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Form + Content

To understand the meaning of design is to sense the common thread that weaves its way through the arts of painting, architecture, and industrial and graphic design. It is also to understand the part form and content play in the intricate process of design, and to realize as well that design is also commentary, opinion, a point of view, and social responsibility.

To design is much more than simply to assemble, to order, or even to edit; it is to add value and meaning, to illuminate, to simplify, to clarify, to modify, to dignify, to dramatize, to persuade, and perhaps even to amuse. To design is to transform prose into poetry. Design broadens perception, magnifies experience, and enhances vision. Design is the product of feeling and awareness, of ideas that originate in the mind of the designer and culminate, one hopes, in the mind of the spectator. Design, as we shall see, is also an instrument of disorder and confusion. Design for deception is often more persuasive than design for good; seduction is one of its many masks.

Design is both a verb and a noun. It is the beginning as well as the end, the process and product of imagination. Like a huge onion with multiple layers, the more it is peeled, the more it reveals. Content is the raw material of design. Form, in turn, is the reorganization and manipulation of content. To form is to fix visual relationships in a given space, hence *form* and *plastic* are also synonyms for design. Design is the fusion of form and content, the realization and unique expression of an idea.[1] Design entails a part-whole relationship expressed in terms of facture, space, contrast, balance, proportion, pattern, repetition, scale, size, shape, color, value, texture, and weight. These are the means; unity, harmony, grace, and rhythm are desirable ends. (This list of means and ends has been cited so often that it has almost lost all meaning. However, these very considerations are what ultimately distinguish art from non-art, good design from bad design. Furthermore, perfection in design depends on the integration of all ingredients. Since such ingredients are inexhaustible, perfection is really unattainable.) Implicit in all this are inventiveness, intuition, judgment, and experience. There is no formula for good design; each problem is unique, as is each solution. Furthermore, the world of design is not utopian; solutions are often willful, arbitrary, or the product of endless compromise.

1. Some aesthetic ians reject the expression *form and content* in favor of *form and substance, idea,* or *preconception.*

"Roosters," said Picasso in 1944, "have always been seen, but seldom seen so well as in American weathervanes." Clearly, the designer of this sheet metal weathervane (circa 1800) was acutely sensitive to form. His business, however, was not design, nor did he have to explain or justify what he did. But for the designer who may have to explain, understanding the problems of form takes the place of a lot of babble and ambiguity.

Fernand Léger, in his splendid little book *Functions of Painting,* succinctly describes his ideas about form. "I consider plastic beauty in general to be completely independent from sentimental, descriptive, and imitative values. Every object, picture, architectural work, and ornamental arrangement has an intrinsic value that is strictly absolute, independent of what it represents."[2] Léger considered painting (and presumably design) as object rather than subject and as the priority of form over subject matter.

2. Fernand Léger, "The Machine Aesthetic," *Functions of Painting* (New York, 1971), 52

It is true that while aesthetic judgments are largely intuitive, it is the abstract (or formal) aspect of a work that takes precedence over other considerations. Yet when form (the abstract) not only predominates but is allowed to overshadow the content of a work, information goes astray, and the conflict between form and content remains unresolved. To see the abstract in the concrete and the concrete in the abstract is the essence of art making and appreciation.

The difference between *fine* and *applied* or *popular* art is not a difference of genre but a difference between two kinds of *formal qualities,* between good and bad, sensitive or insensitive to visual relationships — rhythm, contrast, proportion — and how these qualities, for example, separate Rembrandt from Norman Rockwell. In Rembrandt one is awed by *formal invention,* in Rockwell one is awed by *manual dexterity.* Considering such questions, one must be sensitive to the elusive qualities that so often affect one's perceptions when, for example, symbols are understood as the real thing, vagueness may be seen as subtlety, mawkishness as genuine feeling, faddishness as originality, and popularity as substance. Regrettably, the expressions *applied* and *popular* have a pejorative ring — the very words seem prejudicial, implying something inferior. The so-called primitive art of Africa or Mexico, for example, easily refutes this notion. That folk art is an art of and for the people does not in any way diminish whatever aesthetic value it may possess.

