



DESIGN BASICS

DAVID A. LAUER ■ THIRD EDITION

DAVID A. LAUER

College of Alameda, Alameda, California

THIRD EDITION

DESIGN
BASICS

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PREFACE

A survey was taken a few years ago of college Design instructors and their attitudes about textbooks. In answer to one of the questions, some 60 percent of the instructors said the available textbooks were “structured differently” from their course. This is hardly a surprising fact. Probably no two design courses in this country are taught the same way—nor should they be. Many of us don’t even teach the Design class in the same way in successive school terms.

This wide diversity in approach is exactly the reason *Design Basics* was initially conceived in a modular format. The purpose of putting the information into self-contained units was to allow individual instructors to use it in any sequence that fitted their purpose. No particular order was “built in” for either casual reading or classroom use.

Another question on the survey elicited the response that instructors wanted design topics covered “in more depth.” This again is not an unusual or unexpected response. However, any textbook on whatever subject can only begin to cover a field of study. Naturally, this book is not all-inclusive, as shelves of library books dealing with the many individual topics can attest. This text attempts (as the title suggests) to be a *basic* introduction to a vast array of visual ideas.

Several changes in this third edition will be immediately apparent. The chapter on problem solving or finding visual solutions to design problems has been expanded and moved to the first of the text. The material on value (previously included in the color chapter) has been developed into a separate chapter. The color chapter now includes new topics and hence more color reproductions. This chapter is now the last chapter in the book—a position that seems helpful when the aspect of color is taught in a separate course.

More small charts or diagrams now exist to illustrate the various concepts in a basic, non-objective manner. In addition, *all* of these charts have been redesigned in a crisper, sharper style. Since these charts

are often mentioned as definite teaching/learning tools, the changes should be helpful.

Other changes are less obvious. Many sections have been reorganized, and several chapters include new topics. Of course, there are many new illustrations (almost half of the pictures are changed), and these have continued to maintain the same varied mix of media, periods, styles, geography, and so on. Techniques, materials, and purposes vary widely, but the same basic guidelines and practices apply to all the fields in the visual arts. It is hoped that this book can be an introduction for students no matter what may be their particular career or personal aims.

This revision has attempted to retain the positive features of the first editions, while adding new elements. The writing continues to try to present these topics in clear, easily understood language. However, as Somerset Maugham said: “There are three rules for writing well. Unfortunately no one knows what they are.”

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1

C H A P T E R

DESIGN
PROBLEM
SOLVING

Introduction

Graphic design. Interior design. Industrial design. Package design. Architectural design. Theatrical design. Fashion design. Lighting design . . .

All these varied areas (and many more) use the word “design.” Thousands of artists working in these very diverse fields are called “designers.” What do these fields have in common?

Design is the planned arrangement of elements to form a visual pattern. Depending on the field, these “elements” will vary—all the way from painted symbols to written words to windows or furniture. But the result in each case is always a *visual* organization. To *design* means to *plan*, to *organize* (a). Design is essentially the opposite of chance. In ordinary conversation, when we say “it happened by design” we mean something was planned and did not occur just by accident. Of course, people in all occupations plan, but the artist or designer plans something that other people will *look at* and observe. Art, like other careers and occupations, is concerned with seeking answers to problems. Art differs only in that its answers are visual solutions.

The arts are called “creative” fields because there are no predetermined correct answers to the problems. Infinite variations in individual interpretation and application are possible. Problems in art vary in specifics and complexity and take various forms. Independent painters or sculptors usually create their own problems or avenues they wish to explore. These may be as wide or as narrow as the artist chooses. The architect or graphic and industrial designer is usually *given* the problem, often with very specific options and clearly defined limitations. Students in art classes also usually are in this category—they execute a series of assignments devised by the instructor and requiring rather specific solutions. However, all art or visual problems are similar in that a creative solution is desired.

