

HORIZON NEWS # 61

IMAGES, THOUGHTS AND NEWS FROM HORIZON PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOPS

"I hate it when I look horrible in a group photo and the person who looks good refuses to delete it."
—Anonymous

The "Rules" of the Group Portrait Game

Virtually every one of us has, at one time or another, taken a group portrait. Did you ever stop to think about the many rules—unwritten rules—that govern this genre?

1. Everyone in the group looks at the camera
2. Faces fully visible; upbeat expressions ("say cheese"...or at least don't look serious)
3. Everyone in focus; bodies visible in whole or large part
4. No significant space between individuals; no intimate or inappropriate touching (except for family photos)
5. All shoulders parallel to the camera's sensor or bodies on the left turn counter-clockwise, on the right clockwise
6. Camera level (parallel to the ground) and at "normal" height (5'—6')
7. Neutral background or one that is "relevant," e.g., a ball field for a baseball team (and for team photos—front row on one knee)
8. No unusual lighting

These rules are so ingrained that they largely operate unconsciously. And they are so universal that we can be sure if these rules are followed, the subjects will be satisfied...or at least won't complain.

But what if you want a group portrait that's not traditional? That's more unusual. That's more revealing. That's more creative. That's more memorable. That's more fun to take—for both participants and photographer.

If that's your objective, you've got to break some of these rules.

As a veteran group portrait photographer, whenever I have the freedom to break some rules, I will...which takes me to this effort from two weeks ago. >>>>



This group of NSA employees participated in one of my VisionMining workshops. (VisionMining is a process I developed to help individuals and teams adopt more creative/innovative mindsets and behavior. See: www.visionmining.com) None of these NSA employees was working “undercover,” but conceivably that could change at some future time, so I wanted every face hidden. I broke the most fundamental rule—seeing all faces clearly. I chose to use cell phones to block faces because the phone was the primary tool we use in VisionMining exercises. The portrait was itself something of a VisionMining case study: finding creative, rule-breaking ways to overcome unusual challenges.

I have no doubt the group will remember this portrait far more than if I had done a traditional shot.

Searching for group portrait inspiration? Check out some of Rembrandt’s paintings. He worked 350 years ago, but his groups are far more dynamic and varied than most of what we see today.

Tech notes: 1. Manual exposure was set to reveal some outside detail (1/160, f. 8, ISO 400); flash bounced off ceiling for the main interior light. 2. Flags were hanging almost invisibly on their respective poles. Using a tiny plastic clip I store in my bag, I clamped the flags together so they were visible.

Steve Gottlieb

Upcoming Horizon Workshops

May 17: Adobe Lightroom: The Basics

May 18: Adobe Lightroom: Get Advanced

May 24-26: Creative Vision: 3 Day

June 7: Abandoned Factory (Yorklyn, DE)

June 7: Adobe Photoshop Elements: An Introduction

June 8: Adobe Photoshop Elements: Advanced Techniques

June 22-29: Eastern Sierras & Yosemite

August 10-17 Ireland: Landscapes & Locals (Wait List Only)

August 23: Creative “i”: Shooting with the iPhone

September 6: Abandoned Factory (Yorklyn, DE)

September 13-14: Flash Magic: Indoors & Outside

October 18-19: Washington DC: Icons w/ a Creative Eye

October 31-Nov 2: Chesapeake City thru Nat Geo Eyes

November 8-9: Creative Vision: 2 Day

November 15: Abandoned Factory (Yorklyn, DE)

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT: One of Horizon’s regular instructors, Bob Madden, will be leading two overseas workshops (not affiliated with Horizon), and we wanted to bring them to your attention. One is an exploration this September of the diverse wildlife in Tanzania – including the spectacular wildebeest migration. You can expect to see and photograph large concentrations of animals close-up. This adventure is slated for only 8 photographers: www.natgeophotog.com/feature/tanzania-photo-safari/ Bob’s second workshop is in China: www.natgeophotog.com/feature/secrets-of-the-tibetan-kham-a-photographic-journey/