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The Likeness of a Beautiful Thing

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Johannes was born in Germany in 1931 and came to the U.S. in the winter of 1949-50. He graduated 1955 in Illustration at Rhode Island School of Design and continued with Painting at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts. He received an MFA at Yale in 1962, studying color under Josef Albers.

He taught several years each at University of Illinois, serving as head of Basic Design, and at Kalamazoo College, MI, as department chairman. From there he continued to work privately, with creative art, writing, and community teaching, first for twenty years in Lancaster, PA and, after retirement, in Rhode Island.

From the essay:

"Undergraduates at Rhode Island School of Design in the 1950s studied during one semester a subject called Philosophy of Design. The course was taught by a great man, John Howard Benson. It was beautifully organized, and ably introduced us to a domain of intellectual concern that few artists ever get to know. Also, it fulfilled better than most others the twin purposes of all instruction:
1) It saved the student time, advancing our understanding far beyond what any of us could have reached on our own in whatever many years; and –
2) For me, it stimulated the widely-ranging labors of philosophic thought, now making possible this series of talks.

I have in my possession only skeleton notes of this course, so that the fleshing out will be my work and its failings my responsibility. But my debt would be plain to any who have shared this excellent beginning, and deserves to be acknowledged.”
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of a
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PHOTO -
Red Plastic Cup

PAINTING -
The Red Cup
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In the early 1990s this was given first as a speech to a class at the Lancaster County Art Association, and in briefer form afterwards on a couple of other occasions. Some of the illustrations come from the text, others from references to physical works that Johannes brought with him, and one from live demonstration.

I  The Artifact and the Art Object

A. Rules for Right Making in Utility and Art

In past times distinctions were drawn between products of the Fine Arts and humble Objects of Utility, adding to the latter ever the inferior rank. Much thinking in this century turned this around, proclaiming the well-made artifact the equal of the work of art and, in all essential ways, indistinguishable from it.

The difficulty may not be amenable to any final settlement. There is a common good desired of them both: We want our furnishings as well as our pictures to be beautiful. But their capabilities and purposes can also differ widely; and that needs to be accounted for before this search for understanding ends. Yet, for our start it will be helpful that the ground rules for creating a good product govern equally the object of utility and one existing solely for its beauty – the Applied as well as the Fine Arts.

B. John Benson’s Course and the Twin Purposes of All Instruction

Undergraduates at Rhode Island School of Design in the 1950s studied during one semester a subject called Philosophy of Design. The course was taught by a great man, John Howard Benson. It was beautifully organized, and ably introduced us to a domain of intellectual concern that few artists ever get to know. Also, it fulfilled better than most others the twin purposes of all instruction:

1) It saved the student time, advancing our understanding far beyond what any of us could have reached on our own in whatever many years; and –

2) For me, it stimulated the widely-ranging labors of philosophic thought, now making possible this series of talks.

I have in my possession only skeleton notes of this course, so that the fleshing out will be my work and its failings my responsibility. But my debt would be plain to any who have shared this excellent beginning, and deserves to be acknowledged.
C. Ways of Delivering the Wrong Results

When an otter lies upon its back and opens a mussel by breaking the casing with a stone, or a raptor rises to some height and drops its catch to shatter on the ground below, or again, an early hominid seized a rock to cleave with it the brain-case of his game, the deeds appear identical in their complexity of mental action. But they are most dissimilar in their cultural and, in the end, historic consequences. Man alone evolved to overcome, to an extent, the specific limits all other species failed to breach. These, however, remain the causes of inferior work at the hands of man, to the present day. They are:

1) Ignorance: Inadequate understanding of the problem to be solved in terms of the materials and the tools required, as well as of Technique – that is, the body of orderly procedures demanded by the job.

2) Lack of Good Will: If our purposes are feeble or we intend to cheat the buyer, the outcome must be flawed.

3) Lack of Inventive Sensibility: That is, the intelligent discernment of a promising conception, or road to choose – the failure to see beyond what our teachers have transmitted, in the sense of Leonardo’s dogma that “It is a wretched student who cannot surpass his master.”

4) Lack of Skill: A kinesthetic ignorance, not of the intellect, that is, but of the muscles through want of aptitude or training. Failure to govern our tools as instrumental extensions of the body, that is, of bodily dexterity and strength.

The way we fail by Ignorance, Ill Will, Want of Imagination, and Bodily Ineptitude portrays man as a being who at his best can succeed by all their opposites. That is – by his gifts of Reason, Will, Forward-Looking Vision, and Dexterity. In consequence, man recognizes . . .

D. The Worthwhile and Essential Callings of Man’s Life

1) Science, or Right Knowing: Assembled by the faculty of intellect, conscious realizations bound by actuality and truth, not subject to the will. I have some comments to contribute later about how knowledge must rely on will to constitute itself. But will is not involved in what is and what is not a truth.

2) Prudence, or Right Doing: choices made by the faculty of will. It presupposes and depends on knowledge, and we often know much better than we are behaving. We smoke, though we know it devours our lungs. Though we know fattening foods are harmful and will cause us to grow heavy, we eat them all the same. Right Doing calls upon the power of
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resolve to sustain an appropriately chosen path, that is, upon free will.

3) Art, or Right Making: It presupposes and depends upon Right Knowing as well as on the Right Resolve, but prospers by the Faculty of Intuition – what I have called Inventive Sensibility – which, forward-looking, takes us from the known to the unknown, and is thereby our means of progress.

Of all the callings, the Arts are most clearly dependent upon skill, that is, the artist’s corporeal suitability for his work of making.

E. The Causes of Things Made

There are reasons, or causes, why Man-Made Things Exist

1) Final Cause: The beginning, as opposed to the final, form. The end for which a work is undertaken, the problem posted by the patron. The intended function of the object will therefore be a good desired by the user.

2) Material Cause: The substances from which a thing is made, and without which it would not exist. These are chosen always for their serviceable qualities toward the desired end.

3) Efficient Cause: The means by which materials are given their appropriate shape through one of the following:

   a. The Material Means, that are the artist’s Tools
   b. Kinesthetic Means, which are the artist’s Skills
   c. Technical Means, which are Instrumental Actions or Techniques that are the employment of the tools in their right relationship to the materials and of the materials to each other.

      Techniques are the union of the Material and Efficient Causes. Materials properly chosen for their purpose are shaped according to what the right tools and materials can suitably be made, and want, to do for a desired end.

4) Formal Cause: The solution of the problem and its final form are achieved in Stages. The Stages are reductions, that is, Abstractions derived from the problem posted by the patron. Stages constitute the successive images to which the materials must by shaped.

[Other Causes than those cited as Antecedents of Results –from notes at end of essay:
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a. First Cause – the self-created being and prime mover – God
b. Immanent Cause – originating or evolving within an entity (Spinoza)
c. Transient Cause – originating outside the entity affected by it (Spinoza)
d. Occasional Cause – a desire or resolve as remote cause (occasion) but not an immediate – such as the efficient – cause of an effect.]

F. Stages as Instrumental Intermediate Forms

1) Stages are thus Instrumental Intermediate Forms. Themselves deliberately simple, they clarify one step at a time the tasks to be performed, so that the greatest complications can be managed. They represent the orderly Division of the Work Path, and serve equally for the tasks of mass production and the creation of unique works in the fine arts.

2) Through dividing the Work Process into its appropriate sequential forms – each requiring the performance of but simple tasks – the artist is delivered from anxiety and put at rest in his own mind about the progress of the job.

a. Clarity of planning and simplicity of operations are the purpose of the Stages. They represent a good desired by the artist rather than the patron.

b. Only to the degree that tasks have grown accustomed can the required Stages be well known. But for the breaking of new ground, not only knowledge, will, and skill, but also inventive sensibility, is brought to bear to set the correct milestones in their places as the Work Path gradually unfolds. It is here, when we must rely on our uncertain intuitions, that we cannot altogether escape our own uneasiness of mind.