We use the word “creative” to mean a solution

that is original, imaginative, fresh, or unusual. The creative aspect of art is effectively expressed in **b**. Taking a cue from Michelangelo’s famous *Creation of Adam* fresco on the Sistine ceiling, the designer visually symbolizes, in a very simple manner, this creativity of both fine artists and graphic designers. To be creative is a challenge, but many of us are creative in some area. Now this ability must be applied to the visual arts.

The creative aspect of art also includes the often-heard phrase that “there are no rules in art.” This is true. In solving visual problems, there is no list of strict or absolute *dos* and *don’ts* to follow. Given all the varied objectives of visual art through the ages, definite laws are impossible. However, the “no rules” phrase may seem to imply that all designs are equally valid and visually successful. This is not true. Artistic practices and criteria have been developed from successful works, of which an artist or designer should be aware. Thus, guidelines (*not* rules) exist that usually will assist in the creation of successful designs. These guidelines certainly do not mean that the artist is limited to any specific solution.

Discussions of art often distinguish between two aspects, *content* and *form*. *Content* implies the subject matter, story, or information that the artwork seeks to communicate to the viewer. *Form* is the purely visual aspect, the manipulation of the various elements and principles of design. Content is what artists want to say, form is how they say it. Problems in art can concern one or both categories.

Sometimes the aim of a work of art is purely aesthetic. Subject matter can be absent and the problem related only to creating visual pleasure. Purely abstract adornment or decoration is a very legitimate role in art. Very often, however, problems in art have a purpose beyond mere visual satisfaction. Art is, and always has been, a means of communication.

a *It's Time to Get Organized*. 1986. Poster. John Kuchera, Art Director and Designer; Hutchins/Y&R.

b *Connections*. 1986. Poster for Simpson Paper Co. James Cross, Art Director; Ken Parkhurst, Designer; Cross Associates.

a



C O N N E C T I O N S

© 1983 John Kuchera

b



Introduction

We have all heard the cliché “a picture is worth a thousand words.” This is true. There is no way to calculate how much each of us has learned through pictures. Communication has always been an essential role for art. Written communication indeed can be traced back to when “writing” was done simply in pictorial symbols rather than letters. Today, pictures can function as a sort of international language. A picture can be understood when written words may be unintelligible to the foreigner or the nonliterate. We do not need to understand German to grasp immediately that the message of the poster in **a** is pain, suffering, and torture.

In art as communication, the artist or designer is *saying* something to the viewer. Here the successful solution not only is visually effective but also communicates an idea. Any of the elements of art can be used in communication. Purely abstract lines, colors, and shapes can be very effective in expressing ideas or feelings. Many times the communication is achieved through symbols, pictorial images that suggest to the viewer the theme or message. The ingenuity or creative imagination exercised in selecting these images can be important in the finished work's success.

In art as communication, images are frequently combined with written words. The advertisements we see every day usually use both elements, coordinated to reinforce the design's purpose. Countless paintings demonstrate that words are not a necessity for communication. Three examples are shown that all suggest the idea of movement or change. In *Dog on a Leash* (**b**) we instantly feel the motion taking place. No words are needed to communicate the idea. The same is true of the design in **c**. Here though, the printed copy adds the specific information that the art design studio has moved its offices to a new location. In the third example (**d**) the two approaches are combined. Now, intellectually we read the word, but the visual presentation also conveys the basic idea of movement immediately.

These successful design solutions are due, of course, to good ideas. “How do I get an idea?” is a question often heard from students. Actually, almost everyone shares this dilemma from time to time. Even

the professional artist can stare at the empty canvas, the successful writer at the blank page in the typewriter. An idea in art can take many forms, varying from a specific visual effect to an intellectual communication of a definite message. Ideas encompass both the areas of content and form.

