# In Praise of Shadows

Use Them to Create More Impactful Photos

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## "It's all about the light"

- Light key to all photography
- But without shadows, photos often middling

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# "Where there is most light the shadows are heaviest."

Goethe

## Shadows depend on the light
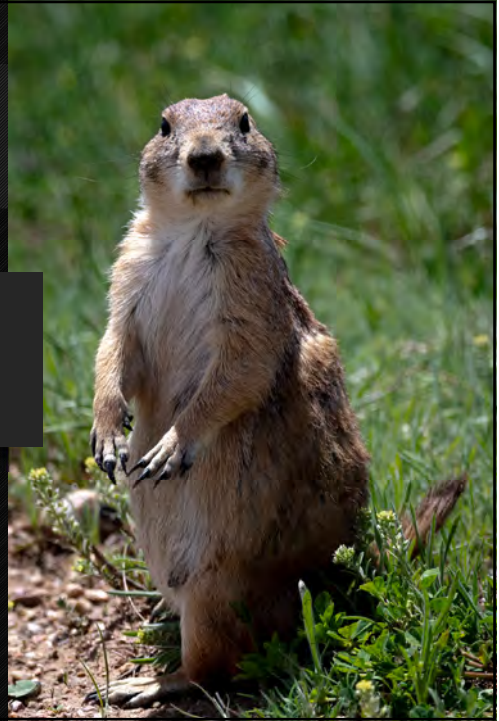
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## Shadows important to good photos

- More than absence of light
- Shadows play positive roles
- Shadows define light
- Light without shadows often boring



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# Shadows as important as light

## Without shadows, this image would be flat

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# Shadows important in many ways



- Compositional elements like geometrical forms
- Counterpoints to lighter areas
- Negative space
- Add mystery, ambiguity, depth
- Define shape, location, and source of light
- Source of texture
- Wide range of tones

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## Shadows add "a moment of trance"

- More highly valued in Asian than western culture
- Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*



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## Shadows have wide tonal range

Open shadow - Zone IV

Textured – Zone III

Deep shadow – Zones I and II

Totally black – Zone 0

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# Totally black shadows

- Deep shadows highlight subjects
- Example of "background" style

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# Shadows with texture

- Columns, wall, ground show texture
- Photo combines several shadow types
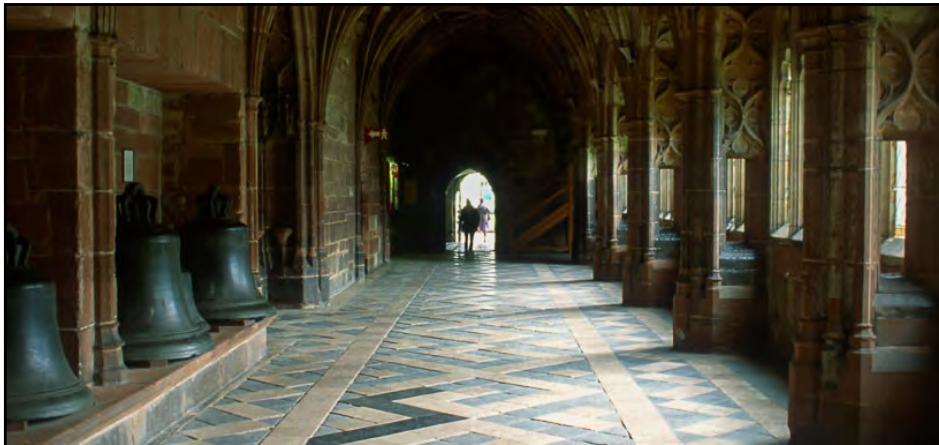  - ✓ Silhouette
  - ✓ Repetition
  - ✓ Cast shadow of columns

