Figure Ground

Selection
Planned
Mother and Daughters
Unplanned

Figure/Ground Compete
Camouflage
Notan
Exercises

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Selection: The first step in seeing is selection—separating a figure (the subject) from the background (ground). Did you first see the white pedestals as figures? If you did, then the dark area served as the ground. But you could also have seen the dark area, which has a similar shape, as the figure. When you do, then the white pedestals become the ground. Figure and ground can change as your attention changes but cannot be seen at the same time. Some writers use the term positive space to describe figure and negative space to describe ground.
**Planned:** Notice how Jackson positioned one of the hanging white throws behind the standing woman so that her head and dark hair do not blend into the dark background of the tent. This provides a good separation of figure and ground. He also arranged the group in such a way that the three women form a strong triangular shape with the baby, in a triangular wrap, in the center.
Having these lovely Uzbekistan children positioned in front of an uncluttered background eliminates any distraction. Attention is on the lovely children as they look innocently at the photographer and at us as we view the photograph. The four girls all wear traditional head coverings, and one holds a small purse. The two girls sitting have a somewhat puzzled look. The higher girl on the right smiles and the one at the left simply looks at the camera. The arrangement of the children, with the boy in the front and the four girls staggered behind him in a flat U-shape, works well.

The test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*
Every photograph has a background. The background in the lower photo does not add much to the composition; neither does the way the two women and girl are arranged, all the same height, with their bodies perpendicular to the camera. In the upper photo, however, the colorful background, the bodies of the two women at a slight angle and the position of the three to form a triangle gives vibrancy to the photo.
There are times when you may want figure and ground to come together and join as one, as we see in the playful photograph of Renée holding her cluster of balloons. The position and proximity of her head in relation to the two oval pictures on the wall are easily seen as related.
Unplanned: Every photograph has a background, which can work with or against the intended subject. The background can be very carefully planned and set up or just be there and used without much thought. Here we see a young boy intently look at the running water on his feet. Not an unusual photograph until one notices that box of “Miracle-Gro” in the background and makes a humorous connection. This photograph is proof that great-grandmothers with a digital camera can take some interesting and unexpected photographs.

I have found that the best way to give advice to your children is to find out what they want and then advise them to do it. Harry S Truman
Photographing sporting events that have fast action requires a quick response, as one has only an instant to capture the peak action. This photograph not only captures the moment but also the composition of a skewed triangle, anchored by the basketball at the apex. Notice that just behind the ball is a camera on a tripod, which forms a triangle that complements the player’s triangle. Figure and ground connect.
Sometimes a cluttered background is helpful by providing a context for the main subject, the woman in the boat, as she paddles away with the purchases she has just made. The rich background provides a colorful, varied, and interesting surround. It is important, however, that the main subject be dominant over the important but secondary surround. Figure and ground support each other very well. If the background were plain, the photograph of the woman in the boat could be ambiguous and subject to mistaken interpretation. One is invited to spend time with the photograph and learn something about how people in this part of the world live.

No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem.  

_Booker T. Washington_
A long telephoto lens was used to capture this female bluebird. Because telephoto lenses have a shallow depth of field, the background is out of focus, giving full attention to the bird.

The moment a little boy is concerned with which is a jay and which is a bluebird, he can no longer see the birds or hear them sing. Eric Berne