It is doubtful that anyone can truly explain why or how an idea suddenly arises. While doing one thing, we can be thinking about something else. Our ideas can occur when we are in the shower, mowing the lawn, or in countless other seemingly unlikely situations. An answer to what we have been puzzling over can appear “out of the blue.” But we need not be concerned here with sudden solutions. They will continue to happen, but is that the only procedure? The relevant question is, “What can we do consciously to stimulate this creative process?” What sort of activities can promote the likelihood that a solution to a problem will present itself?

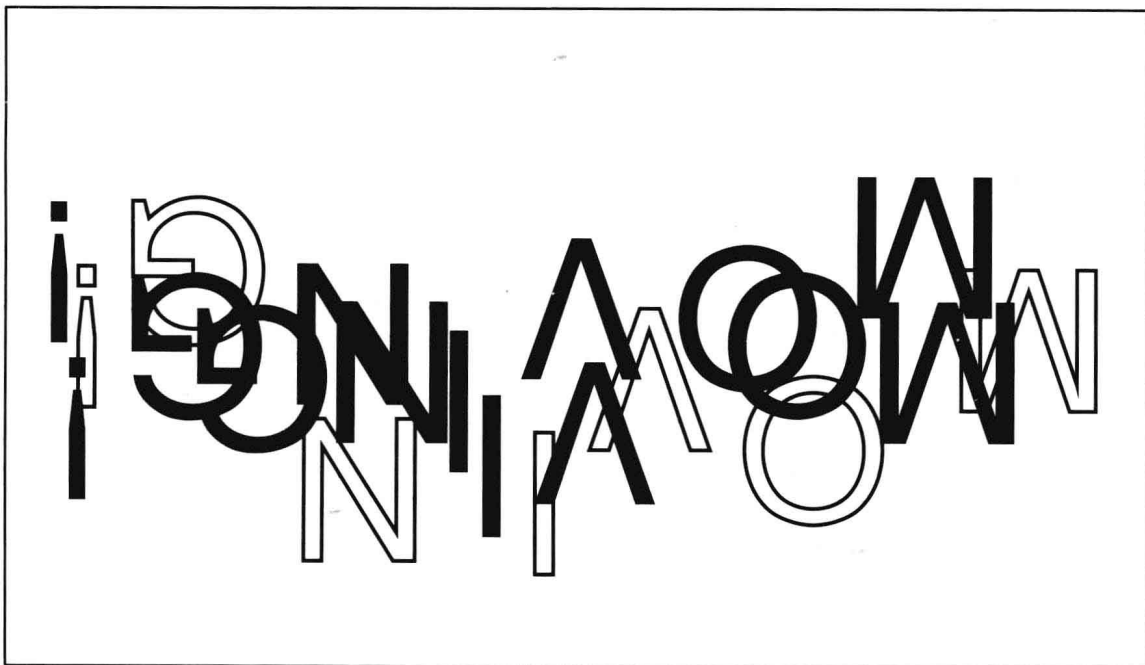
Many people today are concerned with such questions. There has been a great deal of study of the “creative process,” and a number of worthwhile books and articles have been devoted to it, featuring numerous technical terms to describe aspects of this admittedly complex subject. But let me suggest three very simple activities with very simple names:

Thinking
Looking
Doing

These activities are *not* sequential steps and certainly not independent procedures. They overlap and may be accomplished almost simultaneously or by jumping back and forth from one to another. Individuals vary; people are not programmed machines in which rigid step-by-step procedures lead inevitably to answers; people's feelings and intuitions may assist in making decisions. Problems vary so that a specific assignment may immediately suggest an initial emphasis on one of these suggestions. But all three procedures can stimulate the artistic problem-solving process.

