

The Key . . . A Visual Language

Influences

Horizon / Horizontal Line . . .

Like most artists, my early work had been greatly affected by interpretations of the visual world around me. The most important influence I discovered early in my life/work, the one component that would appear in my work time after time, over decades, was the Horizon line of the Midwest, and the Atlantic Ocean. This line spoke to me on a very personal and emotional level. I described it as the division line between the sky and the earth.



I soon added another compositional element to the work, a circle. On a trip to the farm lands of Pennsylvania, I had taken a number of 35 mm slides. When I took these pictures, I was standing in a large field looking west, just as the sun had dropped behind a distant mountain. The overall light was dim. I made what I thought was a compensation with the camera for the low light. In doing so, I opened the aperture of the camera all the way.

Circle . . .

Back in Florida, when I looked at these slides, I discovered that a few of the slides appeared to be flawed. There was a halo, or circle, superimposed over the landscape. At first, I thought the slides were ruined. But after studying them for some time a revelation occurred to me. The slides of the field with the dark mountain ridge beyond were light-struck, a diffused halo circling it. I realized these slides were a portrayal of the reality of the way we see. I became aware that our vision, in terms of focusing on a specific object, is very limited. First, our entire peripheral vision is contained within a circle. Second, when you look at an object, the



eye automatically focuses down to almost a pinpoint. For example, if you were to look at an apple sitting on a book and the book is on a table, all the objects are within your peripheral vision. However, if you were to look at just the apple, the apple is the only object that is in sharp focus. Your entire peripheral vision becomes blurred.

Aside from this visual phenomenon, over time, I became more infatuated with the circle itself. I began to put all the subject matter of a painting inside a large circle. I would pick a point inside the circle to focus on and paint the subject with sharpness, in focus. As the eye moves from that focal point, across the canvas, the painted image would diffuse. The further the eye moved from that focal point, the more abstract the painting would become, a mere suggestion of the actual subject.

The circle became, for me, the symbol of infinity, a never ending line. At the same time all that was within the circle was contained.

The horizontal line and the circle became part of my visual vocabulary, a vocabulary of image components put on canvas. Artists sometimes refer to this individual vocabulary as the signature of the artist's work, a recognizable style, resulting from the artist's subjective interpretation of subject, color and light, combined with application through brushwork, etc. These are just a few of the components which, when combined, create a visual image on canvas. The subjective or individual use of these components creates the individual artist's style or signature. This signature is easily recognizable. Once you have seen a Rembrandt, a Van Gogh, a Warhol, or a Jasper Johns, and recognize the artist's visual vocabulary, from that point on, you instantly recognize these artists' works. What all of this is leading to is the definition of certain terms that are both spoken and visual.

These terms are part of this visual vocabulary.

One can say that all visual art is divided into two basic categories. The imagery is either Organic or Geometric. Of course, the two can be combined, although they remain separate elements within the work.

Organic . . .

Organic means the subject matter is living or has lived. This could range from a portrait to a landscape, from lichen on a rock to the cell structure of an amoeba. Non-living subjects, such a river rock or tidal sandbars, are also organic. What all these organic subjects have in common is organic shapes. They are natural, flowing, spontaneous and random. Have you ever stood on a river



bank and looked at the polished pebbles under your feet? No two will be exactly the same, yet they all have in common this organic shape. There is a universal truth to these shapes, all appearing to be random. No two humans, except for twins, appear exactly the same, or no two trees or rocks, yet we recognize them in the broad sense as being the same.

Geometric . . .



Geometric is the opposite. Man-made objects such as a house, a telephone pole, a fence, a car or an entire city, are geometric. Curiously, all these geometric shapes are made by man with manmade tools. To draw a straight line you use a ruler. To draw a perfect circle, you use a compass. Manmade tools can perfectly reproduce or duplicate a geometric shape. As a result they're never random or spontaneous. The opposite of a drawn square is the natural, yet universal shape of a river rock.

The combination of organic and geometric shapes in a painting might be a landscape with a row of telephone poles, or a farmhouse in the middle of a pasture. Another combination could be a portrait of a person sitting in a chair with a window

in the background.