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## Open shadow

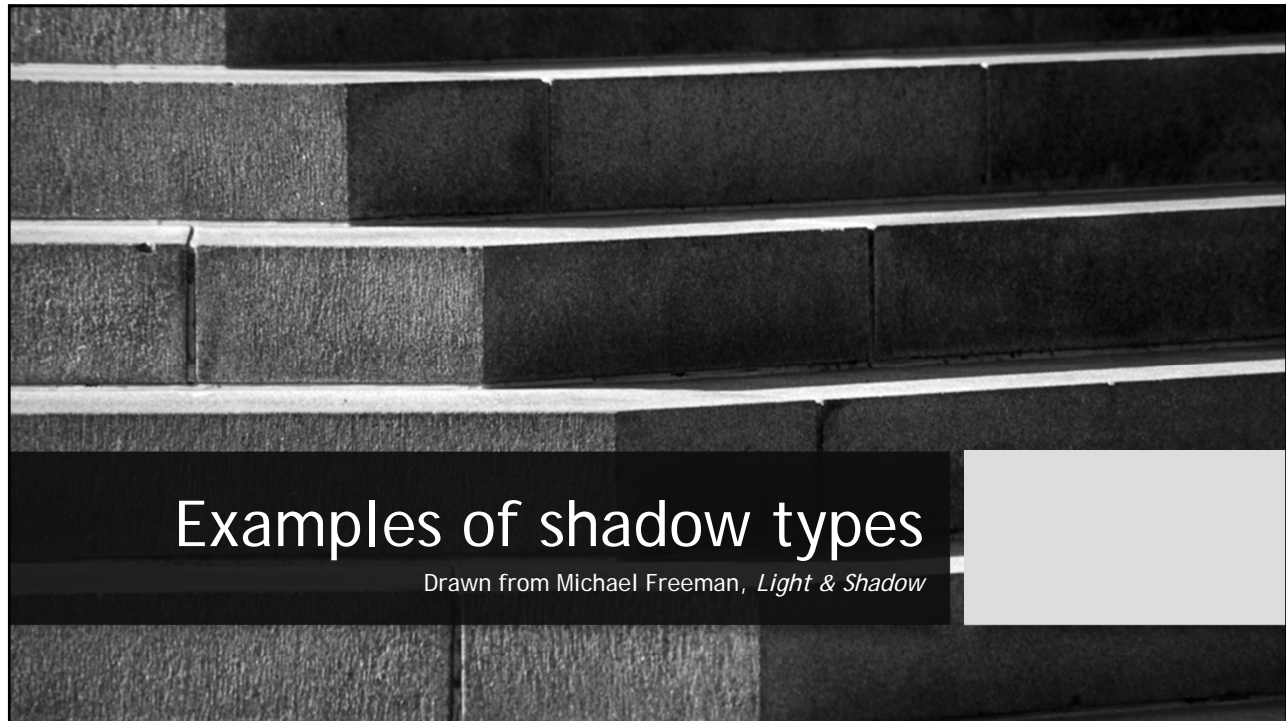- Subject gently shadowed
- Face sidelit
- Reflected fill light

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## Shadows have greater tonal range than highlights

*Use them to create drama*

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# Examples of shadow types

Drawn from Michael Freeman, *Light & Shadow*

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# "Basic rich"

- Deep shadows
- Good contrast
- Default that doesn't fit other types

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## "Basic rich"

- Black background shadow
- Deep shadow on subject
- Cross-lighting



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## Backdrop shadow

- Totally black background
- Subject stands out from background
- Background frames subject



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## Backdrop shadow

- Shadow sets off crocodile
- Highlighted subject stands out
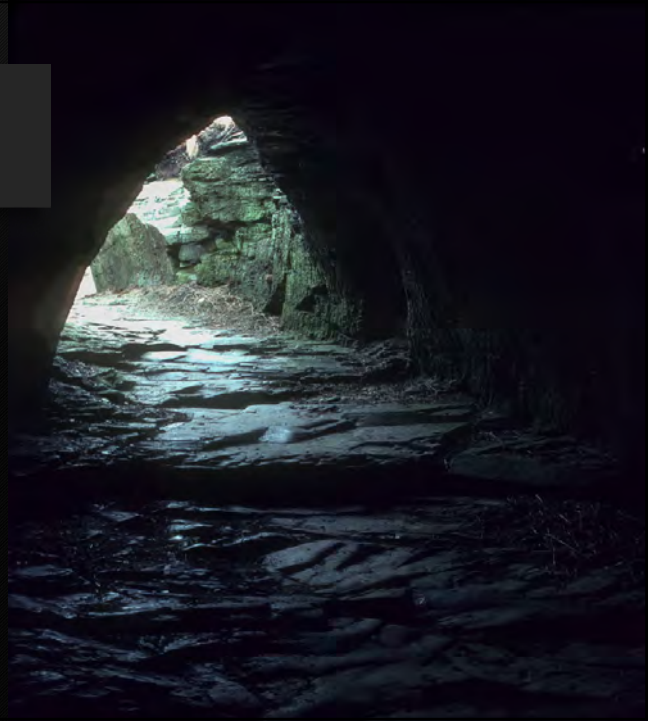


