

How Forms in Art Work

by Simon Abrahams

Style, the traditional method of classifying art, is rarely mentioned on our website because it has little effect on interpretation. Mark Roskill has written:

‘discussion[s] of style provide measures of constancy in artistic language...which reach beyond the individual to the group, and beyond that potentially to some larger cultural entity. They also serve as ways of....grouping under a single descriptive heading particular, identifiable ways of doing things. But while all of this makes style an apt and adaptable tool for classificatory purposes, it is not clear if, so understood, it either has or is left with any kind of a role for interpretative purposes’¹

Style may influence individual taste but is unlikely to effect universal judgment. It is one of those aspects of art that is truly cultural and is of no help to the emerging master of another time. What they look for in developing their method are those aspects of the canon that are inherited and which can be seen evolving from one variety to another down through the ages. Great artists share a common understanding of human perception, a deep communion with nature and common ideas that express basic truths. Much of this is communicated through use of similar forms which evolve with modifications from artist to artist. Though some scholars use *form* to mean *style*, when we use it *form* always means *shape*.²

No-one argues that words are meaningless but many writers on art think forms are and scorn anyone investigating their etymology. It used to be common to identify sources and there was much prestige to be had in academic circles when a scholar could show that one artist had borrowed a figure from another. The word ‘source’ used to appear frequently in the titles of scholarly articles, as in “A New

Source for Manet's *Olympia*". However, after formal analysis fell out of favor, source-hunting also fell victim. By 1985 David Carrier was writing of Manet's art: '..forms are not of interest in themselves. We learn nothing by tracking them to their sources.'³ Three years later a Harvard professor said:

'The study of sources is treated now, in art history, with widespread contempt. People can lose their jobs for doing it in public. To the extent that source hunting becomes an end in itself, it falls to one of the lower levels of the historical enterprise, and contempt in such cases may be well deserved.'⁴

As recently as 1998 Leo Steinberg criticized 'a propensity to induce....similarities between dissimilar things' as a 'pathological streak in art historical practice.'⁵ Today most scholars run scared of that tar brush though museum curators have recently discovered, with little concern for their own academic scruples, that the public enjoys exhibitions where one great artist's influence on another is illustrated. The shows have names like "Matisse Picasso", "Bacon Picasso" or "Turner Whistler Monet.". Despite this recent counter-trend, one eminent writer recently "reassure[d] the reader that I have no intention of reviving it [source-hunting.]"⁶ The bias against source-hunting has long hindered interpretation because, as Rudolf Arnheim explained, an object 'can be said to be truly perceived only to the extent to which it is fitted to some organized shape.'⁷ The separation of form from content in recent scholarship is bewildering. It denies the well-established belief since Plato that form *equals* content.⁸

HOW FORMS WORK

Any great European artist would have assumed that a borrowed form borrows meaning and that there was no difference between an *idea* for a painting and a composition of form. Plato's word for form was *idea*.⁹ Nevertheless, in the world of Manet scholarship where I started, such thoughts are considered heresy. From the supportive criticism in Manet's own day of Emile Zola to the scholarly

writings of the 1950s, it was generally accepted that ‘subject, narration and symbol were alien to Manet’ and that ‘no object had any meaning beyond its formal function.’¹⁰ A handful of scholars, though, without particular reference to Manet, were investigating forms in other ways. In 1934 Henri Focillon restated St. Augustine’s argument from a millennium earlier that forms live in the artist’s mind.¹¹ Forms, he argued in *The Life of Forms in Art*, are in constant change not only in the mind of the artist but as they are transmitted from one work of art to another. The metamorphosis that a form undergoes in the mind of a great artist, he declared, is unavailable to the unimaginative painter who cannot recognize the common element or even effect the change.¹² Later research by psychologists into visual perception expanded on some of the same ideas. Arnheim, once a prominent voice in art scholarship, noted that:

‘what we need to acknowledge is that perceptual and pictorial shapes are not only translations of thought products but the very flesh and blood of thinking itself.’¹³

