

Minimalist Composition

Who - When - Where - How

Presented by Jeffrey Sward

September 2, 2025 00:35:02

Minimalism Topics

- What
- Who
- Where-When
- How: five sections
- Why

What

In order to know what something is, it is often useful to know what it is not.

Minimalism – Maximalism

Minimalism

- Austere simplicity
- Sparseness focusing solely on the smallest number of objects in the compositional process
- Only the most important things are placed into a space
- I know it when I see it
 - Supreme Court Justice **Potter Stewart** in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (1964)

Maximalism

- Every available space is filled with something
- Content complexity causes extreme visual incoherence to the point that nothing can be isolated as a discrete thing
- Mixed patterns
- Excessive collections
- Saturated colors

Minimalism – Maximalism Continuum

- Less is more
 - **Ludwig Mies van der Rohe**, notable architect, referring to the aesthetics of minimalist architectural design
- Less is not more, more is more
 - **Dolly Parton**, notable philosopher
- Simplicity is complicated
 - **Jeffrey Sward**



Farnsworth House
Ludwig Mies van der Rohe
Architect

[No window coverings]



Dolly Parton

Minimalism and Maximalism in Interior Design



In which environment does more thought occur when adding a new element?
Or is the thought process itself different?

Minimalism and Maximalism Photograph Examples

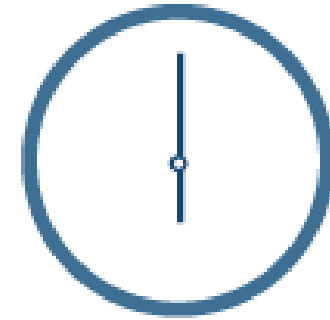
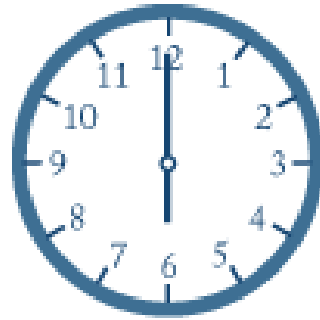


Hiroshi Sugimoto





Function



Form

Form follows function.

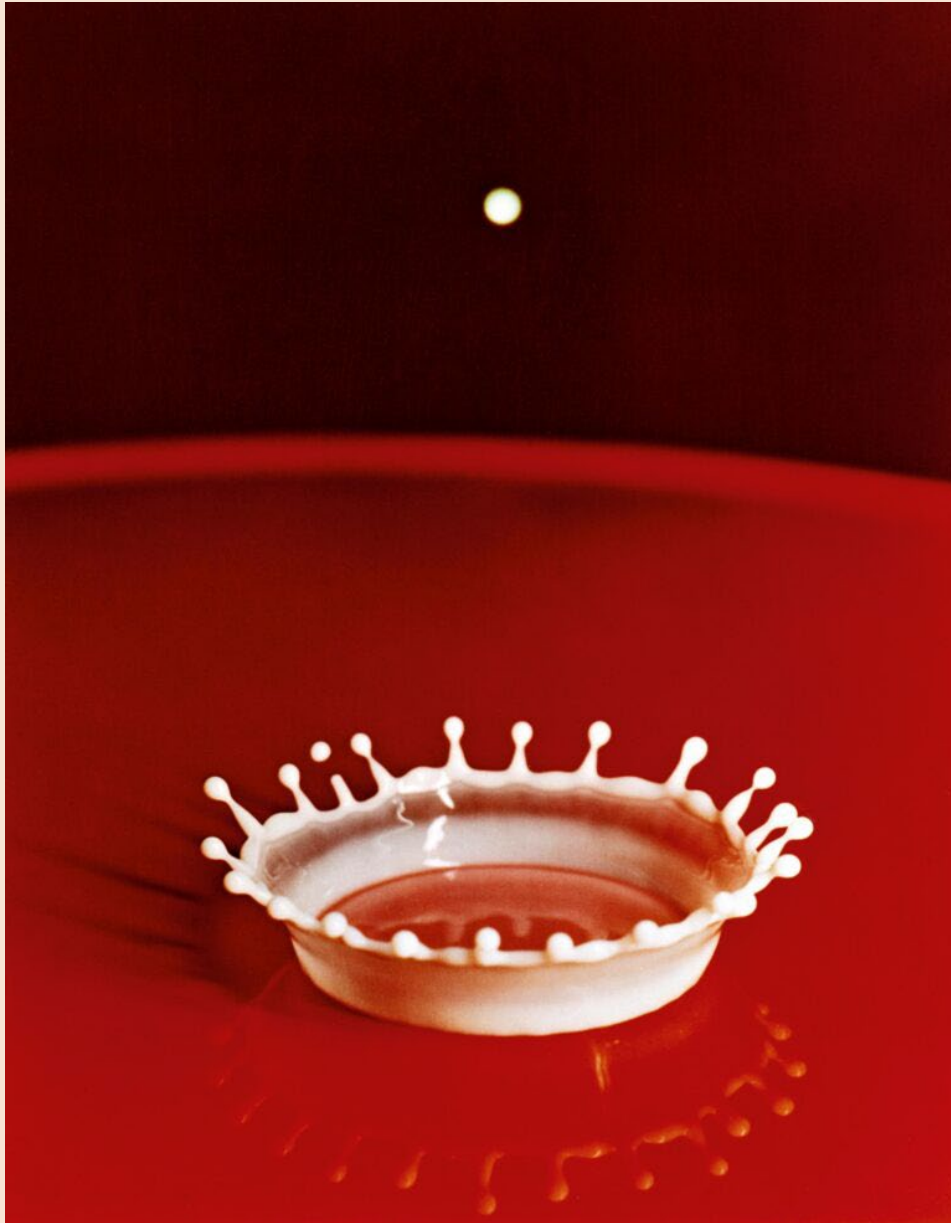
Beauty in design results from purity of function. [2]

Does it? How? Why?

Who

The best way to learn a style is by studying expert practitioners from the past.

- Paraphrased from **Donal Michalsky**

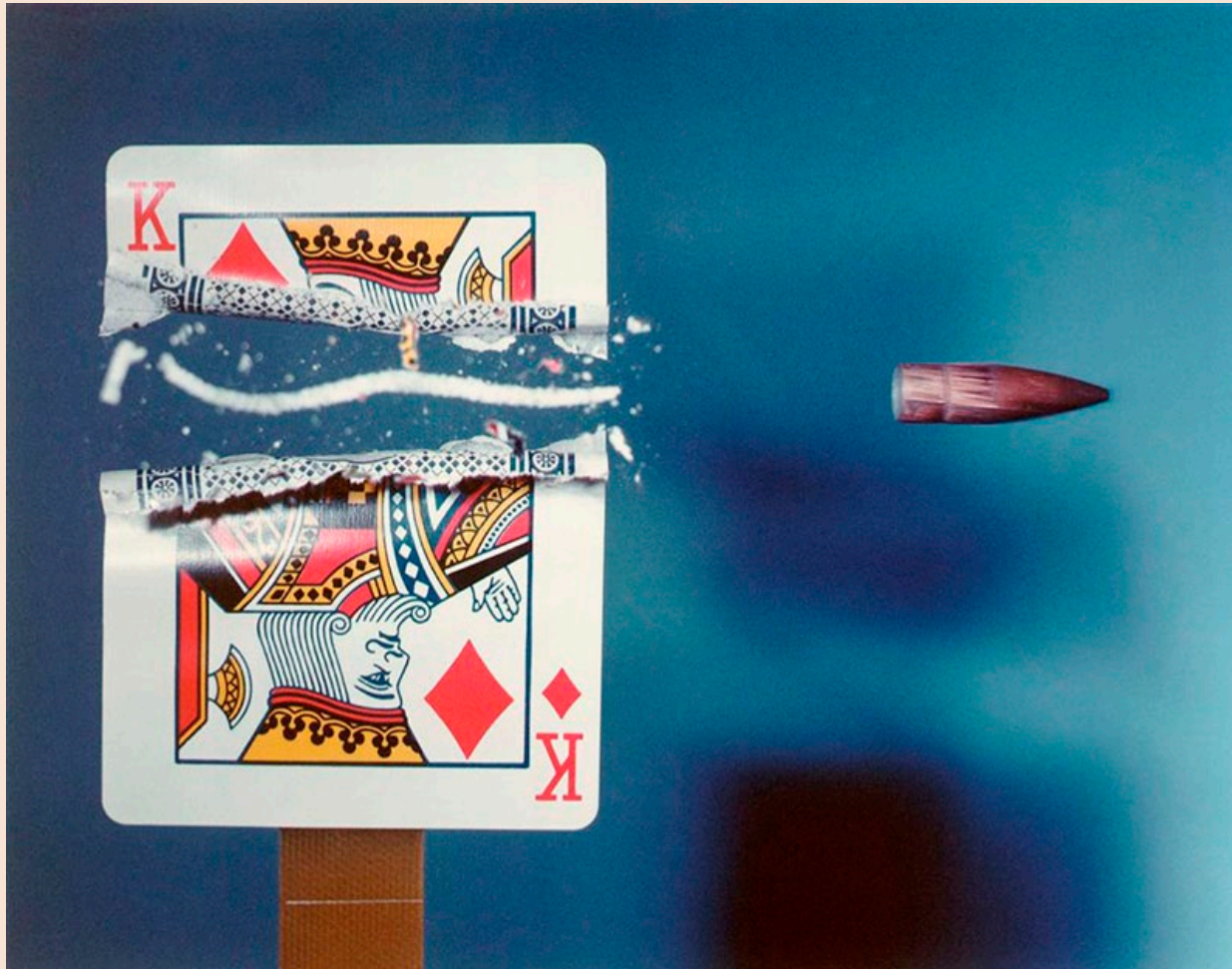


Harold Edgerton

Aka Popa Flash

High speed motion picture camera for atomic bomb tests.

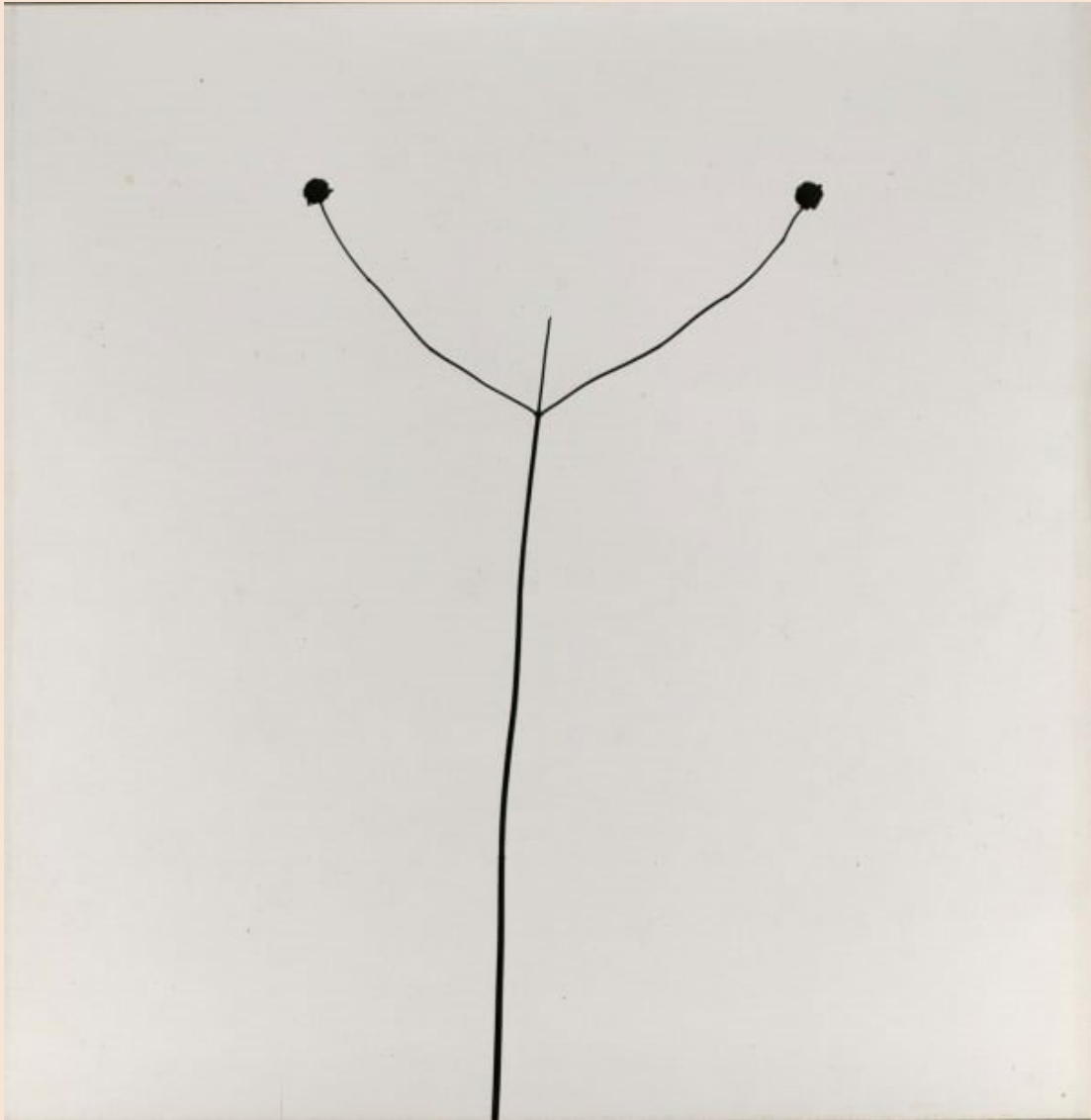
Aerial reconnaissance photos at night using (very large) flash



Harold Edgerton



Harry Callahan



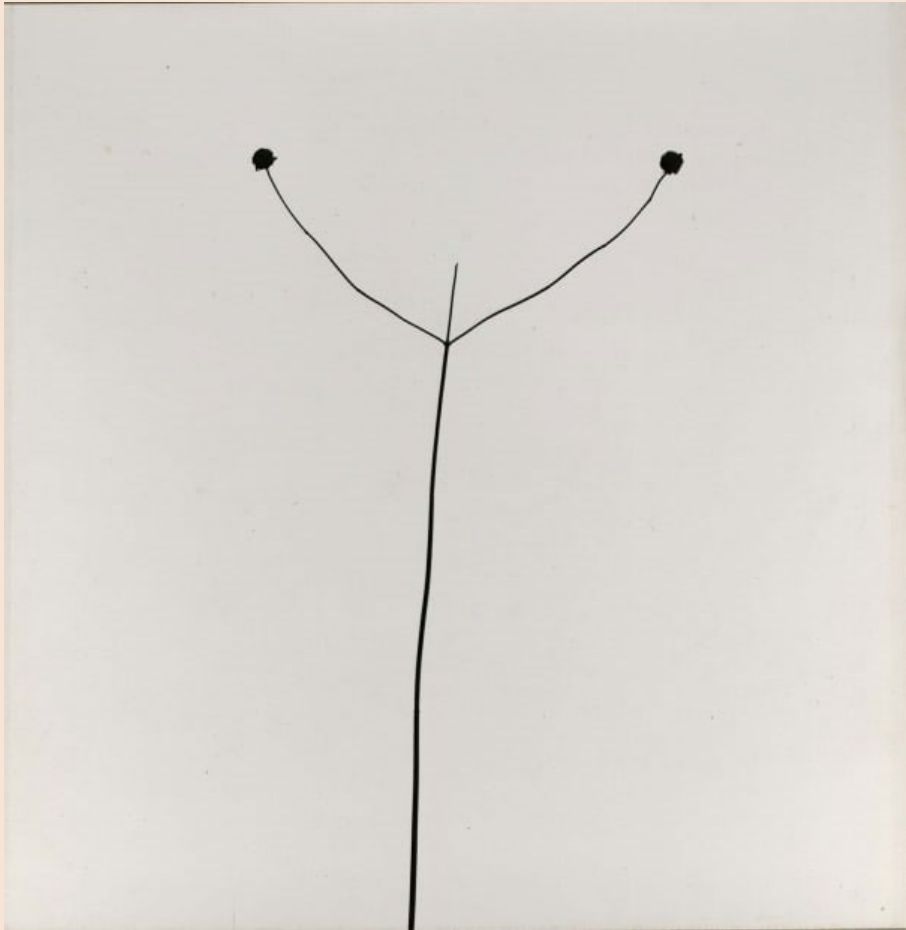
Harry Callahan



Hiroshi Sugimoto



Hiroshi Sugimoto



Harry Callahan



Hiroshi Sugimoto

Discussion. Both have minimal subject and organization but Sugimoto resists analysis.

