



# DRAWING THE EYE

CREATING STRONGER IMAGES THROUGH VISUAL MASS



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# Introduction

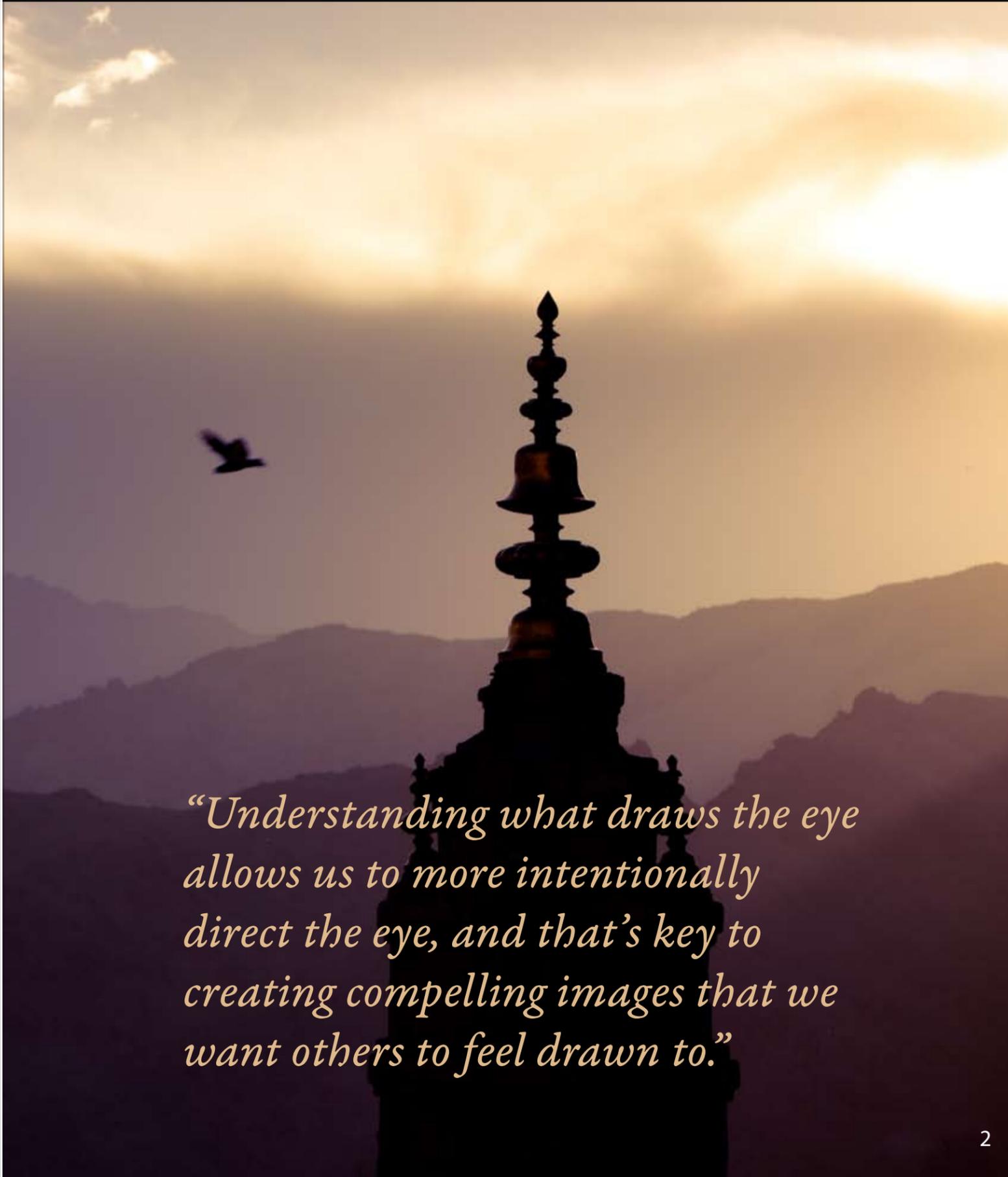
This short eBook had the potential to be an egghead exercise in academia. The concepts of visual mass aren't sexy ones with cool names like the authoritative-sounding Rule of Thirds. But sexy or not, understanding what draws the eye allows us as photographers to more intentionally direct the eye, and that's key to creating compelling images to which we want others to feel drawn, images that tell the stories we want to with the best chance of communicating the things we want told.

