

Writer Gustave Flaubert once said, “Travel makes one modest. You see what a tiny place you occupy in the world.” To me, there is nothing quite like getting on a plane to go somewhere or packing up the car for an adventure to see and experience something new. I am continually amazed at the ways in which traveling shapes me. I see my place in this world and as Flaubert says, it often makes me realize what a small part I play. One particular aspect of travel that is important to me is National Parks. While I do enjoy the “natural” parks most, and have a goal to visit all of them, I usually do not miss an opportunity to visit other places that are part of the National Park Service. When visiting locations of historical significance, I also attempt to put myself in the midst of the story, and see its connections to me today. I enjoy working to photograph at whatever park I am in a way that captures the essence of that place as well as specific experiences or moments. To me, this is what Chris Orwig means when he talks about photography providing the opportunity to savor life (Orwig, 2014).

In this case, I wanted to capture the symbolism of the Gateway Arch, which is part of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis, Missouri, as well as the brilliance of the sun. I sought to have someone experience the sunlight as well as the significance that this structure is an arch. The two of these things are meant to work together to lead the viewer to the symbolism of the Arch. The less compelling image does not combine these two ideas. The shape of the arch is lost, and the sunlight does not draw the viewer into the photo.

While walking toward the Arch for the first time over Martin Luther King weekend, I became increasingly awed by its size, but also by the natural light of the day. We have seen very little sun here in Michigan this month, so I wanted the viewer to be able to feel the sunshine more directly. I desired to do more than just show that it was a sunny day with a blue sky; I wanted to convey what I felt in that moment (Rockwell, 2014). To do this, I captured the sunburst and the rays of sun spreading out and eventually hitting the Arch, thus bring the two together. This integration, which leads the viewer to feel that one could not exist without the other, is key to establishing a mood (“How to Tell More Compelling Stories”, 2014). The sunburst draws the viewer’s attention to the sun, and the rays help the viewer feel the sunshine as if he/she were standing in the photo. Technically speaking, this was partially accomplished by using a medium aperture ($f/13$) as well as standing at the right angle. In his article “Landscape Photography Composition – Part 1”, Guy Tal says, “Light is the life blood of your image.” (Tal, 2014) In helping the viewer feel the sun, I hoped to give life to the scene and set a mood, one that helps give the experience of something new, or something good. This is the hope of a new day, brought forth by the sunlight. By contrast, the sun in the less compelling image is hidden, thus causing this feeling to be absent.

Since the Arch represents the beginning of Westward Expansion for the United States, the sun is significant in more than one way. The side of the Arch that is away from the sun is darker, but the viewer is drawn toward the light. Together with the Arch, the viewer feels the urge to walk forward into the hope of this new day. As the gateway to the West, the Arch should beckon someone to walk through it and be drawn to have his or her own growth of new opportunities just as pioneers were drawn westward. Both the sunlight and the positioning of the Arch help to do this.

I purposefully captured most of the Arch because I wanted the viewer to experience the size of it. By standing at this angle and allowing the Arch to come out of the side of the photo, I was able to capture and portray the size and grandeur of this structure. It provides depth, which is partly what draws someone into walking through it. To stand straight out from the Arch or to only capture part of it would not have the same effect, as seen in the non-compelling photo. I could have moved back slightly to truly capture the entire arch, but it was important to fill the frame, further establishing depth (Calvetti, 2014). While the less compelling photo utilizes Orwig's idea to "reduce and simplify," by doing so, the size of the Arch is lost, as is the sense of depth (Orwig, 2014). Depth, coupled with the angle of the Arch, is important to the experience of wanting to walk into the scene, toward the light and through the Arch. The size of the Arch on the left side of the photo together with the height, provide some idea of how small it makes one feel to stand at the bottom. Other angles, including that in the non-compelling photo, lose this feeling.

The position of the sun in reference to the Arch is key to the nature and design of this photo. Typically, the two diagonal lines of the Arch would lead the viewer to look up to the point at which the two diagonal lines meet (Rowse, 2014). My goal was to make the viewer want to walk forward and through the Arch, not look at the top of it. It is natural for the person viewing the photo to look up to the top because of these diagonal lines, but the position of the sun helps to bring the focus back to other parts of the photo.

There is good reason to break the rule of thirds in this photo. Other aspects of the photo would not have been captured had the rule of thirds been followed. However, the fact that the sun is off center helps with the composition of the photo and the experience given with such composition. When discussing the rule of thirds, Guy Tal generally speaks about placing the subject off-center and how to decide when to do this. He speaks of a technique he uses when considering placing subjects off-center. This technique utilizes the idea of concentric circles that diminish in attention grabbing effect the farther from the subject it is (Tal, 2014). If you apply this technique to the composition of this photo with the sun being the subject, the next most attention-grabbing parts are through the Arch, which helps to further develop the desire to walk through this Arch, this gateway, into something new.

As I took this photo, I did not catch the juxtaposition of the beauty of the natural sun against the beauty of a manmade structure, but when I look back at this, it is fascinating to me. Even the person standing at the bottom brings life to the wonder that "man" created this structure to symbolize the progression of our nation across the continent. How wondrous that we can build something so large when we are yet so small.

Eisner states that our experiences are "influenced by our past as it interacts with our present (Eisner, 1985). In the end, the viewer who knows the significance of the Arch and what it is meant to represent is left with something upon which to contemplate or reflect. Those who moved west sought something new, and held the hope of a new day as they set forth on their travels. Yet, their own travels may have left them feeling modest, realizing that they hold a small place in this world, all while desiring to experience the new day. In this, I am no different from the pioneer heading west.

Works Cited

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