Who else?

When and Where

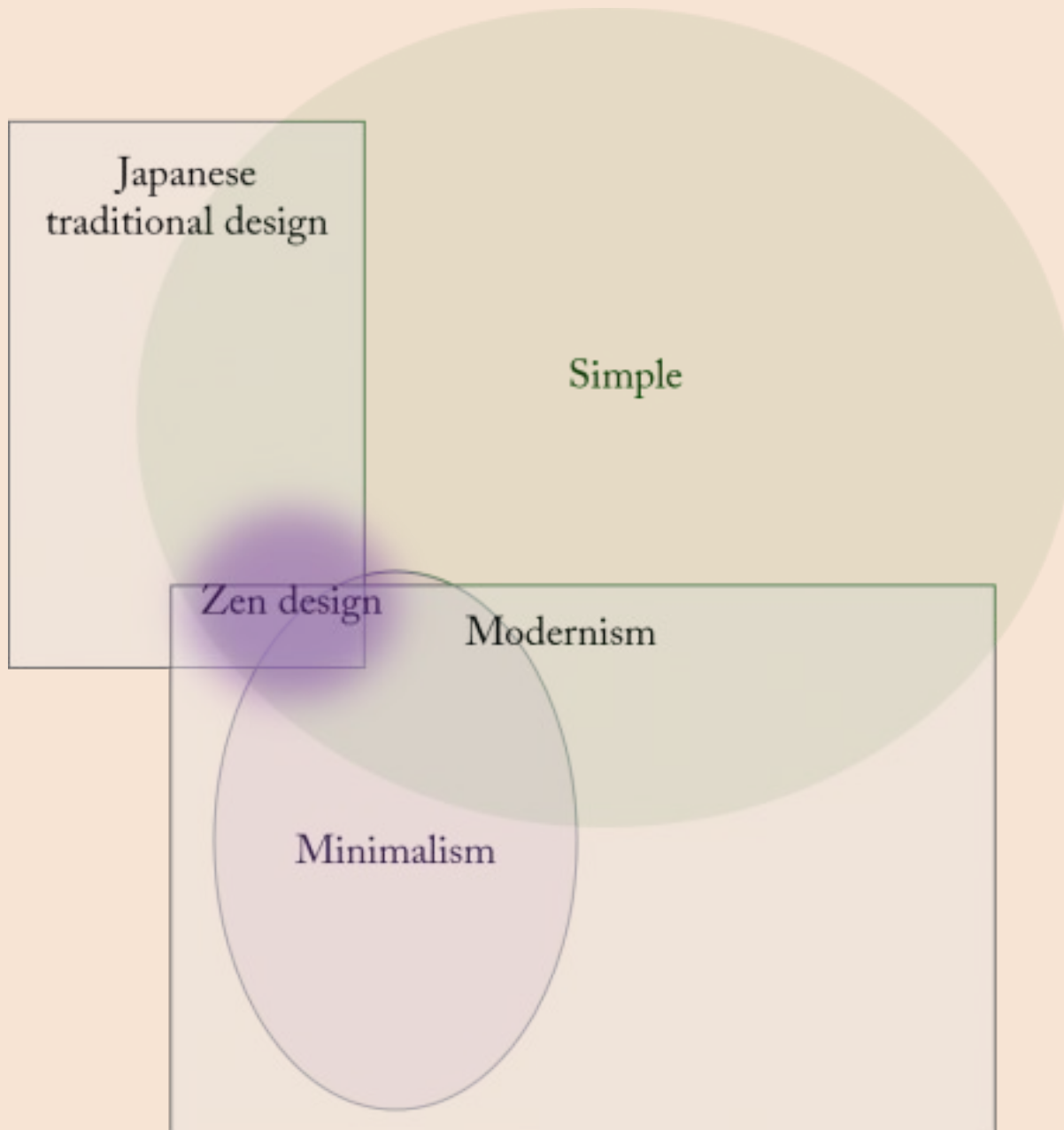
Some History

- Great pyramid of Egypt c. 2560 BC (golden ratio)
- Parthenon c 432 BC (golden ratio)
- Euclid documented the golden ratio c. 300 BC
- Zen Buddhism c. 600
- Leonardo Fibonacci 1202
- Leonardo de Vinci, Vitruvian Man, human proportions, 1490
- [First] Minimalism, Modernism in Art, Malevich, Moholy-Nagy, van der Leek, etc. c. 1890 - 1930
 - *Salon des Indépendants* 1911, *Salon e la Section d'Or* 1912
- [Second] Minimalist art movement, Robert Morris, Frank Stella, Carl Andre, Robert Ryman, Donald Judd, etc. 1960s-1970s

Zen and Minimalism

- Form is emptiness; emptiness is form. Form is not different than emptiness; emptiness is not different than form.
 - Heart Sutra
- The reverse side also has a reverse side
 - Japanese proverb
- We shape clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want.
 - Lao Tzu
- What follows is trying to explain the empty space by describing the pot.

Overlap with Similar Approaches



Some of these approaches are recent (modernism) and some of these approaches have occurred for centuries (Japanese traditional design)

How

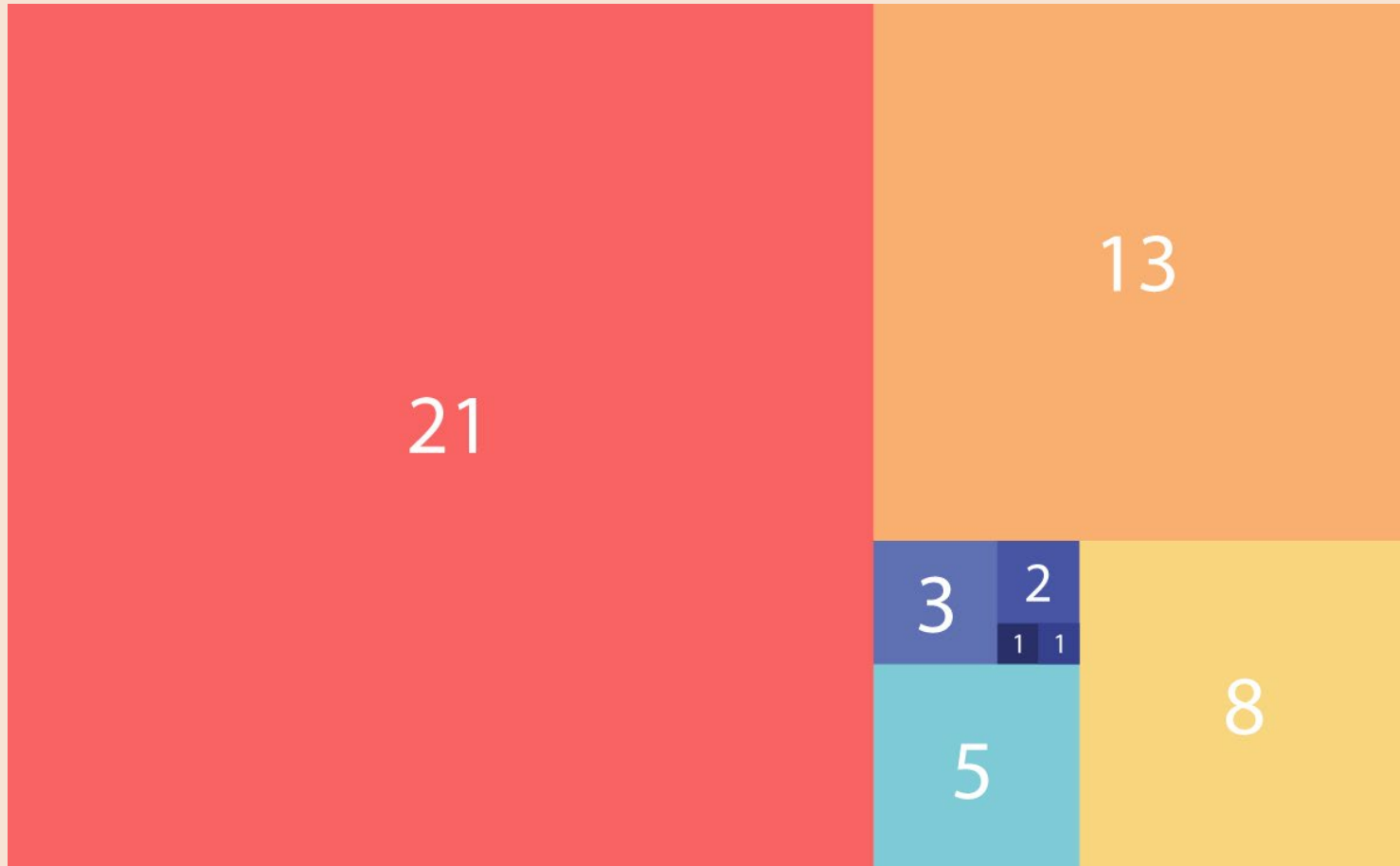
**Golden Ratio and Golden Spiral Tools
for Organization
Danger: technical section**