What I've tried to do here is in the spirit of my first two eBooks, TEN and TEN MORE. I have tried to create a book that is for the amateur who already feels comfortable with the technology of his or her camera, but wants to get down to the art of creating images that captivate the eye, the mind, and the heart of others.

From the beginning it's important to remember that the idea of visual mass is a metaphor drawn from physics and as a metaphor it is limited. Try not to get hung up on how accurate the metaphor is; in fact feel free to find your own name for it if "visual mass" doesn't work for you. What's important is how this all affects your photography.

Lastly, before we launch into this stuff, I need to say that the concept of visual mass is not my own. I've encountered it elsewhere in bits and pieces. It might even be explained more thoroughly and authoritatively elsewhere, but this is my shot at explaining my understanding of it. The book is divided into four sections. The first explains what Visual Mass is and why it even matters. The second looks at how we can use an understanding of Visual Mass when we shoot. The third looks at using Visual Mass when we refine our image in the digital dark-room, and the fourth is a set of exercises to work on this stuff, to put the rubber to the road, so to speak.

PS. If I have to type the words Visual Mass one more time my hands will get tired. I suspect if you have to read it once more you'll just get sick to death of it. So I'll use the acronym VM when my hands cramp up.



*“Understanding what draws the eye allows us to more intentionally direct the eye, and that’s key to creating compelling images that we want others to feel drawn to.”*