3) The last of the abstractions that we call a Stage is the Final Form and conclusion of the worker’s effort. It represents perfection as a thing complete and thoroughly constructed.

Perfection is here not an attribute divine, but must be rightly understood as a property of man-made things within their range of possibilities, that is, within the impediments or limits of the job. When the last possible duty is faithfully performed, perfection as achieved because we can do no more – the final chore and last detail.
This is one of the instrumental forms we call stages. It is itself preceded by less exact, simpler means of orientation.
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J.G. 1991
This design is, in a sense, the muscles impainted on the preceding layout.
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Painted study on letter-size paper for final acrylic canvas, 3 feet by 4 feet
G. Perfection, Compromise and Wear

1) Compromise: The perfection of an artifact is not bound by a single function but by several that are traded off against each other: A pitcher permits us to transport a liquid as a solid and ought also to dispense this liquid without spillage. Its interior should be easily accessible for cleaning and its handle so positioned and so shaped that its weight is manageable and its pouring inclination easily controlled.

2) Wear: Even a thoroughly made thing composed of best materials is, in the end, reduced through use to its final material substances and then discarded by the owner. Wear – the deformation of an artifact through use – can be long delayed, but not entirely avoided. A favorable Pace of Wear goes with function and – as a good desired by the patron – is required for completion of the job.

H. The Integrity and Wholeness of a Perfect Thing

The constraints of compromise and wear are difficulties which we may dismiss once we have managed them as well as circumstance allows. But we can center ourselves so narrowly on practical utility that we are scarcely able to endure and live with our functional creations.

Unsightliness – through irritating or distracting and thereby weakening the user – impairs the function of an object. Moreover, artifacts are not just with us when they do their work, but also at their idle periods. Thus, among their varied functions, that of giving satisfaction to the viewer who beholds them has to be included. An artifact is made completely – that is, wholly finished and in that sense perfect – when visual excellence and utility are joined.

When a man-made thing thus embodies an optimal reply to each of the user’s sensible requirements, it will bear wholly the character of all that it is made to be. It will be itself. That is, within the constraints of its own integrity, it will be perfection, in quite a similar sense that geometric shapes also can be perfect. A circle, for example, will be perfect within the limits of its own identity, because it is unsurpassable in its character of circularity.
I. The Excellence of Art

Visual excellence is an attribute of all good art toward one especial function, namely, that of being seen. It is essential in both the applied as well as fine arts, and consists at least of two requirements.

1) Proportion: The just relationship of visual parts is an expression of proportions resulting from the artist’s power to compose by using as a guide his own attentively observed involuntary attractions and repulsions. These are not intuitions, experimentally predicting possibilities, but instinctive reflex actions, such as those which cause us to withdraw from a foul or rotten smelling food but to surrender eagerly to the appealing smell of fresh-baked bread.

Neither are they predilections in a sense of taste by which we may be fonder of peaches than of grapes and prefer blonde girls to brunettes.

Just proportionality gives to us the unimpeded visual coherence of a thing and hence its ready legibility. (This should be demonstrated live.)

2) Clarity: However, clarity is an intrinsic property of the work itself and therefore no more dependent upon who can look at it with understanding than is the legibility of writing to be judged by those who do not know their letters. For clarity inheres in the exactitude of the artist’s reconstruction of his purpose in visible material form. Clarity brings illumination into our minds and is there loved by our understanding.

Clarity does not mean an expression is directly understood but only that it is amenable to comprehension. However, since we mostly want to understand any subject we consider, we love lucidity for granting us what we desire.

J. The Common Foundation

The Basic Designs – both two and three dimensional – are a line of learning aimed at Visual Literacy pursued by students in every field of art but thereafter put to different uses. All able expression of visual literacy is valuable and deserves a place in art. But the different art disciplines do not, on that account, produce interchangeable results.

1) Pictorial Limitation: I cannot put my pictures to work to pour coffee or bicycle myself downtown. But, equally, I cannot put the artifacts suitable for these two uses to the assignments that pictures may perform:
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2) Pictorial Expression:

a. A friend called my *Little Steamer in Distress* by the name of *The Little Tug That Could*, and thus read most precisely my intention of articulating tenacious pluckiness in the face of towering adversity. A whole drama of the elements unfolds within the limits of a private space:
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2) Pictorial Expression (cont’d)

b. *Demons over Moby Dick* takes up Melville’s many times repeated phrase “the demoniac fish.” My strange beings in the sky are thus the Demon Allies helping the Demoniac Fish in his demoniac work.
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2) Pictorial Expression (cont’d)

c. *Winged Demon* and *Demonic Monolith* are both malevolent and threatening. But the winged creature must find his victims and close his talons on them bodily.
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2) Pictorial Expression (cont’d)

On the other hand, the *Demonic Monolith*, his furnace eye flashing open in the late afternoon, will work an imponderable but far greater menace at long range.
Pictorial interpretation of Literature, Fantasy and Life is beyond the reach of objects of utility, which are expressive chiefly of the use to which we put them, and closely limited therefore to an excellence of visual form and the material service desired by the patron, without profound interpretive intention.
3) Artifacts in Numbers: The potential of an artifact is thus exhausted only if we regard it by itself. A work of Architecture with various details – inside as well as out – and its assembly of artifacts for every sort of use, especially indoors, can, overall, be far more than the sum of all these parts. They can give an eloquent articulation of the owners’ habits, character and will. Whole human lives express themselves that way. The discipline of Archaeology, from just such clues, endeavors to reconstruct entire cultures.

Thus, artifacts in numbers – coherently selected and arrayed, achieve an expressive range that eludes them singly. For this breadth of creativity, apparently, was Architecture named “Queen of all the Arts” by Michelangelo.

Artifacts can be as powerfully and as far expressive as products of the Fine Arts. But while the latter are able to achieve this purpose singly, artifacts themselves cannot.

Yet, of the many times when a judgment of what will be better and what worse cannot be evaded, in this case we may let the question rest and strive to design better the objects of utility as well as nobler works of art. It is important only to thoroughly understand what each is all about.

K. Two Definitions of Art

1) Defining the Exactions of Making: Art is a thing ably joined together by the imposition of ideas on suitable materials toward clearly stated aims of form and function. The second definition follows from the first, to tell us what form and function want to do.

2) Defining the Purpose of the Making: Visual Art is a language for engaging the participation – not of our sense of hearing, but of sight – for sharing, by an apt assembly of the visual parts of color, form, and line, the artist’s intention, with our open eyes and receptive minds, so that we shall be enriched and, in the end, fulfilled.
II The Transmission of Knowledge

A. Dexterity Training

Today objects of utility are products of industrial virtuosity and “know-how,” and the machines that shape them are the vastly powerful offspring of the classical tools designed for manual use. The computer may permit a parallel industrial development also in the Fine Arts toward which, at present, there is both skepticism and enthusiasm.

We must admire the sheer technical magnificence that the computer has made so readily available. But the seeing eye is subtler than we easily observe and may find eventually something bleak and arid in endless repetitions of computer “fireworks.” It would be a sad result, if all the love and adulation lavished today on the computer, brought to us tomorrow a nostalgia movement for the second time around, because our prevailing culture of that day will be too sterile and too feeble to nurture our souls.

1) The Parallel Good of different skills: The skills of the computer artist may differ partly from those of workers like myself trained in the use of hand-held implements applied directly to the materials. But the computer artist also has to learn to suit his instruments and his materials to the purposes he strives to gain. That universal rule can be demonstrated by any skill employed towards however disparate aims.

2) Skill Training in Calligraphy and Drawing: I have known only a single Drawing Course prescribing exercises, in the form of drills, for manual control. Instead, Calligraphy has generally taken up that task to much good purpose, so that, even in my drawing courses, I have included letter forms for dexterity instruction.