Right: This gouache as well as the watercolor on page 9 and the oil on page 10 were painted between 1952 and 1954 without benefit of smock or mahlstick. My perception was no different then from any other time I spent mulling over some design or typographic problem. This painting, with slight manipulation, could have been a poster, a mural, an illustration, or a book jacket.

Everything possesses form of some kind, good or bad, pleasing or not: even decoration is a kind of form that has lost its way. There is no such thing as formlessness. Form and content are interactive; they are mutually dependent. Insofar as form manipulates content, content determines the nature of its manipulation. For constructivists or deconstructivists, no less than for conservatives or avant-gardists, there is good form and there is bad form. One cannot speak of form without implying value. Form may intensify, obfuscate, or even change meaning; it is never in a vacuum. Content, on the other hand, can never hide behind form: the more it tries the more it reveals itself as the absence of substance.

Design (aesthetic) judgments are based on two kinds of values, one symbolic or associative (extrinsic), the other formal (intrinsic). Symbolic values are those most of us use but often confuse with formal ones. These values are largely subjective and have little or nothing to do with design or art per se. Judgments are most often based on habit, hearsay, opinion, special meaning, prejudice, misunderstanding, conditioned learning — on social, psychological, political, financial, or even religious considerations. (To a visually unsophisticated pious person, for example, a bad copy of da Vinci's *Last Supper* seems no different from the original painting. His concern is piety, not art.) Intrinsic values involve aesthetics, the design itself (what it looks like, its visual quality), but not what it represents. Extrinsic judgments relate to content and meaning, intrinsic to *beauty,* which is more difficult to fathom because talent, expertise, taste, sensitivity, experience, and visual acuity must come into play. (What is meant by beauty here has nothing to do with fidelity to nature, beautiful nudes, or dazzling scenery; rather it has to do with fidelity to form [aesthetics]).

In painting and sculpture, as well as in architecture and design, problems of form have always been the same. Proportion is proportion; order, order. The effects of color are not dependent on medium, nor are the effects of scale, economy of means, harmony, rhythm, or even subject matter. Form is without bias. It is not based on time, place, nationality, school, or style. Picasso, speaking of Cubism, put it this way: "It is no different from any other school of painting; the same principles and the same elements are common to all."[3]

3. "Picasso Speaks," *The Arts* (May 1, 1923)

In another context he stated, "The art of the Greeks, of the Egyptians, of the great painters who lived in other times, is not an art of the past; perhaps it is more alive today than it ever was."

To understand the significance of form is to understand the similarities and differences among Masaccio (1401–1428), Rembrandt (1606–1669), Mondrian (1872–1944) on the one hand, and Norman Rockwell (1894–1978) on the other. It is also to understand the difference between the poetic and the prosaic, as well as the difference between a well-designed advertisement or machine and a badly designed advertisement or machine. In graphic design, *formal relationships* fix the appearance of things, while in industrial design they also help elucidate or camouflage their function.

Garry Wills, speaking of Lincoln's mastery of form in the Gettysburg Address, tells us how Lincoln "sensed from his own developed artistry, the demands that bring forth classic art — compression, grasp of the essential, balance, ideality."[4] The principles of form are universal and immutable. Emphasis on form, however, does not in any way diminish the role of substance, skill, emotional content, world view, or appropriateness. Form merely provides the spark without which content languishes.

4. Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (New York, 1992)

There is nothing esoteric about art, but the language *of* art is not the language *about* art; one is visual, the other verbal. The ultimate question, *But is it art?* reveals not the power but the impotence of words and the limitations of reason. In art there are perceptions, opinions, speculations, and interpretation, but no proof. This is both its mystery and its magic.