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# The Function of Flat Shape in Painting

Marla Friedrich

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THE FUNCTION OF FLAT SHAPE IN PAINTING

by Marla Friedrich

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in the College of Fine and Applied Arts  
of the Rochester Institute of Technology.

Date of Submission: May 1970

Advisor: F. Meyer

To Lou

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## Introduction: Thesis Proposal

Submitted February 1970

### I. Purpose of the Thesis:

The purpose of this Thesis is to investigate the esthetic and formal qualities of flat shape in painting, and to summarize the research in a series of paintings.

### II. Scope of the Thesis:

I plan to research the Japanese concept of notan and its application to their art, particularly to their screen paintings and woodcuts. I plan to study the works of European painters influenced by the Japanese print, as well as the works of artists who have reached control of the flat shape from other heritages or through independent intellectual processes. This group would include Alexander Cozens, Matisse, Klee, Miró, Mondrian, Baziotes, Avery, Frankenthaler, Eskimo printmakers and the Northwest Coast Indians. I hope to read critical works pertinent to the subject, such as The Life of Forms in Art, by Henri Focillon, Point and Line to Plane, by Wassily Kandinsky, and the esthetic essays of Piet Mondrian. Visits to museums and galleries will be undertaken whenever possible.

The media in which the project will be executed will be oils and acrylics, on standard two-dimensional canvases and masonite. Eight to ten paintings are proposed.

### III. Procedures:

First, I plan to study in the library and to form my

own thoughts. I would like to investigate both the esthetic and the humanistic elements that have influenced artists in their handling of shape in the past. Then I will use cut paper and drawings to plan a series of paintings to summarize what I have learned from my research.



## THE FUNCTION OF FLAT SHAPE IN PAINTING

Chapter 1: Background

Graphic Design became my undergraduate major at R.I.T. because I was intrigued with the power of designers to catch and hold the attention of the public, and to shape minds to think and act in a certain way. In order to be able to convince someone of the truth of an argument, the designer needs to have a deep understanding of the human psyche. He should know not only what attracts attention, but also what designs will still please people after they have looked at them repeatedly. He needs to know both what is the current visual fashion, and also what kinds of things have always appealed to people, what kind of visual images have retained their interest over the centuries.

It seems that the communicative power of the simple bold image has never been completely eclipsed, even in periods when flamboyance and ornateness were the vogue. In browsing through any general art history text book, the simple forms appear again and again -- from paleolithic paintings and neolithic pottery, through the beautifully simplified Egyptian portrait statuary, African sculpture, masks from New Guinea, the huge stone images from the Easter Islands, American Indian Art, and finally, the starkly simple paintings of the twentieth century (Plates 1 and 2).

Peoples all over the world and from every period of time have used simple forms to communicate, whether as

Plate 1. Neolithic pot,  
using spiral motif.

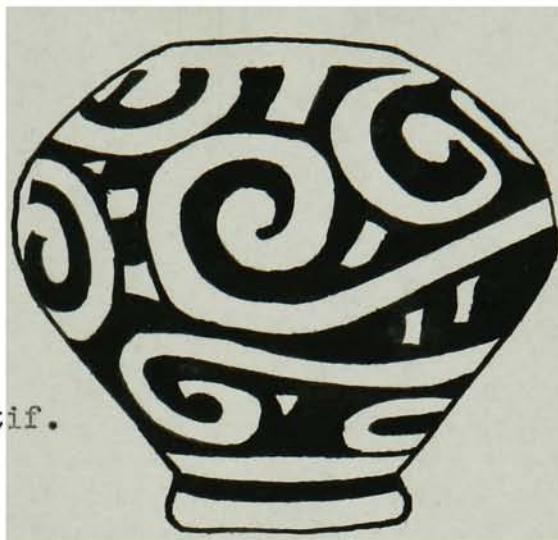
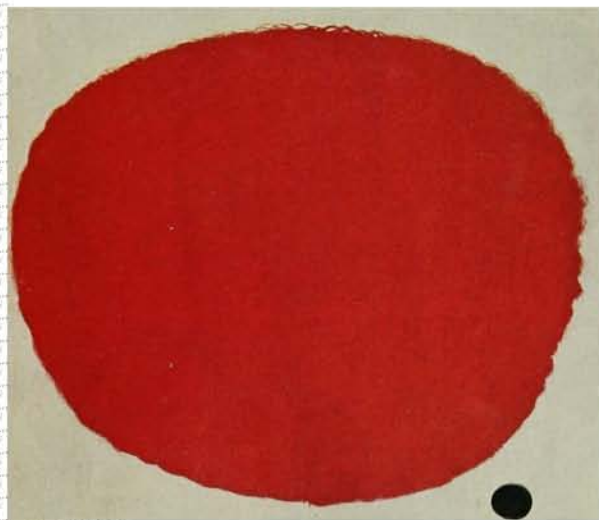


Plate 2. "Painting," by Joan Miró, 1930.





Experimental/Mousseau



Numburger Schwab  
/Haass



Didot Italic/Amst. Cont.



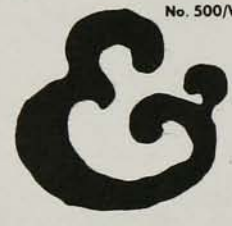
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Delphin II/Weber



Kennery Italic/Goudy



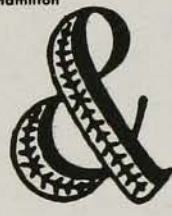
Ben Franklin/Hamilton



Virtuoso 1/Amst.



De Vinne/Har



Ornata/Stempel



Baskerville/ATF



Sapphire/Stempel



Melior Bold/Zapf



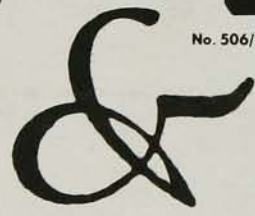
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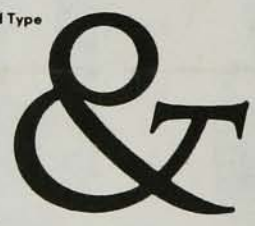
Hammer Unziale/Klingspor



Ornamented Outline  
Stevens & Shanks



Amazone/Amst. Cont.



Augustea/Amst. Cont.



Aldus Italic/Zapf



Lette Gotisch/Haass



Bodoni Title/Bauer



Palatino/Zapf



Crayon/Morgan Press



Diotima Cursive/S



Copperplate Gothic Bold/Mono.



Gras Vibert/D

Plate 3.  
 Ampersands  
 since the time of  
 Gutenberg, showing  
 the variety of ways  
 of presenting  
 a single  
 character.

Egmont/Amst. Cont.



Fontanesi/Amst. Cont.



Garamond Italic/Mono.

Banjo/Deberny & Peignot



Forum/Goudy



Caslon 540 Italic/ATF



Flirt/Morgan Press



No. 514/Wood Type



Zentener-Fraktur/Bauer



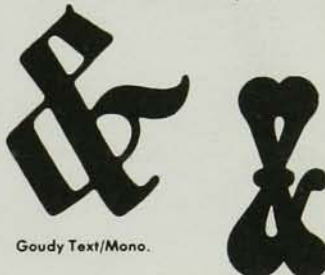
Garamond Bold Swash/Mono.



Bernhard Modern  
 Bold/ATF



Century Expanded/ATF



Goudy Text/Mono.