Dexterity improves to varying degree with any art work we perform – but only over time, so that, in the present series of four speeches, I cannot help you to become more skillful. But I may attempt to add a little to what we understand.
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B. Intellect and Will

Will, Intellect and Intuition are used as words so confidently that it is easy to be unaware how little we were ever taught about them. Though the will cannot determine what the knowledge of a subject is, this knowledge cannot constitute itself without the energy of the will.

1) A Drafty Place: The intellect appears to be a drafty place in which incoherent thought particles or fragments of awareness would blow at random in and out if they ignited no curiosity or interest – that is, emotion – urging us to develop and advance them.

2) The Will: Not all feelings are emotional. For we can receive them in happy timespans of fulfillment while emoting nothing.
   a. The Mutual Enablement of Will and Reason: When an awareness triggers our curiosity – that is, the incipient will to know and comprehend – and thus sets us on a path of intellectual pursuit, we can say that emotion here reacts to a stimulation and, in its turn, stimulates and drives this mental action. Reason and Emotion are therefore not antagonists forever locked in combat, but can be mutually enabling and sustaining.
   b. The Emoting Will: Besides a seed of thought, Will can be set in motion by greed, compassion, hatred, affectionate attraction and so on. That is, an emotion can stimulate emotion. For, the will shares with these specific passions the trait of seeking to express itself through striving for an outcome. That is to say, the will emotes, and only an emotion is capable of that.
   c. The Alliance of the Will and Reason: While the Intellect is but a drafty chamber, the will resembles most of all a shark in feeding frenzy. It is at all times in pursuit. And, given their unprepossessing separate natures, it is no surprise that Will and Intellect together may be conscripted for every class of evil and of folly as well as for the good.

   Solely our fads and fashions – inspiring annually prodigies of drive and clever planning, should persuade us how frivolously one may employ both intellect and will. The emoting Will can enslave and put the Intellect to work for any cause.

3) Education: In youth our unattached emotional energy surges in every direction. And through education – not by the schools alone, but in the sense of an ancient wisdom out of Africa that it takes an entire village (a whole society) to raise a child – we must hope to reach that vast reservoir and
powerful potential.

a. Compulsory Instruction and Self-Expenditure: Early instruction aimed at propriety and learning is, as well as it ought to be, a series of compulsions that require youth to invest their work in Right Knowing – thus to honor signal truths – and in Right Doing, to learn the value of good will as our source for just as well as prudent conduct.

We do not like to hear this anymore; but, much as this pill is at present being sugared, the reality is still one of requirements – though we meet them badly – and not just personal bent and impulse.

Eventually, self-expenditure can help youth to cherish the good products of their labor more than any ready pleasures falling unearned into their empty lives, and to cherish also in a little way themselves as people who have worked faithfully to learn to behave properly and labor thoroughly and well. And so the personality begins to grow into an enduring likeness of the way we live and work.

b. When we are thus prepared to walk on our own a path of proper action, we have from time to time rich periods that take us further than the reach of any pedagogic guidance.

C. The Three Ways of Seeing as Three Ways of Learning

The Three Ways of Seeing would be: Naturalistic Seeing – through Observation; Derivative Seeing – from Experience; and Original Seeing – as a Creative Vision. This last inclusion is owed to John Howard Benson’s course. When we call these three divisions the Three Ways of Learning, some of them may gain a little ground.

1) Naturalistic Learning is Right Knowing gained through personal observation.

2) Derivative Learning is a discipline of Prudence, or Right Doing, as well as of Right Knowing, gained from our teachers rather than from Nature. It is the Learning transmitted through an education based on past experience, and its value is two-fold:

a. The transmission of knowledge far beyond the scope any human being owns years enough to assemble for himself, and thus an admirable saving of man’s time, descended as an offspring.

b. The teaching that we have, in any line of work, no actual freedom to accomplish what we wish to do, except by our unstinting and precise
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obedience to the conditions which render our wishes possible. Thus, by endless object lessons, our will is schooled to welcome prudent discipline as the path of our freedom for gaining our purpose and desire.

Good Education will always help the student to succeed, because the material is already proven – even the most up-to-date, at the time of teaching, is confirmed. So, if he masters it and learns to work with it, the student cannot really fail.

3) Original Learning: To profit as abundantly as possible from listening to others, we must listen also to the voice of our personal understanding – that is, to ourselves.

A self-created pattern of sensible, experimental forecasts must now provide the guidance to a deeper understanding and a more useful, nobler product.

That achievement is the work of intuition that I must now describe in some detail. Useful intuition comes mostly to the well-prepared.

D. The Pathway of a Partly Failing Intuition

1) The page I offer here following records one of my intuitions in the act. Whether intuition succeeds or fails, the advancing paces of its operation remain, in principle, forever constant.

a. Figure 1 sets down the perspective knowledge I owned already at the start. From there I ventured the intuitive prediction that I might delineate all forms by perspectively gaining and reducing particles.

b. The sphere and cube of Figures 2 and 3 are readable results and were, by odd coincidence, utilized close to the same time in paintings by Victor Vasarely, who had no idea my prototypes existed.

c. Figure 4 aims at the top view of a cone, but does not yield a fully legible construction.

d. The more I change the angle of regard to approach the apex to the distant outline – Figure 5, the less space remains for graphic treatment; and, with increasing complexity of volume combinations, the method utterly breaks down, so that – in this pure form – I made no further use of it.
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The Pathway of a Partly Failing Intuition

Fig. 1

This Space has grown too sterner to be useful.

Fig. 5

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Fig. 4
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2) An intuition is easily mistaken for a feeling, because the well-familiar information from which it is descended is taken much for granted and hence no longer paid attention – and also because hope, even anticipating joy, attend promising intuitive perceptions. An anticipation – no longer perceived against the background of its origins, and attended by strong feeling – will easily itself appear as a feeling. But we can no longer so mistake intuition if we keep in our sight the preparatory knowledge which brought the intuition within the range of our speculations.

a. Perspective, the knowledge I had already at the outset of the above example, begins with the true proportions of an object, such as ground and elevation plans – not shown here – could readily supply. From there we note how distance alters the proportions through foreshortening and diminution.

b. This beginning gave me more than the literal extent from the start of true proportions to the achievement of perspective. For, these composed a pathway of direction and emotional momentum of stimulation or eagerness to aid my venture into the unknown.

c. That my gains had not so long a reach as I desired lies in the experimental nature of an intuition by which it always paces some lengths in advance of our well-secured acquirements from earlier effort and experience.

3) Intuition is precognitive (foreknowing) in its character, and does its work by leading us to knowledge – that is, to full cognition. Given their rational foundation, its forecasts have to be of intellectual substance – not as a solid certainty – but as an intellectual probe.

Thus I rely upon my intuitions all the time. For without its capabilities, there are no advances. But an intuition can only serve us well if we treat with skepticism every result it urges and then express our distrust by a thorough work of testing. This is truly most important – that you must distrust your intuitions in order to obtain from them all the benefit they have to give.

4) Were I to be your teacher, perhaps daily over many years, I could help you to improve your skill and show you how you might proceed, with prudent discipline, to achieve the results for which my teaching aims. But I could do no more – and it is a most uncertain game – than hope to stimulate your intuition. And you might not like me very much for trying. For Stimulus is Latin for a cattle-prod, and who could welcome the sort of treatment such a tool implies?

Important intuitions must instead result always from lighting one’s own
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fires. But useful knowledge – as we have clearly seen – can provide the kindling spark. And I may share with you, perhaps, some useful knowledge even in these few short hours we can have together.

E. Practical Knowledge

Philosophical reflections may lead the artist to many profitable understandings. Practical knowledge, it is said, leads him directly toward action. But, as insight must inform us what is, and what is not, a worthwhile practice, we must not proceed unphilosophically when we enter into action, in order not to paint ourselves into a corner.

