

Order and Beauty through Composition

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Summary and Key Points

Twentieth Century Theory

The elements of art and design sometimes referred to as the alphabet of visual art began with Mary Ann Dwight, who quoted eminent British and European artists on the importance of the artistic principles of beauty, symmetry, and harmony. Up until the early twentieth-century art theory remained secondary to a mastery of naturalistic representation. Influential figures: Arthur Wesley Dow, Denman Waldo Ross, and Albert H. Munsell were grounded in theory which was opposed to formal values and sought to “extend human faculties towards higher spiritual powers” (Stankiewicz, 2001).

Arthur Wesley Dow began teaching art in 1882 and was influenced by Japanese art, meeting Ernest Fenollosa, the curator of Japanese art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, at the time. Dow taught as a teaching assistant to Fenollosa, then became known within his own right. “Dow asserted that art was sensuous, the formal aspects of visual art were like music, transcendent and mysterious” (Stankiewicz, 2001, p. 91). Dow demonstrated how universal principles could be discovered in works from varied cultures.

Ernest Fenollosa also influenced fellow Bostonian, Denman Waldo Ross. From 1899 through 1914, Ross taught his theory of pure design in summer school classes at Harvard University. Ross’s aesthetic theory was grounded in a series of distinctions and classifications. “He argued that anything done by humans has two elements: a motive based on the needs and goals of life and performance” (Stankiewicz, 2001, p. 95).

Technological advancements also impact the development of art education. By the end of the nineteenth-century printers were able to produce full-color images from photographs, this made it possible for art teachers and students to study reproductions of artwork. Color theory of

this period was influenced by standardized approaches to color printing, Froebelian Kindergarten models, and from quasi-scientific experimentation and painting utilized by Munsell (Stankiewicz, 2001, p. 98).

Fundamentals of Design before Bauhaus

In the mid ninetieth century, the approach to artmaking was heavily influenced by the teaching of “art structure” and fundamental principles and elements of design. This approach reached its apogee in the work of the Bauhaus (Wygant, 1985, p. 158). The development of abstract approaches in art and design was heavily influenced by early theorists of laws of design and the influence of Japanese principles of design.

Arthur Wesley Dow, a prominent influence in modern design principles gathered inspiration from Japanese prints, the concept of Notan, and space cutting in pictorial composition (Wygant, 1985, p. 158-9). In *Composition*, he wrote that he avoided “detailed consideration” of such principles as opposition, transition, subordination, balance, and dark-light because without extended discussion and illustration, the result would have been confusion (Dow, 1898). The Dow synthetic method was intended to promote early individuality of experiment and judgement (Wygant, 1985, p. 160).

Dow’s Influence on Art Education

Mock-Morgan further explores the life and career of Arthur Wesley Dow, in the 1985 *Proceeding from the Penn State Conference*. One of Dow’s services to art education was to move the training of art teachers out of the art academies. Mock-Morgan believed Dow explained the mysteries of design in a clear and organized manner (Mock-Morgan, 1985, p. 234). For the first time, the elements of art and the principles which supported them were clearly defined in the “Synthetic” System. His method of investigating was introduced at the Pratt Institute in

Brooklyn, New York, and was widely accepted. Three factors that contributed to this acceptance were firstly the publication of his textbooks, secondly, his position at the Pratt Institute, and at Columbia University, and thirdly his pupils staffed art classes of many schools in 1940s America.

Dow's development of the "synthetic" system of identifying elements is composed of three parts: Line, Notan, and Color. (Mock-Morgan, 1985, p. 235). **Line** can be further divided into line with *spacing*, with *character*, with *expression*, with *principles of design*, the *composition of line*, and *representation with line*. **Notan** can be further divided into *dark and light values*, *quality of tones*, the *composition of dark and light*, and *light and shadow in representation*. **Color** can be divided into *color as hue*, *value*, *intensity of color harmony*, and *color composition*. "Dow's elements of line, Notan and color, were modified by five supportive principles: opposition, transition, subordination, repetition, and symmetry (Mock-Morgan, 1985, p. 235-6).

Postmodern Principles

Olivia Gude compares the degree of overlap among contemporary understandings of the various elements and principles of art and design. Each author presents his vision of contemporary art teaching and the visual examples accompanying these texts are often quite beautiful and unique (Gude, 2004, p. 6). Many of these modernist texts contain culturally specific references such as Dow's prominent use of Notan or Itten's references to the philosophy of traditional Chinese painting.

Gude writes, "this ungrounded and highly problematic use of the art of "others" is almost inevitable in classrooms that use 7 +7 concepts as a foundational curriculum structure..." (2004, p. 7). The elements and principles of art are enshrined in most art education textbooks today.