Phanitalian/Page



Gothic Tuscan X-Cond./Cooley



Bulmer Italic/ATF



Experimental/Goudy



Banco/Roger Excoffon



Elegant Grotesque/Stempel



Futura Medium/Bauer



Stradivarius/Bauer

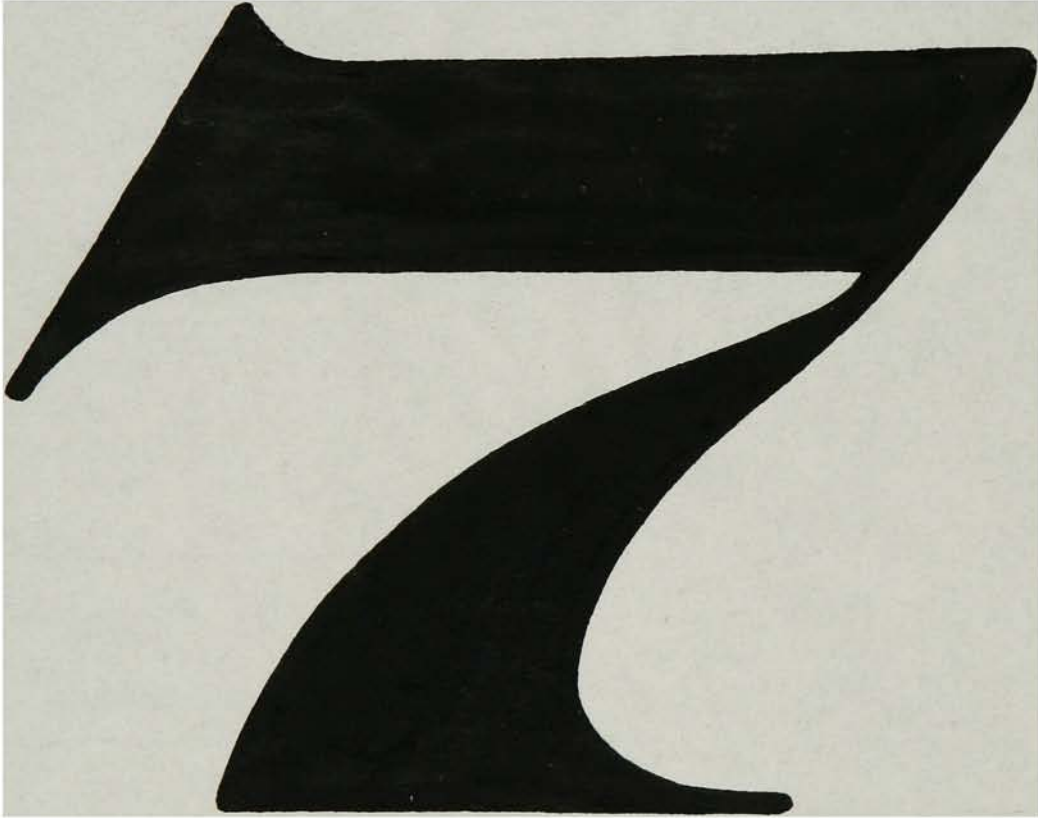


Plate 4. The number seven, a graceful design in wood type.

recognizable images from the familiar visual world or as abstractions, such as symbols.

Training in graphics taught me that a simple, even common form, such as a letter or traffic symbol, could be manipulated in an extraordinary number of ways (Plate 3). Designs of great beauty and power could be evolved from a single numeral, or from the proper placement of a severe black shape on a white page. A study of type faces showed that a simple, useful, recognizable, black shape could be designed to be esthetic as well as communicative (Plate 4).

Previous to my studies in graphics, I had been introduced to the philosophy of Carl Jung through a course in esthetics. His belief that there are certain experiences common to all human beings through their evolutionary development, experiences which remain submerged in the psyche, seemed to me to have a relationship to the universal appeal of certain forms in art. In his writings, Jung used the example of the cross, a configuration found in many cultures. He says that in the early history of man, the crossroads was a place of danger, one where enemies might attack from all sides. Because of this ancient situation, man has always instinctively placed importance on the sign of the cross, although the exact meaning of the symbol may vary from culture to culture.<sup>1</sup>

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1. From the lectures of Dr. Paul Schmidt, California College of Arts and Crafts, 1966.

I felt that the black and white prints of paintings of Rembrandt, Ryder, and others in art history textbooks often showed a psychological attraction that might be related to Jung's theories. The massing of dark forms against light seemed to have a strange appeal, at times unrelated to the spirit of the subject matter. I concluded that the bold value organization of these paintings contributed essentially to their success, since the value patterns were subconsciously recognizable as Jung's primordial forms. Although it is impossible for me to know what images and accompanying events were experienced by primitive man, I believe with Jung that the same images may be subconsciously recognized by us now in the art work, evoking similar emotions to those which were once elicited by them.

A result of these studies was the development of my R.I.T. Senior Project, a series of paintings in which I tried to find simple but interesting images to paint in high value contrast to their surroundings.

## Chapter 2: Graduate Concentration in Painting

The Graphic Design field has expanded into many new technical areas. Film, tapes, and three-dimensional media are now common in classroom graphics problems. I feel, however, that pure, two-dimensional design is still the most challenging area, and I became a graduate student in painting in order to specialize in this aspect of design.

Because there are such an infinite number of things that can be done with paint, I found that it is often difficult to be sufficiently selective. Because an art education in our time includes years of study in art history and constant exposure to a wide variety of styles through museums, galleries, books and magazines, the student is tempted to try everything at once.

Not only is he aware of the training of the old masters in copying, but also the student learns how a great contemporary artist, such as Arshile Gorky or Henri Matisse, spent many years painting in the manner of other artists that he admired. I believe that copying and studying past artists is still a very useful exercise.

But features from a number of historical phases of painting which particularly interested me, for example, Abstract Expressionism, often turned up unresolved on my canvases. Those things which made me love to look at paintings, I had simply put into mine. The overall impact of each painting was admittedly weakened by this adulatory approach. There was a disagreeable confusion in my work



and a distinct lack of pleasing relationships between the parts of the paintings. Frequently the instructor would suggest that I eliminate entire large areas of a painting and replace it by a simple flat band of color. It was depressing to see how helpful this was in almost all cases, since I obviously was going to have to give up a lot of intriguing little ideas to get a single painting to succeed.

I went through stacks of old paintings and covered large parts with flat areas of black, white, or color, and realized how unnecessary a lot of the detail had been.

It seemed that my concurrent studies in printmaking had much to contribute to my painting. I have always admired the very direct communicative effect of the woodcut and linoleum cut, and have been carrying on an independent study of Japanese and Eskimo prints, especially of the Eskimo specialty, the stonecut, for a number of years. The most effective prints seemed masterpieces of the creation of flat shapes, or of the interlinking of flat areas of color. The two ethnic groups seemed to concentrate on different aspects of shape, however. The Japanese were expert at the integration of the flat shape into the entire picture area, often alternating a very detailed or realistic element with a flat area representing a stylized object such as a bridge, stream, wall, garment or hairdo. Japanese prints often treat space and shape in very sophisticated relationships, turning from deep to flat at surprising occasions. The Eskimos, on the other hand, seem primarily interested in the

black or positive image printed from their stone (Plate 5). The negative space around their pictographs is usually effective, but one is not very conscious of it in most cases.

A natural development from a study of Japanese print-makers is the study of the painters who have been influenced by them, such as Mary Cassatt, Gauguin, the whole gamut of French Impressionists, Matisse and many contemporary artists. It is clear that the Japanese structural organization of the rectangular format helped artists to break away from the standard European device of featuring people and things and letting the surrounding space be just background. Especially in the paintings of Gauguin, each area of the painting is composed of interlocking fragments, like parts of a jigsaw puzzle, which depend on the next piece for some of their character. In the paintings of Mary Cassatt, the flat dark shapes often serve as a structure on which the realism of the figures and setting are securely based.

The relief printmaker, however, has one important thing in his favor, one thing that forces him to stay close to the simplicity that makes an effective communication with the observer. This is the difficulty of working and re-working the medium. It is a lot harder to carve wood or stone than it is to make a brushstroke. The printmaker knows, too, that if he miscarves, the wood cannot be put back in place so easily, so he usually plans more carefully for every move. A beautifully simplified design, such as Munch's "Women on the Beach" (Plate 6), is often the result.



Plate 5. "Hunter and Birds," stonecut by Kiakshuk.



Plate 6. "Women on the Beach," woodcut by Edvard Munch.

The painter, on the other hand, realizes that he can easily repaint something if he doesn't happen to like it. So often he ends up repainting and repainting without any clear idea of where he wants to go.