Forms encapsulate ideas which we subconsciously translate into words for speech and writing.¹⁴ This means that language, like the sound from Mozart’s violin, is the product of intelligence and not its medium. We do not think in words. While controversial, this position has the support of some particularly creative minds who have sensed their inner workings. Albert Einstein observed that words or language ‘as they are written or spoken, do not seem to play any role in my mechanism of thought’. Charles Darwin complained that his lack of facility with words was a serious impediment to conveying the *clarity* of his ideas and Jacques Hadamard, the French mathematician, said that ‘words....remain absolutely absent from my mind until I come to the moment of communicating the results in written or oral form.’ Words are not even the most important medium for storing information which is far more efficiently done in visual images, genetic traits and the human memory. The wings of birds, for example, contain an understanding of aerodynamic laws. Even Horace, whose medium was words, recognized that *images* are more stimulating to the mind.¹⁵ We could not learn to

read as children if we had to think in words because spelling is rarely phonetic. The words themselves must be remembered visually. It is also perfectly clear from metaphoric language that we think in images. We say:

‘I *see* what you’re saying. It *looks* different from my *point-of-view*? What is your *outlook* on that? I *view* it differently. Now I’ve got the *whole picture*. Let me *point something out* to you. That’s an *insightful* idea. That was a *brilliant* remark. The argument is *clear*. It was a *murky* discussion. Could you *elucidate* your remarks? It’s a *transparent* argument. The discussion was *opaque*.’¹⁶

Buried metaphor, it is rarely recognized, is sometimes a key to knowledge that Man was once aware of or intuitively knew. Great masters are aware of this. They take metaphors literally while we usually ignore them. Not surprisingly, when we view their ‘metaphors’ in paint we tend to perceive the forms *literally* and miss the metaphor.

Forms in the mind, the elements that construct a mental image, are a difficult concept for scientists to investigate. They are unlikely to resemble an actual image, like a painting or sculpture, but generate neural activity that resembles in some way the neural activity of our visual system. Thus we call them ‘images’, as opposed to ‘writing’ or ‘music’. Einstein, who was frequently aware of them, tried to explain how the process works. He noted that ‘memory-pictures’ emerged in his head which are then ordered into a series and when ‘a certain picture turns up in many such series’ it formed connections between series of pictures which thus became a concept. Elsewhere he wrote more simply that:

‘The physical entities which seem to serve as elements in thought are certain signs and more or less clear images which can be ‘voluntarily’ reproduced and combined.’¹⁷

Samuel Taylor Coleridge famously described falling to sleep while reading a book on Kubla Khan. Then, as he described in the third person, ‘*images* [italics added] rose up before him’ and:

‘On awakening he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved.’

Music too is formed from the firing of neurons which more closely resemble those that occur in the

visual system than the aural. Mozart said that on completing a long composition he could ‘survey it, like a fine picture or beautiful statue, at a glance. Nor do I hear in my imagination the parts *successively*, but I hear them, as it were, all at once.’¹⁸ This must be accurate because Beethoven described his thought in similar terms:

‘...In my head, I begin to elaborate the work in its breadth, its narrowness, its height, and its depth, and as I am aware of what I want to do, the underlying *idea* never deserts me. It rides, it grows up. *I hear and see the image in front of me from every angle, as if it had been cast...*’ [italics added].¹⁹

The shapes in the mind of a great master are gathered from many sources beyond art but the most significant forms are from art itself. A great master changes a form to his own particular use but it retains inherited meaning from its prior incarnations.²⁰ This explains why an educated eye, familiar with the canon, instinctively recognizes another work of art as important even though it may not consciously recall the form or understand the meaning. Thus one scholar can write of a painting by Rembrandt without a hint of embarrassment: ‘Although the image clearly makes sense as a whole, what sense it makes cannot be easily decided.’²¹