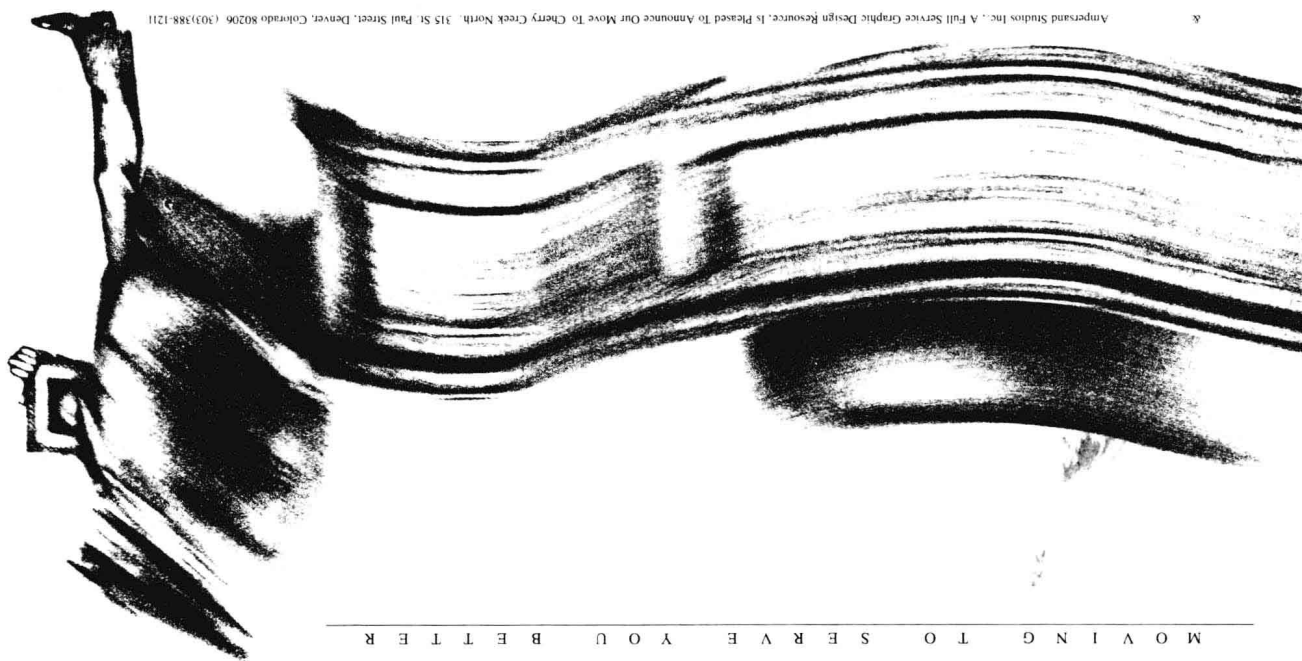


- a** *Stop Torture.* 1985. Poster for Amnesty International. Stephan Bundi, Art Director and Designer; Atelier Bundi, Bern, Switzerland.
- b** Giacomo Balla. *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash.* 1912. Oil on canvas, $35\frac{3}{8} \times 43\frac{1}{4}$ " (90 × 110 cm). Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York (Bequest of A. Conger Goodyear and George F. Goodyear, 1964).
- c** *Moving to Serve You Better.* 1986. Poster. John Kjos, Art Director; David Clune, Designer; Ampersand Studios, Inc., Denver.
- d** The graphic technique matches the word's meaning to convey the idea.



x

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M O V I N G T O S E R V E Y O U B E T T E R

Procedures

THINKING

Georges Braque, the well-known French artist, wrote in his *Cahiers* (notebooks) that “one must not *think up* a picture.” His point is valid; a painting is often a long process that should not be forced or created by formula to order. However, each day countless designers must indeed “think up” solutions to design problems; *thinking* is an essential part of this solution. When confronted by a problem in any aspect of life, the usual first step is to think about it. This is applicable also to art and visual problems. Thinking is involved in all aspects of the creative process. Every step in creating a design involves choices, and the selections are determined by thinking. Chance or accident is also an element in art. But art cannot be created mindlessly, although some twentieth-century art movements have attempted to eliminate rational thought as a factor in creating art and to stress intuitive or subconscious thought. But even then it is thinking that decides whether the spontaneously created result is worthwhile or acceptable. To say that “thinking” is somehow outside the artistic process is truly impossible.