The conclusion for me was that the simplicity and organization common to the block print would be equally desirable in the painting, but that this would be harder to achieve. Discipline and planning, therefore, would be my key interest as a graduate student painter\* in order to achieve this simplicity.

### Chapter 3: Thesis Research on the Function of Flat Shape in Painting

When I had decided that my basic problem in painting was how to simplify, I began to study various aspects of the simple shape. I read psychologists such as Clifford Morgan, Anton Ehrenzweig and Carl Jung to learn more about why and how shapes and images act on us the way they do. I also studied the writings of artists and estheticians for their opinions of the relationship of shape and form to the esthetic and communicative qualities of the art object.

In a general survey of the ways in which flat shapes have been used throughout the history of art, the following areas were of particular interest.

Japanese art of several periods makes expert use of flat shape, especially the Heian period scrolls, the Edo period screens, and the 19th and 20th century prints. The Japanese concept of notan, or flat, artificial value pattern, with no attempt at realistic light and shade,<sup>1</sup> is of key concern. Especially impressive is the Japanese ability to combine beautifully the flat, the stylized and the realistic in a single painting (Plate 7).

Although ordinarily associated with complexity and flamboyance, Art Nouveau and its influence on modern advertising design is an excellent study in the use of flat shapes. In some of it, a careful flattening of pictorial

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1. Definition by Professor Dorothy Cogswell, Mount Holyoke College.

elements into an interlocking design is the main feature. In other work, such as the ink drawings of Aubrey Beardsley, an elegant linear pattern is balanced by sophisticated shapes of flat black or white.

Textile design of all periods and countries offers much study material, for as in the case of the woodcut, the nature of the media has encouraged simplification of design. But even in modern times, when primitive looms have been largely replaced by machines that make the execution of complex designs relatively easy, many contemporary artists have created fabrics and wall hangings in which simple shapes are used with striking success. For example, the Swedish industrial and graphic designer Stig Lindberg has designed fabric patterns of very simple, abstract shapes which float and bump against one another in a light-hearted manner.

In general, the richness of modern fabrics and tapestries often seems to depend on the sensitivity of color and textural relationships between extremely simple compartments of space.

Jack Youngerman's symmetrical acrylic paintings seem akin to textile design in that the broad organization of hard-edge, flat colors makes one think of flags or banners. (Plate 8). This type of strong, almost mechanical, edge to edge treatment of the square format seems particularly in tune with the aggressive, explosive nature of modern life.

Helen Frankenthaler, on the other hand, makes bold arrangements of simple shapes, yet gives a final impression of softness, humanness and vulnerability (Plate 9). The



RED AND WHITE PLUM TREES  
*Count Tsugaru Collection, Tōkyō*

THE UNIVERSITY PRINTS  
BOSTON

OGATA KŌRIN. 1658—1716  
TOKUGAWA PERIOD

Plate 7.





Plate 8. "Bahia," by Jack Youngerman



Plate 9. "The Human Edge," by Helen Frankenthaler, 1967.



Plate 10. "Ruby Gold," by Hans Hofmann.

poetic quality of the color relationships balances the feeling of masculine boldness emanating from the huge rectangular shapes with an air of the feminine and the spiritual. Her personal technique of staining the raw white canvas with washes of acrylic paint is an important part of the achievement of this spiritual effect.

The furious plastering on of thick paint in the work of Hans Hofmann (Plate 10) gives yet again an entirely different emotional tone, though the flat shapes used are quite similar to those in the Frankenthaler paintings. Here the mood is brash, animal and electric.

Other areas of special interest in the study of flat shape in painting, some of which are discussed in other parts of this thesis are: 1) African Art, 2) Eskimo Art, 3) Northwest Coast Indian Art, 4) the frescos of Piero della Francesca, 5) the paintings of Pieter Breughel the Elder, 6) the ink blot studies of Alexander Cozens, 7) murals by modern Mexican painters such as Diego Rivera, 8) the graphic art of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, paintings by 9) Mary Cassatt, 10) James Whistler, 11) the French Impressionists, especially Georges Seurat, 12) Paul Cézanne, 13) Henri Rousseau, 14) Jean Arp, 15) William Baziotes, 16) Milton Avery, 17) Joan Miró, 18) Paul Klee, 19) Henri Matisse, 20) Piet Mondrian, 21) Arshile Gorky, 22) Robert Motherwell, 23) Stuart Davis, 24) Mark Rothko, 25) Franz Kline, 26) Adolf Gottlieb, 27) Arthur Dove, 28) Pablo Picasso, 29) Edvard Munch and 30) Charles Sheeler.

## Chapter 4: The Painting Procedure

Five different procedures were used in the actual paintings. First I took paintings I'd already started and tried to simplify them by eliminating as many shapes as possible. I tried to structure them by replacing some of the three-dimensional forms with flat shapes.

Second, I pasted large pieces of billboard poster over paintings which resisted simplification through the straight thought process. Often the large, hard-edge shapes of the poster letters provided just the relief needed from the painterly softer surface. And it was easier to break away from any hardened idea of what this painting should be by introducing a completely foreign element.

Third, I laid scraps of fabric across the painting and found the most agreeable balance between the matte flat fabric and the shinier, often depth-suggestive paint surface. This was similar to the poster scrap technique in forcing me away from a failing direction a painting might seem to be inexorably taking.

Fourth, I adopted Matisse's technique of cutting out various forms from paper and manipulating them on the surface of the canvas until a satisfactory arrangement was produced. Then I traced around the paper shapes and removed them. The resulting composition was painted in, usually in simple flat areas.

Fifth, I tore up old drawings, lithographs and woodcuts and shuffled them around. Then, instead of using them in

a collage, as did Braque and Picasso, I put layout paper over them and traced what seemed to be the most interesting forms and arrangement of forms. Frequently the tracing procedure was repeated several times, each time removing more lines and shapes. In this way, the tightness of the drawings was eliminated and I was able to discover relationships and shapes that probably would never have emerged from my head. The resulting design was blown up by the grid technique onto a canvas or masonite.

In the last four techniques, one great value was the ease with which a change of basic design could be made before the actual painting was started. This meant that a great number of possibilities could be tested before a commitment in paint was made, and therefore the final design was often better than that of my earlier paintings because it had been chosen from so many.

A number of artists have successfully used techniques similar to these to stimulate the imagination. Not only did Matisse and other modern artists use cut paper and collage both to design paintings and to construct the actual work of art, but even Leonardo da Vinci took inspiration from such accidents as stains on walls. The 18th century artist Alexander Cozens tried to get away from stale compositions by using crumpled paper and ink blots.

I found the activity of tearing up my own drawings of particular help in developing a sense of freedom and freshness of design.

## Chapter 5: The Paintings

### Painting # 1

This painting was worked out by laying torn and cut pieces of paper on the sized white cotton canvas. When I thought I had an interesting design, I traced around the scraps of paper with charcoal, then removed them and began to lay on washes of acrylic paint. The original paper design was not strictly followed in this particular painting, since the explosive, upward movement of the center shapes seemed emphasized by leaving some transparent transitional washes between the basic forms. I very gradually made the paint over the basic forms more opaque, so that I could stop when the painting reached the right combination of solidity and transparency. It was startling how quickly this painting was conceived and finished by this technique.