The growing specialization of art scholarship over recent decades has resulted in a vast increase in information about art but it has not been matched by a comparable increase in understanding. This should not be surprising. If specialists were to spend a lot of energy emphasizing the common links between the art of their area and another instead of giving them lip service, they would undermine the barriers that keep scholars from other disciplines and laypeople out. Nevertheless, as mystics and artists intuitively sense, beauty must be looked at as a whole not as individual pieces because unity transcends diversity.²² However disparate individual works may seem, and there are differences, they are bound together by a relationship that is not now consciously recognized, though all the great masterpieces are part of the canon. Great European art has been mainly transformed from such a small

number of sources that the same forms frequently reoccur. However, the meaning of each work can only be fully realized by a conscious recognition of the form, hence the importance of source-hunting.²³

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NOTES

¹ Roskill, 1989, pp.99-100

² Arnheim clearly expressed the confusion surrounding style when he wrote of visual perception: 'A popular prejudice has it that what is not sharply outlined, complete, and detailed is necessarily imprecise. But in painting, for example, a sharply outlined portrait by Holbein or Durer is no more precise in its perceptual form than the tissue of strokes by which a Frans Hals or Oskar Kokoschka defines the human countenance.' (Arnheim, 1969, pp.108-9). It is important to remember that the structure of a sonnet or Alexandrine hexameters or even the symphony and concerto of a composer are only shells. It is the thought expressed within those structures which carry meaning. Equally, there is nothing in common between a tragedy by Shakespeare and one written in Hollywood because the words reveal the thought not the classification.

Paul Klee, a 20th century master, said that: 'word-making and form-building [by which he meant shape not style] are the same thing.' *Form*, a word confusingly used by writers in the early twentieth-century to mean *style*, means *shape* in this article. Even as late as 1963 Ernst Gombrich entitled an influential essay "Norm and Form" meaning "Norm and Style." Form as shape is not even mentioned, an oversight which leads him to conclude that Caravaggio rejected the possibility of Raphael's influence 'and struck out on a path of his own'. Had he considered form as shape he would have noticed that Caravaggio's forms are almost entirely dependent on Raphael's, far outweighing the influence of any other artist. See Chapter Seven on *The Creative Struggle*. (Gombrich, 1971, pp. 81-98).

³ Carrier, 1985, p.331; in Carrier's favor, though, is that he is one of the few, if not the only previous writer on Manet, to question whether Charles Baudelaire, Emile Zola and Stephane Mallarmé had any understanding of Manet's art at all (ibid., p. 328). In fact, nothing is more indicative of Mallarmé's near-total misunderstanding than the following comment: 'But the chief charm and true characteristic of one of the most singular men of the age is, that Manet (who is a visitor to the principal galleries both French and foreign, and an erudite student of painting) seems to ignore all that has been done in art by others, and draws from his own inner consciousness all his effects of simplification, the whole revealed by effects of light incontestably novel.' ("The Impressionists and Edouard Manet" published in *The Art Monthly Review* I, no. 9, Sept. 1876, reprinted in New York, 1998, p. 40)

⁴ Shearman, 1992, p.233; Robert Herbert, an authority on Manet and Impressionism was equally dismissive: 'I also take my distance from the kind of art history that is devoted to finding precedents and "influences" in earlier art. Too many writers mix and match reproductions of pictures, looking for earlier examples of the same theme within the seemingly autonomous world of images. It is a great temptation to assume that the "answer" to a given picture's cafe table or river bridge is found among earlier representations of tables or bridges; this pseudo-method should be called "iconodolatory".' (Herbert, 1988, p.xiii)

⁵ Steinberg, 1998, p.100; Fried, like a voice in the wilderness, has discriminated between Manet's use of a source from popular imagery and one from high art, noting that the latter tend to play an active role 'in an ideal viewer's consciousness' while the former are useful in 'the painting's construction but in effect got used up, rendered null and void, in the process'. (Fried, 1996, p.183).

