

Composition Case Study #09

ADVANCED COMPOSITION

This is a very interesting picture that caught my eye immediately.

I love the subject. I love the use of symmetry.

It was really only upon further study that I began to find cracks in this composition.

This particular case study is going to show you how "the devil is in the detail."

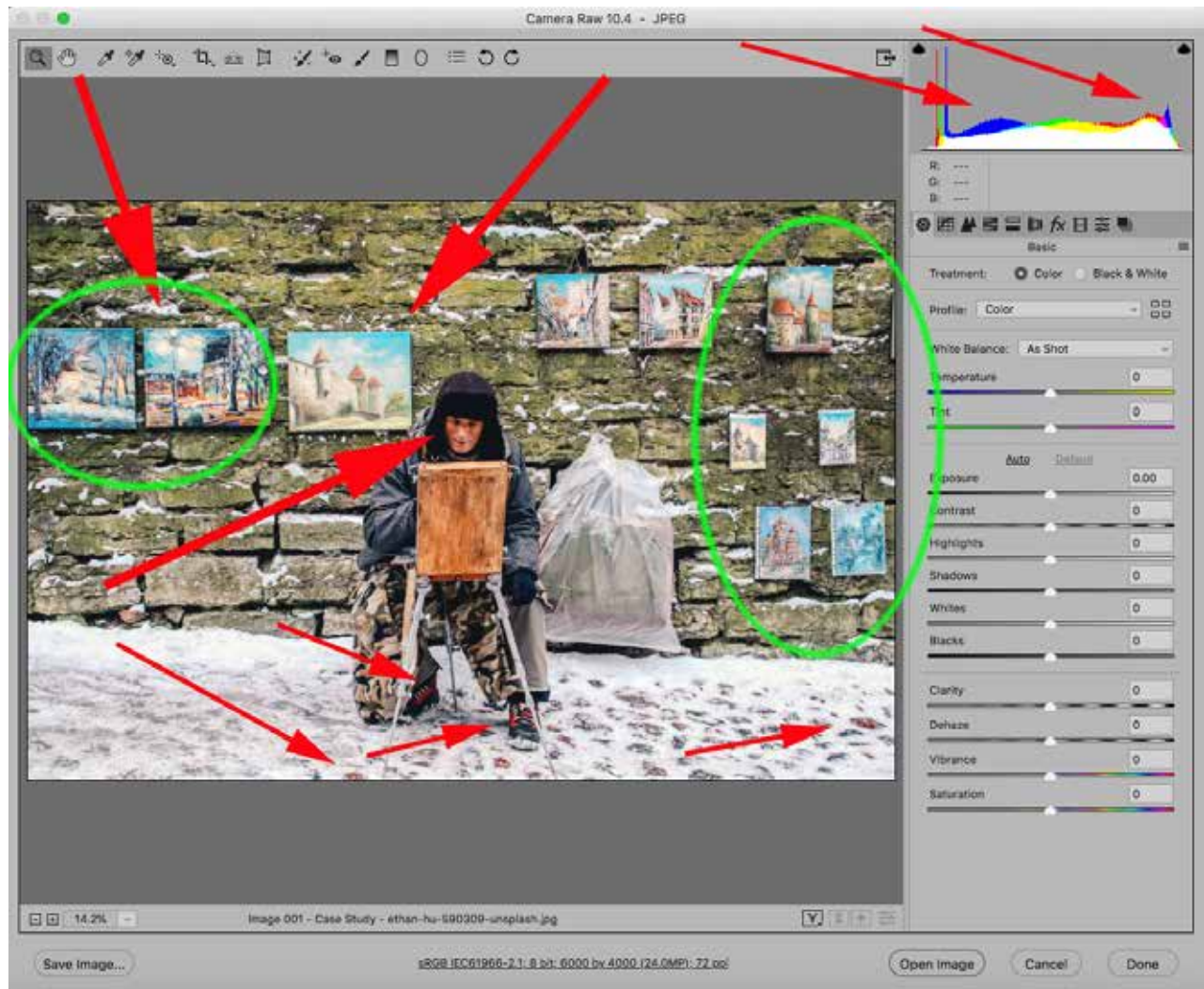
For those of you who may not be familiar with that phrase, here is the definition:

"The devil is in the detail" is an idiom that refers to a catch, or a mysterious element that is hidden in the details, meaning that something might seem simple at first look, but it will take more time and energy to complete successfully. (Wikipedia)

This image is a perfect example of this philosophy because no one would condemn this picture at first glance.