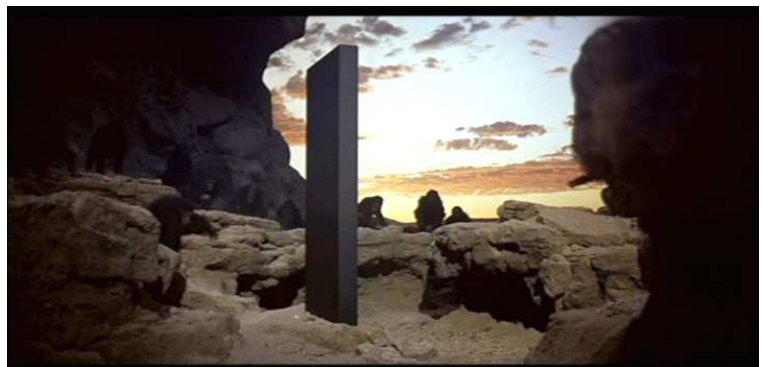
What I have been describing in writing is part of the visual language of the artist. Simply put, giving universal vocabulary to the visual images in a painting.

On a number of occasions, while teaching, I challenged my students with, "Is there a third ingredient beyond organic and geometric in art?"

I would now like to take this language of visual images one step further. In this language there is a correlation of terms and images used to translate organic and geometric into emotional and intellectual.

I am of a mind to think that the emotional portion of the human psyche is part of our natural state. We are born with five natural emotions: The first is Fear, fear of falling, fear of a loud noise. Any fear beyond these two is learned through the intellect. The other four natural emotions are: Love, Grief, Anger and Jealousy.

In 1968, while teaching at the Orlando Museum of Fine Arts, I saw Stanley Kubrick's film, "2001: A Space Odyssey," for the first time. The very next day, I requested that all my students see this film.

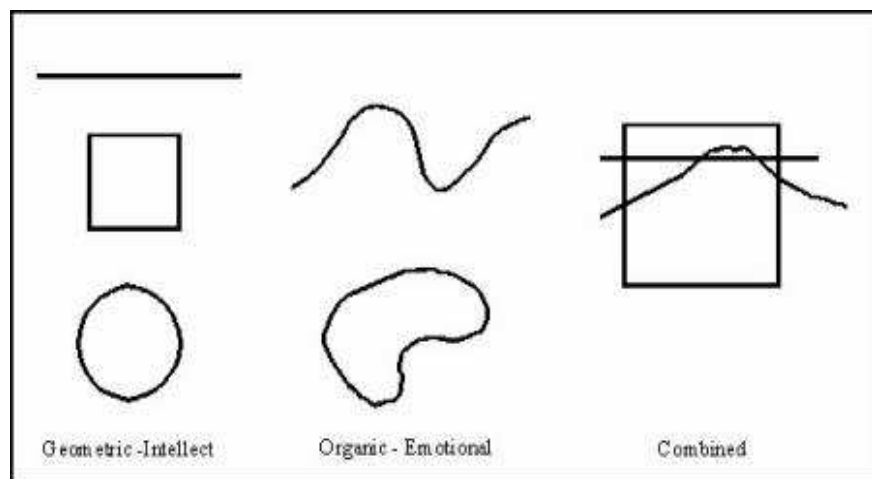


Allow me to describe my reaction and interpretation of the first 20 minutes of film. At the opening, the entire landscape and life forms present were purely natural, or organic. This portion of the film was subtitled "The Dawn of Man." There was a marked absence of intelligence. With the life forms were present, a higher form of apes, there was a marked presence of emotions, primarily fear of predators. As this opening sequence of the film reached its climax, intelligence, in an almost mystical way, made its presence known in the form of a giant monolith. When this monolith appeared it was in stark contrast to the total environment. The monolith's lines and textures were flawless in contrast to the rough rocky terrain. My response, and the apes, was that this monolith was a mystical presence. Emotion and intellect are part of the human psyche. They are two key ingredients that separate us from the natural world. Within the psyche the two work side by side. A conscious decision, by the intellect, can be based in the emotions. When you are angry, emotional, you may intellectually say things you don't mean. Your emotional response to a beautiful sunset may be the inspiration for the intellect to write a sonnet. Psychology teaches that one should not make important decisions while wrought with emotion.

The monolith, without question, was intelligence, knowledge, perhaps even God. I felt, it was that moment in prehistoric time when, through the monolith, the apes stood erect and received the ability to reason, thus becoming the ancestors of all human-kind. Human-kind was created when it received intellect. Purely for the sake of this discussion, I will equate organic images with the emotions. An artist, when witnessing the sunset, had an emotional response and, in turn, painted the picture as his emotional interpretation. The painting of a sunset, which is organic, may cause a poet's emotional response to write a sonnet about the painting.

Now we will discuss the intellect. Organic is the opposite of geometric and, following that logic, emotion is the opposite of intellect. Organic and emotion are interchangeable. Geometric and intellect are also interchangeable. I stated that a geometric image could be a house. What created the design for the house and brought that design into reality? A human and his intellect.

