

COMPOSITION

By Dr. S. D. Jouhar, F.R.P.S.

A meeting of the Pictorial Group of the Society was held on Wednesday, December 13th, at 16, Prince's Gate, with Mr. J. Dudley Johnston in the chair. Dr. S. Jouhar, F.R.P.S., gave an address on "Composition."

DR. JOUHAR said: You have heard so many talks on composition that it is difficult to know how to approach the subject from a different angle. The subject of composition is very wide, a whole hour could be spent on discussing tone values, lines and their significance, chiarascuro, framing, etc., a thorough study of the application of the principles of composition is most necessary, especially to the monochrome worker, since the lure of colour is lacking, and he must make the most of the art of composition.

Knowledge of anything is peculiar in that what we think we know, we know, and what we do not know, we know not where to look for unless someone else shows us the way. I am only here to point out what you probably already know, but there may be points here and there that are new to you.

The sense of composition can be acquired provided, of course, that the individual is at all capable of learning anything. It may be a trifle more easy for some to learn than others, but learnt it can be. All learning and knowledge are acquired faculties. All our sense of right and wrong, good or bad, ugly or beautiful, sacred or profane, including our æsthetic judgments and our likes and

dislikes, are primarily based and moulded on the general attitude of our parents, particularly that of the mother, especially during our early impressionable years. Later on our ideas and conceptions may be modified or conditioned by the attitude of our teachers, brothers, sisters, schoolmates, other immediate relatives, and later still by associates, friends, neighbours, our environment and by society at large. Moreover, every day of life we are being influenced, consciously and unconsciously, by our surroundings, by the daily papers, propaganda, the radio, the cinema and books. In fact, our concepts and mental make-up are conditioned entirely by, and are the sum total of, our immediate and remote expressions and experiences.

When a person says, "I like this" or "I hate that," he is giving expression to his personal reaction which is based upon a lifetime of reaction, experience, knowledge and convictions. If I do not know very much about a subject I give a lecture on it because that involves research, reading of books, articles, and so on, and I benefit and learn in the process. I wish to acknowledge with grateful thanks the benefit and inspiration I have derived from Arthur Hammond's book on composition, R. N. Haile's "Composition for Photographers," Mortensen's excellent works, and an article by Paul Anderson on "Rationale of Pictorial Composition" in the *American Annual of 1939*. Apart from this I can thoroughly recommend seekers of knowledge of composition to read Ricardo's page in the *Amateur Photographer*, or Mr. G. L. Hawkins's instructive hints that appear in the *Miniature Camera Magazine*.

What does "composition" mean? The word "compose" is derived from Latin—*conpono*; *con* meaning "together" and *pono*, "I place." So that composition, for our purpose, may be taken to mean "Placing together symbols or images within a picture plane to express ideas and emotions." A picture, in short, may be described as "an intelligible idea in a frame." To make a picture is like writing a short story. In order to

be able to write we have to know the language of the person for whom the story is intended, to write a language we must first learn the alphabet and the spelling. Learning the technique of photography is analogous to learning the alphabet in the process of writing. After the alphabet comes the grammar which is equivalent to learning the principals of composition. It is only after the alphabet and the grammar have been mastered that we can ever hope to write a story, and only after we have learnt the principles of composition that we can make a picture.

Most photographers, without realising it, spend all their time trying to learn the A.B.C. of photography. They are the technicians. Now, suppose we use a typewriter instead of a pen for writing our story, we not only have to learn, but thoroughly to master the technique to such an extent that it becomes an unconscious and automatic process before we can concentrate all our attention on the story we wish to tell. Accidentally sitting on the keyboard or random typing will not result in a coherent story any more than haphazard "pushing the button" of a camera will spontaneously materialise in a wonderful masterpiece. So that the three stages are: first,



A "circular" composition



Diagonals and curves

learning and thinking tion, and then practice and more practice, t perfect.