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## Backdrop as frame

- Backdrop frames subject
- Arches, tunnels make common frames



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# Backdrop as frame



- Arch frames tunnel shape
- Example of receding shadow

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# Deep shadow



- Shadows dark but not totally black
- Shows some texture

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# Deep shadow



- Shadows show texture
- Subject stands out boldly

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# Receding shadow



- Light falls off from camera's position
- Progression from dark to light source in distance
- Can be reversed, with light in foreground

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# Receding shadow

- Darkness in foreground
- Light in distance
- Eye led to the light
- Darkness frames the image



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# Volumetric shadow

- Graded shadow shows volume of subject
- Soft, distinct penumbra works best



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# Volumetric shadow

- Shadow makes curvature apparent
- Without shadow, subject would be flat



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# Reflective shadow

- Glow from reflected light
- Light source can be off camera



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## Open shadow

- Gentle shadows
- Fill light from external surface like a wall



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## Open shadow

- Shadow in open space
- Can be backlit or cross lit
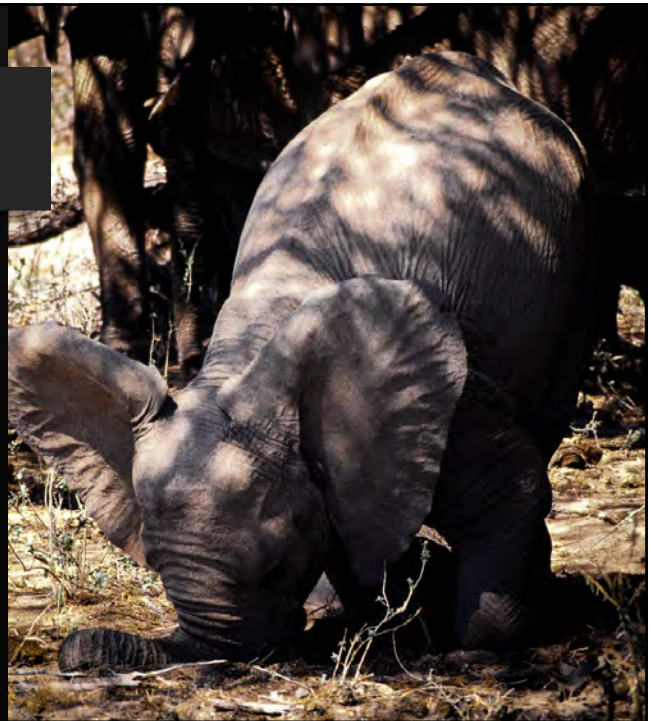


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# Graded shadow

- Smooth gradations from dark to light
- Best when surface is smooth
- Rare in nature
- Often used in studio setups



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# Chiaroscuro



- Different types of chiaroscuro
- Here light filtered through screen of branches
- Dramatic form of lighting
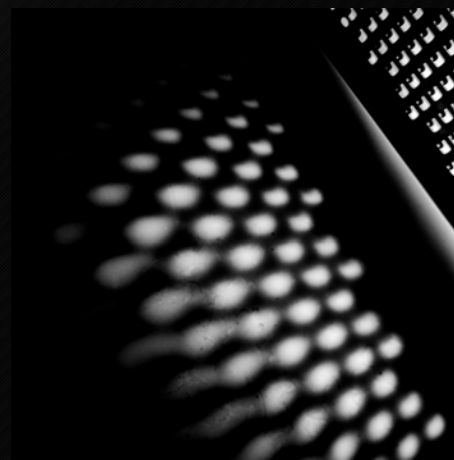
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# Chiaroscuro



- Light from single small source
- Dramatic light
- Selective lighting
- Hides many details

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# Chiaroscuro



- Light creates geometric patterns
- Need hard directional light
- Subject casts sharp shadows

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## Cast shape

- Shadow cast onto plain surface like wall
- Image can include subject or just shadow
- Shadow must be sharp to be effective



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## Cast shape



- Subject and shadow both in image
- Shadow mirrors wildebeest's shape

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# Cast shape



- Shadows of photographer and friend
- A bit of fun!