⁶ Wright, 2004, p.10

⁷ Arnheim, 1969, p.27; In literature Sarah Annes Brown has correctly identified the importance of source-hunting and her point-of-view regarding the nature of poetic influence is remarkably similar to that suggested here for the visual arts. She errs, though, in failing to see that the same is true of painting and sculpture and falls back on literal allusion when discussing the source of Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne* (S.A. Brown, 1999, pp. 1-21, esp. pp.1-5, 14-16).

⁸ Klee, *The Thinking Eye*, ed. J. Spiller, 1961, p. 17, cited in London 2002, p. 54; Panofsky, in an attempt to distance himself from Heinrich Wölfflin and the previous generation of scholars whose 'formal' theories of art were based on analyses of style, wrote in the opening sentence to his influential book, *Studies in Iconology*: 'Iconography is that branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to their form.' (Panofsky, 1967, p. 3) Freud's theory about the origins of artists' creativity also ignored forms from art itself, giving precedence to artists' unconscious ability to retrieve childhood images and feelings. Roger Fry rightly chided Freud in his essay, *The Artist and Psychoanalysis*, for ignoring the importance of form. (Kessel, 1989, p.206).

⁹ Plato's definition of ideas as forms was based on their eternal, unchanging nature. Seneca described Plato's definition of *Idea* as 'that from which all things visible are made and according to which all things are shaped'

and as ‘the eternal model of the things which are made by nature’ (cited in Panofsky, 1968, pp.24-5) He further asserted that ‘God has within himself these models of all things...He is full of these figures, which Plato calls ‘ideas’ (Panofsky, *ibid.*, p. 125); Aristotle stated that ‘the form of a work of art is present in the soul of the artist long before being translated into matter’ (Panofsky, *ibid.* p.27).

¹⁰ Brombert, 1994, p.487

¹¹ St. Augustine ‘acknowledged that through art a kind of beauty is revealed that, far from being merely derived from the creations of nature and transferred to the work of art by a simple act of copying, *lives in the mind of the artist himself* (author’s italics) and is directly translated by him into matter’ (Panofsky 1968, *ibid.*, p.35)

¹² Focillon described the influence of forms on the minds of artists of varying abilities: ‘With a mere imitator, a reliance on memory narrows the field of metamorphoses; with a virtuoso, such a reliance does not necessarily diminish their intensity in any way. To a visionary, the sudden, imperious nature of an image seems to impose itself on the life of forms with no little violence. There are, finally, those intellectuals who strive to think of form as thought and to adapt its life to the life of ideas.’ (Focillon, 1989, p.125)

¹³ Arnheim, 1969, p.134

¹⁴ The belief that words are a component of thought is of long-standing. In eighteenth-century England, for example, the term *belles-lettres* described not only literature but all the humanities. It is also an idea that literary minds, apt to confuse words and intelligence, are loth to discard. Nevertheless it should be clear to just about everyone that we think too fast to use language as a medium in our minds. Although Gestalt psychologists in the mid-twentieth century supported the individual observations of men like Horace and Einstein it was not until cognitive scientists overcame stimulus-response dominance in the early 1980s that mental images gained wide scientific support (For the use of *belles-lettres*, see Garber, 2001, p.15; on recent science, see Damasio, 1994, pp. 106-8, 280, n.13).

¹⁵ The comments by Einstein, Darwin and Hadamard are cited in Simonton, 1999, pp.29-30; the idea concerning the wings of birds: *ibid.*, p.26; John Pfeiffer described the use of cave paintings as the ‘tribal encyclopedia’, cited in Mithen, 1996, p. 172; Horace, *Ars Poetica*, trans. T.S.Dorsch, in *Classical Literary Criticism* (Baltimore: Harmondsworth) 1965, p.85, cited in Rosand, 1984, p.38. Recent studies have also shown that language interferes with the ability to recognize colors, judge taste and make aesthetic evaluations. It is even believed to hinder insight, a talent which great masters must have in large measure. See Schooler, Fallshore and Fiore, 1995, p.583

¹⁶ Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 48. These examples were provided to support the authors’ argument that metaphor is not just rhetorical flourish but structures our conceptual system and cultural values. They did not make the case that metaphor reveals an underlying truth. It is possible in this case that when language first developed people had to assume that they thought in images because words were novel or rudimentary. This may explain why sight is used to describe thought and why prehistoric people are unlikely to think that they thought in words. The examples of metaphoric language provided are sometimes thought to be ‘dead’ metaphors but were persuasively shown by Lakoff and Johnson to actively structure the way that we think. They are ‘alive’ but are so common, or ancient, that we do not normally notice them (*ibid.* pp. 54-55).