## PART ONE

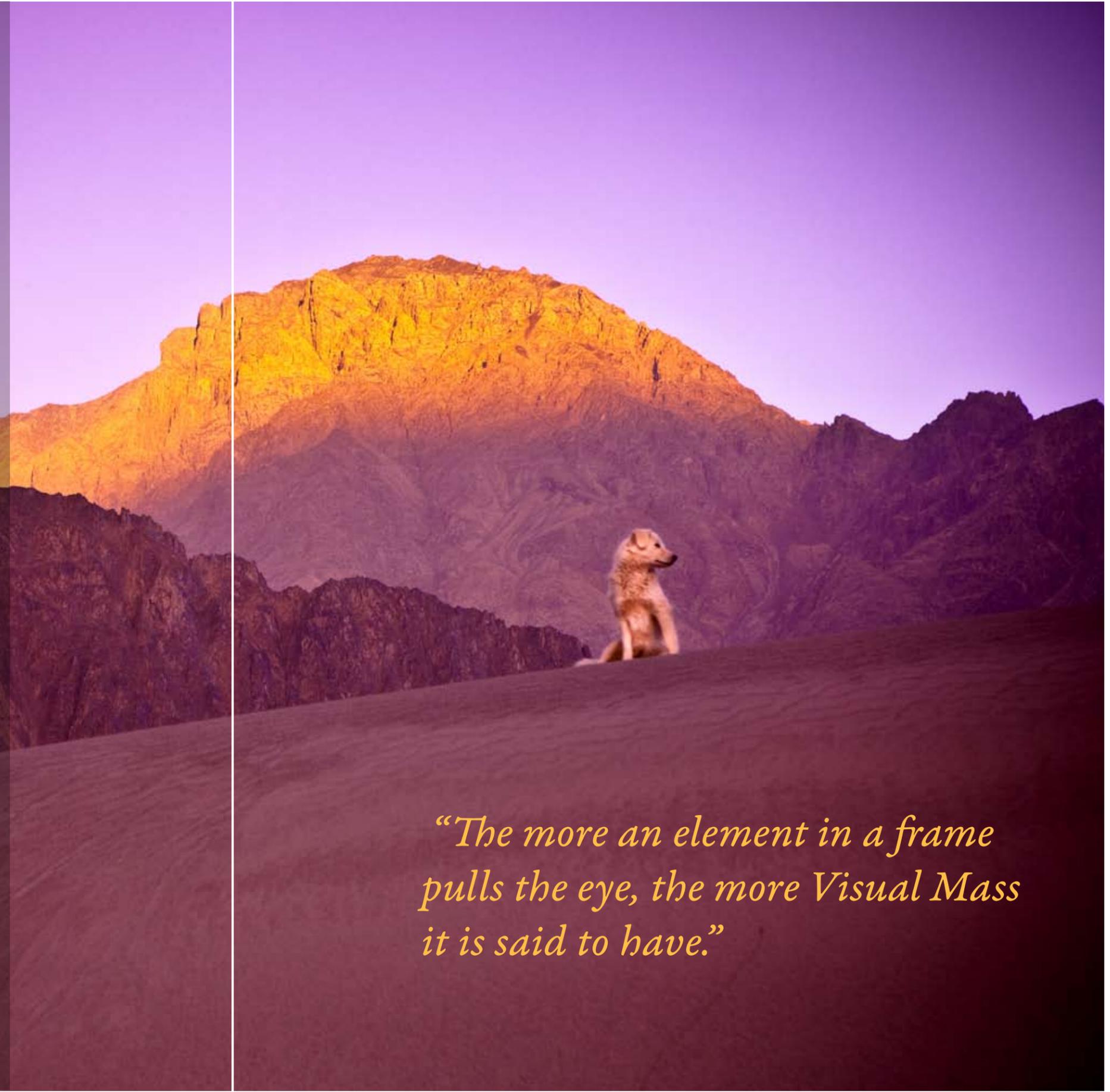
### VISUAL MASS EXPLAINED

#### What is Visual Mass? Why Does it Matter?

In the shortest possible terms, elements in an image are said to have Visual Mass (VM) when they pull the eye towards themselves. In fact, it's more like Visual Gravity, though in physics mass and gravity are connected. The greater the gravitational pull on an object, the greater mass it is said to have. Similarly (though not perfectly), the more an element in a frame pulls the eye, the more VM it is said to have. Borrowing this metaphor of gravity and mass from physics has its problems, not the least of which is that in physics this stuff is actually pretty precise, and in photography it's subjective and heavily artsy fartsy. Stephen Hawking would not be impressed at what I'm doing to his science in the name of my art.

More importantly, and this is a product of my own relentless insistence that WHY we do things informs HOW we do them and therefore matters, is not how good the metaphor is, but why it even matters in the first place.

Understanding all this VM stuff matters because it affects what we look at in an image and in what order. It matters because what draws the eye and which elements have more mass than others determines how images are balanced and whether that balance is dynamic or static. It matters because, to put it bluntly, it affects how the image looks and how the it feels. And that's the point of the whole thing, isn't it? To create images that look, and therefore feel, the way we want them to.



*“The more an element in a frame pulls the eye, the more Visual Mass it is said to have.”*

## Visual Mass Expanded

What has Visual Mass?

If an object or element within the frame of a photograph pulls the eye of the viewer more than another element, it is said to have more mass. That's the easy part. The hard part is determining which objects have more mass than others. This is where it gets muddy and subjective really, really quickly. So from the beginning you have to know that this is all up for grabs. These are not formulas or rules. They're principles, and principles are notorious for being a little hard to pin down. But in general here are some things to consider as you begin to wrap your brain around the concept of VM.

The human eye is drawn to certain things over other things. The problem is the eye itself isn't our only organ of perception. We see through the eye, but we perceive with the mind, emotions, and memories. So those things influence the way we as individuals see things, perceive them. Don't despair; the very subjectivity of all this is what makes it so much fun, and is what allows us to create art that is uniquely expressed by us and uniquely perceived by others. It just makes it all a little more, well, fuzzy, when it comes to nailing it down.

In general then, we are drawn to:

**The human figure before anything else.** On a tighter scale we're drawn more to the face; and on a tighter scale yet, we're drawn to the eyes first.

**Objects that are large before objects that are small.**

**Objects that are bright before objects that are dark.** This one's tricky. It's probably more accurate to say that in a predominantly dark image the eye is drawn first to elements of a lighter tone; and in a predominantly light image, to elements of a darker tone. It's more about which tones stand out. We're drawn to contrast.

**Elements that are sharp and in focus before elements that are out of focus.** This too is a function of contrast as the focussed elements are those with the cleanest contrast between themselves and their out-of-focus surroundings.

**Elements that are recognizable before those that are less recognizable.**

**Elements that are presented obliquely or in perspective** (diagonal lines) before elements that are flat, vertical or horizontal.

**Elements that are warm before elements that are cool.** But again, this is similar to the issue of bright/dark elements. It really has more to do with context. A blue ball (cool) will draw the eye more than the background (warm) on which it sits, breaking the so-called rule while still proving the point. We also look at elements that are more saturated than areas that are not.

**Elements of emotional significance over those with none.** This one's really subjective, but if your lover's face appears in a photograph you'll be drawn to it more than others, even if it has the least possible amount of visual mass to someone else. You can't trump emotion, and that's what makes this all so subjective. It's also why the uber-geeks, pixel-peepers, and mega-pixel mongers keep missing the point; they don't get that a technically perfect photograph resonates less with the heart and soul of the viewer much less than a less-than-perfect image of something that pulls the heart. In the end this is about attraction, resonance, and impact, and those things can't be measured.

