



COMPOSING A PHOTOGRAPH

This resource was developed to support the Detroit Institute of Arts exhibition,
Russ Marshall: Detroit Photographs, 1958–2008



Opening Night, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Detroit, Michigan, 1984

Candid Photographs

Candid photographs are pictures of people unposed or of objects in places as you find them. Compose the photo in advance or try not looking through your viewfinder by shooting from hip level. Wait until the right moment to capture the scene and take the photograph quickly when you think something interesting has happened.

Keep in mind that sometimes subjects who do not know they are being photographed may get upset when you photograph them without their permission. Always be respectful of the privacy of individuals who may not want to be photographed and mindful of how you use the images on social media and elsewhere.



Don Mayberry with J. Wilkins Orchestra, 1993

Artificial or Natural (Available) Light

Russ Marshall used mostly natural light (also referred to as available light) in his photographs, as opposed to artificial light from a light bulb or camera flash. What type of lighting will you use and how will that impact the mood of your picture?

Look at the source of the lighting where you are photographing. The time of day or evening, even the weather (sunny or overcast) will produce very different results. Notice how the light falls on your subject – from above, from behind or directly in front of them?



Sandy's Lunch Counter, Gratiot Market, Detroit Eastern Market, 1980

Black and White or Color

Will you choose to photograph in black and white or color? How will this decision affect the feel of your work?

Black-and-white photographs often gives a sense of timelessness or of things, people, and places of the past. In a color photograph, color can either add to or distract from the subject or story you are trying to convey.



Press Operators, GM Fisher Body Trim Plant, Fort Street, Detroit, Michigan, 1982

Cropping Images

Cropping is the removal of unwanted areas of a photograph. After you take a photograph try cropping it to create a more interesting composition or to eliminate extra space around your subjects.

You can also crop your image as you look through your camera viewfinder or at your smartphone screen. Be careful not to unintentionally crop your subjects. Look at where the subjects are placed. Are you cropping out or cutting off something or someone important? Are you looking at the edges of the frame and thinking carefully about how you will arrange or capture the objects, people, or things in your photograph?



Genevieve and Boris, East Berlin, Germany, 1990

Camera Angles

The angle from which the photograph is taken can add emotion or visual interest to your composition.

Will you use a view from up high (bird's eye), eye level, or a view from ground level (worm's eye)? Or will you try something different, like moving in very close up to your subject or tilting your camera to alter the natural horizon line?

Captions (top to bottom)

"Opening Night, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Detroit, Michigan," 1984, Russ Marshall, American; gelatin silver print. Gift of the artist, 2012.168.

"Don Mayberry with J. Wilkins Orchestra," 1993, Russ Marshall, American; gelatin silver print. Gift of the artist, T2019.383.

"Sandy's Lunch Counter, Gratiot Market, Detroit Eastern Market," 1980, Russ Marshall, American; gelatin silver print. Gift of the artist, 2015.174.

"Press Operators, GM Fisher Body Trim Plant, Fort Street, Detroit Michigan," 1982, Russ Marshall, American; gelatin silver print, Russ Marshall, American; gelatin silver print. Gift of the artist, T2020.2

"Genevieve and Boris, East Berlin, Germany," 1990, Russ Marshall, American; gelatin silver print. Gift of the artist, T2019.417.