¹⁷ Einstein quotations cited in Holton, 1988, pp. 385-6

¹⁸ “Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Prefatory Note to *Kubla Khan*” in Ghiselin, 1952, p.85; “Mozart: A Letter” in *ibid.*, p.45

¹⁹ Beethoven, quoted by Louis Schlosser, in Hamburger M (trans-ed), *Beethoven: Letters, Journals and Conversations* (New York: Pantheon Books) 1952, p. 195, cited in Rothenberg, 1976, p. 20; Frank Gehry, a contemporary architect, has described the financial acumen of Norton Simon in similar terms which, though quite credible, is more literally a description of an architect’s mental image of a building: ‘Simon could finance three-dimensionally. He could turn a deal in space and visualize it.’ (*The New York Times*, Arts & Leisure Section, July 18th 1999, p. 34); The connection between mental images and perceptual images was explained by Arnheim: ‘perception consists in the grasping of relevant generic features of the object. Inversely, thinking, in order to have something to think about, must be based on images of the world in which we live. The thought elements in perception and the perceptual elements in thought are complementary.’ (Arnheim, 1969, p.153) Or, as another scholar noted: ‘Thoughts need shape, and these must be derived from a perceptual medium.’ (R. Smith, 1993, p.6). Cognitive psychologists continue to believe that ‘through our vast experience with the objects and ideas in the world we form generalized impressions, or “idealized” forms, much like Platonic forms.’ (Solso 1996, p.120)

²⁰ Arnheim argued that an artist's intelligence is evident not only in the structure of the form but, as importantly, in the depth of meaning conveyed by the form (Arnheim, 1969, p.269).

²¹ Bal, 1998, p.127; Kenneth Clark wrote of Leonardo's standard of perfection in painting as including 'scientific accuracy, pictorial logic and finish' but, as far I know, did not define pictorial logic other than as producing a sense of satisfaction. Satisfaction in a knowledgeable observer is hardly a very rigorous definition of logic, although he is correct (Clark, 1989, p. 65). Another example is Roland Penrose's comment that though Picasso's work often seemed incomprehensible, serious critics had to 'admit their admiration for his talent', a talent which could not have been based on technical facility alone (Penrose, 1958, p.15); Picasso himself stressed the need for intelligence which demands explanation beyond the matter of aesthetic judgment. Picasso said: 'Painting is a thing of intelligence. One sees it in Manet. One can see the intelligence in each of Manet's brushstrokes, and the action of intelligence is made visible in the film on Matisse when one watches Matisse draw, hesitate, then begin to express his thought with a sure stroke' (Ashton, 1972, p.16).

It is seldom acknowledged, though, that judging great art on its aesthetic merits cannot possibly be subjective because there has always been wide agreement on five superstars: Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian and Rembrandt. Recognition of Velázquez was delayed because most of his works remained relatively isolated in Spain. Separately, the fact that even knowledgeable critics must be unaware of the principles upon which they make aesthetic judgment has been discussed before. See Ackerman, 1973, p.318

²² St. Augustine made the same point about art. Summers, 1981, p.309

²³ The influence and unconscious recognition of form is the critical factor behind Beatrice Farwell's observation, for example, that while the Old Master references in Manet's *Olympia* and *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* were missed by contemporaries they 'must have had the look of familiar compositions in the humanist tradition' (Farwell, 1981, p.214). Kenneth Clark noted in 1939 that the work of all great draughtsmen is composed of relatively few forms which constantly reoccur, adding that:

'the development of such an artist as Leonardo is not marked by the frequent discovery of new forms but by the rendering of inherent forms more finally expressive.' (K. Clark, 1989, p. 79).