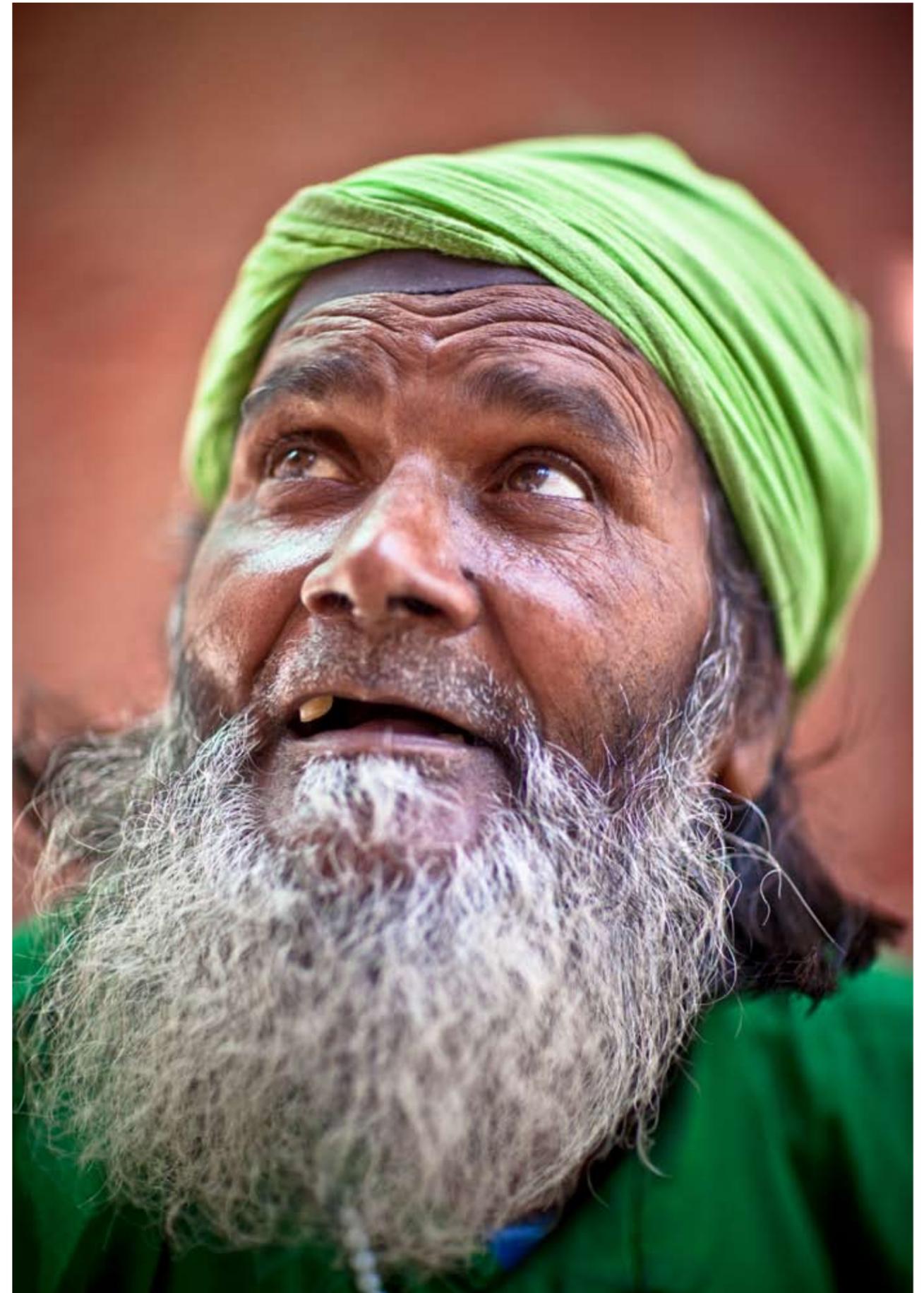
The great thing about all this is that you don't need to memorize the list. You simply need to be observant and aware. The more conscious you are of this stuff, the more you'll recognize it as you capture and develop your images, and the more able you will be to intentionally create images that draw eyes and hearts where you want them drawn.