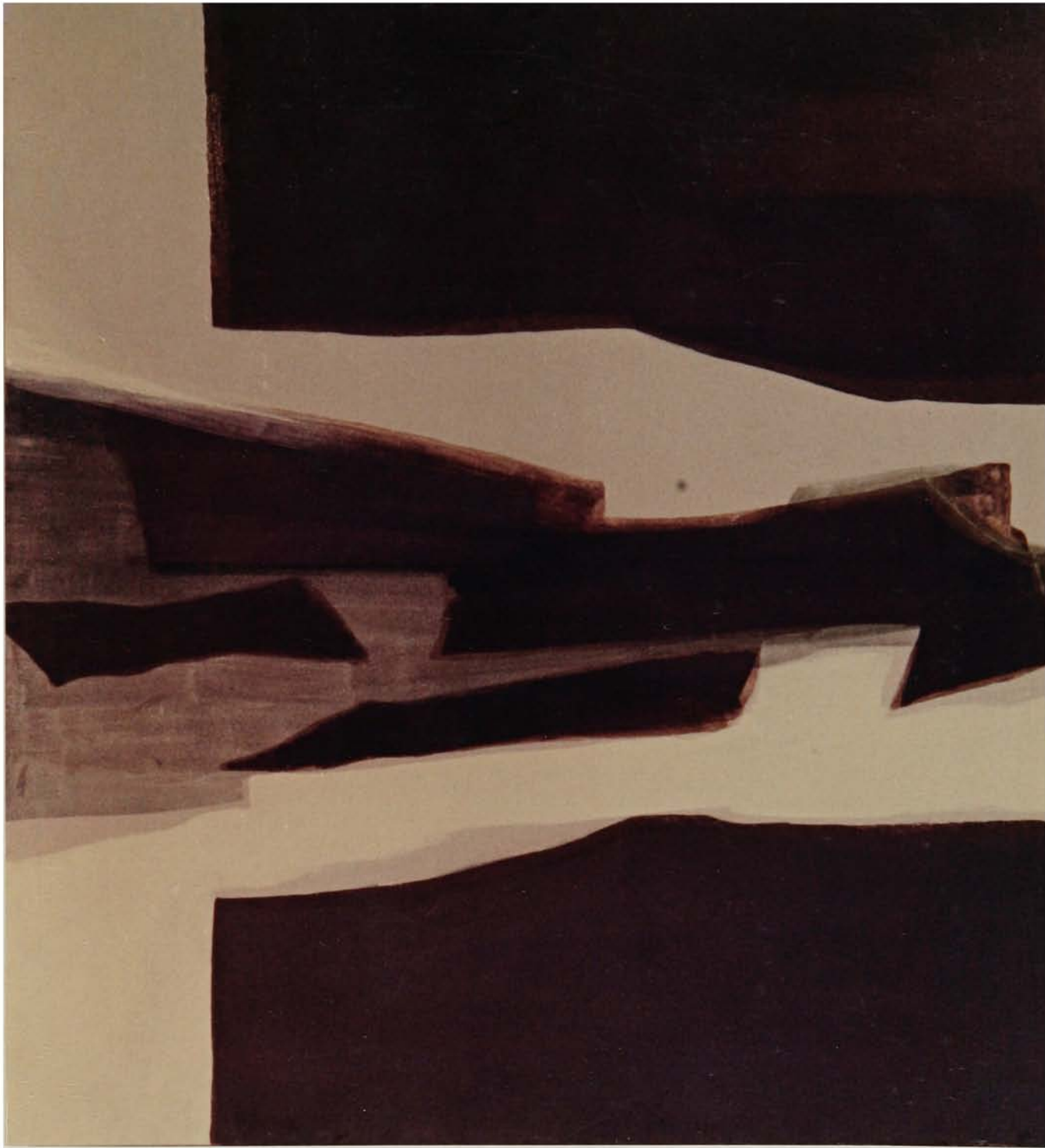


Plate 11.  
Painting # 1





Plate 12.  
Painting # 2

Painting # 2

First I painted the whole piece of masonite a solid gray-violet, then laid the pieces of torn paper against this background. The pre-painted surface made it easier to see the paper design than laying it against white cotton canvas or primed masonite. I recut and shuffled the papers until a simple progression of shapes seemed to take on a dynamic aspect, then sketched around the forms with a chalk pencil. I painted in the forms, then adjusted the background so that there was more of a value variation from one side of the painting to the other. Some texture was employed to relieve the starkness of the simple pattern of forms and intervals. In order to make soft transitions in the background areas, I used sandpaper and small dabs of paint.

Painting # 3

This painting was originally a simple, objective study of a horse and rider, but it lacked freshness and intrigue. I covered parts of the painting with paper until I found what seemed to be an interesting elimination of many of the forms. When I traced around the paper and painted in the covering shapes, the painting was still not satisfactory, and continued to be unimproved by countless adjustments and further eliminations. Then I threw down on the surface a part of a torn billboard poster which contained a large red letter and zig-zag shape, and suddenly the painting seemed exciting. I glued down the paper over the paint and found that the poster, a combination of severity and gaiety, made the perfect contrast to the soft, mellow tones of the oil painting. The collage technique had managed to break up the tension of the worked-over shape relationships.



Plate 13.  
Painting # 3



Plate 14.  
Painting :

Painting # 4

Originally designed by the cut paper technique, this painting had reached a stage where it seemed almost good but not quite. While experimentally laying pieces of black matte fabric over various parts of the painting to see what needed to be eliminated, I discovered that the hard-edged and extremely light-absorbant character of the wool provided an effective contrast to the soft, glossy, warm paint tones. After experimenting with a number of positions, I glued down the cloth. The solidity and flatness of the cloth shape gives a sense of depth and space to the painting because of its contrast to the transparencies of the paint.

Painting # 5

In trying to design a painting by sketches, I found that my imagination was turning out only a series of uninteresting forms. When I ripped up some drawings in desperation and threw them in a heap, I noticed that the heap had some interesting patterns in it. So I shuffled the pile around, and finally glued and stapled the scraps together in a new order. Then I traced the most interesting configurations onto a piece of layout paper and blew the drawing up to be worked in acrylics on a piece of masonite. At first it was difficult to translate the extreme linearity of the drawing into paint, because the design took on such a different quality when translated into a series of adjacent flat or almost flat shapes. Yet I found that when I had done a couple of paintings in this way, I could anticipate the nature of the change and plan for it.



Plate 15.  
Painting # 5





Plate 16.  
Painting # 6

Painting # 6

This painting was done in the same manner as Painting # 5, except that I now had had the experience of doing one with this method and was able to anticipate certain problems, such as the translation of the linear black and white design into flat and textured areas of color. This time I did not worry when the character of the painting seemed distant from the character of the sketch, but instead took advantage of the developments in mood which the color gave. Thus the sketch provided a plan for the division of space and the creation of form, but did not dictate the emotional tone of the painting.

Painting # 7

In this painting, the cut paper was actually used as a stencil. Starting with a raw cotton, stretched canvas, I laid down the shapes until I had the design I wanted, then made a wash of polymer medium and watercolor and painted over the paper edges with a broad brush. This provided an interesting variation between the soft, torn edges and the hard, cut edges. It seemed as if nature had done parts of the painting rather than a human being. However, the design was not satisfactory at this stage, and I used paper shapes again, this time tracing them against earlier washes with white chalk. In places the chalk was left permanently, since it served to emphasize the distinction between the matte and the gloss areas. The painting was completed with a brush, palette knife, and acrylics when it seemed clear which areas needed solid paint.



Plate 17.  
Painting # 7



Plate 18.  
Painting # 8

Painting # 8

Again, the tearing up of drawings provided the design for this painting. After blowing up the layout paper design by the grid method, it was sketched onto a piece of masonite which had been prepared by giving it a wash of gray-violet acrylic. In some areas, I sanded down the wash so that the warm brown tone and grainy texture of the masonite became part of the color and textural scheme of the painting. In other areas I used washes and allowed the brush strokes to remain on the masonite to provide a textural relief to the hard flat shapes which characterize part of the painting.

Painting # 9

Torn pieces of paper were laid on a piece of unprimed, unstretched canvas, rearranged until the composition seemed satisfactory, and then sketched around with charcoal. When a preliminary blocking in of the shapes with acrylic washes had been completed, I gradually built up the color with opaque acrylics. Sometimes I sanded back down to the stained canvas to enhance the impression of space in the orange areas. In a few spots I used different tones of gray pastel in a network of cross-hatching over the paint. While making parts of the painting seem more transparent, this made the dark shapes at the bottom seem even flatter and more solid in comparison. When completed, the canvas was mounted on masonite.