Let's reduce all this terminology to simple images. If one were to draw a straight line with a ruler on one side of a piece of paper, and on the other side draw a waffed line freehand, which would be the organic/emotional statement? Which would be the geometric/intellect statement?



The answer is obvious: The natural as opposed to the engineered.

However, when the two are combined, a third element is introduced. When a natural image, organic/emotional, is placed in juxtaposition to an engineered, geometric/intellectual shape, by virtue of their innate differences a contrast is created. Each emphasizes the other because of their differences. A tension is created, resulting from opposites. Yet, they complement each other by making the hard-edged straight line more rigid when placed next to the natural, wafted line. The natural line appears more natural when placed next to the hard edge of the straight line. The intellect contrasted with the emotional and vice versa.

This simple principle applies to life. By virtue of our differences, we complement each other. By virtue of contrast, we help others to shine. When we are different from each other and we stand side by side, we each shine more through contrast. We are individuals, not clones. There is no judgment made of one or the other being better, more important. One does not outshine the other. As a result, a balance is created, a harmony between contrasting differences, creating a whole. Together, we shine brighter than when we stand alone.

Perhaps what I have just been describing is the ideal. Even within the human psyche, many times, there is a conflict between the intellect and the emotions. Depending upon the circumstances, one will overpower the other, creating discord and confusion and, at other times, tension, one-sidedness and the feeling of being out of control. Artists recognize this balance and tension in both the natural world and the realm of human behavior. They also recognize this balance and tension within themselves. In a painting, there must be a balance between tension and contrast creating harmony in order for it to speak as a whole.

In order to defuse any one-sidedness in this discussion, I would like to offer briefly, the two sides of the philosophical coin, intellect versus emotion.

Rene Descartes [1596-1650], the French philosopher and mathematician, went up into a cabin on a mountain top to establish a priori knowledge, "How do we know that we exist?" He came up with the Latin phrase, "Cogito ergo sum." "I think, therefore, I am!" It was concluded from this that all real knowledge, or truth, comes from the intellect. The physical senses pass information on to reason and the intellect interprets.

Blaise Pascal [1623-1662], the French mathematician and philosopher, read Descartes and, in a sense, said nonsense! For him, humans were the superior beings of creation and what separated them from the rest of creation was their ability to feel and be aware of that. Passion was the authority over reason. We felt first, then we developed reason to support that passion.

Note: The above are mere thumbnail sketches by an amateur who is indeed biased in favor of Pascal. Pascal also said, "The heart has reasons that Reason does not know."

Intellect: Rigid, governed by rules, left-brained, calculated and knowledgeable.

Emotion: Free, spontaneous, right-brained, natural, intuitive..

This understanding of the geometric/intellect and the organic/emotion would become the key to all my work, the hidden code to my visual vocabulary. As in life, and on the canvas, there is always a struggle to maintain a balance between the emotions and the intellect. On canvas I would try to push these two elements to their extreme. I consciously sought the ultimate statement of the intellect and of the emotions, always by putting the two in juxtaposition with each other.

Throughout my early and mid-painting years, I always remembered the challenge I put to my students, "Could you discover a third component, aside from the organic and geometric?" The answer to this riddle had always been inside of me. The organic world is the natural world of nature. We humans, as flesh, are part of that world, transient from generation to generation, equally affected by the natural world. We are governed by the laws of this natural world. In that sense, we are no different from an oak tree, subject to disease and age, subject to the changing seasons, subject to the natural cycles of life.

Clouds . . .

In the mid-seventies, through a mystical occurrence (I call it mystical because I have no other explanation) I made a conscience decision to change the course of my work. "I sought the ultimate statement of the intellect and of the emotions, always by putting the two in juxtaposition with each other." The painting to the right was the last of the series. I felt I had painted myself into a corner, not wanting or knowing how to go any further with this direction. This was



the changing point. I had asked myself what I really wanted to paint. There came an answer from out of nowhere, so simple that it struck a cord with me . . . "Clouds."

I did not discard my philosophy of painting. I merely added another component. However, clouds have become my true signature. To me, clouds are the ultimate organic forms. But the magic that was added to my work via the clouds was, and is, the play of light on the clouds and the atmosphere.