Visual Mass, at its simplest, is pretty easy to figure out. This shot, taken in Lamayuru, India, has some pretty heavy visual elements with the solid curving blacktop of the road, but the small man in red pulls the eye even more. Why? He's a recognizable human figure; he's dressed not only in contrasting colours, but in red. The challenge then, in an image like this, is to intuitively gauge the pull that each element generates and to balance those in the frame. In this case that was done by zooming my 70-200 lens in and out until my own eye felt that the frame was balanced. This isn't science; it's art and we move by feel and instinct. But that instinct can be trained, so keep reading.





Two similar portraits of a man at Nizamuddin Darga in Delhi, India. A moment separates the two images and creates different areas of visual pull. The image on the left pulls the eye of the viewer first to the eyes. The image of the right is more complex, pulling the eye of the viewer - like the first image - to the subject's eyes, but then to the top left corner, then back down to that single tooth. Both are engaging, but the one on the right forces the eye more powerfully on a predictable path.



## PART TWO

### VISUAL MASS CAPTURED

#### Using Visual Mass in Composition

Understanding which elements have more pull on the eye than others is the first step in incorporating it (ie. the pull) into your photography. But actually applying it is another thing altogether.

In Part 3 we'll look at refining the image we've captured in-camera within the digital darkroom, but the heavy lifting has to be done in the camera when you compose your image. There is no substitute for a good capture, and, while digital post-production has made our job easier by leaps and bounds, the job of composing an image remains with you at the moment of capture. So how can we make use of the concept of VM when we compose and capture?

Composition is the way we place elements within the frame in relation to each other and to the frame itself. It includes the choice of optics, your choice of perspective, and what you exclude - as well as what you include - from the frame. But to make any of these choices without considering how the final image will be read by the viewer is putting the cart before the horse. The question that should be in our minds, even if it floats there sub-consciously, is what do I want the viewer to look at? Then we need to point to that in subtle but intentional ways. We point by understanding, and using, visual mass.

I tend to think about all this stuff as a visual hierarchy. As visual storytellers we don't tell, we show. And to show we use the only tools at our disposal - the exclusion of elements that are not part of the story and then the intentional framing and arranging of the required elements. How you do that depends on which elements are most important to you. Let me illustrate this with a simple cliché. Imagine you want to photograph a beach at sunset. It's a beach with a sunset - that's your background. But what really draws your own eye is the foreground, an old 1953 Buick Stationwagon - a woody with surfboards on top. So how do you create an image that draws the viewer's eye in the same way?

You are in charge of how people read this scene. Your decisions now will affect what they see. Stand way back, at the rear of the car, and shoot the scene head-on with a wide lens and what they'll see is a great sunset with a small car silhouetted from the back. That's scene one. Now get close with the same lens. No, get really close. Now you have a great car in front of a great sunset but it's still not right. Walk a little to the left so the car is on more of an angle and you're showing more of the car - the lines making a diagonal line that draws the eye along the lines of the car and the surfboards on top (now a very specific and identifiable car) and into the sunset. Your choice of optics and POV (point of view) here are determined by what you know about how people will read your image.

Each scenario I just discussed gives elements within the frame different visual mass. In the first scenario the sunset has all the mass, the car has very little. The sunset is colourful; the car is not. The sunset is large; the car is small. The sunset takes no effort to interpret; the back of the car is less recognizable. The draw on the eye changes in the second scene. The car is larger; it's seen from an angle and is therefore more recognizable. The lines are more oblique, creating more pull on the eye. The car is probably now more sharply in focus than the sunset. Two photographs of the same scene, yet the elements within the scene as captured have different VM from one frame to another and therefore are read very differently. Which one is right? That depends on what you're trying to express.

*“The question that should be in our minds is ‘What do I want the viewer to look at?’ Then we need to point to that in subtle but intentional ways. We point by understanding, and using, VISUAL MASS.”*

Let's look at another example, this time more concrete.

On a recent trip to India I was in the Nubra Valley on the border with Pakistan. We hired some camels as models and brought them to a place we'd shot the night before. The first image was taken on the first run through with the camels. The second was taken on the last run through. In between the first and last we ran the camels through the water about six or seven times. I knew what I wanted the viewers of this image to see:

the camels (1)  
in the water (2)  
at sunset (3)  
with mountains in the background (4).

That was my visual hierarchy, the order in which I wanted viewers to see the elements in the image. So I shot the first frame and did a quick scan of the image. The mountains pulled my eye too much. There was too much water, and the camels blended in to the background.

What I was getting was a mediocre image with a confusion of elements, all with similar visual pull. If all the elements have a similar pull on the eye, the viewer doesn't know where to look.