1) The Foundation Program: I take the closest interest in the first year of instruction at the college level. For, if that program is the product of a sharply focused mind, it can teach with unmatchable lucidity how the many labors of an artist ought to be pursued. Moreover, later – in more specialized activity – neither so crystalline a clarity nor this great variety are altogether possible.

Though we shall look at works far surpassing a beginning education, foundation study will be the perspective from which we pay attention to them.

2) The Parts of Art: To study our English tongue we were taught to parse a sentence into its grammatical elements and the parts of speech. We thus looked precisely at the constituents of language and learned how each one helps to build the whole.

The Foundation Program has the very same assignment. It divides the body of the artist’s learning into the parts of Art, in order to resolve with certainty what each part really is, and how it therefore can contribute to the entire realm.

3) Descriptive Geometry: Classical art instruction teaches two scientific disciplines, Anatomy and Descriptive Geometry. The latter has longer reach and is hence the more important. Descriptive Geometry is the scientific study of three-dimensionality, and deals with volumes whose surfaces are of three types:

a. Volumes of the Straight Plane type – Pyramids and Cubes
b. Volumes whose surfaces include Curved Planes – Cones and Cylinders
c. Volumes whose surfaces are Double-Curved – such as Sphere and Ovoids, and also the Tire.
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9/5, 1995

freehand construction

SPHERE
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These Oblique Cuts are Reversed Below.

freehand construction J.G. 1995
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Practical Knowledge (cont’d)

4) Perspective: As a first year course this study may end with the scientific consideration of perspective.
Since every basic study prepares the way for more advanced instruction, we should take note – whether or not a given art school offers it – what this advanced work ought to be: In Descriptive Geometry that is the combination of volumes in a study called the Intersection of Form, and the scientific study of light, including – beyond light and shade – Mirror Optics and Refraction.
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Mirror Image of a Boat-Shape

J.G. '85
Practical Knowledge (cont’d)

5) Drawing and Observation: This includes learning the use of the pencil as a Sighting Rod for the exact spatial disposition of all objects and their parts. But description at its best is not a copy of the subject in various shades of gray.
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Practical Knowledge, 5) Drawing and Observation (cont’d)

a. The play of light produces a warehouse-full of shape configurations hidden from the lay observer, but equipping the artist with a repertory he could never imagine, let alone design, solely on his own. Once such observations are accustomed work, shaping can be freely altered – even dark and light reversed – for better clarity and more eloquent design.
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Practical Knowledge, 5) Drawing and Observation (cont’d)

b. To draw the figure, we must differentiate the subtle balance of obliques in the Living Form from the right angles that mostly rule the man-made world.
THE BASIC MASSING

1. These depictions seem unusual only by their geometric crispness. But in fact, such basic massings of component volumes record what all of us can know or quickly learn about the human figure.

2. They are often the beginning layouts artists sketch loosely into place before anatomical or individualizing traits are induced upon the work & gradually take over.

J.G. 1992
c. Human Anatomy is not Foundation Study. It leads ultimately to a map of muscles, lifelong in the artist’s mind, which is induced upon the skeleton but a little more inclusive than the essential minimum. The study which makes this sparse but lasting memory of a possibility has to be a great deal more elaborate and thorough.

d. The skeleton of animals may be a sufficient clue to the shape and placement of the basic muscle groups, since the principles of leverage remain unaltered, so that a detailed knowledge of Comparative Anatomy – though good to have – will not be indispensable for a persuasive rendering of animalic muscularity.
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F. The Basic Designs

1) Three-Dimensional Design is not sculpture, but teaches only the control of sculptural surfaces and the proper relationship between technical action and the materials chosen for the job. It teaches also that a great simplicity can be very beautiful – not because elaborate magnificence is to be disdained – but that a handsome thing can be had at a great deal less expense. In building my own furnishings, I have used this training in simplicity with profit. But I have never taught this demanding discipline of composition whose results must give satisfaction from all angles, and I therefore hold no views about which inclusions – in what order – provide the best instruction.

   a. Three-Dimensional Design makes possible the study of what materials want to do on account of what they are. Modern materials are a multitude that we cannot manage in a college course. But two or three simple, inexpensive ones ought to be observed very closely and precisely under the instrumental action of the student’s tool.

   b. This principle of responsiveness to the exactions and the possibilities of a material cannot be learned from a supermarket of material substances, each considered only briefly and as swiftly once again abandoned. But a small representative selection will serve the student well when, on day in the future, he seeks to impose his creative will on substances today unknown.

But I have never taught this demanding discipline of composition whose results must give satisfaction from all angles, and I therefore hold no views about which inclusions – in what order – provide the best instruction For Three-Dimensional Design.

2) Two Dimensional Design:

   a. Art has committed, and will continue to commit, many stylish follies as wayward as spiked heels with pointed toes for ladies’ shoes – that must, in time, deform the foot – and as silly as the mini-skirt. The obsession with the whims of fashion has caused the truly pioneering revolution in the Modern Visual Arts to neglect its best achievement – and that may have cost us a great deal.

   b. Very early in the modern movement it was recognized that a Line, a Shape, and a Field of Color have aesthetic merit in themselves and deserve to be subject of an artist’s effort and display. The study of what
such autonomous pictorial elements have power to perform was never undertaken. Instead they were much used with little understanding, although at times with beautiful results. So entangled seemed each succeeding generation with the fashions of their day that the full potential of these acknowledged visual parts remains, to this day, largely unexplored, and their range unknown.

c. To mend that failing is a sternly structured task and, on that account, cannot likely have a welcome in modern education. But, in the intimate circle of this modest class, maybe we can try that venture.

G. Two-Dimensional Design, First Term

A study with the aim of constituting the enabling fundament of all the labors of the colorist and draftsman is an ambitious plan. But Basic Design will either be of basic value to the wider tasks of art or else becomes a detour and superfluous delay. Yet our beginning will be unpretending and extremely simple.

Two-Dimensional Design, First Term, is pursued with least expensive materials and tools, but is capable of covering the widest range of visual learning.
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1) Composition starts as shape arrangements in humble black and white, but the turn to color occurs quickly. Color compositions are first made by combining rectangular paper snippets of the most various size and color, and so eliminating the separate demands of joining complex shapes.
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2) The Work in Color falls into Two Divisions:
   a. The smaller of the two is technical, and teaches the constituents of mixtures and exactitude in using them, as well as the surprising optical behavior of color combinations when placed side by side.
   b. The most useful of the technical assignments is the Color Change, by which a single color may so alter its appearance against different ground that we must call it different names. The Color Change alerts the artist that the material pigment content is only a sham of facts in art, while its truth is what appears to the viewer.

3) Similarly there are visual illusions by which straight lines seem to bend and parallels both to spread and to converge. Thus, to correct unwanted optical effects, the work I show is always done freehand. For even the boundaries of solid shapes are subject to this fooling of the eye.

   Both the color and the line visual effects follow a familiar rule: If we eat a spoon of honey and then bite into an orange, in comparison with that sweet predecessor, the orange will taste sour as a lemon.

