

AMATEUR PHOTOGRAPHY

Conducted by H. McBean Johnstone

THE LANDSCAPE—THE ARRANGEMENT OF MASS.

The angle included by the human eye in normal vision is about fifty degrees, while our photographic lenses usually include half as much again, or in some cases twice as much. Wander around at an exhibition and you will find scores of prints, which in many cases embrace a whole panorama, whilst embedded in the wide expanse of detail-crowded paper is a small cameo; a gem, had it but been seen by the operator. Unfortunately, this is a fault just as common to the professional as to the amateur, and in either case can only be accounted for by a lack of knowledge of those few simple and general rules that govern the composition of the landscape and the arrangement of its masses. The idea seems to be current that to make a photographic masterpiece it is essential that the scene be either grand or rugged in outline, or should at least look so, and in judging this our old enemy, gorgeous coloring, is apt to creep in and put us at sea. It is not at all necessary to ascend the highest hill to get a view. Select first the commonplace daisies at your feet and stay at them until they are thoroughly mastered and a result secured in which you can pick no fault.

One ever-present weakness of photography is its liability to select or isolate the parts of the view that are wanted from its undesirable features, or in the alternative devoting itself exclusively to one feature and giving us an uninviting and unsightly representation. Irreproachably correct as a recorder of fact, it may yet record too much and so fail to make as strong and lasting an appeal to the mind as if it could select this or that objectionable feature and leave it out. It has been said by a well-known photographer: "We want nothing but the truth, but we do not want too much of that."

If you will examine any of the paintings of great artists produced during the last two hundred and fifty years you will find that their arrangement is all based on a few very simple forms and that these same forms, which partake of the leading idea of the triangle or pyramid, the diagonal line and its contrasts (which is a variation of the same thing) and the circle with its modifications, may be traced through all kinds of pictures from the simplest landscape up to the grandest historical subjects.

In his "Picture-Making by Photography" (a book that should be in the hands of every ambitious amateur), Mr. H. P. Robinson quotes from Howard's Sketchers' Manual, a curious chapter on the strong and weak points of a picture, and as it is full of instructive and interesting points and should be useful to the student in the arrangement of his compositions, I have taken the liberty of repeating it here:

"The feeble points are those which are at equal distances from any two of the boundary lines or of the corners of the picture.

"The strong points are those which are at unequal distances from all the boundary lines and the corners.

"Any point that appears to be at an equal distance from one corner or boundary line, whether top, bottom, or side, and

from any other boundary line, or corner, is feeble, or an improper situation for the subject or points of effect. The most feeble are those situations which are equidistant from the top and base lines, or from the two sides.

"The central point is the most feeble of all, and, to a certain extent, they increase in strength or value as they diverge from the centre.

"But it is not every boundary that may be at unequal distances from the boundary lines and corners, which is a strong point. The inequalities in distance must bear a mathematical ratio to each other, as one and two-thirds, or two and three-fifths.

"Those points will be strongest or best adapted for the reception of the subject which are distant from the four boundary lines, and the four corners in degrees the most varied, yet bearing a mathematical ratio to each other, as one-third from the base, two-fifths from one side, three-sevenths from one corner, four-ninths from another, and so on in every possible relation that it can bear between the opposite corners, the two upper corners, or the two lower, or the upper and lower, or the upper and lower of the same side, the two sides, or the top and base."

The latter part of this is rather abstruse and confusing, but there is something in it. The object is to avoid uniformity and to get variety of composition. The late Norman Macbeth—an authority on art, who took an active interest in photography—in an excellent paper read before the Edinburgh Photographic Society, gave illustrations based on the above divisions, which will be in the recollection of the readers of the photographic journals, and I cannot do better than adopt his remarks on the divisions:

"After deciding on the breadth of the picture—whatever it be—find the square of it. A diagonal line from one corner to the other metes out the size of length of the picture. This proportion of breadth to the length suits almost every subject requiring either a vertical or horizontal form. It so happens that the 'half-plate' size used in the camera is as near as possible to the relative proportions.

"Now as diversity in unity is one of the essential elements in good composition, the method of producing this lies in certain sub-divisions of the field being made both vertically and horizontally; every intersection or crossing of the lines constitute points, which if anything were constructed on them would prove expressive.

"To divide the field into two equal parts both ways, the intersection would be in the centre; such a point, although some might think it to be conspicuous, is nevertheless not expressive, inasmuch as it is too finely balanced on either side. To subdivide, again, the two sides would not produce good or expressive intersections, for it would tend to a too equal balancing of parts.

"Now in order to find expressive parts in a field, instead of dividing it into equal numbers, such as two, four, six or eight, divide it into unequal or odd numbers, such as three, five, or seven, and you produce points at each intersection which are easily composed and always expressive.

"Bear in mind that the centre of the field is the weakest point in it. To put an object there, especially in a landscape, divides the subject, and raises a conflict of interest on both sides, so much so that if there be an object of interest on either side the eye is tortured and distracted. In order to avoid this and make important parts of a scene or figure expressive, I