Fibonacci Sequence

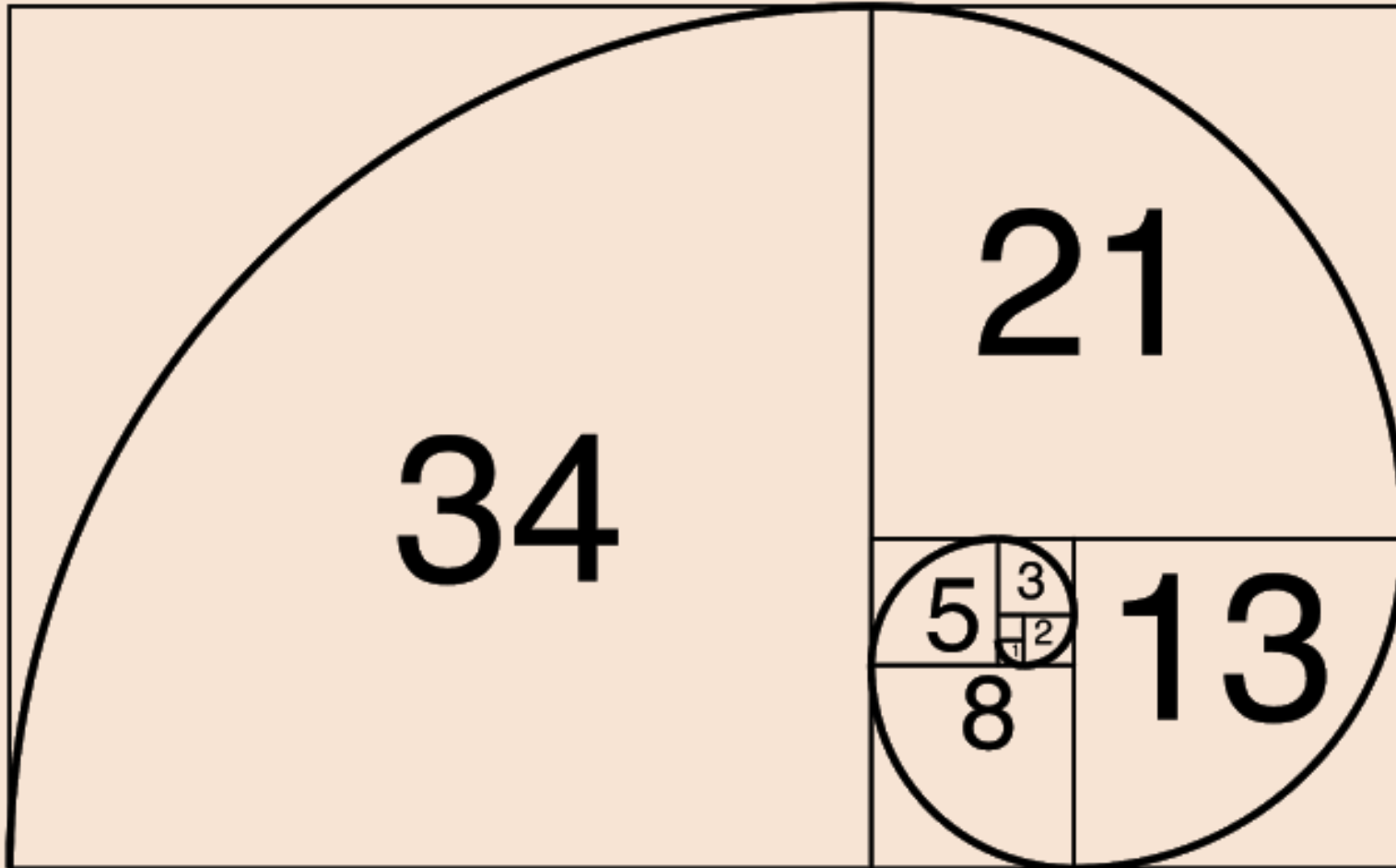
Each number is the sum of previous two

1 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 5 - 8 - 13 - 21 - 34

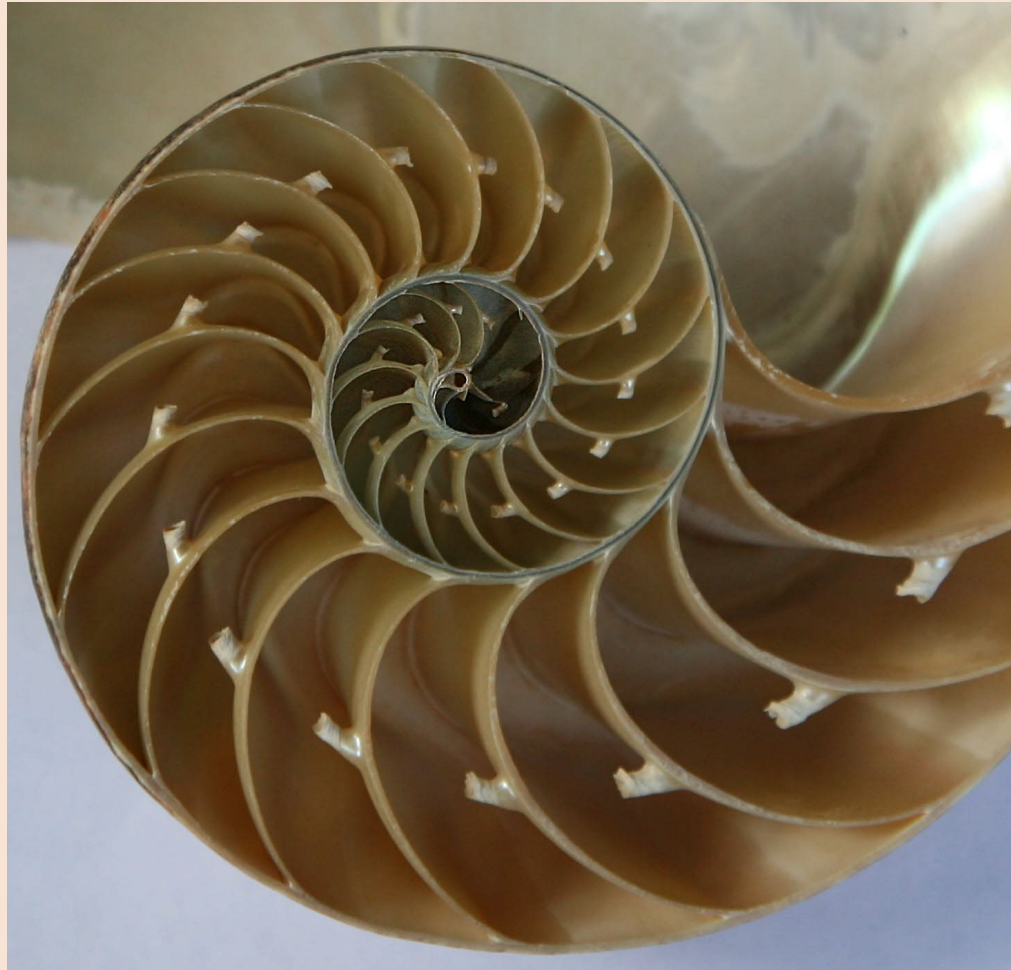
Fibonacci Squares



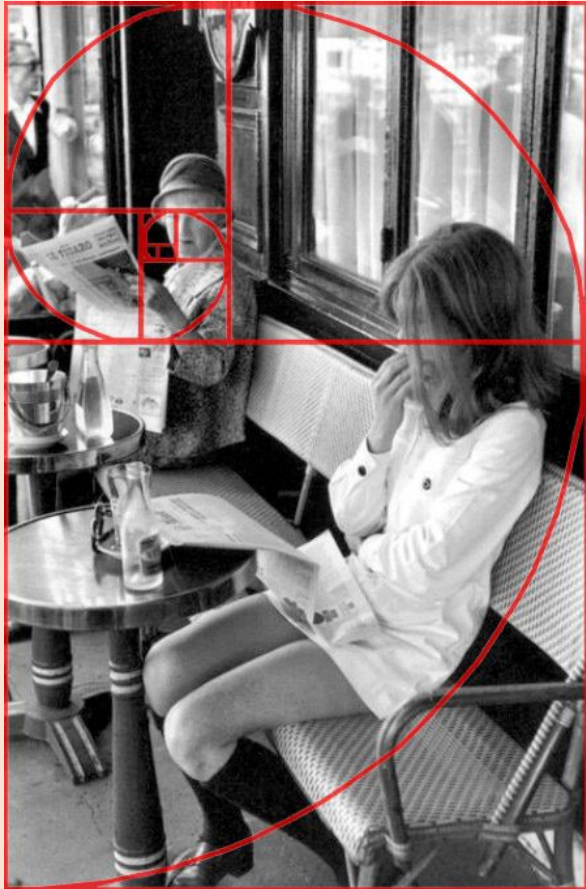
Fibonacci (Golden) Spiral



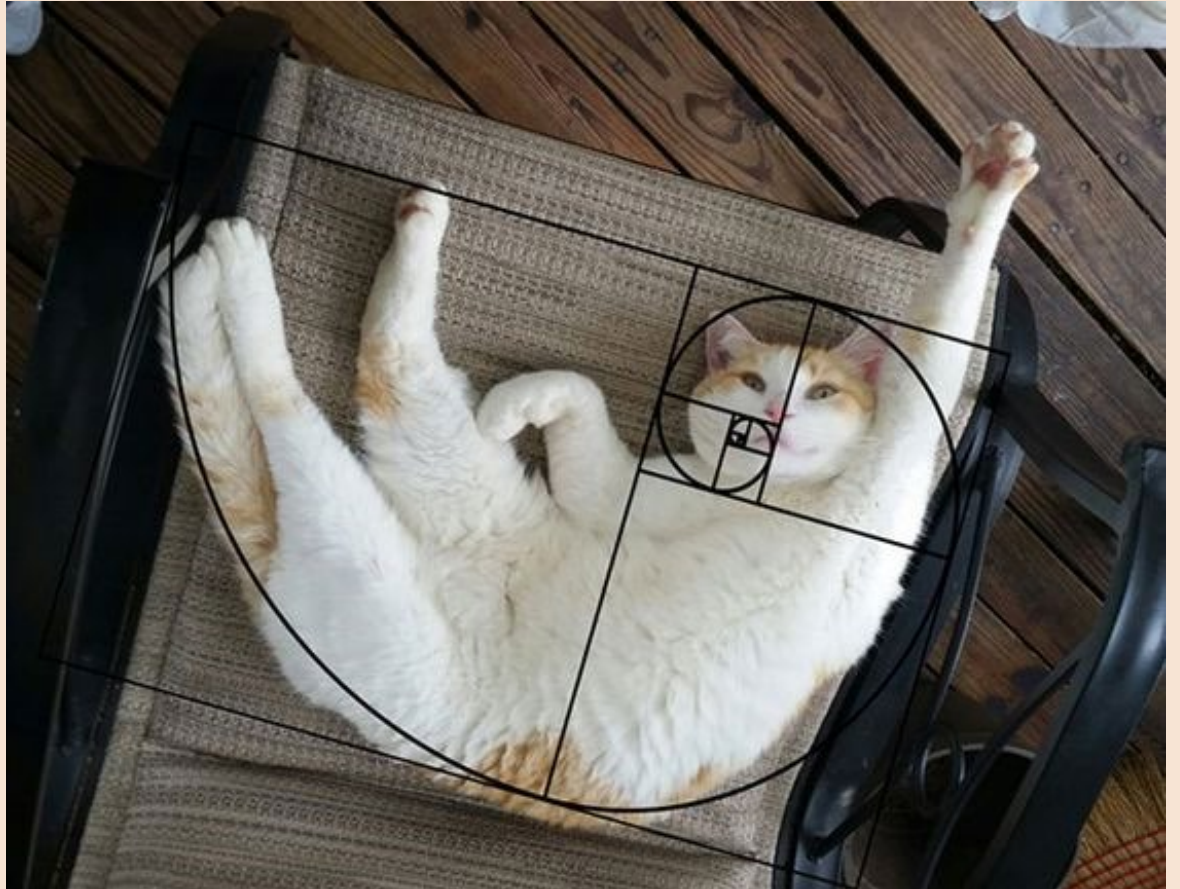
Golden Spiral in Nature



Golden Spiral in Photographs



Cartier-Bresson
Frequently present!!



Golden Ratio

$$\frac{21}{13} = 1.615$$

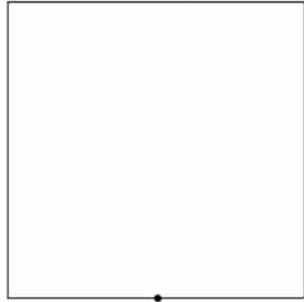
Ratio of consecutive Fibonacci numbers approach exact value as numbers get larger

$$\frac{1 + \sqrt{5}}{2} = 1.618... = \varphi$$

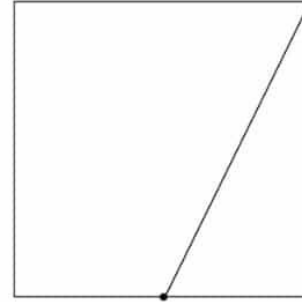
Mathematical limit of ratios

$$\frac{1}{1.618} = 0.618...$$

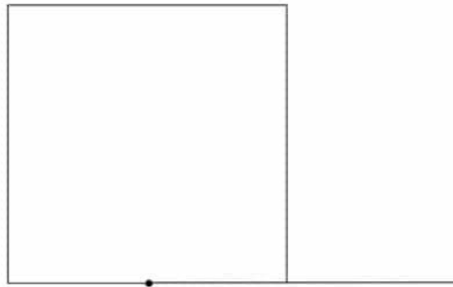
Decimal part is the same as reciprocal !!



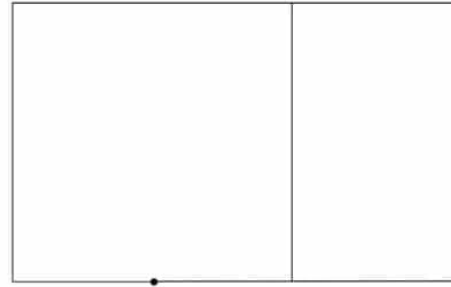
Draw a square with a dot on the center of the bottom line.



Draw a line from the dot to the top right corner.



Drop the line down to the right.



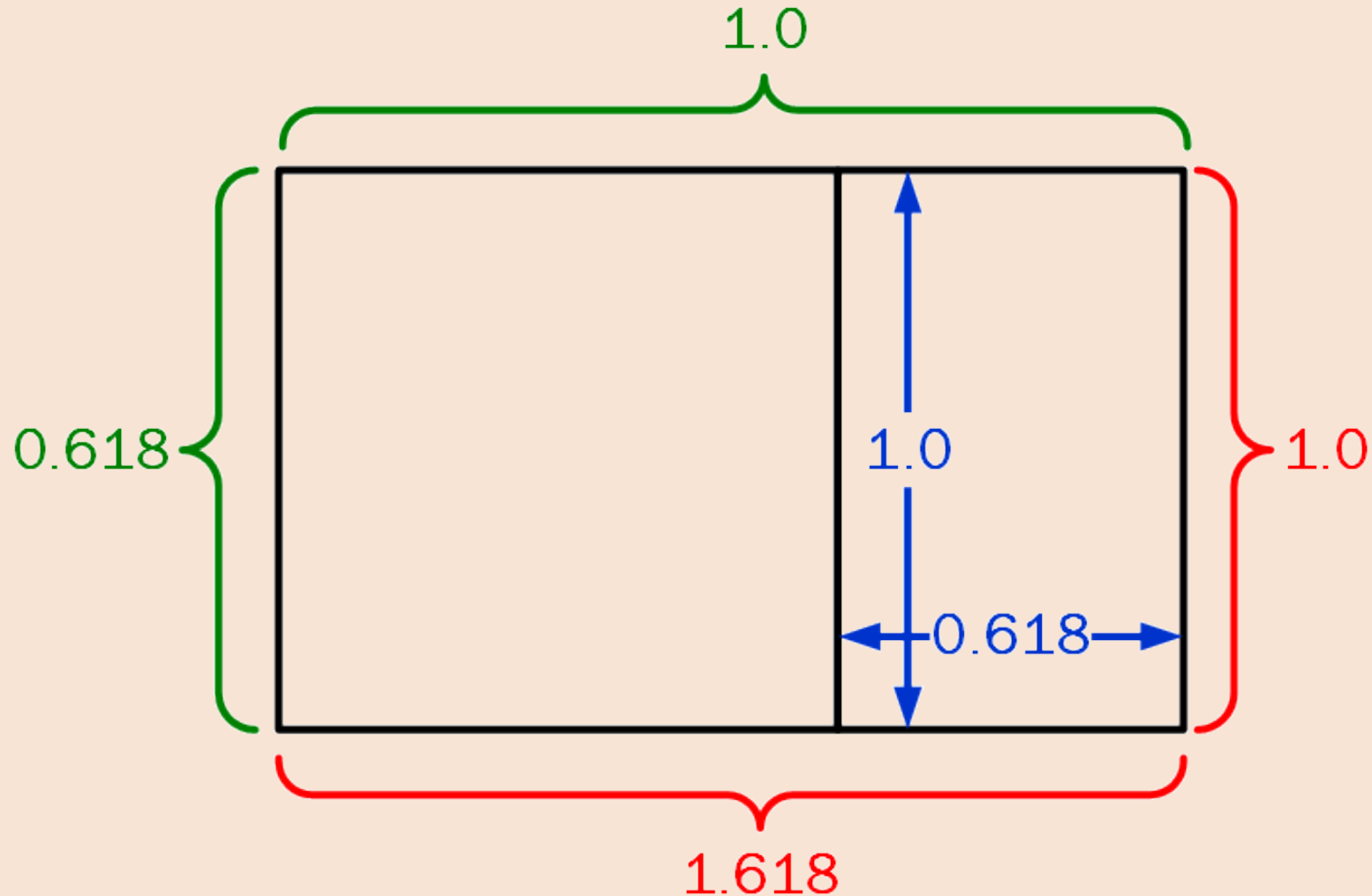
Finish the rectangle started with that line.

CRAFT
whack

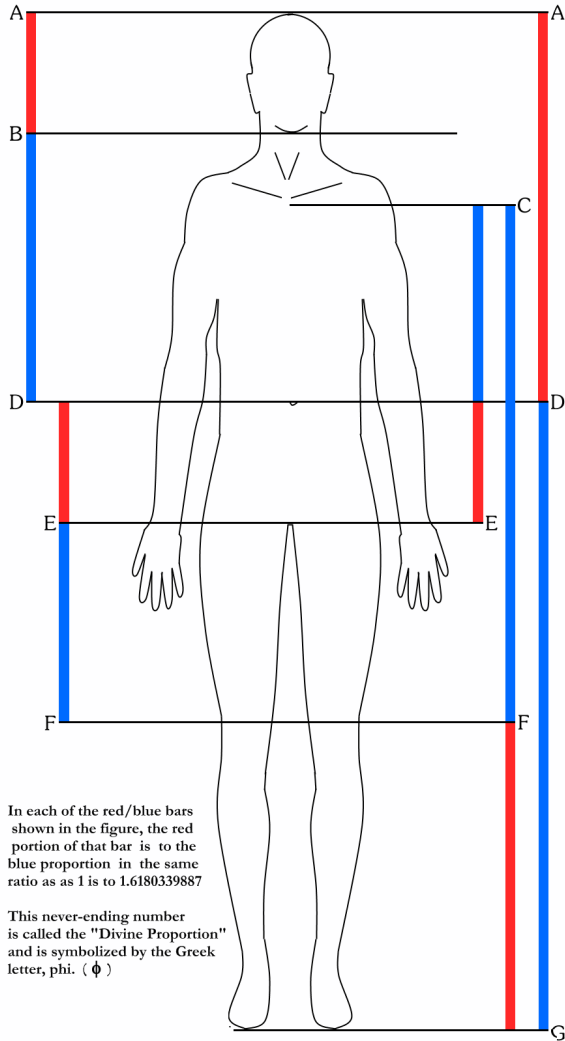
Making Golden Ratio Rectangle

Golden Rectangle Has Both Ratios and Reciprocals

- Large Rectangle Shrunk Will Overlay Exactly the Blue Rectangle ○



DIVINE PROPORTIONS



In each of the red/blue bars shown in the figure, the red portion of that bar is to the blue portion in the same ratio as as 1 is to 1.6180339887

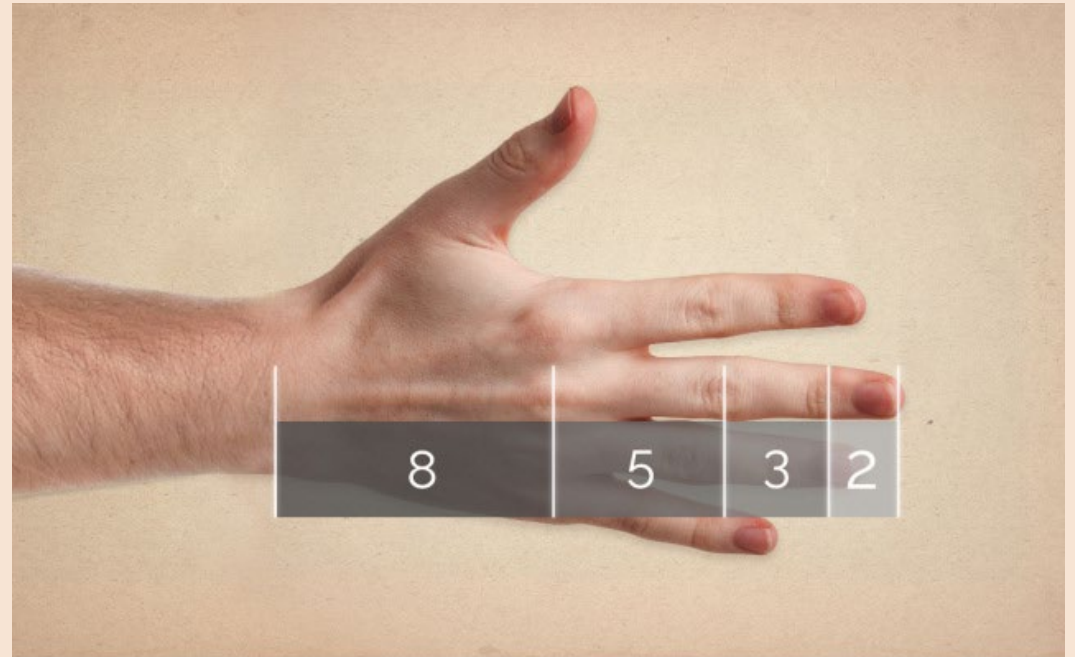
This never-ending number is called the "Divine Proportion" and is symbolized by the Greek letter, phi. (ϕ)

$$\overline{BD} \div \overline{AB} = \phi ; \overline{EF} \div \overline{DE} = \phi ; \overline{DG} \div \overline{AD} = \phi ;$$

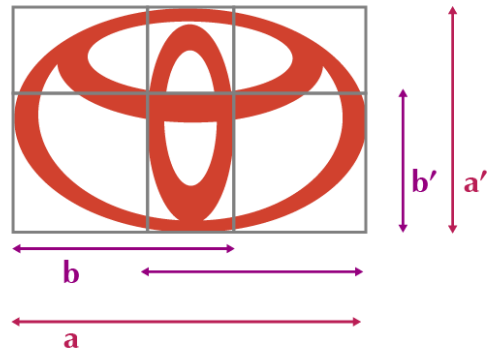
$$\overline{CF} \div \overline{FG} = \phi ; \overline{CD} \div \overline{DE} = \phi ;$$

Beyond those shown here, other divine proportionalities also exist. For example, the width of the lips is in divine proportion to the width of each eye, the width of the shoulders is in divine proportion to the width of the waist and so on.