4) My second great teacher, Josef Albers, deserves mention here. From him stem the Color Change and other valuable color demonstrations, as well as one signal tenet of visual expression, of which the following example will give you an idea – though its specific form is mine: “When you draw a profile portrait,” he might say, “give to me the person – not the skull in back – but the identifying features to the front!” This means that off-theme emphasis can be as damaging to pictures as it would be misleading in the spoken tongue.
   a. Composition is often taught by curious rules: Supposedly there must be balance, focal points, but there must not be any signal element at the center. Or, it is said that the eye moves from here to there in an unending guesswork that could be settled by an electronic instrument capable of tracking down the scan path with precision. Artists proclaim they set up tensions, resulting chiefly in the destructive harm we call distraction.
   b. The failure of such precepts shows in their wide following without a product of very much distinguished art. We should be glad that not every artist practices this kind of thing – although he may like to say he does – or we should lack good work even more than we already do.
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4) Composition rules (cont’d)

c. My Pyramid below stresses by adjusted contrasts the characteristic rising edges, while diminishing the baseline margins. And so it articulates that showing visually closely parallels the lowering and rising volume of common human speech.
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4) Composition rules (cont’d)

d. Albers’ insight proved of the greatest service. For I found a way to stretch its clarity into a basic compositional principle of just a little wider range. How this works cannot be shown to full effect with slides, and I shall therefore teach it to you live with “Paper Snippets,” before this series ends.

5) My composition course is a melding of two minds, Albers’ and mine.

a. Much of the work is done in colored paper, to furnish the most experience in the quickest time.

b. But some problems are designed for paint, notably a task beginning with a splash and splatter party on large sheets. Out of all these messes, small areas are selected, enlarged, and re-composed. The student learns here careful observation, and starts to grasp his personal limits. For, when he is encouraged to devise any shapes and colors to his liking, he is not even capable of wanting – that is, imagining – the shape configurations he draws upon for this assignment. It is hoped that he will thereby first begin to value the vast visual abundance of the world that surrounds him on all sides as if it were a “spare imagination.”

c. There are further problems in which the number of areas and colors is strictly limited; but the solution must give no impression of constraint, but only of an ample plenitude of color.

d. In all such work, two classes of corrective action will be carried out. What seems out of order or fragmented is brought into a coherent unity that will not be of dull sameness, but of ever changing pace. Hence, what seems characterless and slack must be more sharply differentiated, as in the frame-by-frame progression of my demonstration page: Quick, short curves alternate with longer, slower ones, corners contribute angularity, while the thick and thin of line, as well as intervals and solid shapes appear.
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The Growth of a Design

1

2

3

4

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Composition rules (cont’d)

The viewer re-compounds the unity of a design by his own sustained attention to it. A coherence without character – that is, without each part contributing its own unmistakable identity – will suffer, despite its blameless unity, a twofold damage of distraction. One will be the boredom of the viewer and the other, in any exhibition, the powerful attraction of competing better works.

Any person – perhaps not himself an artist but seeking practical experience to help him look at art with a sharper vision – might profit from this First Semester of Design. For its manageable, rather simple, technical demands recommend the course not only to beginners but also to the amateur and layman. But the reach of this course unfolds fully only in the second term.

H. Two-Dimensional Design, Second Term

1) Volume and Space Perception: Progressive systematic learning was in the Renaissance brought to bear on every field of study, and sought to put man’s entire visible domain within the artist’s competence and reach. From that time, Western Art separated more decisively from foreign art traditions than these differ from each other.

This once seamless continuity of learning may now be weakened, because Modern Art inclines more to celebrate that man is able to emote and feel instead of his ability to reason, know and understand. To emote and feel is no achievement – we may as well take pride in the possession of an alimentary canal. What I feel may gradually grow apparent; but what you and I can learn and understand together is the reason for this program.

2) Abstraction: The self-understanding of Modern Art regards abstraction as its central innovation, but its grasp of what that really is seems very vague at best. For Modern Art has sought to tell us that Abstraction equals progressive Non-Representation, where the least recognizable equals the most abstract.

a. The visual arts have no monopoly upon abstraction, because abstraction illuminates with clarity very various endeavors. If I describe to you an outing with fine sights and many pleasures, I should focus on the highlights while deleting dull and trivial detail. Far from any aim of non-representation I should want to isolate the quintessence of the action and experience of my outing to show more plainly why it gave me joy.
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b. Similarly, we can reduce to their essentials our visible surroundings and say the whole world is made up of areas of dark and light, or we may choose to see it wholly as abutting fields of color. For my aims in Basic Design II, all the world is my source, once more, for the derivation which I call Abstraction. But here the work is technically more demanding than it was before.

3) The First Operation of Abstraction: A dog, a tree, a table and a stone differ sharply from each other but share a property of cubic magnitude. They each possess Height, Depth and Width – the attributes of Volume. Thus, Volume is a signal Derivation from the unwieldy visible abundance of the world and – here particularly the Abstraction of Dog, Tree, Table and Stone.

a. To make this abstraction visible on the level page, a favorable angle of regard has to be selected. For, if a cube shows only a single face, we see a square and not a volume. But when we rotate or tilt the cube to offer more sides than just one – preferably in asymmetric combination – its three-dimensional character is made clear.

b. My linear likenesses of Geometric Solids below, and the Human form shown in an earlier illustration, are literally an isolation of the sparse essentials of their three-dimensionality from all distractions and confusions that clutter our world.
4) The Second Operation of Abstraction: If you compare my outlined volumes to the picture below which my wife has named *The Floating Cube*, you discover the latter to be more complex and offered in a setting to strengthen the illusion of a solid body advancing from a depth of space. It is the terminal abstraction and completion of my task, derived – like all foregoing stages – from the Final Cause that posts the artist’s problem.

a. *The Floating Cube* was made to give the viewer cause to feel attracted to it. If I succeed, my augmented cube will be more beautiful than its outline predecessor, because we call a visible thing beautiful when it engages our participation through the sense of sight. We name it interesting when it engages our intellect and capacity for thought and, once more, we call it beautiful if – as music does – it engages us through the sense of hearing.
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Abstraction (cont’d)

b. The Second Operation of Abstraction re-supplies, in orderly successive stages, the stark essentials – isolated by the first operation from all random clutter and distraction – with additions aiming to prepare them for the task of effective contact with the viewer and their role of being looked at with appreciation.

5) The Continuity of Surfaces: The experiment of my faulty intuition resulted in a final sphere illustrating an acoustic fancy in which voices of exactly regulated volume are calling to a blind man to let him hear the sphere he cannot see.
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5) The Continuity of Surfaces (cont’d)

a. From there I learned that heavy strokes which never alter their direction, but whose changing weight creates strong contrasts at the identifying edges of solids – such as pyramids and cubes, are not suitable for articulating curvatures, but that these exact a more densely packed description of many finer strokes.

b. While keeping the gain of having learned to make edges visible through contrast, we may once more shift stroke-direction freely. With reduction of detail and much agile and inventive probing, we can delineate the human head and figure or a tree and every other class of form.

c. This study of continuous overall description – though valuable, is not indispensable. But from it follow consequences I regard as absolutely necessary learning.

d. The spaces where my description grows heavier and looks like shadowing need not be so considered, but can be simply seen as clues to the surface of a form. Shaded and illuminated areas have a precise geometric kinship to the surfaces they cover and are always geometric segments of the whole. It follows to suppose that geometric sections of our own design can give the same clear legibility as those that are the product of illumination. And here my intuition did not fail. With the sole exception of pits and elevations seen directly from above, light and shade may be dismissed as a descriptive tool. And what the First Semester of Design has taught about the art of arranging and composing shapes assumes now overmastering importance.

6) Detail and Mass: We grasp readily how spherical sections derived from the latitudes and longitudes of the globe render its form legibly and clearly. But any pattern may be altered to conform to any surfaces. For the most complex configurations do only three things against the perspective grids we can inscribe upon all forms:

a. The parts of shapes either parallel, incline, or curve against the grid. They are thus able to reveal how they function in the perspective situation of each form. The lines of grids can also intersect at various – indeed, unlimited – inclinations to each other, so that reasonable practicality and visual appeal determine shape as well as grid design.
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6) Detail and Mass (cont’d)

b. My overall repeated line descriptions gave me, after considerable struggle, a single way to draw all forms. But here—by a flash of intuition—I strolled, almost at my ease, into an enabling insight for rendering all forms in all possible ways.