Knowing what you are doing must precede your doing it. So thinking starts with understanding the problem at hand:

- Precisely what is to be achieved? (What specific visual and/or intellectual effect is desired?)
- Are there visual stylistic requirements (illustrative, abstraction, nonobjective, etc.)?
- What physical limitations (size, color, media, etc.) are imposed?
- When is the solution needed?

These questions may all seem self-evident, but effort spent on solutions outside the range of these specifications will not be productive. “Failures” can occur simply because the problem was not fully understood at the very beginning.

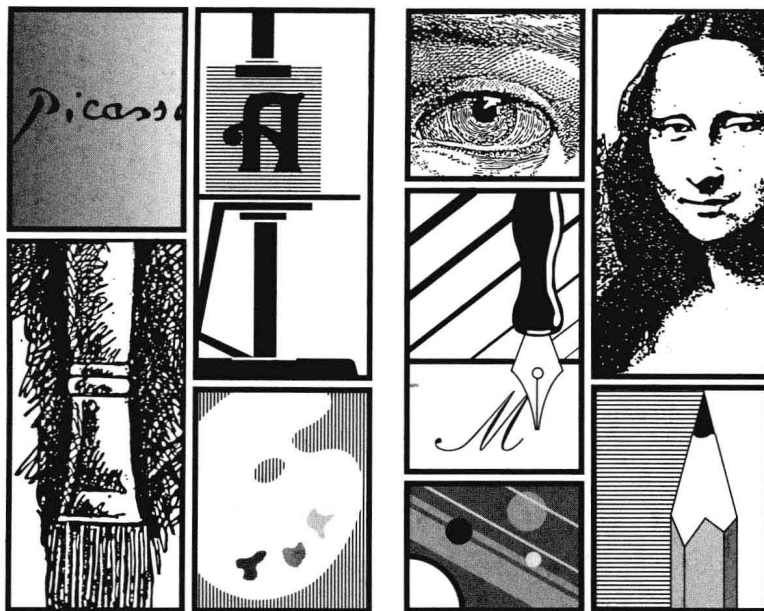
Thinking can be especially important in art that has a specific theme or message. How can the concept be communicated in visual terms? A first step is to think logically of which images or pictures could represent this theme and to list them or, better yet, sketch them quickly, since a visual answer is what you’re seeking. Let’s take a specific example: What could visually represent the idea of art or design? Some obvious symbols are shown in **a**, and you quickly will think of more. You might expand the idea by discussing it with others. They may offer suggestions you have not considered. Professional designers often are assisted by reports from market surveys that reveal the ideas of vast numbers of people.

Sketch your ideas to see immediately the visual potential. At this point you do not necessarily decide on *one* idea. But it’s better to narrow a broad list to a few ideas worthy of development. Choosing a visual symbol is only the first step. How is the symbol to be used? Of course, countless possibilities exist. The examples in **b** and **c** use the common pencil to represent the idea of design. But these solutions are very different, and both are imaginative. In **b** the pencil is a “plow” cultivating a crop of artistic flowers at the right. The Rembrandtlike portrait in **c** features unexpectedly a pencil thrust through the subject’s nose (like the familiar image of an aborigine with a bone in his nose). The startling juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated images is arresting.

Selecting a particular symbol may depend on limitations of size, medium, color, and so on. Even thinking of the future viewers may be an influence. To whom is this visual message addressed? What reaction do you want from this audience? What effect or feeling do you wish to create? To symbolize *art* as a bearded figure in a spattered smock and beret could be humorously effective in some situations while silly or trivial in others. Neither of the wonderful illustrations in **b** and **c** would be appropriate for the cover of any erudite book on aesthetics.