Golden Ratio in Nature



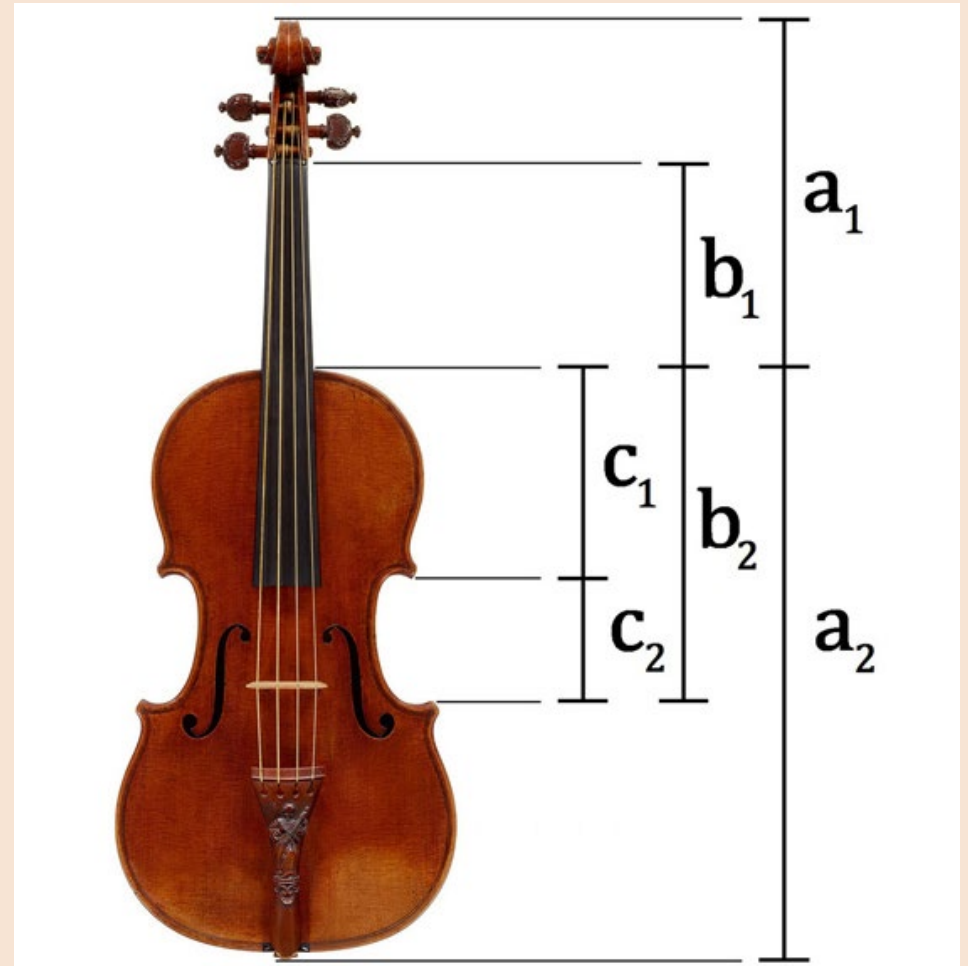
Golden Ratio in Design



$$\frac{a}{b} = \frac{a'}{b'} = 1.618!!!$$

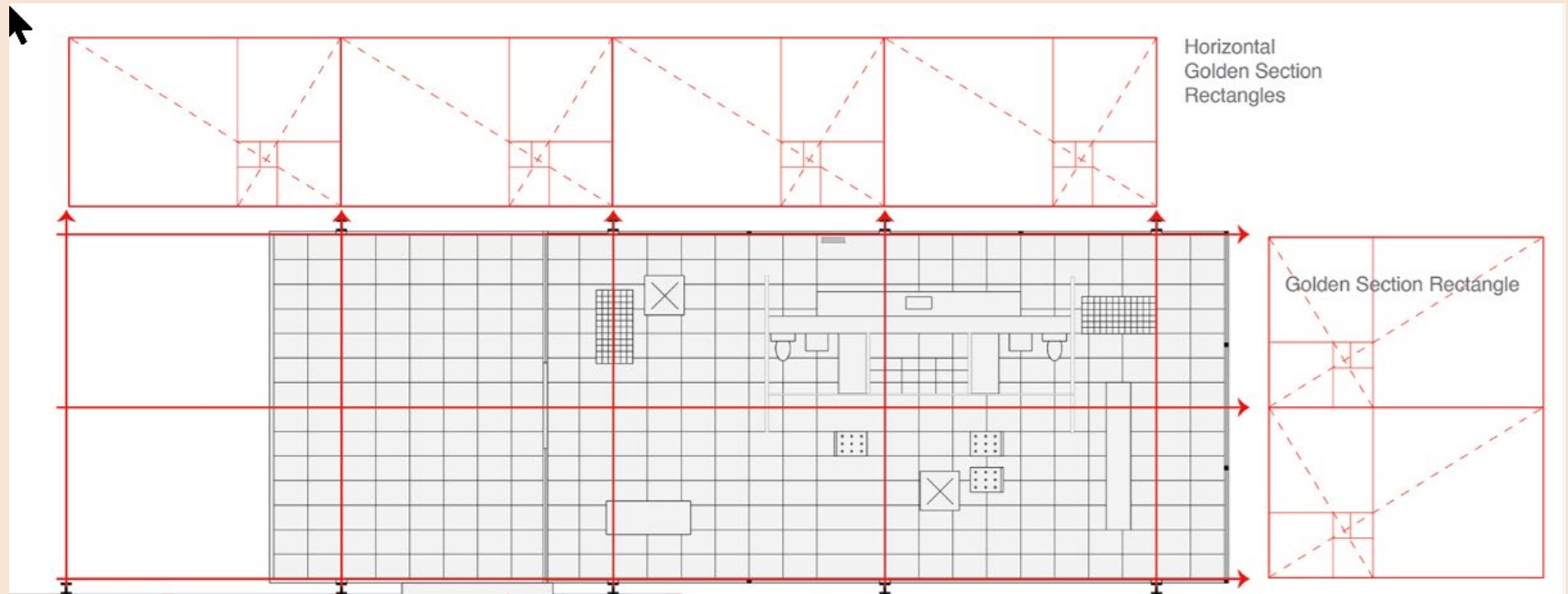
goldenratio

dm|DesignMantic

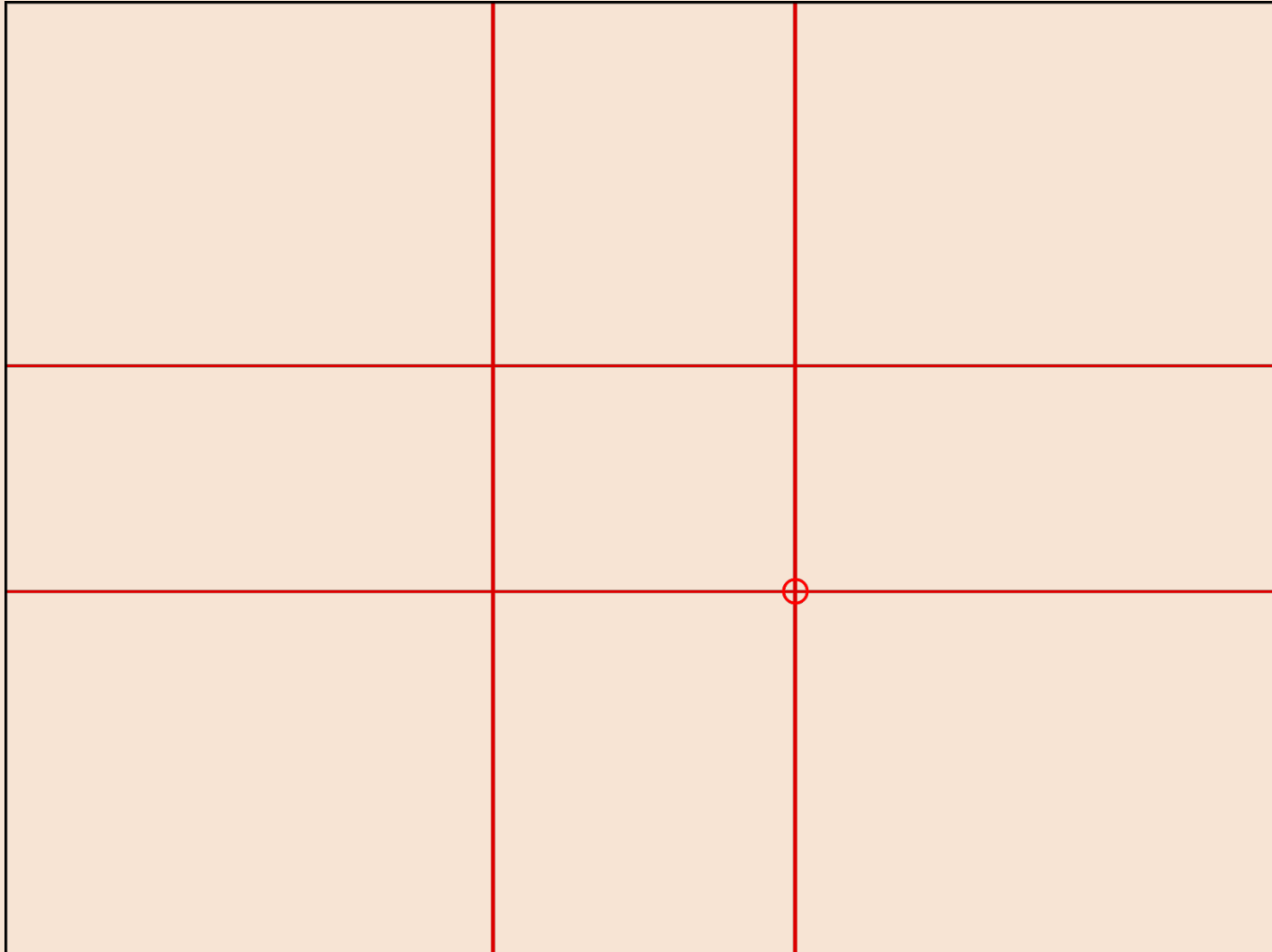


Farnsworth House (van der Rohe)

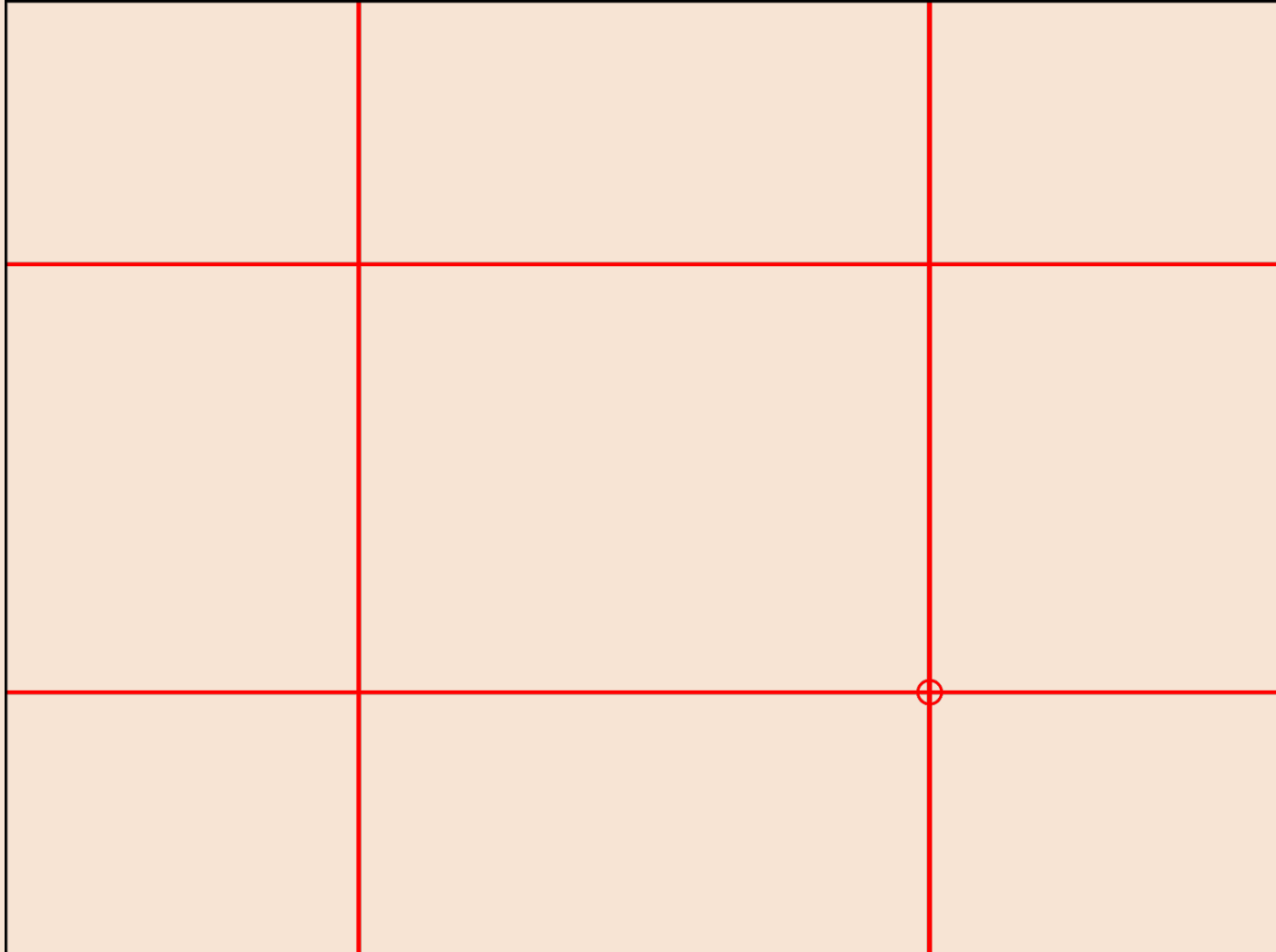
analysis by Kimberly Elam [1]