Since the limits of a shape configuration are linear, suitable line elements – as my human profile shows – can render form as readily as solid areas.
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6) Detail and Mass (cont’d)

c. Depth relationships can be expressed by merest hints, so that stress of visibility must rather fall upon the labors best able to reward the viewer.
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6) Detail and Mass (cont’d)

d. This task my *Boulders at the Shore* below tries to carry out at the change of elements where solid ground and sky strip meet in the considerable distance. The sharpened focus upon distant sights is also a function of the eye, as well as of the camera, and familiar to photographers. But a precise consistency of the descriptive weight with every point in space – as the earlier example of my *Partly Failing Intuition* showed, is nearly always an impossibility.

It is not a law of light direction which rules description but the geometrically precise relationship between the parts and the whole – that is, between detail and mass. My demonstrations thus intend to pose a model or prototype of Basic Knowledge for the treatment of all objects at once massive and detailed – that is, literally everything we see. But it bears repeating here that the play of light – which we do not need for clear articulation – is an inexhaustibly rich source that we may draw upon as if it were an entire “spare imagination.”
7) Motion: Blur passages of movement are observable chiefly in rapid reciprocal and rotated motion which tend to render the moving parts unreadable.

a. Relying on the action of the body, a runner may be described firmly and completely and yet give the impression that reminds us of great speed. But the pure form of my two spheres, despite their blurs of motion, is almost at a stand-still.
7) Motion (cont’d)

b. In my continuous Hill and Dale design, the valleys appear nearly as a running brook by their fragments of description. Thus I obtained a rapid sense of motion where I did not plan for it, and failed to gain it where that was my intention.
7) Motion (cont’d)

c. Either through shape design or the increasing weight of line, directions can be shown, as in my spinning cube, now sufficiently dissolved in structure to be capable of speed.
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8) Texture:

a. Letting go of the sometimes inexact repeating patterns we call textures is best accomplished by an intermediate abating of its description, before it is made to vanish altogether.

b. A precisely legible articulation at the boundary seems more essential than any labors carried out within.

c. Textures are often drawn proportionately larger and number far fewer units than the original in nature. Yet there will be a sense of vaster numbers in the picture than are actually rendered, for reasons worth exploring: Twenty people on St. Peter’s square will be a dot here and a dot there and dots in a few other places. But in the confines of your living room the twenty will constitute a considerable throng and so will twenty figures, or twenty of some other repetition, within the limits of a picture.
9) Form Articulation: Basic Design II as a college course includes neither motion nor texture, but ends with form articulation.

   a. When direct use is made of this signal gain in conventionally drawn or painted work, it will be good to learn that a shape can blend into its neighbor and yet the blending run a firm and shapely path.

   b. Most of all, the study of volume description here makes optimal use of the compositional experience of the First Semester and, clearly, both are wonderfully practical for good work in all the things drawn or painted later.
I. Basic Design within the Foundation Program

Within the Foundation Program the two semesters of Basic Design are by themselves a compact summary of an artist’s purely visual work of form and color, as opposed to figure or landscape drawing.

Apart from the special mission of three-dimensional composing, the Surface Designs divide the language of their visual domains very carefully into the parts of art and gradually join them toward a plane of competence where the student will be no longer a beginner.

To summarize the tasks of a two-semester Basic Design course:

1) Basic Design I:
   a. Shape arrangement compositions without color.
   b. The optical behavior of colors and precision training in their use.
   c. Color composition ending with incipient training in careful observation, but starting with no demands concerning shape

2) Basic Design II:
   a. Freehand Construction of geometric solids.
   b. Volume perception and delineation through geometric sections of the whole.
   c. Composition of volume combinations to articulate spatial advancing and retreating in the action of describing.

J. Historical Study:

1) Artists need a grounding in Art History to see how cultural excellence – due to causes that fundamentally can never vary – appears in every period and all kinds of places.
   a. Technical knowledge is good – even indispensable – to have for themes involving the especial difficulties technical knowledge must be relied upon to master. Technical knowledge enlarges our range of action rather than improving upon the excellence of our action.
   b. However, excellence in art essentially does not depend on technique, but rather on the just interpretation of a subject combined with genuine achievement in design. Art History does not equal composition as an essential study, but it does help us and is therefore good to have. Other
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times and other places had not the learning of the modern West and thus not quite its range, but had equal excellence.

2) Besides needing the History of Art to train their eyes at discerning other workers’ best creations – regardless of how unfamiliar may be the face they wear – artists want this study, as every man must want the history of his own kind, for the assuring companionship it offers.

   a. For all such learning reveals how others – very much like ourselves – have lived and what they did.

   b. In our calling we may thus share the triumphs and frustrations of our brother artists through the ages and so take our places in a greatly lengthened life made stronger by a little faith in ourselves and a hope we owe to their example.

There is no time for me to treat in our framework any useful portion of the History of Art. But we can deal here with the major steps in the development of Western Writing, whose dual heights of excellence must substitute for the miraculous abundance of the history of art which, alas, at present, poses an unwieldy horn of plenty.

1) Our Alphabet is the lineal descendant of Phoenician characters, which are thought to go back to Egyptian pictographs, or to have been independently contrived in Phoenicia. Aleph the bull became Alpha and “A,” Beth – the house, Beta and “B,” Gimel – the camel, Gamma and “G,” so that our word “Alphabet” itself is of this North Semitic origin.

2) Pictographs are unevenly exact sound-alikes. A picture of a deer could do duty for addressing some we are fond of, as in “my dear” and, less precisely, a “gull” as in seagull might mean a “girl.”

   When Aleph, Beth and Gimel turned into Hellenic Alpha, Beta, and Gamma, their names became mere pronunciation keys for the initial sound and the Phoenician meanings disappeared. Along the way the pictographs grew simpler and more geometric in design, and so became true letters.

3) Around 200 BC, ill-crafted linear letter skeletons, more of a Latin than of Greek appearance, assumed truly geometric character in the centered horizontal bar of “A” and the semi-circles of “C, D, S and R.”

   The geometric character since then has been preserved, but was modified correctively to give aesthetic satisfaction. These changes produced in A.D. 100 the Monumental Stone-Carved Roman Capital, with the thicks and thins, as well as serifs of our present day.
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4) The monumental Roman Capital is the first of two lettering masterpieces we have in Western Europe.
   a. It is, however, a letter suitable for carving but cumbersome to write. Only its thicks and thins – the results of preparatory writing with a chisel-form brush – endure, when the chisel-edged nib takes over throughout the whole development of our second alphabet, of the letters we call “small.”
   b. The path was gradual, with beautiful pen-forms on the way. Letter shapes grew rounded, in part longer, and eventually slanted, for rapid writing by the pen. The end-product was the Chancery Hand of the High Renaissance, and marks the second crest of excellence in Western writing:
   c. The whole alphabet went through the paces of my “M” and “F” skeletons, which mark the pathways followed by the pen, without thick and thin resulting from the width of the pen.

5) I am indebted here a second time to John Howard Benson – who was the greatest writing master this country ever had – for my brief history of lettering. In his understanding, Chancery Cursive is the finest possible compromise between the needs of the reading eye and our rapidly writing hand.

6) Should we venture, perhaps rashly, to design an alphabet of our own, we must consider this historic line in order to remain inside the bounds of legibility.
   a. Yet there is, within those limits, much we can create with the thicks and thins, with clarifying and widened endings modeled by the serif, and with the curving strokes of the rapid, running hand.
   b. The visual correction taught to us by Rome is simply the design of legible, well differentiated, and yet consistent, elements belonging to one family of forms. And, when we go our own way, we should seek to equal that especial excellence instead of copying the Roman shapes.
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If we paint and draw still lifes, landscapes, or the human face and figure and think that lettering can teach us nothing, then we are not true students of the arts we practice. For an excellence a little off-side of our personal striving allows us to dismiss for a while our own designs and can refresh our fatigued and clouded minds, thus crystallizing our judgment and brightening our vision.