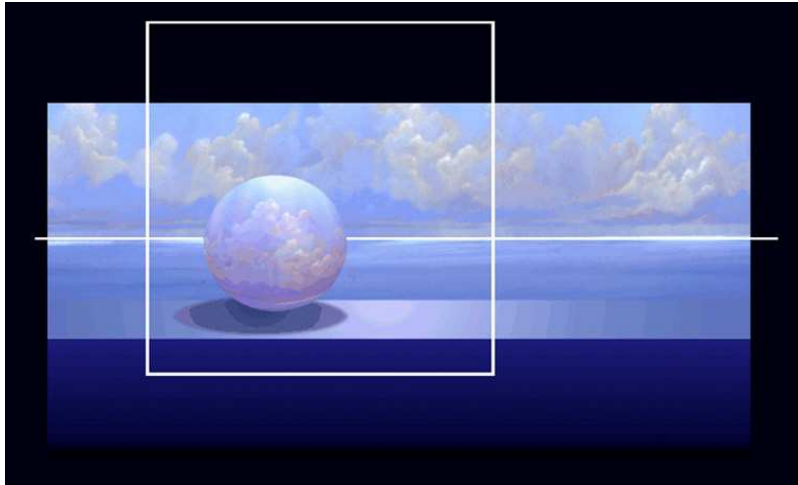
In the human, there is the intellect, and all the components that make up that intellect, one of which is reason or free will. With the human intellect comes knowledge and power. We are the superior beings of this planet. That sounds arrogant. We are arrogant because of the power we have over the natural world, to destroy it or to be its caretaker.

To the casual observer, the human essence, aside from being biological, is intellect with emotions, or emotions with intellect. From this essence comes the knowledge to create. Man has eternally sought the answer to the riddle, "Are we more than biological flesh with a mind that can think and reason and make choices?"

If you look to the arts, you may find an answer. Do not all the arts speak of and to the human spirit? Here is the answer to the riddle, the third component of existence. Through the act of creation, the voice of the Creator's spirit speaks to the spirit of all humankind. This voice can speak of and to the emotions and intellect, can communicate an intangible component of life, an intangible component of art. It is intangible in so far as that communication cannot be held or touched with the hand. But, it is recognized by the soul.

The Keys Combined . . .

This image contains all the components of my work, beginning with that distant Horizon of the mid-west, including the Circle or ring, the hard edge of the Square and, last but not least, the Organic . . . Clouds Capturing Light. All of these elements are found in my work in one form or another, from totally non-objective (but always with a hint of these components) to moody studies of form and light; from primal gases rising from a distant horizon to the atmosphere of a hazy summer afternoon.



from a distant horizon to the atmosphere of a hazy summer afternoon.

The creative soul is different and pays a heavy price for that difference, generating an inequity from the point of view of the artist.

The very real personal hunger and sacrifice contained in the creative act
becomes a commercial commodity.

The artist's life made manifest on canvas becomes a decorative accessory.
Is a man's art simply another person's ornamental trophy?

Once, when I was in the home of a well-to-do attorney, I saw a sign on the wall. "He who dies with the most toys, wins." At the time I laughed. That's funny, not true, but funny. The only reason I remember the sign at all is that it troubled me. This same attorney had a large collection of my work hanging throughout his home.

A while ago, through my New York gallery, I attempted to arrange a benefit art show for Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and her AIDS Baby Hospice. The Gallery owner turned me down because he did not think such a show would raise any money. "People would not buy a painting for such a depressing cause. If someone did buy a painting, they would always associate the painting with AIDS. No one will invest money in anything that will always remind them of, or be associated with pain."

Are the owners of a Van Gogh reminded, when they look at his paintings, of his short life? Are they reminded of how he ended it? Or is the work's significance recognized only as a financial investment? Perhaps in the polite society of collectors one does not deliberate on the intimate life behind the creations hanging on their walls. Yet, the images are a documentation of its creator's innermost thoughts.

However, I recognize that all art must stand on its own merits. The life of its creator is incidental in the long run.

In time my memory may fail me,
In time memory of me.
But, the paintings will never forget.

I have had a fantasy . . . to see all my creative efforts of fifty years . . . lined up end to end, under one roof. It would be cathartic to be reunited with such a body of work. However, this would be an impossible task to achieve. Many of the works have been lost, stolen off the walls of public buildings or destroyed in fires. Some have even been named in property settlements of divorce suits, as a result, mysteriously reappearing. And still other works have traveled the globe to destinations as far away as Australia, Japan and Europe. As a result, there is a very large body of work that is lost or beyond my reach.

Fortunately, like most artists, I photographed my work over the years, in order to maintain a personal record. This has always been in the form of 35 mm slides. I must confess I have not been the most diligent in keeping this photographic record. Many paintings were never photographed. In addition, the slides dating back to the 60's have deteriorated, faded or have mold on them. Still, there is a generous cross section of work recorded.

Well, my fantasy has come true. This collection is a representation of the metamorphic change which took place over a period of fifty years.

These paintings are a documentation of that voyage.

Enjoy the journey . . .