-
- a** Some visual symbols for art and design immediately come to mind.
 - b** *Open House at Art Center*. 1988. Poster invitation for Art Center, Pasadena. Richard Louderback, Designer.
 - c** Joel Peter Johnson. Cover design for *Print* magazine. September/October 1987.

a



Sunday, February 28, 1988
10:00 AM - 4:00 PM: Explore the campus and talk with faculty about: Advertising, Environmental Design, Film, Fine Arts, Illustration, Industrial Design, Graphic and Packaging Design, and Photography. 10:30 AM: Welcome and Orientation. 11:30 AM: Admissions Seminar. 1:00 PM: Presentation on Careers in the Visual Arts - Peggy Van Pelt. Talent Development Specialist. Disney Imaginering. 2:30 PM: Financial Aid Seminar. 3:00 PM: Seminar on Careers.

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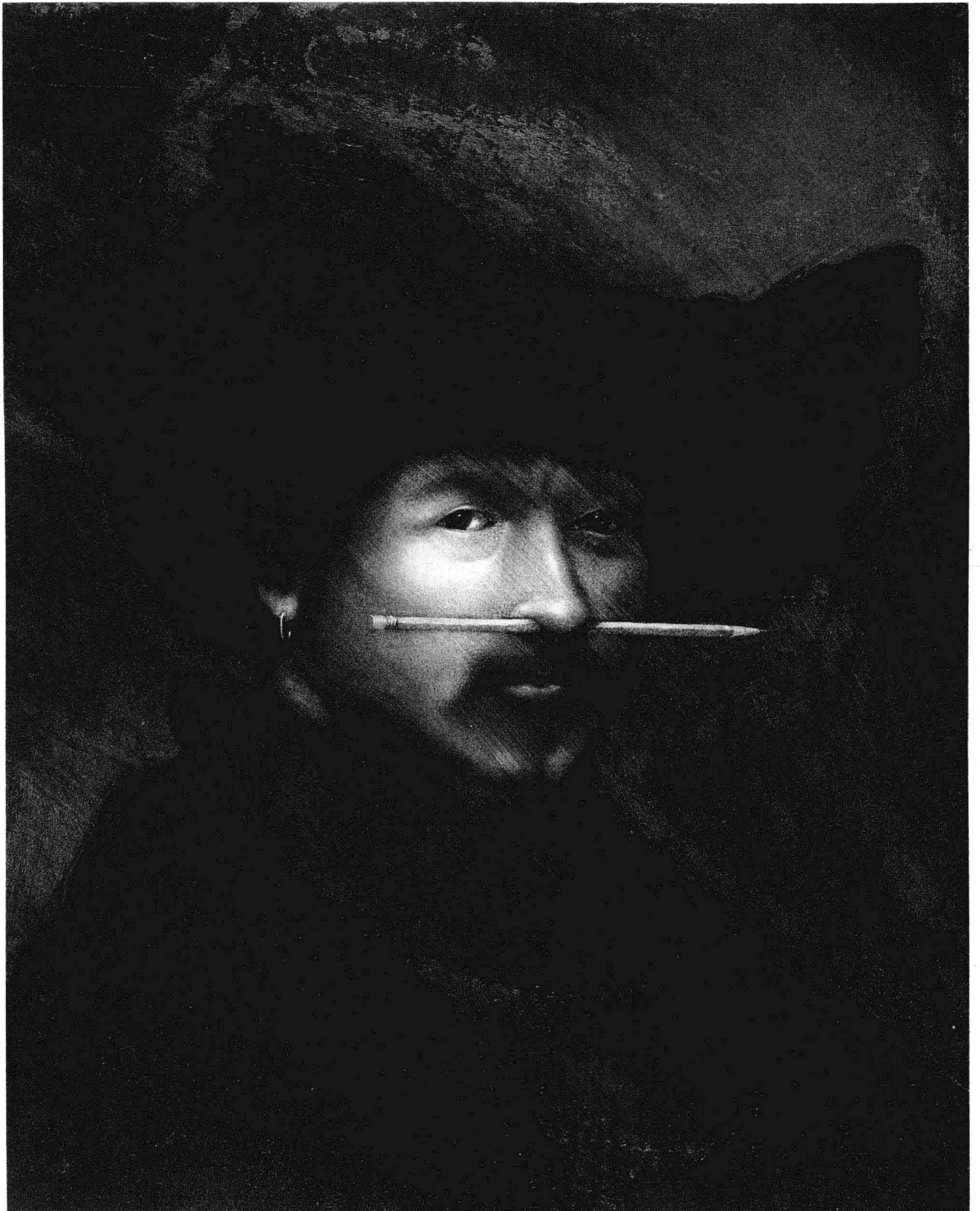
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ArtCenter