To perceive in other disciplines how he may improve within his own, characterizes the ardent student and true learner.

III The Likeness of a Beautiful Thing

A. Two Questions

You owe this portion of the series to a one-time student who wrote me letters with questions about art to which I replied in essay form. One exchange dealt with the theme: “Why do we make art?” Two questions reside within the one:

1) First, what is a work of art? Or, better, what, in the realm of art, is a beautiful thing – as opposed to a beautiful face that is a gift of God?

2) And second, what benefits can a beautiful thing supply that we should feel a powerful compulsion to make a place for it in life?

Both of these are philosophical concerns, and a philosophic bent of mind will help us to consider them. But philosophic learning all alone cannot succeed, because the task requires also the experience of a working artist.

Because of this, my discourse will not be exclusively a set of philosophical reflections, nor center only on artistic action. But, giving both their due, we may achieve right understanding and thus reveal most clearly what an artist will find proper and worthwhile to do.
B. The Meaning of the Term “Art”

Art is a strange word, not for what it means, but what it fails to mean.

1) There are three closely related Latin verbs – “aptare, arctare, and artare.” All mean to join together, as does “articulate” in our tongue.

2) In German, the word “Kunst” is also notable for what it does not mean. It derives from “können,” the German verb for “possibility” – to be able to, or “can.”

3) If we extract meaning, as best we may, from the Latin and the German, a work of art will be a thing ably joined together. Neither the depth of feeling we experience nor that which we express through art are at all delineated by this definition.

In the great puzzles of existence, groping in the dark may be common in Philosophy. But otherwise, so much groping in the dark is not altogether usual, because language strives for our understanding, and not to deepen the confusion. For example, “lawnmower” and “dishwasher” proclaim at once what these appliances are and the service they deliver.

My task is to make as precisely clear what art is and it does for us, as the names lawnmower and dishwasher make clear the function of those objects. To make as clear, however, does not mean to state as briefly. On the contrary, I must, to some degree, become substantially long-winded.
C. The Claim Implied through Showing Art

1) There is implied a declaration when works of art go on exhibit. The artist tells the viewer: “This is a beautiful and very valuable thing; and therefore I am sharing it with you. For it is something you truly ought to have.”

2) From this claim follows a rule an artist breaks only at great cost. His work – for the purpose of being seen – must outstrip reality. A coffee pot, painted just as it appears, is less than the coffee pot we can also use as well as see. Thus, to be genuinely beautiful, a picture must surpass its subject.

3) We often fail to reach such excellence when we make fervent emotional appeals. Sweetly sensitive or pompously heroic striving – while design and form are weak – cannot justify the response of feeling they demand. It is this kind of sentimental and heroic overloading which produces what Germans have named “Kitsch” and Americans call “Corn.”

   But learning that a picture of a coffee pot may be worth painting, and worth seeing, can be a rich reward.

4) In the Coffee Pot still life, my patterns based upon the play of light are a specialized abstraction. They are a chosen derivation from my scrutiny of nature, which informs me that all the world consists of fields of color whose tonal values I may reduce to black and white.
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D. Composition

The real work of surpassing the material world is done not through a preferred abstraction, which can vary, but by a discipline named severally “design,” “composition,” or “visual organization,” whose ground rules never vary.

If the tasks of composition were always as badly carried out as they are poorly understood, we should suffer a scarcity of well-done work even greater than we now endure. But our burdens of misunderstanding are real, and work their share of damage.

The study of visual composition is closely similar to learning Rhetoric in language. If Rhetoric is the study of how to say something persuasively, then Composition in a picture becomes the study of how to show it beautifully.

1) To this purpose we select, alter, and reject visual parts by an aesthetic faculty included as a bonus attribute in our wider capacity for instinctive judgment that we own as a survival tool. This has not much to do with the careless prejudices we acquire of choosing blondes over brunettes or, some years ago, the fashionably favored “Ashley” for naming the daughters of this country.

2) If a weight threatens to fall upon us from a height, we do not squander time to straighten some item of apparel, but leap away as quickly as we may. And there are animals as well as man who will retreat from evil smelling food in favor of more appetizing fare.

3) My preferred example of how composition works differs from that final observation only in its specific parts, but is identical in principle and function: If we played chamber music against the strident screeching of some mechanism, we should not stop the music in order to get better access to the screeching, but rather, silence the screeching because we want to hear the music.

We should un-learn, as best we may, our socially acquired prejudices, but the instinctive operations of the aesthetic sense we have to study, observe, and seek to understand.

4) Tinkering with my demonstration pictures, I shall not try to establish balance. Already the impressionists learned by the snapshot photograph and the Japanese woodblock print that this may be a dubious rule. A double portrait may require balance. But, as we saw, the profile drawing of a head must prefer the character of facial features to the skull in back, and would suffer damage if a rule of balance were applied.

Nor shall I tell you that your eye will move from one point to another. Perceptual researchers can – with the assistance of a suitable appliance,
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show any scan path with precision. And it will not often match the claims of artists.

5) Rather, my examples try to demonstrate how the screeching may be silenced and the music played. But the music sounded here is visual, and the screechings are visual distractions, that is, demands for an attention not justified by any optical appeal.

A distracting “noise” will not be nearly so interesting as it may be loud – but not “loud” necessarily. For whispering too can be an emphatic bother and distraction. My process of fitting and adjusting can – to some degree – be duplicated by sequential slide transparencies. But, for a most persuasive showing, it must be demonstrated live.

E. The Action of the Paper Snippets

Relationships differ from place to place. Thus, only within a given setting can we visually judge and mend what is too big by shrinking, too small by making larger, too bright by making duller, and too dull by causing it to shine. Also, what seems shapeless needs to become form-full, and what is vague – and therefore puzzling – be made clear.

1) The gravity of all such faults and measure of their damage can be assessed by the extent of unprofitable notice they command, determining thereby the amount of mending needed in the opposite direction, with smaller errors being not so urgent.

2) In art we aim for and adjust only that which shows, so that the management of emphasis, by showing weightily and showing lightly, becomes the signal skill of composition. An emphasis is here not solely made through visibility and contrast. But the small as well as large, the exceptionally vague or dull as well as the crystal-clear and bright, all can be emphatic.

3) If there is accord among us that my live demonstration pictures have altered for the better, then my paper snippets have rendered them, step by careful step, more beautiful, by letting our visual participation be a little less impeded and more fully possible each time along the way. Thus I have gained, perhaps, some sounding of my music and silenced, in the end, the screeching.

Coherent unity, the desired outcome of this effort, means the best works are best because they have become themselves – that is, without distraction – the full embodiment of all their theme and striving.
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Matisse
*Still Life with Geraniums*

**BEFORE**

Select PAPER SNIPPETS

**AFTER**
Quiet and Brighten
F. The Definition – What is a Beautiful Thing?

Just as a thing is interesting when it engages the participation of the intellect, so is beauty its ability to engage us through the senses which, in our present line of interest, is the sense of sight.

If we have reached agreement on my live demonstrations, two things will have been made clear.

1) First, we all perceive the music and the screeching the same way once the locations that require action are identified and mended, or you could not have conceded that I had improved anything at all.

2) Second, to ascertain the sites where correction will be needed is a skill which grows more powerful with practice and experience. It was therefore easier for me to do than it could possibly have been for a layman without training.

The true action of this skill is to observe our own responses as we behold a visual display. It is the ability to look at ourselves while looking at a thing.

G. The Purpose – Why Do We Pursue It?

If we ask what makes a beautiful thing desirable to have, we get invariably the reply: “It pleases.” So it often does, but decidedly not always:

1) Matthias Grünewald’s Isenheim Aaltar Crucifixion is a very embodiment of suffering.