It may be said that composition, or education, is a process of culture, which, when acquired, is pre-conscious and later Psychologists say that is the sum total of experience one moment; pre-conscious the memory and ideas evoked very quickly particular effort.

In order to make my think, I should briefly meaning of the terms "and the "unconscious." was to ask you "What for breakfast this morning would at once recall to you were not aware sprang the question. was in your "pre-conscious Now, if I were to question, asking you spend the 7th June, few of you, if any, answer that. And yet lived that day, more of way as you are doing happened that day ago has gone into your mind. It is possible that day may have d "liking" for a picture sunshine. You may happy holiday at the was made all the morning because it was bright

learning and thinking, then selection, and then practice, practice and more practice, to make one perfect.

It may be said that all sense of composition, or education in art or culture, is a process of habit formation which, when acquired, becomes pre-conscious and later unconscious. Psychologists say that consciousness is the sum total of experience at any one moment; pre-consciousness is the memory and ideas which can be evoked very quickly without any particular effort.

In order to make my point clear, I think, I should briefly explain the meaning of the terms "pre-conscious" and the "unconscious." Supposing I was to ask you "What did you have for breakfast this morning?" you would at once recall the answer, but you were not aware of it until I sprang the question. This memory was in your "pre-conscious" mind. Now, if I were to put another question, asking you "How did you spend the 7th June, 1935?" very few of you, if any, will be able to answer that. And yet you must have lived that day, more or less, the same way as you are doing to-day. What happened that day some ten years ago has gone into your "unconscious" mind. It is possible what happened that day may have determined your "liking" for a picture depicting sunshine. You may have spent a happy holiday at the seaside, which was made all the more pleasurable because it was bright and sunny.

The happenings of that day have passed into the unconscious, but certain association of ideas persists. Now when you look upon a sunny picture it gives you pleasure, because sunshine has become an unconscious reminder of the long-forgotten (repressed) pleasant memories. Of course, a sunny picture will not evoke a similar reaction in everybody. An Arab, who may have unpleasant associations, because he has too much of it, is not likely to go into raptures on seeing a picture depicting sunshine. How different communities differ in their conception of what is "fine" and what is not. I shall give just one example. In this country a rainy day is looked upon as miserable and depressing. When I was a boy at school in the Punjab (North India), where rain was scarce during summer months, we used to get an unexpected holiday for a "fine day" if it happened to rain! Believe me, we used to pray for such fine days!

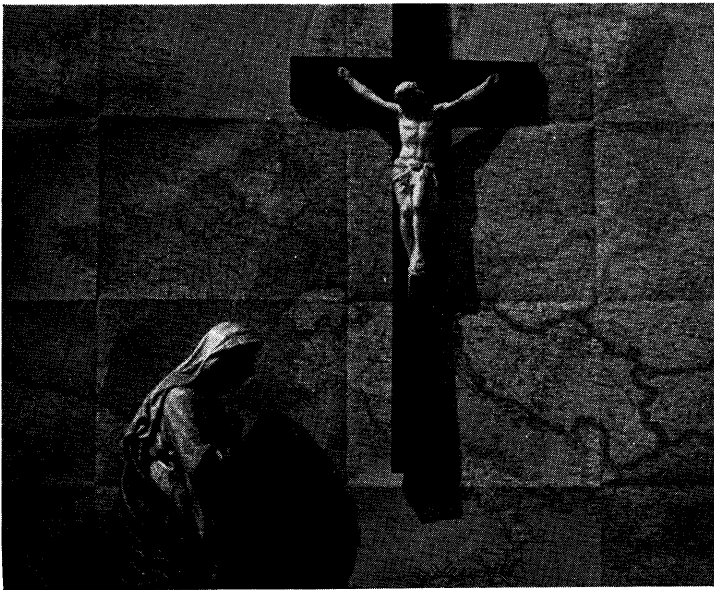
Most psychologists agree that human beings never forget anything, that is fundamental. We say we forget, but given time, a suitable association of ideas and memory can be recalled. Education of all kinds, including education in composition, may also be defined as acquiring the ability to form independent decisions and judgments. All education is based on the fact that we never forget anything.