b



Procedures

LOOKING

Looking is probably the primary education of any artist. An often-heard truism states that “nature is the artist’s teacher.” Perhaps. Nature often may be the artist’s *inspiration*. But the artist learns more by observing other art. Studying art from all periods and regions is enlightening. The more familiar you are with how other artists have solved various visual problems, the better equipped you will be to find your own solution. Artists cannot work in a vacuum; they are concerned with, and influenced by, the past and contemporary works of others. Our advantage today (unlike the past) is that so much visual information is readily accessible through newspapers, books, and magazines. It is relatively easy for us to see how diverse artists from all geographic areas are working.

Looking can be a part of any other activity. Whatever you are doing—walking down the street looking in store windows, leafing through a new magazine, selecting purchases in a store, visiting a local gallery, discussing student projects in class—*look* by analyzing what you see. When your attention is captured by an effective or dramatic visual image, try to figure out why. Why has a certain design (or arrangement) attracted your attention? How is this achieved? The particular subject matter, medium, or artist should be irrelevant—you are looking for basic visual concepts, concepts you can then adapt to your own purposes, subject, or theme. For example, look at the accompanying illustrations. They are all effective designs. Their subject matter, media, and immediate purposes are varied. Yet they are similar in that all use a similar design device: In each design, major

elements are abruptly cut off by the edges of the format. Our attention is caught by this very unusual placement, so different from what we expect to see. In **a** and **b**, human figures are drastically truncated by the borders. In **c** the large piano shape on the right unites several smaller elements. But many of these, including lettered titles, are abruptly cut off on the right edge. The visual effect is not only surprising, but gives a very informal (almost accidental) feeling to the composition.

A good practice is to make a quick sketch to serve as a note of a design that seems to have a unique idea, either through symbol or visual pattern. Many artists keep clippings of effective designs in a “scrap file” to refer to for possible inspiration on future assignments.

This book is filled with illustrations showing visual ideas. Of course, one does not *copy* or slavishly imitate another artist’s work and your work will not be identical to any of these examples. These illustrations provide raw material from which you may fashion a new and original idea. Ideas for a new machine or invention are protected by a patent, but this is not true of visual ideas. In this field, everyone learns from the successes (and failures) of other artists. The more you can observe and develop your critical judgment, the better it will serve you in future problem solving.

This all describes *looking* in a general sense. Looking also includes the more formal aspect of *research*. Some projects may involve subjects about which you have little knowledge or experience. Then visual research in books or magazines limited to the specific topic will not only be helpful but necessary.

-
- a** Andō Hiroshige. *The Benten Shrine Seen from Haneda Ferry*. From *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*. 1856–58. Color woodcut. 13 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (35.3 × 24 cm). Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst, Cologne.
 - b** *Celebrating the Golden Summer of 1984*. 1984. Poster for the *New York Times*. Peter Schaefer, Art Director and Designer; Ken Joudrey, Artist.
 - c** Signature promotion for Mead Paper. 1987. Mark Stockstill/Graphica Miamisburg, Designer; Mike Bonilla, Mark Stockstill and Nick Stamas, Illustrators.