However, the composition can be improved without changing the meaning or intent.





Examination of the histogram and the preview image in the Camera Raw window reveals that the post-production of this image included a heavy dose of increase in the color saturation levels.

The thinking was likely to try and make the colors stand out on the paintings and the shoes.

The lighting appears to be subdued from an overcast day, which isn't necessarily a bad thing for this particular scene.

However, it would mute the colors.

When looking at color, many photographers simply grab the global settings for Saturation and Vibrance and drag them to the right.

The problem with that is that it is short-sighted when it comes to composition, and it can create unnatural elements known as artifacts.

When the global color saturation was raised in this shot, three things happened:

First, the red in the man's shoes became so vibrant that it really created an eye snag toward the bottom of the picture.

Second, the paintings reacted differently to the increase in saturation based upon their lighting. The paintings in the green circles saturated more than the paintings in the center of the image. This creates an eye movement toward the outside edges of the frame rather than toward the subject.

Third, the man's skin tone and the red brick showing through the snow took on an unnatural hue due to supercharging the saturation of the reds.



I made corrections to the color saturation to improve this composition. Can you tell what I did?



- I locally reduced the color saturation of the two far left paintings using the Adjustment Brush in the Photoshop Camera Raw window. This decreased the visual weight toward the left.
- I locally reduced the color saturation of the five far right paintings using the Adjustment Brush in the Photoshop Camera Raw window. This decreased the visual weight toward the right.
- I locally increased the color saturation of the single painting just to the man's right (camera left) using the Adjustment Brush in the Photoshop Camera Raw window. This increased the visual weight at the center of the frame.
- I locally increased the color saturation of the two paintings just to the man's left (camera right) using the Adjustment Brush in the Photoshop Camera Raw window. This increased the visual weight at the center of the frame.
- I locally reduced the color saturation of the man's face back to a normal skin tone.
- I locally reduced the color saturation of the shoes and bricks to vastly decrease their visual weight and eliminate the possibility of drawing the eyes downward.
- I left the box of the easel as it was. This makes it the strongest shape - with the greatest degree of color saturation – centrally located within the frame.

All of these changes have solidified the subject. Remember, a great composition has a strong subject!

What is the subject?

The subject is the man painting.

What are the paintings?

The paintings are negative space. They support the story of the subject. They also 'add' to

the composition (now that we've changed the color saturation levels), rather than detract from the composition, by pushing the eyes inward toward the subject through repetition and color contrast.

If you go back to the image on the previous page, you will see a red arrow pointing toward the right of the frame. There is an eye snag there. This is an element that is cut off, with a prominent shape, near the edge of the frame. In this case, it hurts the composition.



My first thought was to either clone it out or crop it out. The idea of cropping it out caused me to analyze the photograph a little bit deeper.

This shot relies on symmetry for the composition. What if a more substantial crop could increase the symmetry, increase the visual weight of the man and his easel, and accomplish this without changing the story or intent of the original shot?



This image depicts my final crop for this photograph. It places the man in a perfectly symmetrical position. It makes him larger in the

frame. It keeps the paintings but eliminates the eye snags.

The new crop also has another benefit.



By tightening up the frame, we now have a triangulation between the color-saturated paintings and the painter.

Increasing the man's size within the frame makes his face a more important visual element.

It adds character to the story.



In this image, the top photograph is the original and the bottom is our edited version.

It's very apparent how the image has been improved.

The story and intent have remained the same. The subject is now clearly identifiable, and there is no misdirection within the composition.