So I set about to solve my problems one by one.



The first solution was to get my camels closer, easily done by asking the camel driver to walk closer to shore. The next was to underexpose the image so the camels would gain greater tonal density and therefore more mass in an otherwise colour-rich image.

Then I switched my POV in two ways. The first was to spin a little so the camels walked more obliquely away from me, creating a more dynamic angle. See how the camel on the left is much larger? That creates a line of camels in perspective, a line that pulls the eye to the lead camel.

Then I lowered my POV so I was kneeling down right at water's edge. This created a smaller water element relative to the camel element. The camels were now more clearly apparent as camels and get lost less in the mountains. They loom rather than simply pass by, and in so doing they gain much greater visual mass.

The two images are similar but their elements have considerably different visual mass. The eye now knows where to look because the VM is pulling it in that direction.



**Visual Mass is important in achieving balance within the frame of a photograph.**

The 2 main elements in this image have similar visual mass overall. Because the eye is drawn so powerfully to the crouching woman, and to her face, she has greater pull than the imposing figures on the left of the frame. This is helped by the diagonal line of the steps on the right of the frame that lead the eye to her. But the size of the larger figures and their place in the foreground gives them enough mass to balance the figure of the woman. You can't measure this kind of thing; you need to go by feel. Were these men on the left dressed in black or red, I suspect they'd have more pull on the eye and the balance that is now present in the image would be tipped. Knowing this at the time of capture would allow you to make changes in your composition to minimize their presence and return your desired balance to the image.



## PART THREE

### VISUAL MASS DEVELOPED

#### Refining Visual Mass in the Digital Darkroom

Here's my starting point for all this. There are three images that go into making a final photograph: the one you envision, the one you capture, and the one you refine in the digital darkroom. The better you are at the last two the closer you can come to the first. Understanding how to create and refine visual mass in your image through post-processing techniques can create stronger images that are more closely aligned with your vision.

Where the digital darkroom can make best use of the concepts of Visual Mass, or Visual Pull, is in the ability of software like Adobe Lightroom or Photoshop to make specific local adjustments. I use Lightroom for 90% of my development work, if not more. That's not to say Photoshop or Apple Aperture are necessarily inferior; they aren't. You just have to choose the tool with which you work best. So with apologies to those not using Lightroom, that's where I'll be directing my attention. The concepts should still be transferable.

Adobe Lightroom, through the Adjustment Brush, the Graduated Filter, and the Targeted Adjustment Tool present in the Tone Panel, and HSL/Color/Grayscale Panel, makes it easy to apply non-destructive localized edits that bring greater visual pull to one area over another, or alternately, to diminish that pull in other areas.

The image on the right was shot in a small blacksmith shop in Old Delhi. This is the final image. The RAW image straight from the camera is on the following page. Here's what I did to bring the file back to the way I saw it in those moments I spent with the blacksmith.

On the pages that follow I'll show you what I did to give certain elements more pull and to diminish the pull of other elements.





◀ This is the original RAW file. It's flat, overly bright, and doesn't at all look the way I felt about this scene. How I got from this file to the finished image wasn't random; it was a calculated series of adjustments designed to increase the visual pull of certain elements and to decrease the pull of others.

So I begin with the weaknesses. First, the image is too bright, especially the background. It's bright because I exposed not for the aesthetic of the image but to get as much digital information into the file to allow more flexibility in post-production. To do that you "expose to the right," and in this case that means about 2 stops more than what looked right. This is where using your histogram is important. So my first step was pulling the exposure back 2 stops. Then I added a couple more global adjustments. I adjusted the white balance to make it warmer. I added a Medium Tone Curve. I added some clarity too. ▶



Even with just these initial global adjustments the balance of VM in the image is beginning to swing. The background now pulls the eye much less. It can be better, and we'll change that too. But before I do anything I want a sense of where I am going, so I map it in my mind. Some folks use similar techniques with actual percentages; some even map it out as I've done below on a Photoshop layer with notes and squiggles. I just do it in my brain. Here's what's going on in my head for this image:



So once I know where I'm going, it's a matter of experimentation. This isn't paint by numbers; it's just a matter of finesse, and you approach each issue at a time, finessing it in the give and take of the digital darkroom. So the first thing I do is pull the background in a little more, make it darker with the Lens Correction > Vignette slider. Once I've done that I do the following with the Adjustment Brush.

