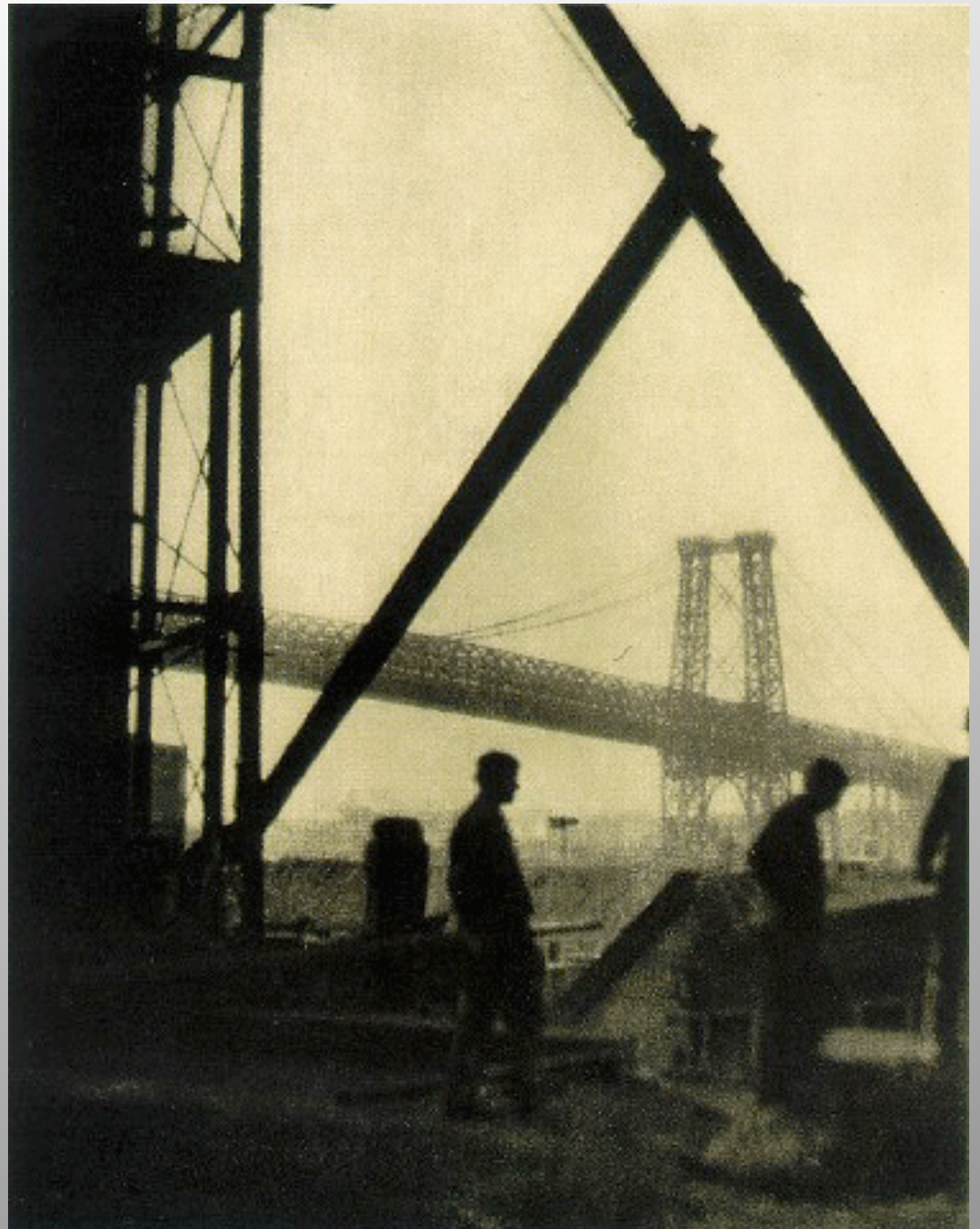


This photograph by Alvin Langdon Coburn is a classic example of a Frame within a Frame Space Division. Notice how there is little else to pull our eye to the boat in the background.





In this photo also by Alvin Langdon Coburn the Williamsburg Bridge is framed. Try to imagine this photo without the frame. The center of focus switches to the workers at the bottom.



# Review Space Division

- Symmetrical division is space divided equally in halves with identical weight on both sides.
- Asymmetrical division is space divided in unequal parts.
- Radial balance is created by repetitive equilibrium of elements radiating from a center point.
- Rule of Thirds is space divided along equally divided third markers vertically and horizontally.
- Frame within a Frame is space divided by creating an interior frame to highlight the subject in the background.