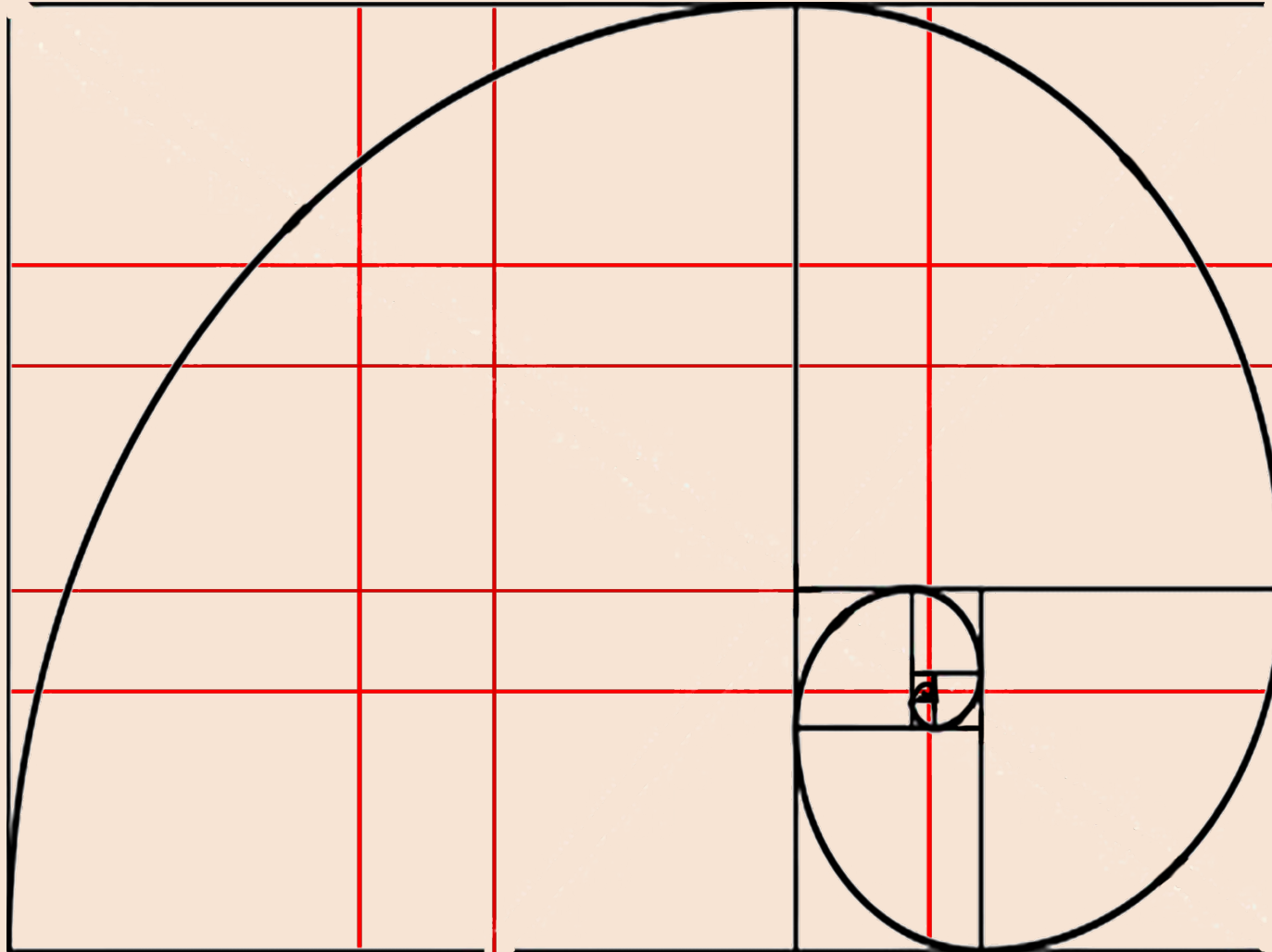
“ φ Grid” Narrow in Center



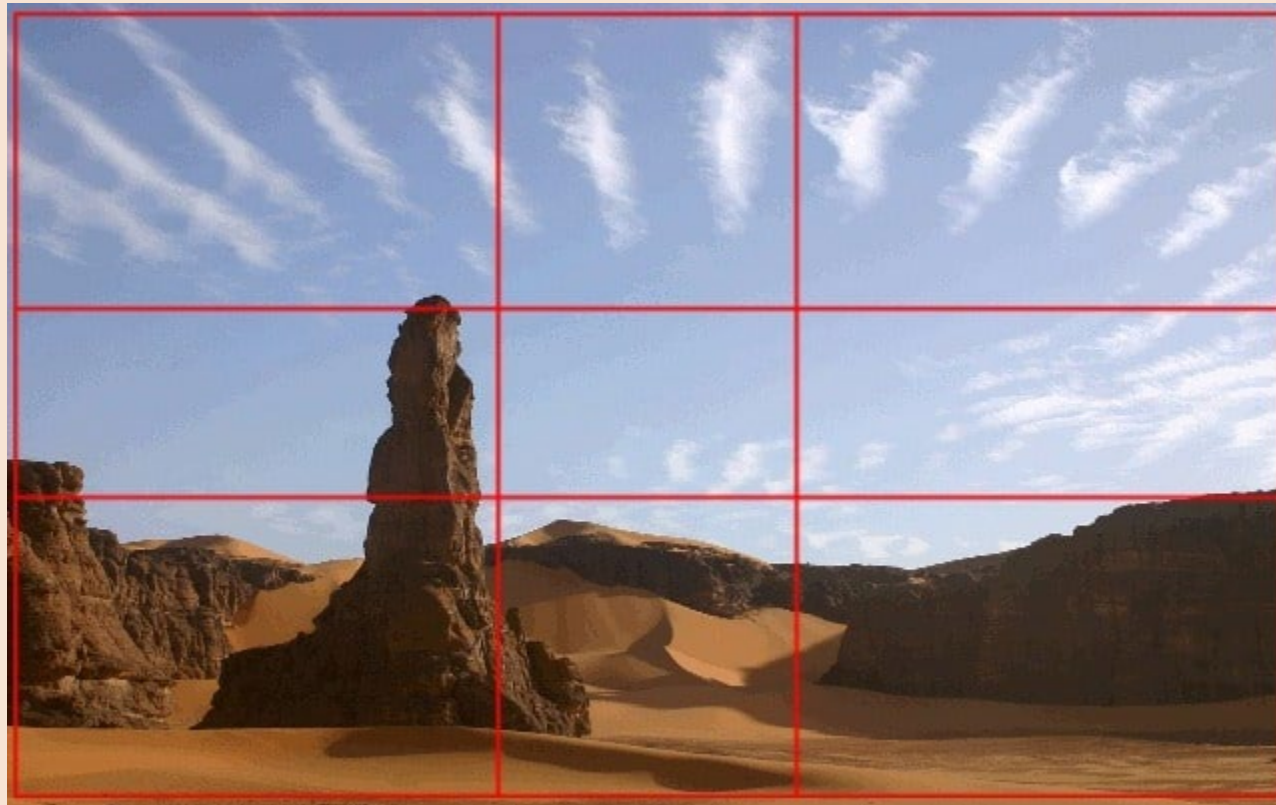
“ φ Grid” Wide in Center



Both Grids with Spiral – Starts at Wide Intersection

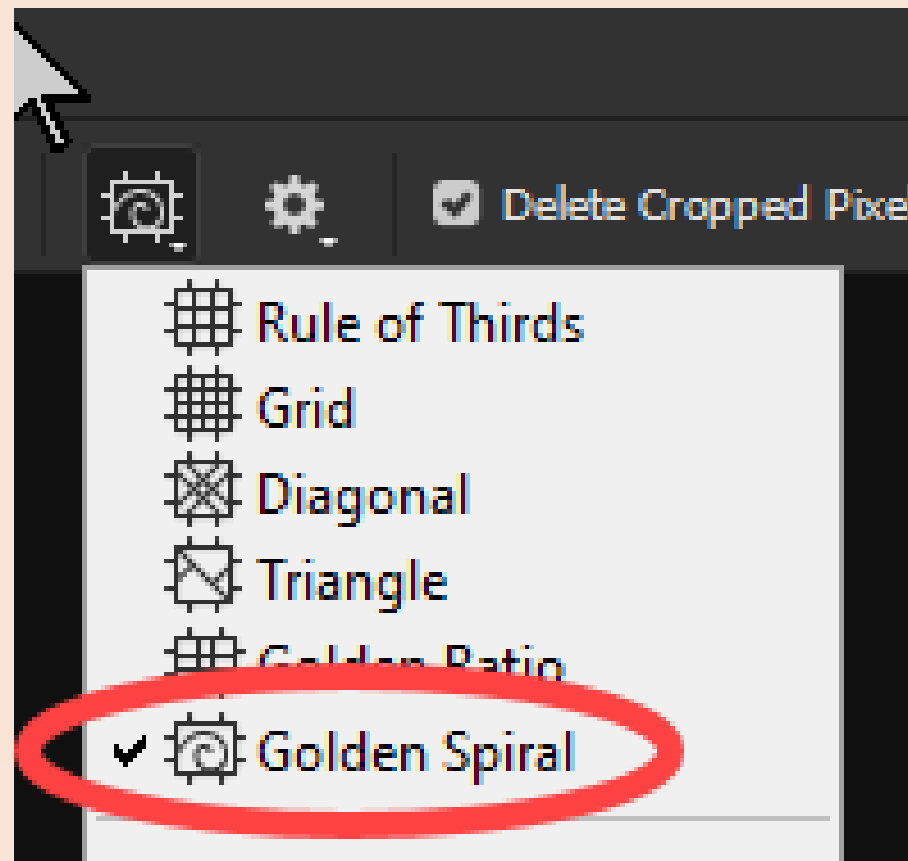
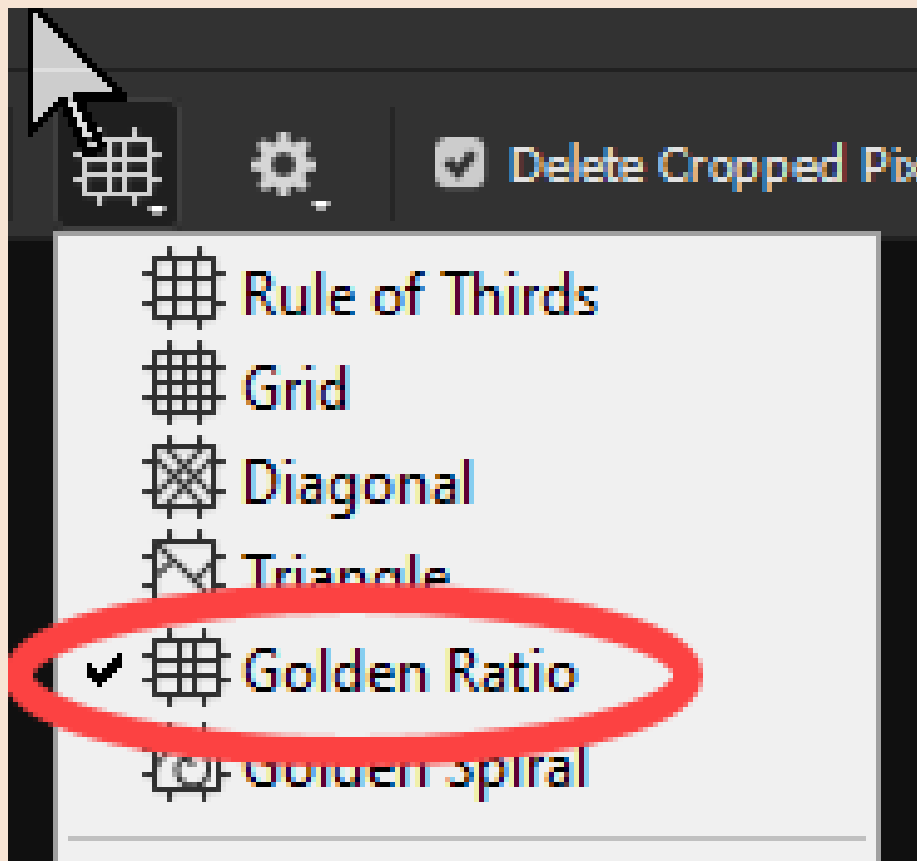


Golden Ratio in Photography



Photoshop Is Your Friend Plan A

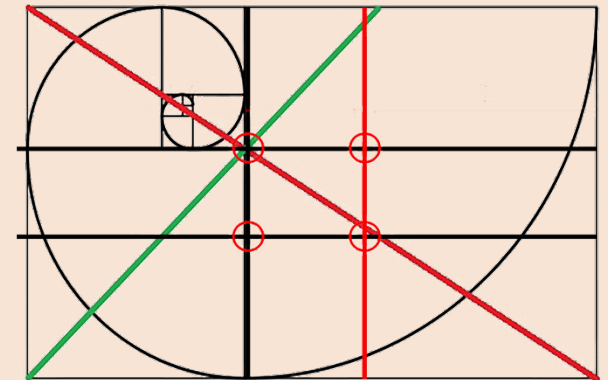
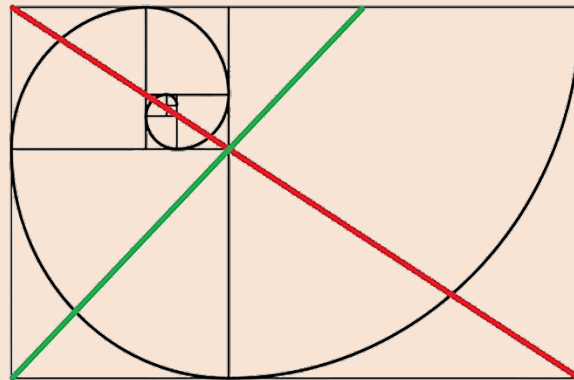
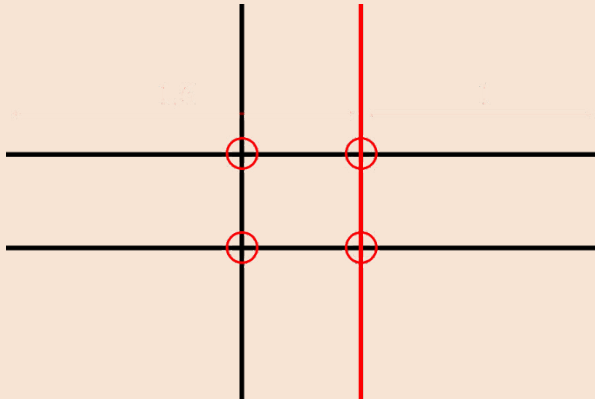
Built-in Golden Ratio and Spiral Photoshop Crop Tools



For Lightroom use “Crop Guide Overlay”