2) And Puccini’s opera Madama Butterfly ends in tragedy and terrible despair.

3) Against the backdrop of Germany’s declining fortunes of battle and her shattered cities near the end of World War II, the narrator in Thomas Mann’s great novel Doctor Faustus looks upon the parallel devastation of the broken sanity and approaching death of his lifelong friend, the composer Adrian Leverkühn.

   a. He relates to us how he felt like one of the condemned souls in Michelangelo’s Last Judgment whom a pair of daemons wrenches downward into the abyss. The figure covers but a single eye while glaring insanely through the other, as though he could not endure and bear to look upon this hell he was nonetheless compelled to see.
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b. The narrator ends these broodings with a prayer of a single sentence: “May God have mercy upon both your souls – my friend, my fatherland!”

Literature, of all the arts, uses the comprehending intellect as if it were one of our senses. For, the reading eye alone would see page by weary page a single basic pattern endlessly repeated. But form and composition speak at first to the brain itself as if it were purely an organ of reception – a retina and eardrum of the mind.

What unfolds in all my three examples are terrifying tragedies. To be gratified or well-pleased with them would be indeed satanic pleasure – a diabolical amusement. But, even while the heart is saddened, these works can so utterly engage all our mind and feeling that no foreign desires are able to intrude, and no distractions tarnish, the experience. Thus we learn through them a perfection of fulfillment.

1) We can otherwise have a perfection of experience without necessarily beholding a perfect work of art.

a. We are capable of giving this fulfilling beneficence to ourselves from something merely good enough to stimulate us to the mental labor of perfecting inwardly what may inherently be flawed. To do this is to make one’s reception better.

b. Pictorial composition may deliberately use incompleteness to achieve perfection. We can mentally complete my sphere and cube in the following illustration, though I have rendered them in fragments only.

c. Experiencing perfection without a perfect work of art also can be base and, at its worst, extremely ugly. Cheap entertainment or cheap reading and, most of all, the deadly plague of psychoactive drugs, furnish a perfection of downward self-fulfillment. While these pleasures last, they constitute perfection for the user, because he is incapable of any wider purposes or wishes.
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Short as well as long, bright as well as dull, like large & small above may stand out in their surroundings. When such prominence proves unrewarding, these attributes are shifted with discerning judgment to their opposites. That, in our case, would mean the large shape is made smaller & the small one bigger.

The two displays at right are seen readily enough as a sphere & cube. This completion & filling of the gaps by the beholder's understanding reaches profoundly into our wider life. Man-made things are at best conditionally perfect only, but the fulfilling benediction they so offer may well be an experience of perfection nothing can surpass.
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The Purpose – Why Pursue Beauty? (cont’d)

2) But to love and learn about the Arts we have to measure up to them. We have the right to assess any work against the artist’s claim – his promise, if you will – that he is showing it to us because it will be a first rate thing to see. Yet, as viewers we must have good will, seek to un-learn our prejudices, and shed the common failing of ill-tempered and pedantic carping. For these will surely shut the doors on art.

Besides good will, and by the instrument and reason of good will, we have to learn to open our eyes and to develop a clear mind, to be – to the best of our ability – a Noble Viewer for the artist’s work.

1) The Noble Viewer of measureless good will, keen intellect, and clarity of vision, plays his role as an artist’s ideal in the Platonic sense. He may grow to be more real than any living person, because he represents the granting of an ardent wish, as the human being with whom most of all an artist wants to share the best of all his work.

2) And no actual person may quite equal the hope and the reliable assurance the Noble Viewer can thus carry into the domain of art, who may be quite severely critical, but never uncharitably so. The Noble Viewer is in that sense a reality that we assemble him from real people – not from a single person, but from the best qualities of several.

3) To attain – even imperfectly—the attributes of our Noble Viewer demands self-control and study, that is, self-expenditure. And gaining so much ground is truly an enrichment. The pursuit of art is always upward self-fulfillment, because it is invariably accompanied by self-enrichment.

The Sciences – and here we must include Philosophy among them – are also fulfilling and enriching. But the Fine Arts and the Sciences cannot take one another’s place.

1) For science when it does not treat reality becomes a kind of science fiction, and Philosophy in this case, an unavailing speculation and subjective brooding.
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2) All the Sciences – to do their proper work – must face man’s needs and problems squarely, as must also the designer of any object of utility, however beautifully made, if his product shall be useful as well as good to see.

The Arts, however, can transport us to another world where our daily troubles matter little, and where we are refreshed as if we went on a vacation.

1) My painting was able to surpass the actual coffee pot, which cannot surpass itself, and so could not accomplish what the picture did.

2) Other pictures articulated images of fantasy and rendered my personal responses to literature and life, while my table easel, for example, must interpretively remain mute and forever a mere tool.

3) My action of setting down the paper snippets showed that a beautiful thing in art is a work capable of engaging fully our sensibilities.
   We consider it worth creating and worth having – not so much because it pleases – but because it simultaneously enriches and fulfills and restores our weary spirit, in a compact – one almost wants to say “efficient” – form that nothing else can quite achieve.

4) Finally, works of art can give to us this true refreshment and unburdening from our common cares in ways no artifact can altogether equal.

H. A Change of Pace Rather than Escape

1) A journey into the world of art is not an escape from reality in the sense of flight, any more than an outing to the Susquehanna means an escape from Lancaster. We want what art can give. And without art – its enriching and restoring powers – the world would be a hellish place.

We have seen that ugly objects – however functional – can distract the user and weaken him in the execution of his tasks. We assume therefore that ugly surroundings damage man’s ability to perform his proper work in life. Yet the unimaginable hell of a world entirely devoid of art – despite our inner city slums – still remains, I hope, mostly outside of human ken.

But we are not prevented by our dependency on art from also wanting the truth of science and the reality in which it operates. We are not put to flight
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by reality.

2) The escapes of mindless thrills and pleasures cannot provide this change of pace we need for our restoration. For, largely disengaged intellects and sensibilities mean a relaxation of no pace at all.

The mind-deadening effects of numerous television offerings – that is, the resulting sluggishness toward mental action – show that downward self-fulfillments as a class, far from giving us refreshment, put us beyond the reach of any restoration.

3) But the Arts demand of us a diligence and an attention that will bring us true enrichment instead of a mere land of dreams. For they alter solely the use we make of our faculties, and thus sharpen them into alertness, instead of rendering them numb.

Leisure time is time which truly belongs to ourselves, and we should get from it all the benefits we may. The Arts are more suitable than almost any other instrument for gaining such a purpose.

Johannes H. von Gumppenberg

Lancaster, PA October 24, 1995
Johannes was born in Germany in 1931 and came to the U.S. in the winter of 1949-50. He graduated 1955 in Illustration at Rhode Island School of Design and continued with Painting at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts. He received an MFA at Yale in 1962, studying color under Josef Albers.

He taught several years each at University of Illinois, serving as head of Basic Design, and at Kalamazoo College, MI, as department chairman. From there he continued to work privately, with creative art, writing, and community teaching, first for twenty years in Lancaster, PA and, after retirement, in Rhode Island.

From the essay:

“Undergraduates at Rhode Island School of Design in the 1950s studied during one semester a subject called Philosophy of Design. The course was taught by a great man, John Howard Benson. It was beautifully organized, and ably introduced us to a domain of intellectual concern that few artists ever get to know. Also, it fulfilled better than most others the twin purposes of all instruction:

1) It saved the student time, advancing our understanding far beyond what any of us could have reached on our own in whatever many years; and –

2) For me, it stimulated the widely-ranging labors of philosophic thought, now making possible this series of talks.

I have in my possession only skeleton notes of this course, so that the fleshing out will be my work and its failings my responsibility. But my debt would be plain to any who have shared this excellent beginning, and deserves to be acknowledged.”