The answer to the question whether photography can be an art depends entirely on whether the

photographer is an artist or not. You might ask, "What constitutes an artist?" One definition can be that an artist is a person who is capable of transmitting by means of graphic art emotions and ideas to others so as to compel their admiration. When composing a picture, the omission of a particular line, or the choosing of a particular viewpoint, is not an accident, it is a consequence of past experience. The resulting picture, like a dream, is a "wish-fulfilment," and because it is partly made up of conscious effort and partly of unconscious urge, a successful picture is usually a cross between the world of reality and the world of dreams.

I may appear to be laying too much stress on the emotional or sentimental aspect. I am aware that some individuals and groups to-day sneer at the canons of composition and try to get away from sentiment which to them is old-fashioned. They want nothing but "modern" photography, although what they mean by that I am not clear. Most of them cannot tell the difference between a work of art possessing æsthetic qualities and a mere photographic record. They are extremely vociferous in the photographic press just now clamouring for recognition of their work which they claim is entirely new! When their half-baked efforts are turned down at some of the more important exhibitions they abuse the committees, but I think they are ignorant of the fact that they are ignorant. Their attitude is mainly based upon the lack of awareness of their own shortcomings, want of general knowledge and information, and their consequent behaviour due entirely to a sense of utter frustration and inferiority complex. The work which is said to be original is not so because of any original treatment, but because they have produced in most cases a technically competent, but an unimaginative and ill-considered record of a modern object, such as a machine, an aeroplane, or a modern building, or, perhaps, a crow's eye view of the earth beneath, at best having a pattern, but no purpose behind, excepting a sort of stunt designed to catch the eye, and really possessing no permanent pictorial value. Their pictures may be useful as records, but they invariably appear to confuse technical excellence with artistic achievement. The majority are unable to tell the difference between a picture and a record.

So important do I regard the clear discrimination between the two types that I have attempted to formulate ten points of distinction, as follows:



Example of "Cross" composition

PICTORIAL PHOTOGRAPH

1. Is a photographic record plus the artist's personal comment and interpretation, which may transmit an emotional response in the mind of a receptive spectator.
2. By the application of the principle of composition the picture space is usually filled so as to produce the greatest concentration of pleasure to the greatest number of aesthetically-minded individuals.
3. Has an all-embracing general appeal.
4. The subject matter of the picture is readily recognisable.
5. The usual themes are sex, sentiment, or wonder.
6. Technique is to be regarded as a means to an end and should be flawless, and appropriate to the theme.
7. Characterised by certain intangible qualities, such as:—
 - (a) Imagination and originality.
 - (b) Unity of purpose.
 - (c) Repose (picture one can live with).
 - (d) Vitality and spontaneity.
 - (e) Infinity (something left to imagination).
8. Main purpose is aesthetic and decorative.
9. The ability to conceive and present pictures with intangible qualities is primarily inherited and subsequently developed, outstanding artists are usually born.
10. Artists who can make pictures can invariably make records of all kinds.

Now I should like to illustrate certain points by a series of eighty slides.

From our earliest days we have come to associate certain symbols with certain things, which, when we see them, represent certain things to us. For instance, we say an object is upright, but has it occurred to you that we never see anything upright, the image is inverted on the retina of the eye and normally we do not see things as upside down simply because of our training. From the time we begin to see we develop a certain sense of right or left, up or down, and so on, and the scientific fact is that the form on the retina is upside down, yet we do not see it that way because of our visual training and habit.

If we adopt a different combination of symbols the meaning is different although the symbols themselves are the same. If we mix them, the same symbols will not convey anything in particular. It is therefore up to us to pick and choose the symbols we wish to use in any particular composition so that we convey our meaning.