It should moreover be mentioned that scholars have been aware of *metamorphosis* in great art but have had trouble either detecting or explaining it. Kenneth Clark, again, wrote of Rembrandt that 'when borrowing a classic motive...he practically always changed the subject, and often modified the form in a way which revealed a long and enlightening process of thought.' The process, though, is not unique to Rembrandt because it is true of almost all great masters (K. Clark, 1968, p.101). Ernst Gombrich, noting that Leonardo da Vinci had turned a cat into a lamb into a unicorn, incorrectly concluded that Leonardo had divorced form from meaning, an implication which he himself wisely found 'astounding'. (Gombrich, 1971, pp. 61-2). Other scholars have been troubled by the manner in which artists used sources, sensing metamorphic form without seeing it. Svetlana Alpers wrote:

'Rembrandt was practicing imitation as *transformation* and as *dissimulation* - the artist effectively hiding his sources by absorbing them into his works' (Alpers, 1990, pp.73-4)

Another scholar has recently written of Goya's use of Rembrandt's art that:

'we are concerned not with the traditional issue of copying or imitation - possibly not even strictly with 'influence' in the narrow art-historical sense of the term - but with a specific form of optical stimulation and enlightenment that is peculiar to the nature of an artist's visual inquiry.' (Amsterdam 2000, p.13)

One wrote of Picasso: '...that it is in the nature of his genius to digest his sources so thoroughly that we sense allusions rather than quotations.' (Rosenblum, 1973, p.48) Richard Wollheim expressed a similar idea about Manet:

'as a further complication...there is Manet's tendency to borrow from more than one source at a time and to blend them in a single painting. His borrowings display massive condensation, often beyond the point at which his paintings could continue to extract historical meaning from them. It is not simply that the spectator could not be expected to recognize the historical source under the disguise - indeed in some cases there was nothing to make him suspect that there was an historical source - but, more to the point, even if the spectator had this knowledge in his cognitive stock, it would be beyond his powers to bring it effectively to bear upon his perception of the picture. The task would be too complex. (Wollheim, 1987, p.237)

Even when a painting is directly inspired by another as is Cezanne's *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* by Manet's eponymous painting, it has been written that:

‘The language typically used to describe the relation between an art object and a “source” is inadequate to describe the relation between Cezanne’s and Manet’s paintings’ (Locke, 1998, p.122)

Whether you want to work as a visual development artist, concept artist, animator, illustrator, or anything else in 2D/3D art, fundamentals are a necessity. But how do you get started? In a recent post I explained the importance of fundamentals and in this post I'd like to focus on a few of these topics with helpful learning resources. The best way to get better is to practice. But you need focused practice to see the best results. If you want some advice from a master skip to 35:40 in this FZD podcast. Feng Zhu is a veteran concept artist who runs his own entertainment art school in Singapore. For centuries, artists have used the Golden Ratio in magnificent works of art. Here's why. The art world has felt the influence of the Golden Ratio for centuries. Also known as the Golden Section or the Divine Proportion, this mathematical principle is an expression of the ratio of two sums whereby their ratio is equal to the larger of the two quantities. During the Renaissance, painter and draftsman Leonardo Da Vinci used the proportions set forth by the Golden Ratio to construct his masterpieces. Sandro Botticelli, Michaelangelo, Georges Seurat, and others appear to have employed this technique in their artwork. Gary Meisner on the Golden Number blog has mapped the geometric under The following is the list of the 10 most famous works of art in the world - paintings or sculptures. The most famous artwork and painting in the world is the main attraction... The most famous artwork and painting in the world is the main attraction of the Louvre museum in Paris, where it is seen by six million people every year! Leonardo da Vinci painted it from the year 1503 or 1504 until shortly before he died in 1519. Most Famous Works Of Art: Mona Lisa, Louvre, Paris. Check Out Our Free Videos. 2. The Last Supper " Leonardo da Vinci.