

Should Horizons Be Horizontal?

Stan Johnston, 12/04

Should the line where the earth meets the sky always be parallel to the top and bottom of a rectangular image frame? Well, usually.

Of course, if the horizon is formed by a mountain that varies in elevation across the image, then the horizon would naturally be sloped, and probably not a straight line. If the tallest object in the picture is a building with one side closer to the camera than the other, then the roof line may slope in the image due to perspective. But if the horizon is distant and flat, like on the open ocean, then there is not much excuse for it to be tilted in the picture.

You could deliberately tilt the camera for a dramatic effect. If you tilt the camera 30 or 40 degrees, then the result might or might not be artistic. But if it is off horizontal by only 3 or 4 degrees, it is likely to just look sloppy and faintly disconcerting. Probably not the result you are looking for, unless perhaps you are shooting an ad for a seasickness remedy.

The best way to get the horizon level is to hold the camera exactly level when taking the photo, but that is easier said than done unless you always travel with a tripod and a carpenter's level. Some cameras can impose a rectangular grid in the viewfinder, which helps. After the fact, you can rotate the image in Photoshop. A simple low-tech solution is to slightly rotate the print behind the rectangular cutout in a cardboard mat.

What about verticals? Should they always be parallel to the sides of the frame? If you tilt the camera upwards, then perspective will cause all the vertical lines to tilt inwards at the top, so they can't all be parallel. You could remove this perspective effect with a special perspective-shift lens, or digitally in Photoshop. But often the perspective effect is an important part of the composition, to emphasize the height of the building, trees, etc.

If you square up the camera with a plumb-bob, the vertical lines at the center of the frame will be vertical in the image, and that might be a good starting point. But you could vary that for esthetic reasons. If there is one dominant vertical in the composition, like a flagpole or a tower, then perhaps it should be vertical in the image even if it is off-center.

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