1. Dial the exposure and brightness down on the brush and paint out the hotspot on the elbow.
2. Using a new brush setting with an increased exposure and brightness I lighten the face and then go back for a second pass to lighten the eyes. While I am at it I bring a little more pull to the feet by brightening them a little. I know, this all sounds very non-specific, but that's exactly how it is, this is about the look, the aesthetic; so I just go by how it looks and feels.
3. Lastly with the Adjustment Brush I add some brightness and clarity to the beard to make it pop just a little.

All of this is the visual equivalent of saying "Look over here." Before I finish the image I'll take it into Photoshop and do some selective sharpening. If the eye is drawn to areas of greater sharpness, then I'd prefer to control which areas those are and leave areas to which I want to assign less VM with less sharpening, if any. In this case I duplicate the layer, sharpen it all, then apply a layer mask and paint away the sharpening I don't want. For the blacksmith I painted out the sharpening everywhere but around the face, the folds of the pants, the feet, and the handles of his tools near his feet. Here they are again, side by side on the following page. Take a moment to look at these images and be aware of how your eye moves around each one differently. How does the finished photograph make you feel in a way that the unfinished one does not?

This is just one image, and I've used only a couple tools. See Part Four for more ideas about using post-processing tools to refine the VM in an image to better guide the eye of the viewer.

*before*



*after*



## PART FOUR

# VISUAL MASS PRACTICED

## Three Creative Exercises

### Visual Mass Practiced in Concept

Understanding Visual Mass, or the way in which the eye is pulled towards some elements in a photograph over others, is not primarily gained through reading; it's acquired through practiced observation. One of the best things we can do as photographers to improve our visual language skills is to look at as many photographs as possible, and not only to look but observe, absorb, and learn from them. Simply being aware of what your own eye looks at and why is the first step in knowing where others will look within your own images, and that knowledge will allow you to craft better images when you raise the camera to your eye.

My sole intention in this eBook is to help you understand that the eye is drawn to certain things, that this effect can be used in your photography and your post-production, and that learning this whole thing begins with you. This exercise is going to take some time; I trust it will become not only an exercise of the here and now but one that you engage in everytime you look at a photograph. Here's the short version. Look at a lot of photographs and be conscious of where your eye goes.

Here's the long version. Pull out your favourite book of photographs, preferably not your own, and most preferably those of the masters. Now look at them with a pad of paper and pen. Look at as many as you can, as often as you can. Let's talk about that first image. Spend 10 minutes on this first photograph. Write down your immediate impressions. What do you think and feel about this image? What do you first look at? Is there a consistent path your eye takes as you look at this image. Where does your eye go? Why does it go there and in that order? Why does it not go elsewhere? The more you do this exercise the more consciously aware you'll be of this pull in your own images.

*“What do you think and feel about this image? What do you first look at? Is there a consistent path your eye takes as you look at this image. Where does your eye go? Why does it go there and in that order? Why does it not go elsewhere?”*



## Visual Mass Practiced in Camera

Unless all this chatter about Visual Mass can be translated to our work with the camera, it's purely an academic matter. But the thing is, this is profoundly practical stuff. This is the kind of stuff, when shot with vision and passion, that divides the snapshot from the photograph that is a compelling act of expression. But it's not easy; it takes time. It's not so simple as making sure the composition conforms to the Rule of Thirds. It's a juggling act, an ongoing effort to gauge the pull of ever-changing elements and their interaction with other ever-changing elements. So you're forgiven if this stuff takes time to "get." I'm still working on it.

So, the last exercise was a sit down and interact with the photographs of others exercise. This one's harder, more "rubber meets the road."

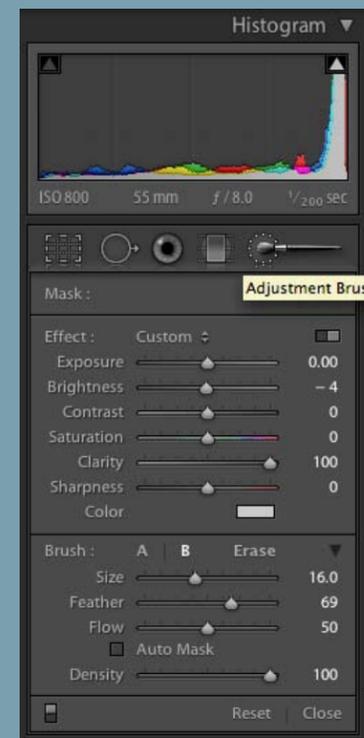
Give yourself an assignment to photograph something specific. It could be a portrait of your cat, a still life, your daughter, or the Golden Gate Bridge. Doesn't matter what it is, just make it something you love because you're going to make a lot of frames. Now make one single frame. This is your sketch-frame. Doesn't matter if it's good or bad. It's a starting point and most beginnings are hard, if not downright crappy, as a first-draft. Now look at it and ask these questions: What is this image about? What do I want people to look at first? Have I given that element (or elements) more pull than other, less important, elements? What can I do to increase the pull in those areas and decrease it in others? Do I need to change my POV, my optics, or my exposure? Should I be using strobe lighting to allow a darker background and lighter foreground or to call out that important detail that right now lacks pull?

