

# Learning to Look: A Format for Looking at and Talking About Photographs Example 1

## Muzeo presents 50 Greatest Photographs of National Geographic



Photo by Thomas J. Abercrombie

**Light and Shadow:** The National Geographic photograph of Mecca in Saudi Arabia shows a brilliant contrast of natural light at the horizon and artificial light illuminating the Kaaba (an ancient stone structure in Mecca towards which all Muslims around the world face to pray five times a day) and the buildings on the surrounding hillsides. The combination creates a photograph that seems to glow from within.

**Value:** The photograph's values range from deep black in the unlit areas to the bright lights, most of which give off a warm yellow glow.

**Focus:** Depth of Field (DOF) is decided by the given lens opening (aperture) or  $f$ /stop. It defines the distance between the nearest and farthest objects in a photograph that appear sharply in focus. The photo of Mecca has a large Depth of Field because you can clearly see the Kaaba in the foreground and the objects in the distance.

**Space:** There is a sense of the vastness of the space in which the annual hajj pilgrimage takes place. The Great Mosque of Mecca surrounding the Kaaba can hold over a million people.

**Shape:** The geometric shapes of the Great Mosque of Mecca and the Kaaba contrast with the organic shapes of the hilltops in the background of the photograph. There are voids at the sky and where the photograph falls off into darkness.

**Line:** The photograph contains a mix of thick, thin, jagged, curvy, and straight lines. Note the thick straight lines of the mosque walls and the jagged, curving lines of the silhouetted hills at the top of the photo. Where else do you see lines both thick and thin?

**Color:** The predominant colors in the photograph are warm yellow tones contrasted with cooler blue tones. These colors are echoed in the sky. What other colors do you see? Try squinting your eyes and look again.

**Texture:** The photograph is highly textured, most notably with the throngs of worshipers creating a pattern at such a distance.

**Angle:** The photograph of Mecca is clearly shot from above the mosque in order to allow you, the viewer, to take in the enormity of the event. It is so far away that the crowds of people become nearly abstract, giving a chaotic scene a sense of peace.

**Color:** The predominant colors in the photograph are warm yellow tones contrasted with cooler blue tones. These colors are echoed in the sky. What other colors do you see? Try squinting your eyes and look again.

**Texture:** The throngs of worshipers create a distinctive abstract pattern at such a distance. Where else do you see texture in the photograph?

**Angle:** The photograph of Mecca is clearly shot from above the mosque in order to allow you, the viewer, to take in the enormity of the event. It is so far away that the crowds of people become nearly abstract, giving what is almost certainly a chaotic scene on the ground a sense of peace.

**Framing:** The bottom and side edges of the photograph fall into darkness in order to focus the viewer's attention on the main subject: the Great Mosque of Mecca. So arresting is the central image that most viewers will not give a thought to what lies beyond the borders of the photograph.

**Dominance:** Close your eyes for a few moments. When you reopen them, what is the first thing you notice? For most viewers, it will be the large illuminated rectangle in the foreground containing the worshipers. For many viewers, the eye will then be drawn to the sky at the top of the photograph because of the light and the echo of the colors of the mosque. What creates these focal points? Lights? Strong shapes? Texture? Contrast? Line?

**Contrast:** There are strong visual contrasts in the photograph created by light v. darkness, and by the strong texture inside the mosque v. the relatively smooth dark voids surrounding it.

**Repetition:** Where do visual elements repeat? Clearly, they repeat within the mosque: each individual worshiper contributes to a series of dot-like patterns that are then formed by light into a secondary series of larger circles. These circular patterns are echoed again in the lights surrounding both the Kaaba and the mosque itself. These repeating patterns create a sense of visual unity in a photograph comprised of many complex elements.

**Variety:** There is almost too much variety in this photograph to name. Circles, rectangles, squares, and the vertical lines of the minarets all appear within the frame of the photo. We have already talked about the variety of textures and values. What other variety can you see? How does it create interest for you, the viewer?

**Balance:** Is the photograph balanced? Does it seem heavier on one side or the other? What about from bottom to top? Diagonally? Although the photograph is centered from side to side, it is not centered from top to bottom. Imagine the difference in how you would perceive it if it were completely centered? Would it be less interesting? Why? What is gained by the choice of the photographer to frame the photograph as he did?

**NOTES:** The photograph of Mecca pictured here was taken by National Geographic photographer Thomas J. Abercrombie in 1965. Although Abercrombie had official permission, it was still considered a risk to photograph at the site. This view of the Great Mosque (or Haram Mosque) was so unique that it became iconic, and the photographer and his wife Lynn often encountered it on later travels to the Mideast adorning walls and even restaurant place mats.