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# Silhouette



- Silhouettes made by dark subjects against light background
- Most effective when subject is black

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## Silhouette

- Best when subject sharply defined
- Subject should be totally black
- The smaller the subject, the more it needs to be black



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## Silhouette

- Small subjects should be totally black
- Smooth, clear background most effective



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## Multiple receding silhouette

- Type of silhouette
- Needs atmospheric haze or smoke for best effect
- Distant mountain view typical



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*Shadows take special care*

# Exposure and post-processing

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## Cameras and software set for midtones

- Cameras handle midtones well
- Software geared toward midtones, not shadows



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## Good Exposure Important

*Exposure decisions affect shadows*

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## Midtones the default for our eyes

- We see things as midtones
- Eyes adjust wide tonal range to midtones
- We expect midtones
- We react when things differ from midtones
- For midtone scenes, no adjustments needed; camera does the job



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## Tonal extremes the most interesting

- Less excitement in midtones
- Extreme light and shadow give special character
- Eyes naturally drawn to highlights
- More differentiation in shadows than highlights
- Care needed in exposure and processing



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## Cameras fooled by dominant tones

- Meters set to capture midtones
- Bright highlights, deep shadows fool meters
- May need to override meter
- Watch the histogram
- Use HDR with caution
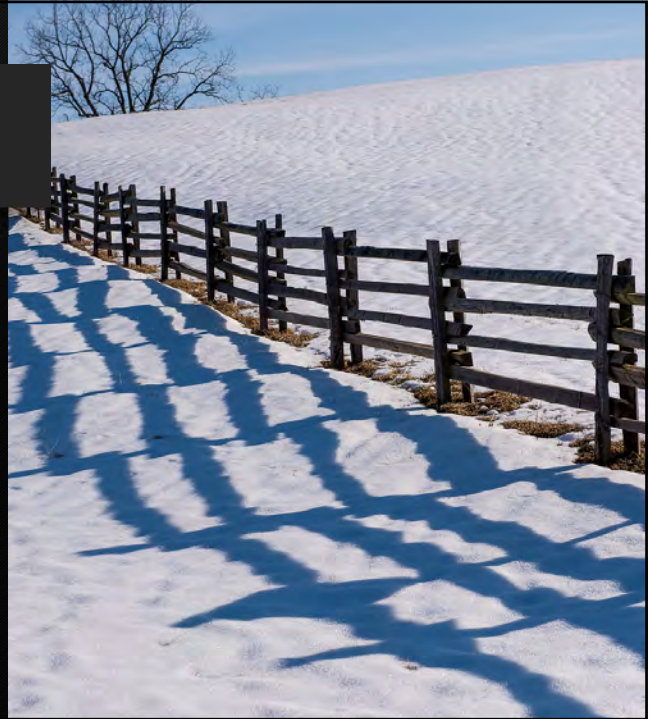
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# Post-processing critical

*In post, you set the look you want to achieve*

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## Image capture and processing linked



- In digital, capture and processing linked
- If you don't post-process, camera does some anyway
- You may not get what you want
- Potential failings:
  - ✓ Not using tools so images are flat
  - ✓ Over-processing so effects are exaggerated

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## What should a photo look like?



- In film days, look was baked in
- With digital, effects vary widely
- Traditional look features:
  - ✓ Smooth tonal gradations
  - ✓ Full range from black to white
  - ✓ Sharpness at edges rather than over whole image
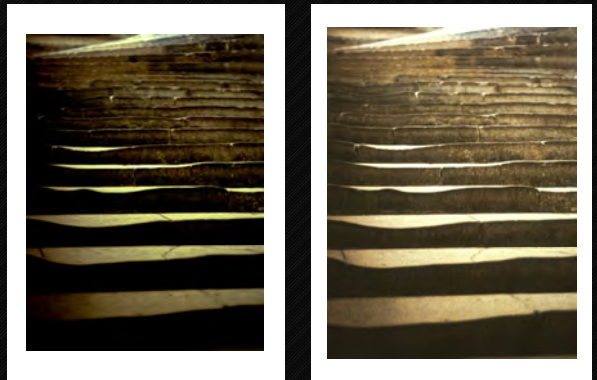
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# Photos open to multiple interpretations

- Which is better?
- Matter of personal choice
- Chance to express own style



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# Choose the look you want

- Matter of personal taste
- Matter of style



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## Process for shadows

- Shadows are tonal extremes, not averages
- Deep shadows more dramatic
- Goal: wide range on tonal scale
- Avoid over-lightening
- Let shadows go black



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## Focus on highlights and shadows

- Default processing will handle midtones
- Techniques:
  - ✓ Global adjustments
  - ✓ Local adjustments
  - ✓ Adjust brightness range
- Risk: unbelievability



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## Make image fit your vision

- Mask selected subjects and edit locally
- Goal: separation from background or highlights



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## Be selective when using sliders

- Exposure, contrast, black and white points are key
- Highlights, shadows, clarity, dehaze focus on midtones
- Use highlights, shadows, clarity, dehaze sparingly



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## OK to push black point to left

- Push slider far left to deepen blacks
- Deepest blacks give more drama

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## Shadows can be key to great photos
*Use them when you can*

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