They are presented as the essence of artmaking, yet we rarely see meaningful connections being made between these formal descriptors and understanding works of art or even analyzing the quality of everyday design. There is no single, agreed-upon set of terms or elements; different emphases allow for suggested areas for investigation. Many educators use the 7 + 7 concept as a foundation for their curriculum. This includes seven elements and seven principles of art. The 7 + 7 concept attempts, rather meekly, to infuse multiculturalism into a mono-cultural curriculum structure. Students become more attuned to nuance and complexity by making and studying art.

Gude's founding principles seek to articulate principles for developing curriculum through eight newly discovered, or defined elements of art as a visual language (Gude, 2004, p. 7). First is Appropriation in which recycling imagery is characteristic in a world filled with disposable images. Using images becomes the stuff of one's own creative expression. The second is Juxtaposition where images and objects from various realms and sensibilities come together as intentional clashes. Juxtaposition is also characterized by random happenings. The third is Recontextualization where the artist positions an image unfamiliar in relationship to the others including symbols, texts, or pictures. New associations are generated (Gude, 2004, p. 8).

Fourth is Layering where images can evoke the complexity of the unconscious mind. This is now a common feature of simple programs like Photoshop, or far more complex programs such as Illustrator. The fifth is the Interaction of Text & Image which is the interplay between two elements of different types. This interaction generates rich and ironic associations that may not usually be apparent. Sixth is Hybridity or the combination of many different types of media such as large-scale video projections, sound pieces, digital photography, and computer animation. Hybridity is characterized by multi-media combinations (Gude, 2004, p. 9).

Seventh is Gazing, an element where shifting the context within the familiar boundaries is commonplace. Finally, eighth is Representing' or locating one's artistic voice in order to proclaim one's identity (Gude, 2004, p. 10).

21st Century Considerations

Three years after publishing her “Postmodern Principles” Gude challenges us to move beyond making the elements and principles the focus of our art lessons. “Has any art teacher ever reviewed the national or state standards for art education or the prevailing list of elements and principles of design and then declared, “I feel so motivated to make some art!” (Gude, 2007, p. 6). Gude discusses art curriculum as an aesthetic and cultural structure, rather than a mere container of content. Quality art curriculum is rooted in the transformative power of art and critical inquiry, creating opportunities to investigate, and representing one’s own experiences.

Play is an integral part of successful learning. Students who are given opportunities to creatively mess around with various media can explore within the process. Art-making which promotes expanded self-awareness and investigates community themes are significant methods of developing a wholesome curriculum. “Good multicultural curriculum introduces us to the generative themes of others—helping us to see the world through the eyes of others...” (Gude, 2007, p. 9).

Written in Finger Jello

There are differences in opinion about what should be included as an element or principle. “It would appear that the elements and principles of art are not written in stone at all, but in something perhaps more like finger jello: loose, pliable, and hard to pick up” (Johnson, 1995, p. 58). The “classical” elements of art do not have clear distinctions. Formalist theory was once important as a way of classifying art and appraising its value on a perceptual basis. But over

the past 90 years, artists have progressively favored making conceptual inquiries rather than producing designs (Johnson, 1995, p. 61).

Personal Reflection and Application

Influential figures such as Arthur Wesley Dow, Denman Waldo Ross, and Albert H. Munsell sought to “extend human faculties towards higher spiritual powers” (Stankiewicz, 2001). Arthur Wesley Dow, a prominent influence in modern design principles gathered inspiration from Japanese prints, the concept of Notan, and space cutting in pictorial composition (Wygant, 1985, p. 158-9). Within my own artmaking-teaching practice I incorporate similar principles of eastern design. Notan or the understanding of light-dark is an integral part of my own curriculum, for several reasons. Firstly, the ability to understand positive and negative space, secondly as a method for developing a balanced composition, and thirdly to incorporate ideas towards design that come from a unique philosophical viewpoint.

The issue of the alphabet of art is longstanding, and differing viewpoints have created different schools of thought. Olivia Gude challenges the reader to go beyond the classical 7 + 7 concepts as a foundation for their curriculum. This includes seven elements and seven principles of art. The 7 + 7 concept attempts, rather meekly, to infuse multiculturalism into a mono-cultural curriculum structure. Gude’s founding principles seek to articulate principles for developing curriculum through eight newly discovered, or defined elements of art as a visual language (Gude, 2004, p. 7).

I cannot commit to one specific idea surrounding how art education should be introduced, however, I am fond of the emphasis on play. Play is an integral part of successful learning. I have seen this firsthand through teaching workshops and within a traditional classroom environment. When artmaking is approached as a task to complete, the creative process can be

separated from the ideas generated. This can lead to student and teacher frustration and create a vacuum of creativity.

A much better approach when artmaking-teaching is to evoke a creative process that allows students to firstly, explore the materials, secondly, explore a big idea, and thirdly, make connections. Artmaking that is centered around exploration and the process of creation leads to the development of work with is far more impactful than a pretty picture. When implementing standards, antiquated aesthetic theories should make way for more progressive and contemporary approaches to studying the formal aspects of art.

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