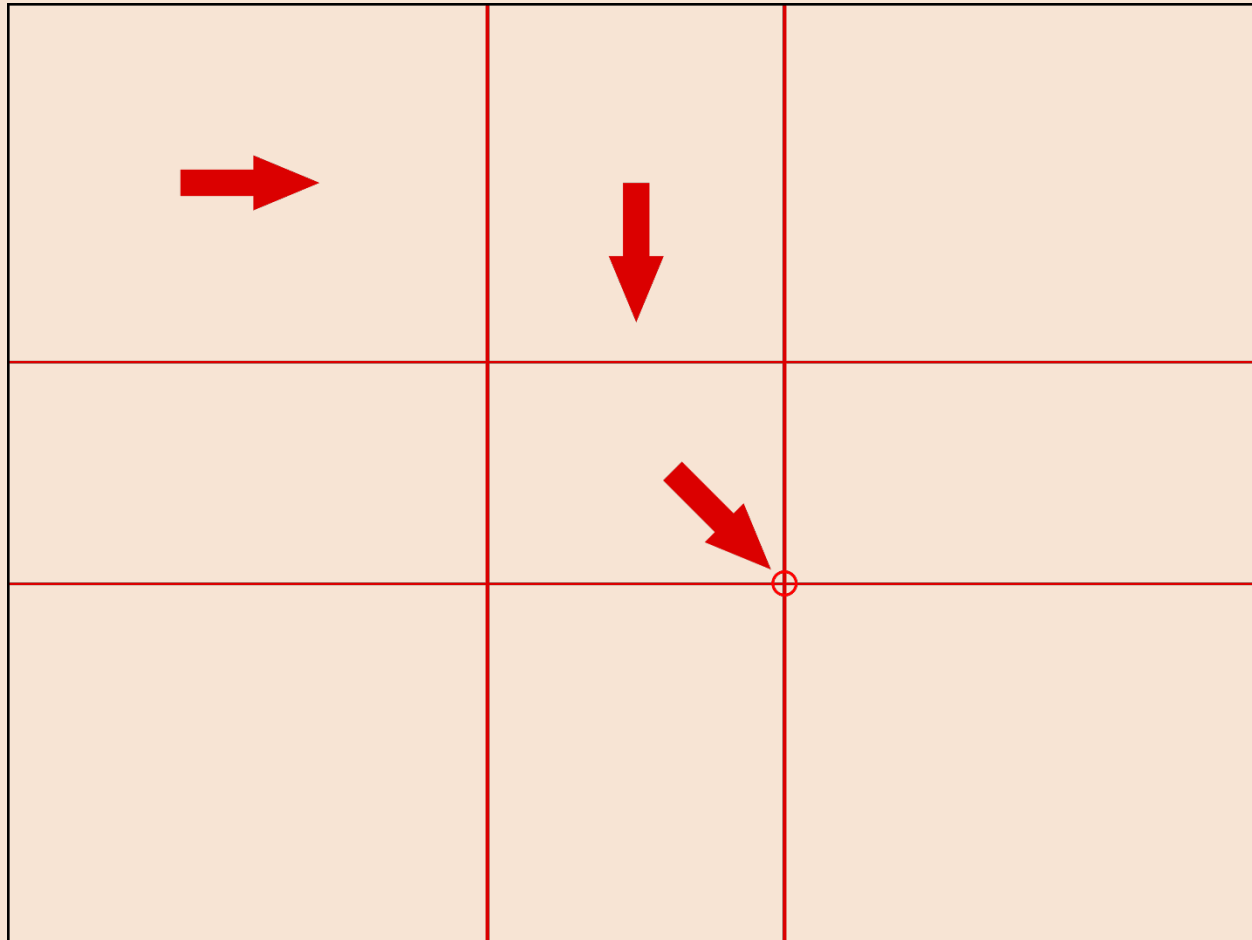
Photoshop Is Your Friend Plan B

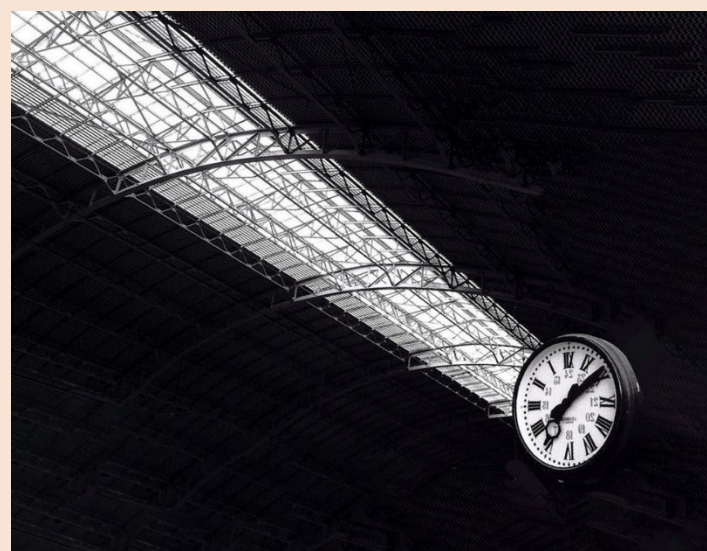
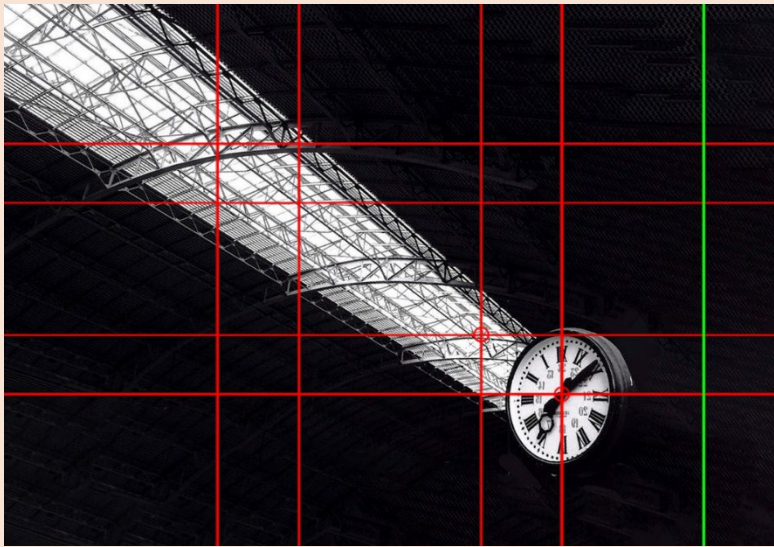
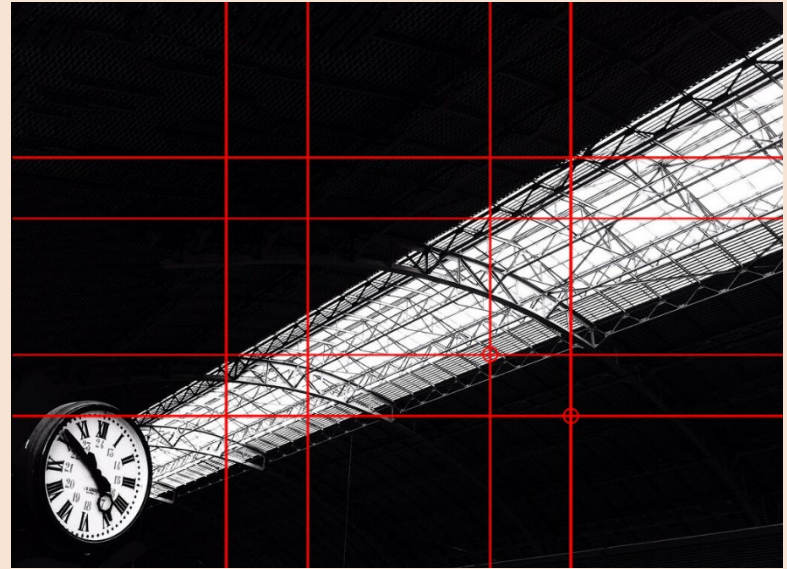
- Grid overlay download from parksphotos.com/goldenoverlays/ [5]
- Paste grid to new layer
- Use => edit => transform => scale with snap to document bounds
- Samples below. 30 variants in zip file



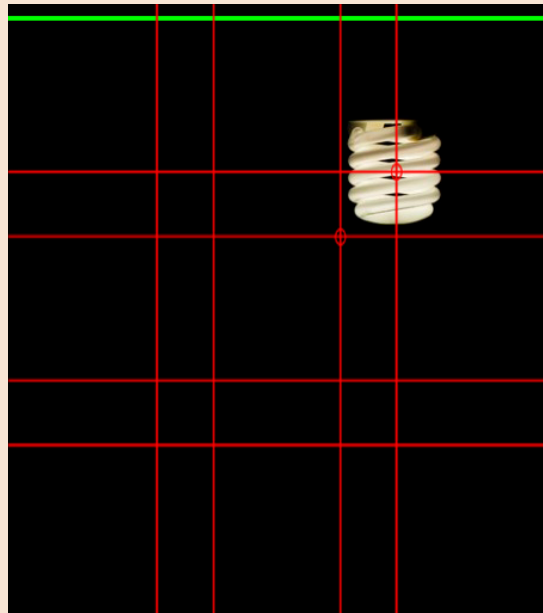
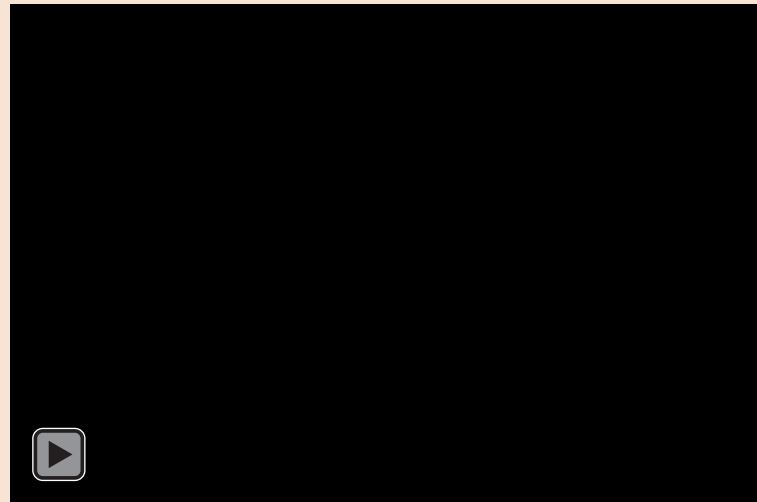
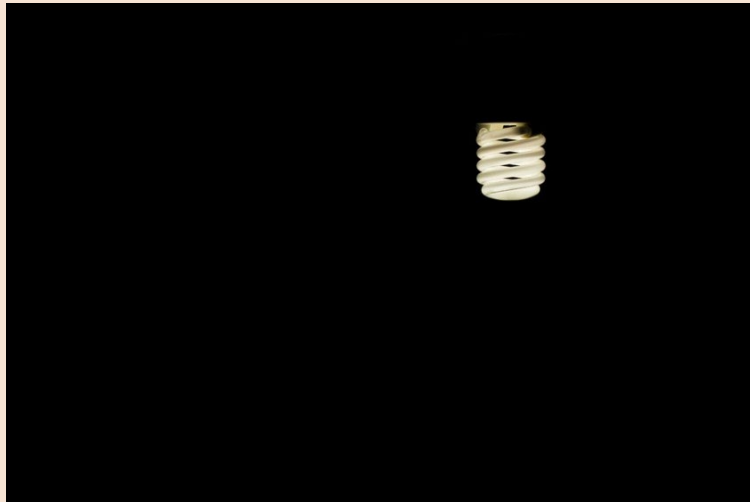
How Re-cropping Sample Images

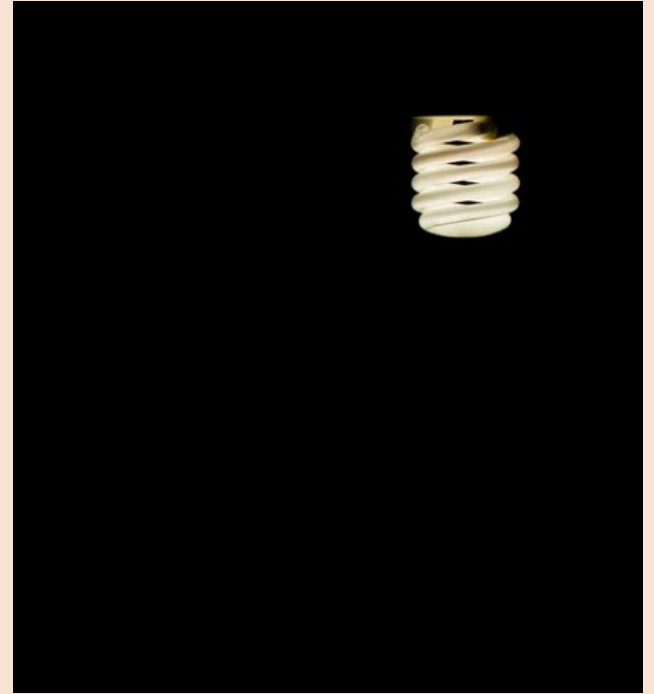
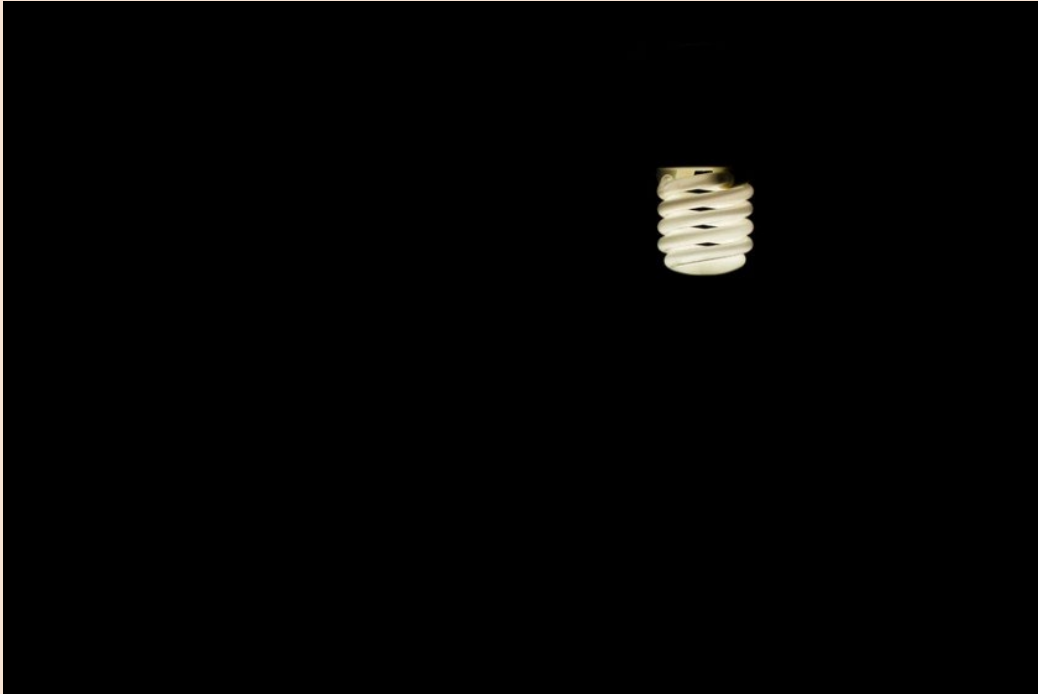
Latin Language Processing: Left to Right, Top to Bottom Logical Destination Circled