Whatever your answer, do it. Play. Experiment. Create another frame. Repeat. Don't just shoot 100 frames hoping one will be magically good. Create one frame at a time. Observe, interact with the image; evaluate it, and, where the pull on my eye should be stronger, make it happen. Refine your sketches until you're ready to paint the final image. The more you do this, the more intuitive it becomes.

## Visual Mass Practiced in Lightroom

The post-processing example I gave in this short eBook contains only one small handful of techniques that can be used to enhance or diminish the pull of elements or areas within an image. Selective darkening and lightening, sharpening and blurring, saturating and desaturating are all tools that can be employed to subtly manipulate the VM within an image. In fact most tools within the Develop module do this; we're just used to thinking of them in different terms. Take the ability to add clarity with either the Adjustment Brush or the Gradient tool, for example. Consider that dragging a gradient along a foreground that is too heavily textured and therefore distracting (too much VM) can diminish that pull significantly if you set nothing more than the clarity to -100. We often think of the gradient as a "darken the sky" tool, but it's so much more.

So here's the exercise. Open Lightroom or Aperture, whatever your dark-room tool of choice is. Choose one image and spend an hour on that one image. Now use *every tool*, from top to bottom, and play with it. How does brightening the eyes pull the attention towards them and perhaps away from that gigantic, and otherwise distracting forehead pimple? How does a using a gradient to darken the foreground subtly pull the eye to the midground? How does slightly desaturating that garish yellow flower in the corner allow the eye to look elsewhere and explore the image? Every tool that allows you to make localized adjustments will allow you to guide the eye of the viewer either to, or away from, certain elements. The more you know these tools and explore the possibilities, the more comfortable you'll be. Your inspiration can only guide you as far as your technique can carry you.



# Conclusion

Call it whatever you like. Make your own metaphor if the idea of visual mass doesn't float your boat. What matters is that you understand that the eye, far from being an objective observer, is easily led. It needs to be. We operate by visual clues, and if you aren't making use of these visual clues as you create photographs, you're missing a chance to create more compelling images. In fact, more to the point, these visual clues - these areas of greater and lesser pull - are already present; it's up to you to do something with them. Deciding to let them do their own thing is like being a movie director who refuses to tell his characters what to do. Sure, you'll get a movie out of the deal, just not the one you envisioned.

If Part Three has got you thinking about the role of tools like Lightroom's Adjustment Brush in new ways, I urge you to consider using a Wacom tablet in your work. Adobe Photoshop and Lightroom have a number of functions that can only be accessed with a tablet. The pressure sensitivity and precision of a tablet allows you to work more naturally, and more subtly than you could ever do with a mouse alone. This is true within Lightroom and doubly true in Photoshop. I've been using Wacom tablets for about 4 years now, and while the learning curve is initially a little weird, if not steep, it's worth it. I use a medium sized Intuos tablet and carry a small older-model Graphire tablet for much of my travel as well. Whichever one you play with don't be so sure that larger is better. The larger the tablet the larger the gestures and brush strokes you'll have to make and in many cases this isn't just unnecessary, it'll tire you out and make your work less precise. I find the medium size is just fine. You can find more about tablets at [Wacom.com](http://Wacom.com)

In the first exercise of Part Four I suggested you study the work of the masters. Then I left you high and dry without suggesting who those masters might be. I couldn't possibly create a definitive list, and this one's heavily skewed by my own tastes, but consider the following as a starting point:

Yousuf Karsh  
Richard Avedon  
Dorothea Lange  
Sam Abell  
W. Eugene Smith  
Henri-Cartier Bresson  
Robert Frank  
Robert Capa  
Sebastiao Salgado

Begin to consider the pull of elements within an image as you look at, create, and refine photographs, and you'll begin to create images that are more closely aligned with the one you see in your mind and your heart.

Peace.



David duChemin  
Vancouver, 2009