In all graphic art we employ length and breadth, it is a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional scene which we are trying to put on a piece of paper. The very fact that we have a certain shape or space to fill inescapably limits our composition, and when we have decided upon the shape we must remain in it. It can only be filled to advantage by following certain accepted principles. It is only a fool or a genius who does not learn by the experience of other people, and the experience of hundreds and thousands of years has evolved certain principles. Those principles must be learnt and then forgotten, i.e., selectively repressed.

If a single dot is put on a picture space the eye is directed to it, if there

are two spots, one larger than the other, the eye is drawn more towards the larger than the smaller. That may seem obvious, but in picture-making people did not appreciate such simple and rudimentary principles. Suppose there are two equal-size spots in the frame, one in the middle and the other near the edge, the one nearer the edge is more distracting of the two. Again, suppose one spot is regular and the other irregular, the one which is irregular draws more attention than the regular one. If one shows more contrast than the other, the greater contrast draws the eye.

Does a line across a picture space make your eye travel from right to left, or left to right? It is said that people who habitually read from left to right would always do so, on the other hand, those who read from right to left would tend to always read from right to left, and this has a subtle implication when it is desired to indicate movement. It is a point which is carefully considered in the motion picture world. It may be a small point in a sense, but in all composition these apparently trivial things go to make the perfect picture. If there are two lines, the thicker of the two will attract more attention than the thinner; the wavy line is more forceful and attractive than the straight, and the line nearer the edge draws the eye more to it. A slanting line is more attractive than a parallel line. In compositions lines parallel to the sides of the frame are a sign of weakness. In a mass, the mass with contrast is more interesting, a series of dots will suggest a line.

Some successful pictures are based on definite shapes such as the pyramid, the diagonal, the circle, the radial form, the "L" shape, or the cross. In good compositions

PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORD

1. Is an illustrative photographic diagram of an object having scientifically accurate presentation in form and tone values not necessarily possessing any emotional appeal.
2. The picture space is filled in anyhow; it is of technical, documentary or scientific interest.
3. Record has personal interest only.
4. Not necessarily so.
5. Subject matter may deal with sex, sentiment or wonder, but wholly of scientific and technical importance.
6. Technique need not be first-rate, except in scientific and technical illustrations, when it becomes an end in itself.
7. Factual and unimaginative illustration, generally possessing no emotional appeal.
8. Main purpose is illustrative or scientific.
9. Technique can be learnt to perfection by any person of average education and intelligence.
10. Craftsmen who are only interested in making records can never make pictures except by a fluke.

these shapes should not be too obvious. Very often there are combinations of all the common shapes. The shape of the frame has a tremendous influence in conveying a particular sense or mood. There is no reason why we should not employ shapes other than mere rectangles. Circles were very popular some years ago, but as time goes on we have dropped them. One reason might be that a freakish shape draws too much attention to itself and detracts attention from the picture. In other words, we must not introduce some element which will ultimately detract from the picture, and that may be the reason why the rectangular shape has become so popular. The vertical rectangle suggests aspiration, height and vertical movement, most portraits are constructed in a vertical composition. If restfulness, expanse, panoramic distance, horizontal movement are desired, then it is horizontal.

Further points with regard to the rectangle is that the top indicates the sky, suspension, the base conveys a sense of support, the two sides might convey the sense of gravity and stability. The corners indicate, at the top, a sense of movement upwards and outwards, and the bottom corners give us a sense of movement downwards and outwards.

The most satisfying shape of a rectangle is said to be the $\sqrt{2}$ rectangle. I believe Pythagoras, 2,000 years ago, asked several hundred people to divide a rod into two, so that the division was not obvious, and, to his surprise, he found that invariably the rod was divided in the ratio of 3:5, 5:8, 8:13, and so on. I do not know whether it is a coincidence or deliberate on the part of the manufacturers that they use a modification of $\sqrt{2}$ rectangle and manufacture papers having sides in the ratio of

5:4, 10:8, 15:12, etc. America eleven inches by ten inches is a very popular size. It appears to be constructed of $\sqrt{2}$ rectangle.