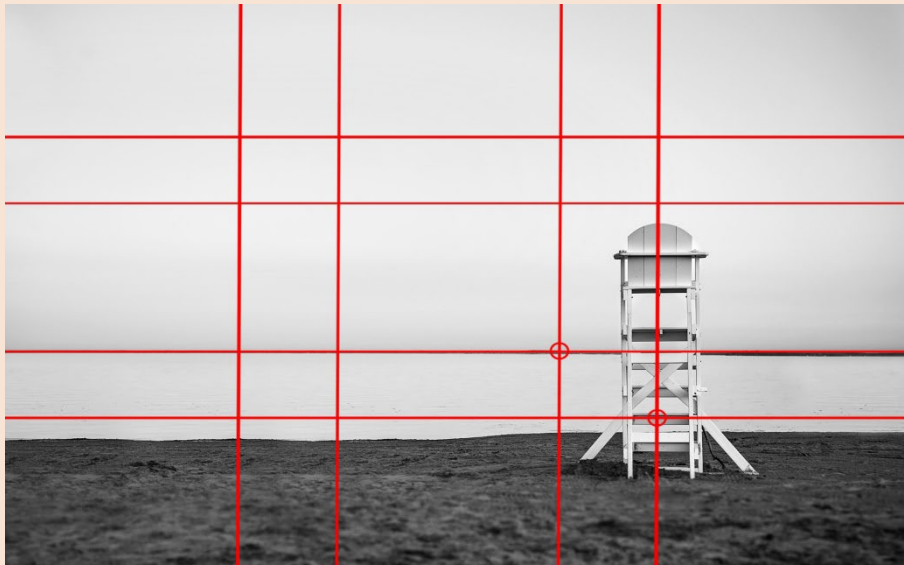
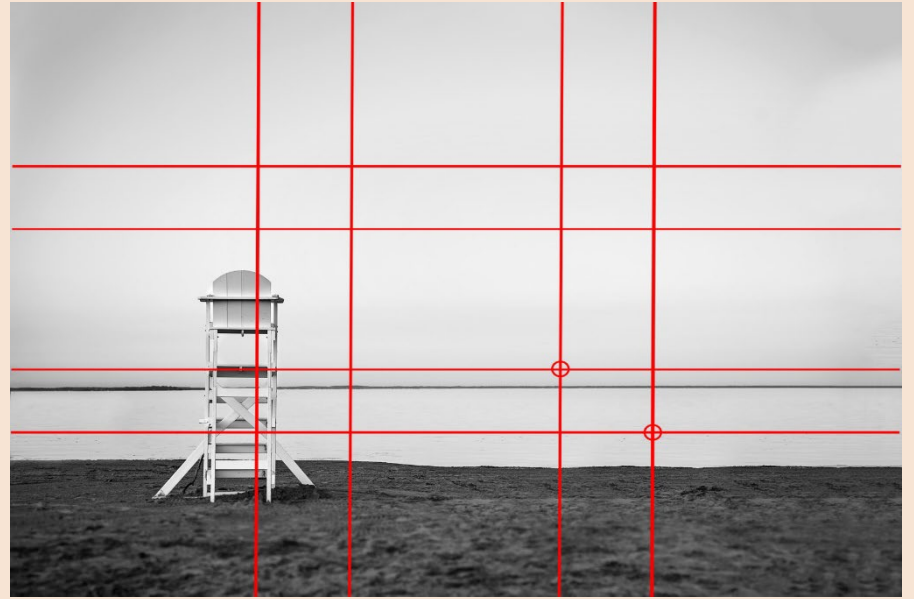












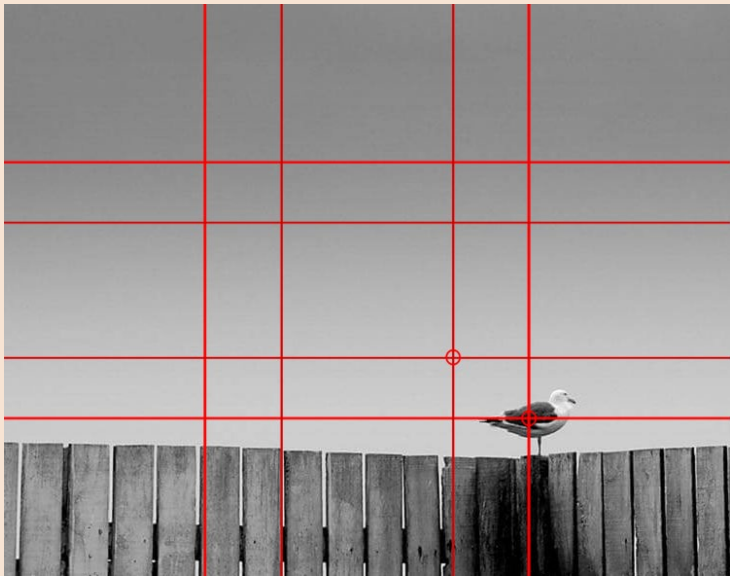
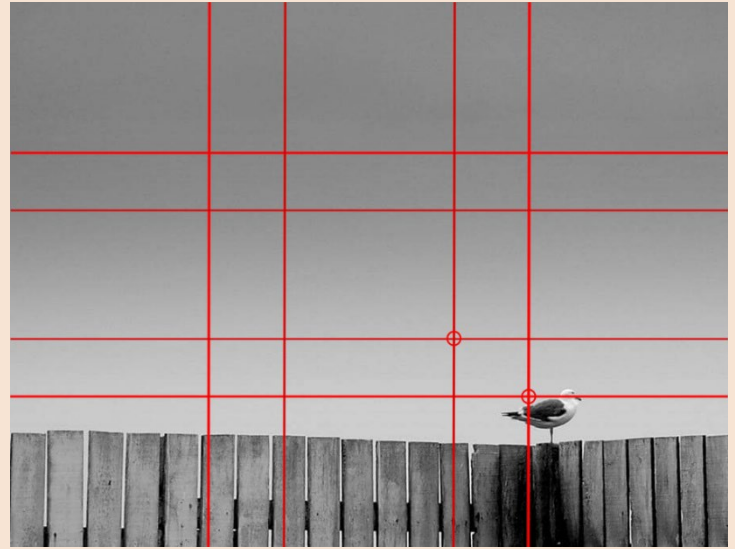
09-02-25 00:35:02

Dana Walton

Fine Tuning

48







Placement of seagull both before and after was not an accident

Strategy

- The golden ratio and spiral are part of the human condition because of their omnipresence in nature. There likely is a fundamental subconscious preference for the aesthetics of the golden ratio. However:
- Geometries of a design should not be contrived to create golden ratios, but golden ratios should be explored when other aspects of the design are not compromised. [2]
- Use golden ratios and golden spirals because they work. When golden tools stop working, then stop using them.
- All theories in the arts can be proven provided the examples are selected carefully enough.
 - Paraphrased from **Nicolas Slominsky**

1/2

Strategy

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How

Case Studies of Placement Process

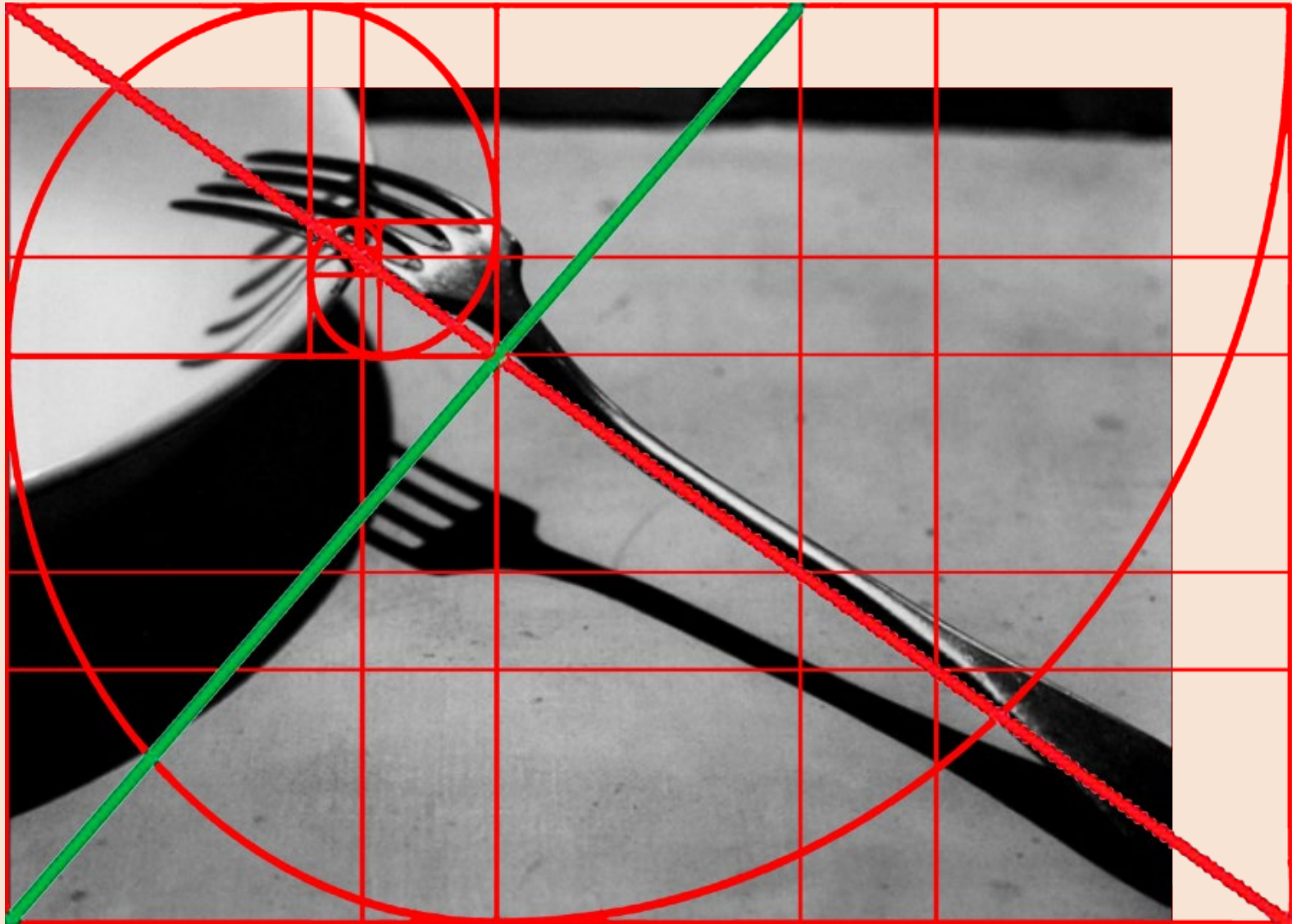
Intuition?

Subliminal?

Objective?



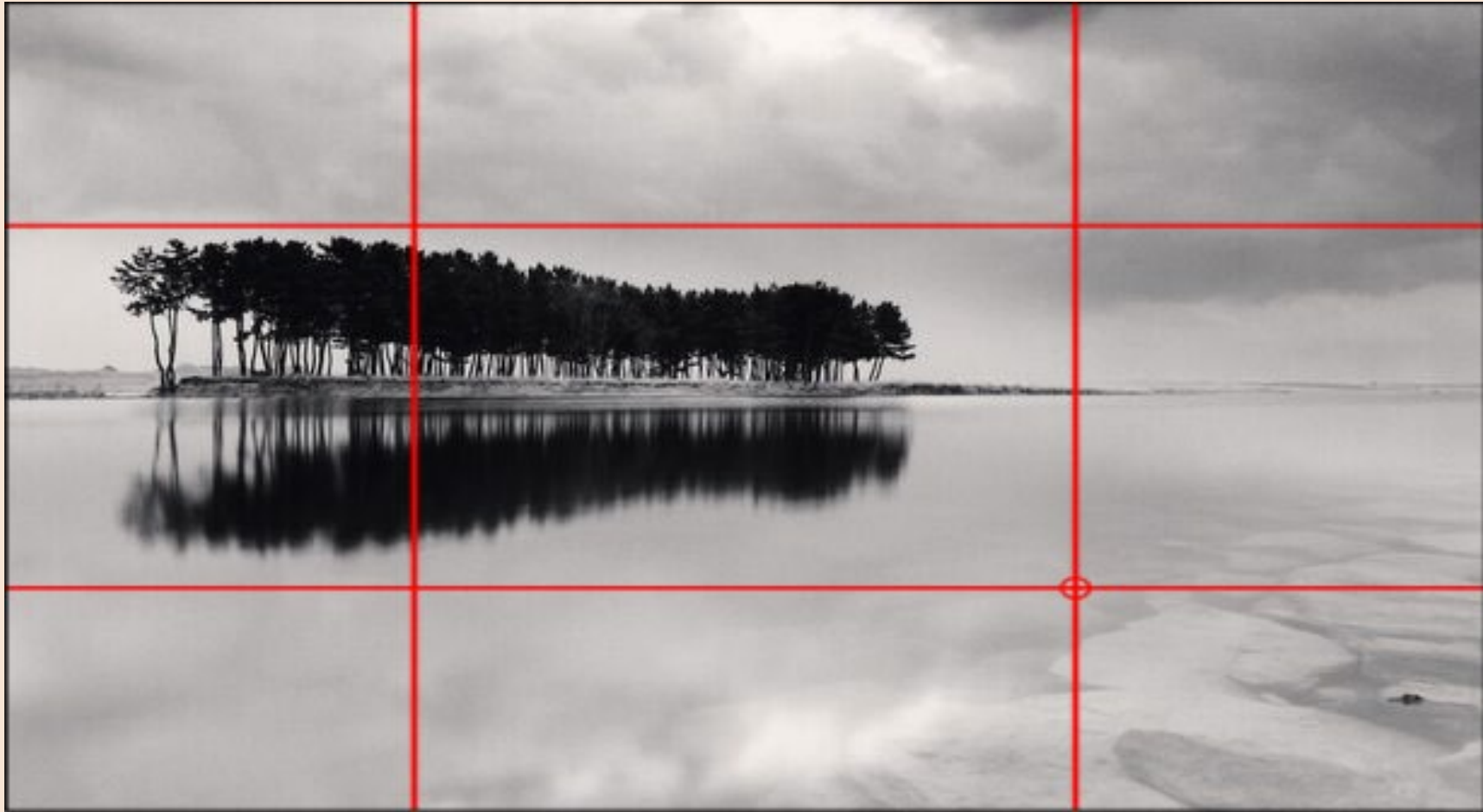
Andre Kertesz



Left to right, top to bottom

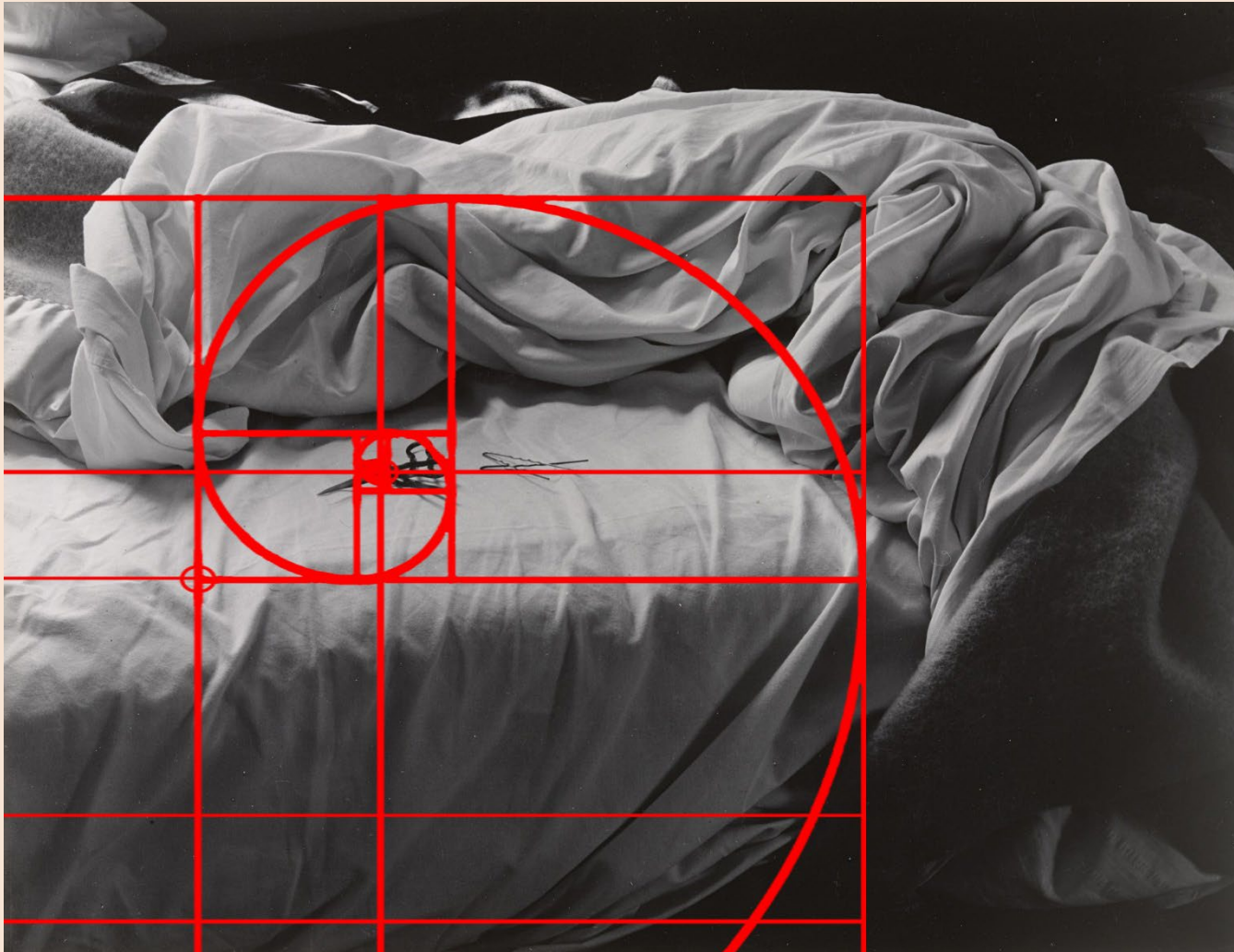


Michael Kenna





Imogen Cunningham



Probably not minimalist, but very strong organization



Valerie Jardin



The placement of the center of the knocker was not by accident

How

Recommendations

Minimalism Is a Design Issue

- Minimalism in photography is 90% management of space, shape, organization, and simplicity.
- The other half is the Elements of Art.
 - Line
 - Shape
 - Texture
 - Form
 - Space
 - Color
 - Value