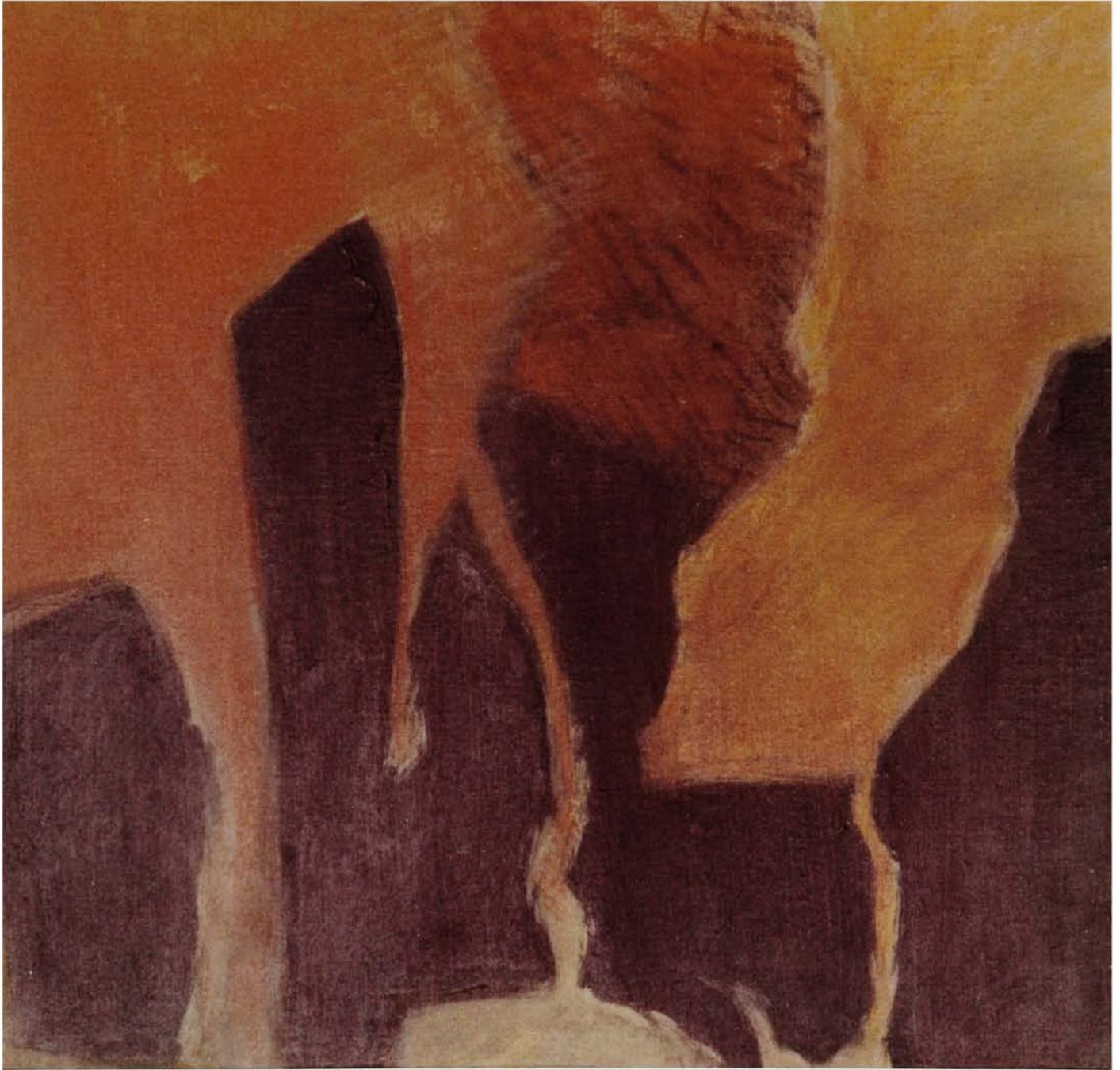


Plate 19.  
Painting # 9



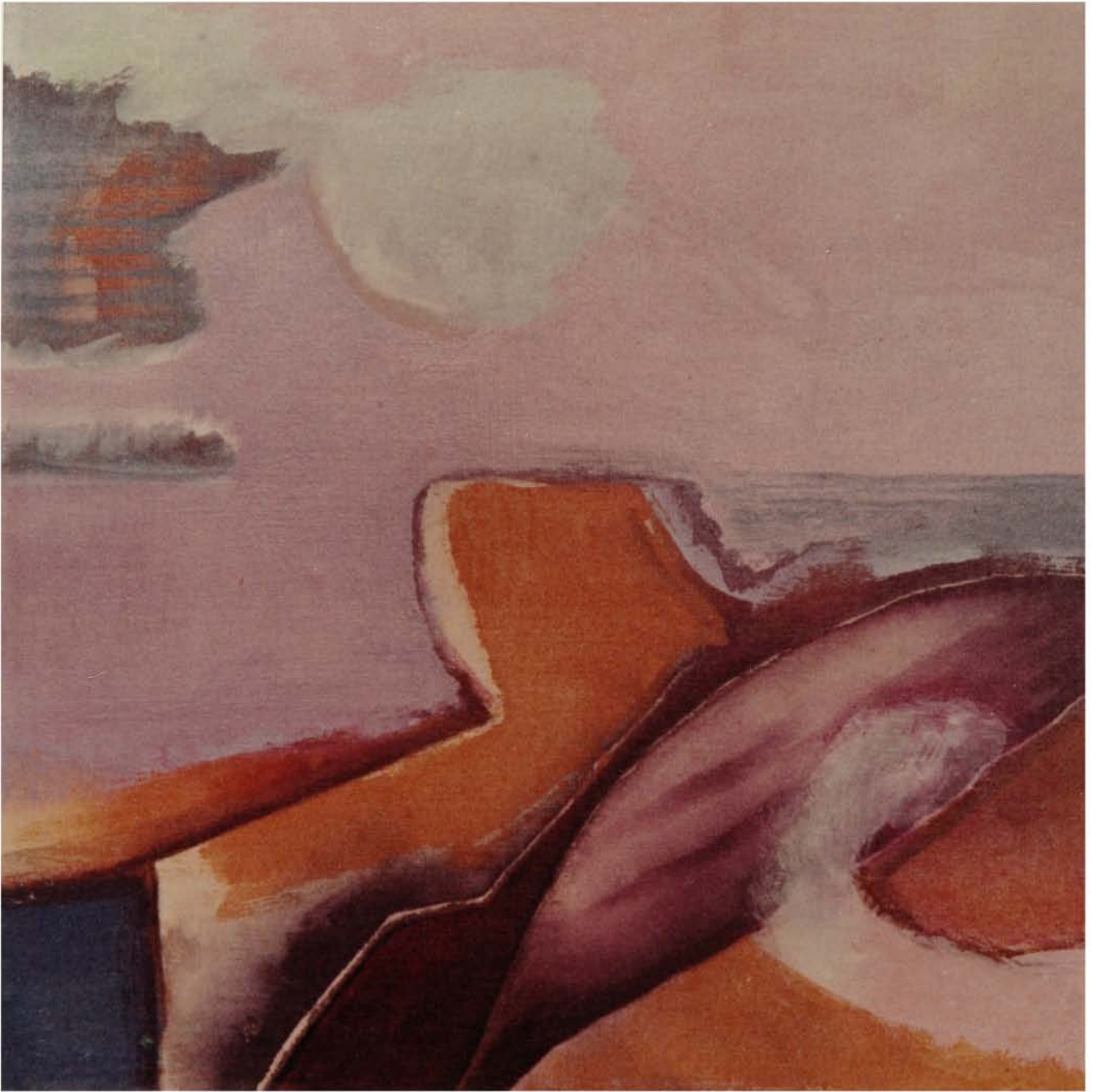


Plate 20.  
Painting # 10

Painting # 10

An unprimed, unstretched piece of white cotton canvas was the background here for a progression of acrylic washes over a basic torn paper design. Although it is necessary to let the canvas dry out for several hours in order to see exactly what color each patch of wash will be, this staining technique can produce beautiful effects of delicacy and transparency. In this painting, a large area of opaque paint seemed necessary to balance the delicate wash areas. When completed, the canvas was mounted on masonite.