The high and low key treatment has an immense effect on the emotional quality of a picture. On the principle of the piano, so there are and if you employ tones very dark to very light tones predominate, a high key results, which usually conveys a gloomy mood or mystery, suitable for character studies or other serious themes. To employ the more light key type of picture which conveys a light and airy atmosphere, which is most appropriate for idealistic types of light misty landscapes.

It is obvious that the subject matter itself lends itself to high or low key. In other words, a black and white photograph rendered in a high key style with light hair and light eyes. The subject chosen should be appropriate to the treatment. A large amount of after treatment and other technical devices would convert a high key subject into a low key subject unless the justification for the treatment was inherent in the subject itself.

I would draw attention to the fact that shapes in monochrome photography is a large mass of dark against a light area draws attention to it before the viewer has realized what it was.

It is suggested that certain shapes or dislikes of certain





An "L" shape composition

5 : 4, 10 : 8, 15 : 12, or 20 : 16. In America eleven inches by fourteen inches is a very popular size, which appears to be constructed on the basis of $\sqrt{2}$ rectangle.

The high and low key type of treatment has an immense effect on the emotional quality of a picture. On the principle of the seven keys to the piano, so there are seven tones, and if you employ the tones from very dark to very light, so that dark tones predominate, a low key subject results, which usually conveys a very gloomy mood or mystery, and is suitable for character portraits and other serious themes. If you choose to employ the more light tones, then a high key type of picture is produced which conveys a light or gay mood, which is most appropriate for children or idealistic types of nude study or light misty landscapes.

It is obvious that the subject matter itself lends itself to treatment, in other words, a black cat cannot be rendered in a high key, it must be a child with light hair or a white cat. The subject chosen should be appropriate to the treatment chosen. No amount of after treatment, development and other technical methods would convert a high key subject into a low key subject, or vice versa, unless the justification for such treatment was inherent in the subject itself.

I would draw attention to certain shapes in monochrome work. If there is a large mass of darkness placed against a light area it would draw attention to it before the beholder realized what it was all about.

It is suggested that our preference or dislikes of certain shapes are

psychological. A dark mass arouses fear. Shapes suggesting a wriggly, furtive movement of a snaky kind also arouse fear when they are seen suddenly. An arrow-like or conical shape, the threat of something sharp, is something which is frightening. These are shapes one should bear in mind when constructing a composition.

Dr. Jouhar then showed some pictures taken from the *American Annual of Photography* and criticised them from the point of view of composition. He said that a subject should be at once recognisable, and if it did not convey anything without

a title it did not convey any message.

Showing pictures which illustrated the forms of composition of which he had been speaking, he said it was always wise to darken the corners a little, and when this was done a circular composition was implied. In most portraits it was more satisfactory to place the eyes more obliquely, one higher than the other. If the eyes were parallel to the top of the frame it did not make for vitality. Very successful pictures had been made where these rules had been broken, but they could only be broken if the artist knew what he was doing. It was also good to have the head slightly disposed one way or the other, supported in some way.

In a picture of running men, the men were depicted running from right to left, which gave a bigger impression of movement, because it was in opposition to the way most people read and made a greater impact on the eye of the beholder. A diagonal shape in a picture usually conveyed the idea of action, the stronger the diagonal, the greater the action.

In order to give an impression of speed it was as well to allow the subject to remain slightly fuzzy. Curves and not angles usually made agreeable pictures.

The CHAIRMAN said that Dr. Jouhar had approached his subject in a very unusual and unexpected, but also very interesting, manner. The analysis he had given of different forms of composition was excellent. He thought it would prove very stimulating to the Group. He proposed a hearty vote of thanks which was accorded by applause.



'Infinite' quality due to misty conditions