Organizing the Minimum

- One can furnish a room very luxuriously by taking out furniture rather than putting it in. - Francis Jourdain, 1876.
- Having a small number of elements means organization is necessary. **The golden tools are a good start.**
- **Placement Comes First**
 - Law #5 of the “Laws of the House of God” [4] Full list at end of presentation.

Nine tips for beautifully minimalist photos

Sarah Wilkerson

- Simplify, simplify, simplify
 - [Keep deleting elements until only the necessary elements remain]
- Work with negative space
- Incorporate spatial isolation
- Look for simple geometric shapes
- Square off your lines
 - [Or have strong leading diagonals]
- Bring in a pop of color
- ~~Seek out strict repetition~~
 - [Repetition is the death of minimalism]
- ***Draw the photo in your mind***
 - ***[Planning is extremely important]***
- Let go of deeper meanings

Keep it Simple A Guide to Minimalist Photography (1 of 2)

Christina Harman

- Learn to See
 - Look for hidden opportunities is the first step towards mastering minimalist photography.
- Keep it Simple
 - Include only the information that's required for the message that you want to convey.
- Create a Strong Composition
 - Keep distracting and unnecessary details out of the photo,
- Strong Leading Lines
 - Lines can show isolation, separation, connection, distance, proximity and depth.
- ~~Geometric Patterns~~
 - [Wrong application]

Keep it Simple A Guide to Minimalist Photography (2 Of 2)

Christina Harman

- Negative Space
 - Negative space is valuable breathing room that's an essential part of minimalist photography.
- Contrast
 - Contrasting colors, shades, patterns, shapes, or even contrasting ideas are effective ways to create compositional tension
- Textures
 - Use light to improve the texture and bring out the colors and contrast. [Be careful not to overuse]
- Light and Dark
 - Both light and shadow can both be used to create minimalist photos.
- ~~Tell a Story~~
 - [Wrong application]

Summary of Recommendations

- Given a choice between functionally equivalent designs, the simplest design should be selected – Ockham’s Razor [2]
- Simplify, particularly by deleting elements until only the necessary elements remain
- Work with both positive and negative space equivalently
 - Either leave extra space or plan to utilize Photoshop context sensitive fill in order to provide negative space
- Incorporate spatial isolation
- Look for geometric shapes and lines
 - Lines can show isolation, separation, connection, distance, proximity and depth.
 - Contrasting colors, shades, patterns, shapes, or even contrasting ideas are effective ways to create compositional tension
- Planning is extremely important
- Avoid flatness if possible
- You will never ever make the final composition at time of image capture

How

Interactive Analysis

- Is there anything which can be removed?
- Is the organization (gimmick) working?
- Does the image succeed under its own premises?



Bill Brandt



Giuseppe Cavalli



Imogen Cunningham



Max Dupain



Ferran Freixa

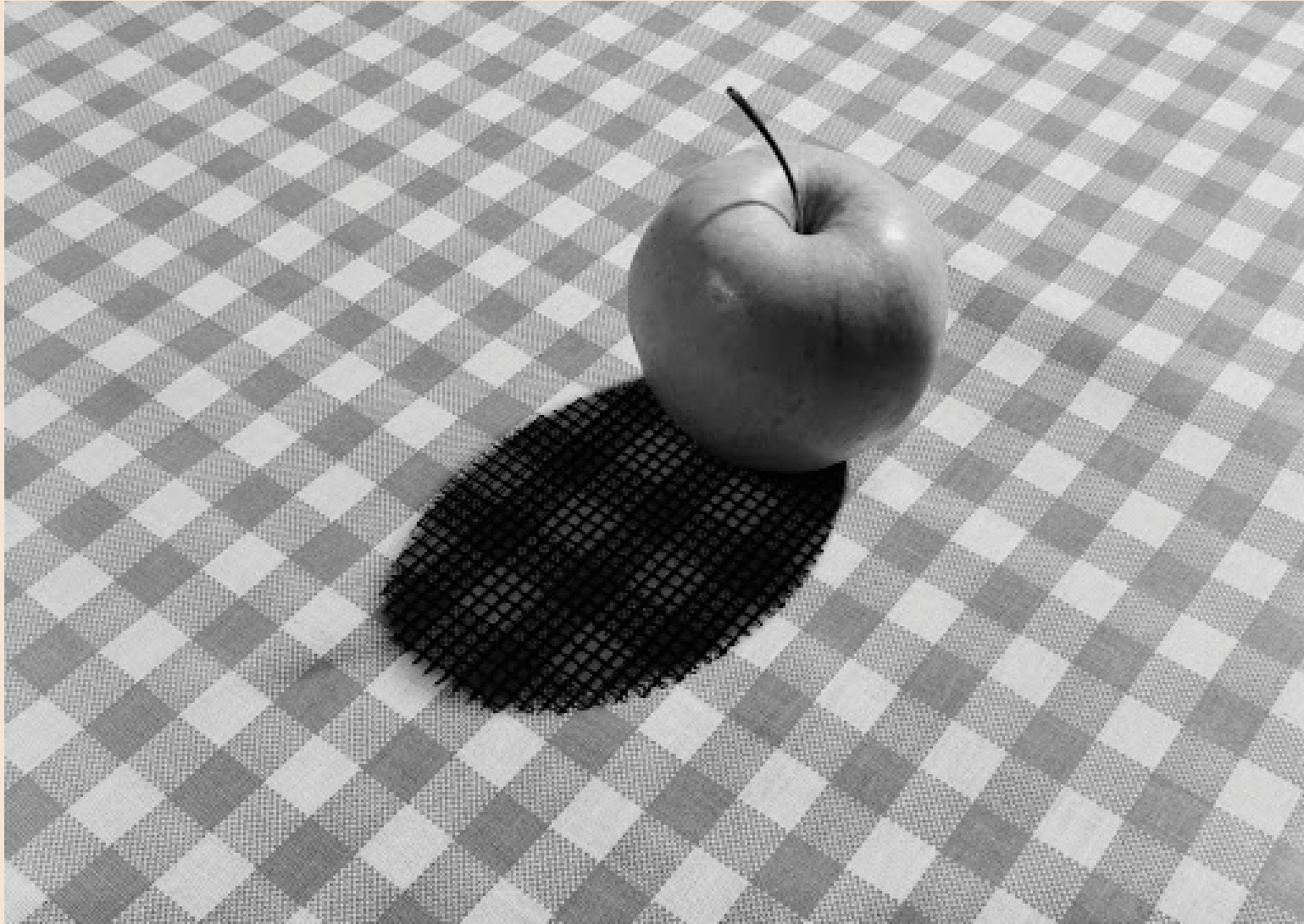


Ralph Gibson



Google
Mainbocher
Corset
Horst

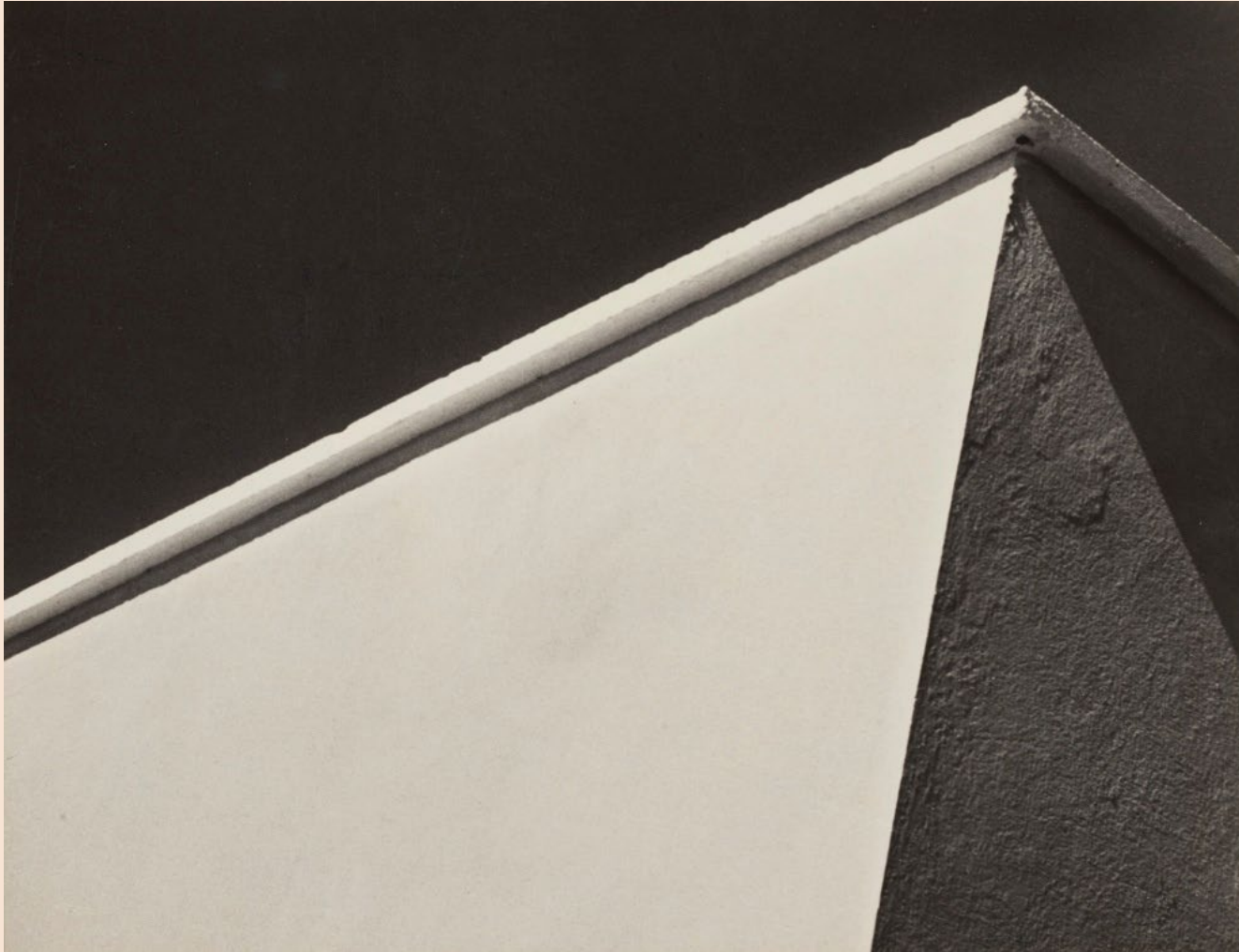
Horst P. Horst
[Horst Paul Albert Bohrmann]



Graham Howe



Sonya Noskowiak



Helmer Petersen-Keld



Lilo Raymond



Christian Vogt

All Done with Your Own Image?

- Is there any element which can be removed (cloning, context sensitive delete, crop, etc.)?
- Can placement be improved?
- Does the image succeed under its own premises?

Why

- Minimalism is the antithesis of story telling
- Are these techniques for you?
- Find out who you are and do it on purpose.
- **Dolly Parton**

15/16

Mathematics for Golden Ratio

Reciprocal of golden ratio φ is the same as decimal portion is expressed as

$$\frac{1}{\varphi} = \varphi - 1$$

Becomes

$$\varphi(\varphi - 1) = 1$$

$$\varphi^2 - \varphi - 1 = 0$$

Quadratic formula generates solution as

$$\varphi = \frac{1 + \sqrt{5}}{2}$$

The ratio of consecutive Fibonacci numbers f_n approximates φ is expressed as

$$\lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} \frac{f_{n+1}}{f_n} = \frac{1 + \sqrt{5}}{2} = 1.618... = \varphi$$

Golden Ratio and Golden Spiral Are Fractals

- A fractal is a never-ending pattern.
- Fractals are self-similar across different scales, meaning larger and smaller scales overlay each other exactly.
- Fractals are created by repeating a simple process over and over in an ongoing feedback loop.

Laws of the House of God by Samuel Shem [4]

- I. Gomers do not die.
- II. Gomers go to ground.
- III. At a cardiac arrest, the first procedure is to take your own pulse.
- IV. The patient is the one with the disease.
- V. Placement comes first.
- VI. Any body cavity can be reached with a #14 needle and a good strong arm.
- VII. Age + Bun = Lasix dose.
- VIII. They can always hurt you more.
- IX. The only good admission is a dead admission.
- X. If you don't take a temperature, you can't find a fever.
- XI. Show me a Best Medical Student who only triples my work and I will kiss his feet.
- XII. If the radiology resident and the Best Medical Student both see a lesion on the chest X-ray, there can be no lesion there.
- XIII. A turf to neurology never bounces.
- XIV. The delivery of medical care is to do as much nothing as possible.

Bibliography

- [1] Elam, Kimberly. “Van Der Rohe's Farnsworth House Geometric Analysis.” *Behance*, 27 Nov. 2013, www.behance.net/gallery/12471003/van-der-Rohes-Farnsworth-House-Geometric-Analysis.
- [2] Lidwell, William, et al. *Universal Principles of Design: 100 Ways to Enhance Usability, Influence Perception, Increase Appeal, Make Better Design Decisions, and Teach through Design*. Rockport Publ., 2003.
- [3] Herrigel, Eugen. *Zen in the Art of Archery.: With an Introduction by D.T. Suzuki*. Translated by R.F.C. Hull. Vintage Books, 1971.
- [4] Shem, Samuel. *The House of God*. Berkley Books, 2019.
- [5] Straub, Marty. “Golden Ratio Overlays at Parks Photos.” *Golden Ratio Overlays*, 2015, parksphotos.com/goldenoverlays/.

2/2