## Chapter 6: Conclusions

A shape in a painting may have one of two functions, or under optimum conditions of design, both these functions. First, a shape may be a suggestion of a part of the viewer's external visual life. Second, it may be primarily an abstract, formal element of design.

A shape which suggests part of the natural world of the viewer can range from a very realistic outline of an object, such as a boot or tree, to an extremely stylized shape which contains only the barest essentials that would remind the viewer of a particular object.

For example, in the paintings of Pieter Breughel the Elder, the 16th century Netherlandish life which is the subject matter is depicted with great detail and accuracy. Yet one is always conscious of the careful shaping of each form within the picture. In his painting "The Return of the Hunters" (1565), the shapes of the dogs, hunters and trees against the snow and sky form a pattern of high design sophistication (Plate 21). Breughel often simplified the shapes of actual forms, such as grain fields, trees and clothing until they were very graphic and almost completely flattened, then wove them in and out of the more detailed and textured elements of the picture.

A step away from Breughel are the Eskimo drawings, prints and ivory incision work. The shapes of natural forms have been simplified, yet it is immediately obvious what kind of animal or person is being depicted (Plates 22 and 23).



Plate 21. "The Return of the Hunters,"  
by Pieter Breughel the Elder (cropped).

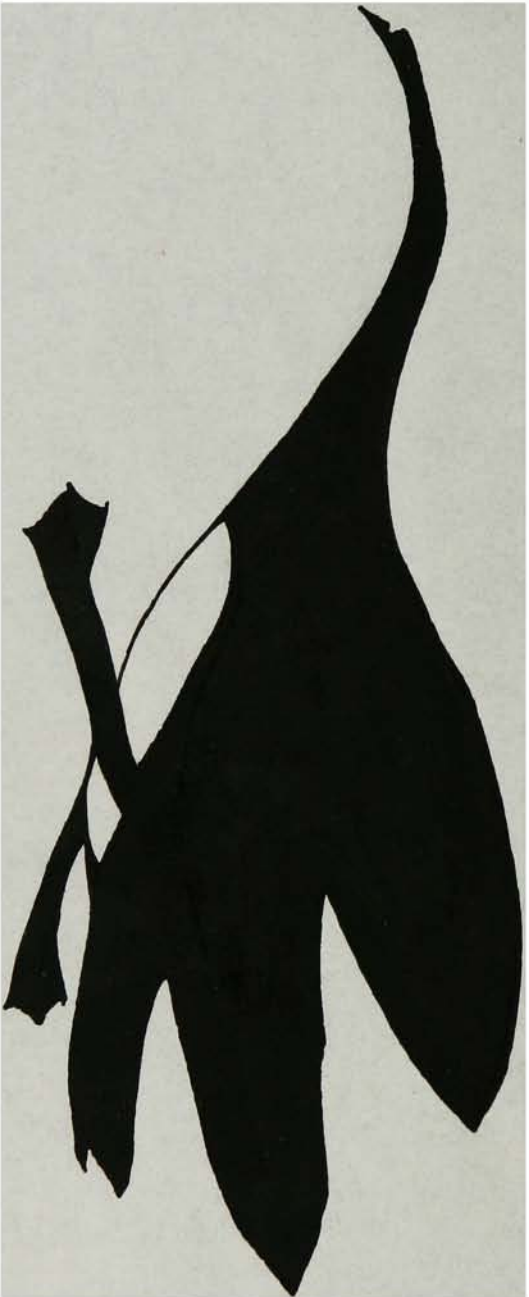


Plate 22. "Running Goose," by Egiyuadluk.



Plate 23. "Man Carrying Reluctant Wife," by Pudlo.

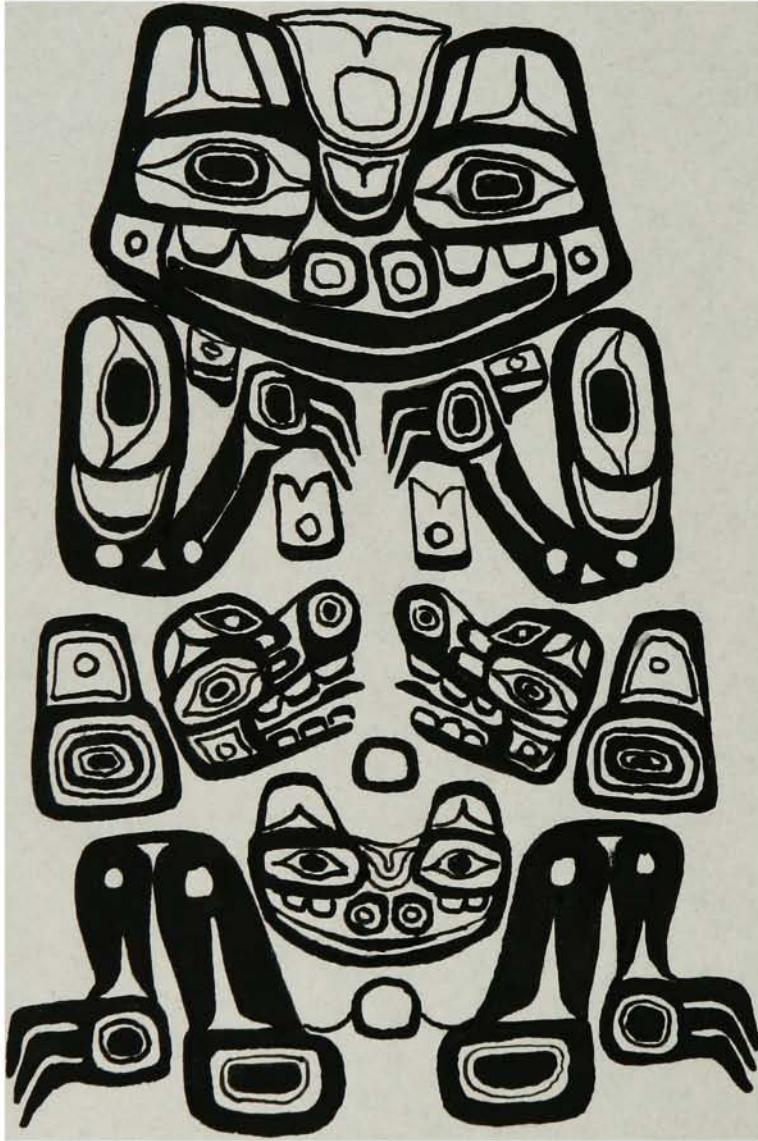


Plate 24. Design from a Tlingit ceremonial shirt.

The images seem to float in space like spirits, and in their isolation are simple, bold and eye-catching. The ancient tradition among Eskimo women in the art of skin appliqué has naturally influenced the art work developed since the coming of the white man, and indeed, the stiff leather was used for stencils at first in printmaking.

But in addition, the comments of Wilhelm Worringer, in his essay "Abstraction and Empathy," indicate an innate urge on the part of these and other artists\* to use flattened forms for a more mental purpose.

"...we see in this abstract art the effort to release the individual external object from its connection with and dependence on other things, to snatch it from the stream of transiency, to make it absolute.... A decisive consequence of such an artistic purpose was on the one hand the approximation to flat representation, and on the other hand strict suppression of the representation of space and exclusive rendering of the individual form.

Men were impelled toward flat representation because three-dimensionality is the greatest obstacle to a grasp of the object in its self-enclosed material individuality."<sup>1</sup>

The Northwest Coast Indians, too, simplified objective forms, but in a different way. In their art, the traditional formula for depicting a certain animal or spirit was handed down from generation to generation. The same small flat shapes found in their totem poles, blankets and painted furnishings were fit together with astonishing variety (Plate 24). The creativity and originality of each artist consisted in his placement of the standard shapes. The

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1. Worringer, in Rader's A Modern Book of Esthetics, p. 389.



shapes are often connected by touching at points, which serves to make the whole painted surface extremely alive and forward in the picture plane.

The furthest reach of this first category, form as reminder of real objects, would be, I think, the work of the modern painter Adolf Gottlieb. Again and again he used his characteristic "disk" and "burst," in different spatial relationships, but with very little additional form in the painting. The appeal of this extremely simple format is proof that it does not take much detail to remind the mind of something it has experienced. The disk, or circle, whether it is yellow, white, black or red, is generally interpreted as the sun, and thus the area around it becomes the sky. The burst reminds one of the dynamic tension present in many of the earth's activities.

Besides its use as a means of simplifying objects, flat shape is important in the structuring of space in a painting. Suzanne Langer points out that there are "numberless ways of making space visible, i.e. virtually presenting it."<sup>1</sup>

Since we get our feeling for space by accumulated experience with physical objects and their relationship to ourselves, the relationship of size of objects helps to construct the nature of the space in a painting. A parallelogram is likely to be interpreted as a wall or flat surface,

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1. Langer, Feeling and Form, p. 84.

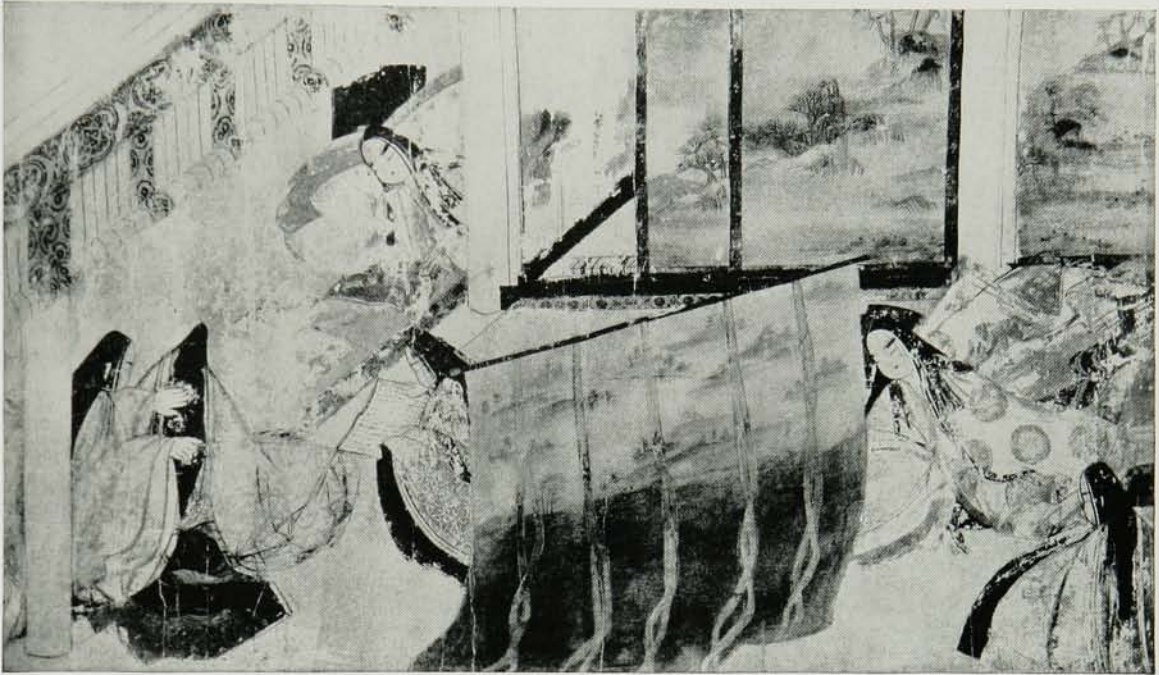
since walls reach our eyes as parallelograms due to perspective. However, this means that almost anywhere a parallelogram is used as a flat shape, the narrower end of the parallelogram will be interpreted as being farther away than the wider end, thus creating space in even a totally abstract painting. Similarly, any of the other geometric forms used in an abstract painting will ordinarily create the sense of space generally associated with them when they are used to describe a natural phenomenon of vision. A square, or right angle alone, will represent a flat plane perpendicular to the picture plane. A shape with two straight lines converging at an angle is likely to suggest something going off into the distance.

Donald Anderson lists five "monocular" clues in space perception (in "binocular", or normal vision, you actually see part way around a three-dimensional object), which can be used in handling the two-dimensional design. These are 1) relative apparent size, 2) overlap, 3) relative position in the field, 4) light and shadow, and 5) aerial perspective.<sup>1</sup> It is possible to take any of these conceptions and develop them by means of flat shape to create the desired sense of space in a painting.

In Japanese art, the scroll paintings offer a good example of the use of shapes to surprise and reshape the viewer's natural conception of space. The ground plane is

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1. Anderson, Elements of Design, p. 31.



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GENJI MONOGATARI: EASTERN HOUSE  
*Marquis Tokugawa Collection, Tōkyō*

THE UNIVERSITY PRINTS  
BOSTON

ATTRIBUTED TO TAKAYOSHI. XII CENT.  
FUJIWARA PERIOD

Plate 25.



Plate 26. Tales of Genji, detail from 16th century Japanese screen.



Plate 27. Tales of Genji, detail from 16th century Japanese screen.

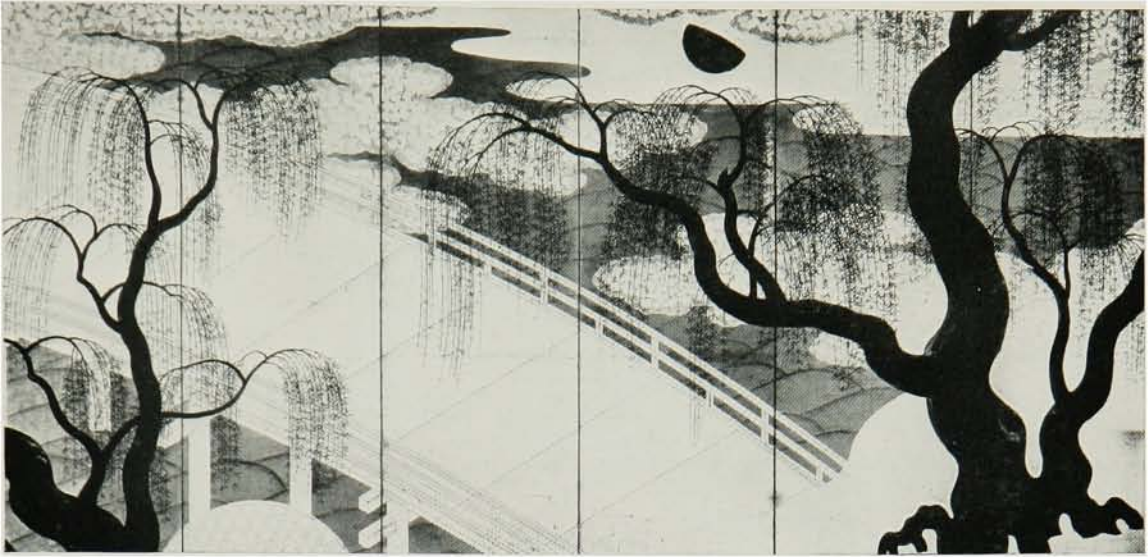
generally tipped up in the back, so that you realize the figure sitting in a certain corner is farther away than the figure standing at the lower edge of the picture. Yet the walls dividing the peek-in rooms have their narrower edge at what you know is the nearer end of the room. This startles the viewer into a new idea of the importance of the background figures and of the interrelationship of the various events depicted in the same composition (Plate 25).

In the Japanese screens, a single flat band of color or gold leaf is sometimes handled so that it represents clouds or sky at the top of the screen, but becomes, without breaking, the ground, river or an object at the bottom of the screen (Plates 26 and 27). Sherman Lee points out that the Japanese creators of lacquers, screens and scrolls seem almost to have placed their silhouettes like the modern artists (especially Matisse), shuffling cut out figures to find the best arrangement.<sup>1</sup> (See Plate 28)

The modern American artist Stuart Davis uses flat areas of paint to describe another kind of manmade space (Plate 29). He paints a large area of flat color, then superimposes black or white lines such as lettering or the outlines of buildings. There is a sense of having various intervals of space often beginning at other places than the edges of objects, starting and ending in almost arbitrary locations. In other words, instead of expressing space as the distance

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1. Lee, Far Eastern Art, p. 473.



UJI BRIDGE  
 Mizoguchi Munehiko Collection, Tōkyō

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 BOSTON

ATTRIBUTED TO SANRAKU. 1559—1635  
 MOMOYAMA PERIOD

Plate 28.



Plate 29. "Garage Lights," by Stuart Davis.

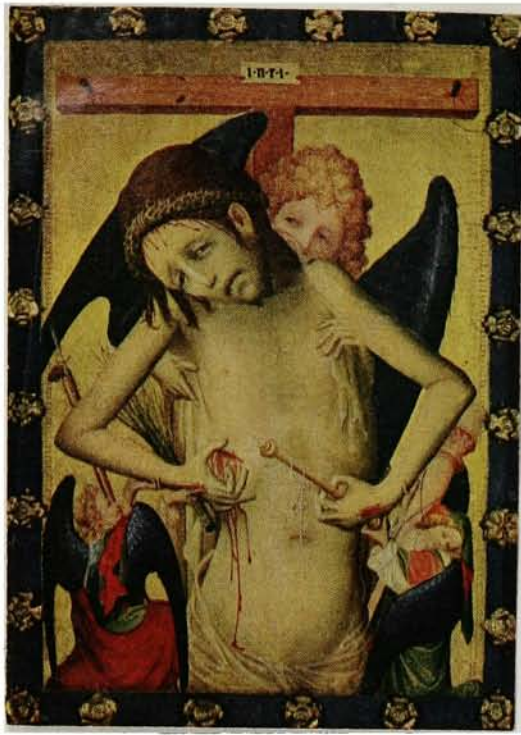


Plate 30. "Christ as the Man of Sorrows,"  
by Meister Francke.



UNIVERSITY PRINTS, BOSTON

THE ENTOMBMENT  
LOUVRE, PARIS  
TITIAN, 1477—1576  
VENETIAN SCHOOL

Plate 31.

between two buildings, it is seen as an abstraction independent of physical objects. Yet the definition of one spatial area is clearly related to the definition of the next, and the whole interrelationship of spatial areas forms the framework of the painting, against which the detail of line exerts a surface tension and yet another dimension of space.

In Davis' paintings, the concept of positive and negative shape seems to reach a high degree of sophistication, for the shape which is positive in one spatial plane becomes, at times, negative in the next, thus destroying completely the background-foreground division common to painting before the twentieth century.

In defining space by flat shape, it is possible to suggest change in space by use of a single line drawn across a flat color. This is seen frequently in the paintings of Joan Miró.

The second major function of shape in painting is as an abstract, formal element of design. This means that the shape is appreciated by the viewer for its design quality alone, rather than any conscious or unconscious image it provides of a natural object. The untrained viewer is only aware of its function unconsciously; the painting seems to "work" or it doesn't. But to the artist or the trained viewer, it is an intellectual element of which he may be conscious to the extent of being completely preoccupied by it.

It is extremely difficult to discover which forms are



appreciated for their pure esthetic or design qualities and which aren't, since our entire intellectual and sensual processes are trained by the experiences we have with natural objects. The problem of distinction seems to me related to the two questions "what is art," and "what is reality;" people are always trying to answer both, but at some point, one must simply accept a working definition and proceed with the work at hand. In addition, there are few people who look at art who are really interested in sorting out the pure design from the representational design. For example, it is perhaps but academic to offer the thought that the spatial function of shape pertains to its use in describing natural phenomena rather than to its pure design quality. Space in painting, it can be suggested, is a fake, an illusion.

But it seems clear that works of art that have handled shape successfully for its own sake, whether intentionally or as part of the natural intuition of the artist, have continued to be considered beautiful and significant no matter how much time passes. Art work which relies on the interest of the subject matter alone, on the other hand, more often becomes dated and uninteresting with the passage of time. For example, some of the painted depictions of religious figures from the medieval and renaissance periods look maudlin and unesthetic now, while others, in which the shapes are interesting and balanced, still can intrigue a non-religious modern person as an art object. For example,

the "Christ as the Man of Sorrows," painted by the German Meister Francke after 1424 (Plate 30), seems awkward and sentimental, while Titian's "The Entombment," painted on a similar theme around 1525 (Plate 31), is still pleasing, in large part because of its fine design qualities.

Roger Fry, in his essay, "Pure and Impure Art," asks the question

"Why are we moved deeply by certain sequences of notes which arouse no suggestion of any experience in actual life? Why are we moved deeply by certain dispositions of space in architecture which refer so far as we can tell to no other experience?"<sup>1</sup>

He answers this by saying that the pleasure is felt in the

"recognition of order, of inevitability in relations, and that the more complex the relations of which we are able to recognize the inevitable interdependence and correspondence, the greater is the pleasure; this of course will come very near to the pleasure derived from the contemplation of intellectual constructions united by logical inevitability."<sup>2</sup>

In addition, he says, the whole must become suffused with an emotional tone which may possibly be derived in the first place by the emotions of actual life.<sup>3</sup> I think his definition is exemplified in the paintings of Georgia O'Keefe, in which a simple, seemingly inevitable set of formal relationships is suffused with an indefinable emotional tone.

Our feelings for shape, then, are somehow vaguely related to natural experience rather than solely to an intellectual process or order. This seems to be in sympathy with Jung's theory that our current vague sensations of

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1. Fry in Rader's A Modern Book of Esthetics, p. 308.
  2. Loc. cit.
  3. Loc. cit.

approval and disapproval are related to previous experiences in the history of mankind.

I think the key element in the enduring quality of painting is the relationship of the parts to the whole. When this relationship is well taken care of, the whole work has a feeling of need satisfied, of order and pleasure. The beautiful art object is most often organized in its every aspect, one form related to the next and to the whole. There are no unnecessary parts.

There may be a dominant shape in a painting which is repeated at various places, perhaps in different colors or textures, and this often serves to hold the painting together. The shape becomes like a modular key to the entire work of art.

The psychologist Anton Ehrenzweig points out that

"we tend to notice simple, compact, precise forms, at the same time eliminating vague, incoherent, inarticulate forms from our perception."<sup>1</sup>

Psychological tests in Morgan show how the human mind forgets and distorts images with even a few simple boundaries.<sup>2</sup>

Possibly this has something to do with the appeal of the organized painting, for something we feel in control of in our minds, we may have more sympathy for. In any case, this psychological phenomena should be born in mind when the artist makes decisions in choosing even flat shapes. A flat shape may have a wide variety of contours -- prickly or fuzzy, smooth and hard, simple or complex, and so on.

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1. Ehrenzweig, The Psycho-Analysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing, p. 3.

2. Morgan, Introduction to Psychology, p. 139.

A final consideration in the discussion of flat shape in painting is the relation of simplicity in painting to contemporary life.

Twentieth century life is vastly confusing. Income tax forms, computers, complicated progressions of schooling, job training, societal pressures, to say nothing of the ever present wars and the need to make a living, serve to make life more filled with detail now than it has ever been. Just purchasing a means of transportation, for example, involves the sorting out of endless possibilities, the incurring of serious debt, and the settling of countless details. Religious standards which once made morals a clear cut case are vague and confused, suggesting that one must make decisions of soul at every turn of the coin.

So simplicity within a work of art might today have a strong appeal and provide a needed respite for harried modern man.

In addition, the realism of photography has made the laborious portrayal of complicated detail by painters seem perhaps anachronistic to the contemporary mind. It may be that now the intellectual and emotional appeal of formal design relationships within a painting are what serve to challenge and interest the intelligent viewer. Respect is given to the painter with the ability to sort out the essential forms for his art and to eliminate the superfluous elements which only confuse or annoy his busy audience.

It may even be said that such a painter can provide

a service for his fellow man. He can design a small area of relief for a home, a small area of canvas or board that is sublimely organized in material and emotion, something which can lift a viewer's spirit temporarily above his war with trivia and confusion, and bring him a breath of spiritual peace.

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