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Painting a composition

Thomas Leonard Brown

The University of Montana

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PAINTING A COMPOSITION

By

Thomas L. Brown

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Approved by:

[Signatures]

Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this thesis was to experiment with compositional arrangements utilizing dynamic symmetry. Previous paintings had been based on compositional concepts which were pleasing to the artist. Technical principles concerning reflections, shadows, cloud and tree formations, sunlight, etc. were studied, practiced, and used. These concepts along with personal attitudes formed the basic characteristics of the earlier paintings.

It appeared after some time and considerable criticism that the paintings were falling into a stylized scheme of learned and overworked principles. It seemed that trying new arrangements possible could help improve these paintings, and so dynamic symmetry combined with concepts of personal feelings became the experimental content of the thesis in hopes of gaining improved compositional qualities in future paintings.
CHAPTER II

DISCUSSION

The paintings described in this thesis will be discussed with regard to four elements of composition: the arrangement of values, the placement of line, the placement of masses or weight, and the placement of objects. These elements will be based on both conscious and intuitive feelings. Dynamic symmetry will be used for the preliminary drawing from which these paintings will be composed.

The principles of design to be found in the architecture of man and of plants have been given the name "Dynamic Symmetry."¹ This symmetry is identical with that used by Greek masters in almost all the art produced during the great classical period. The Greeks obtained the knowledge of dynamic symmetry from the Egyptians sometime during the 6th century B.C.² It supplanted a sophisticated type of static symmetry then in general use. The Greeks soon far outstripped their Egyptian masters and incorporated dynamic symmetry in their statues, pottery, and architecture.

²Ibid., p. xv.
The Greek form of measurement was called the Root System.\(^3\) Root One was a square and from this were constructed Roots Two, Three, Four, Five, etc. The width of Root One remained constant, while the diagonal of Root One was the length of Root Two; the diagonal of Root Two was the length of Root Three; the diagonal of Root Three was the length of Root Four, and so on. As this page is so many inches high and wide, a Grecian page this size would have been composed in about Root Two. Theirs was a measure of space, while ours in a lineal measure.

Dynamic symmetry in nature is the orderly arrangement of members of an organism such as is found in a shell or the adjustment of leaves of a plant.\(^4\) Taking a sunflower pod, for example, it was found that the sockets formed a series of intersecting curves which were based on a form of numbering called summation. Further studies showed that all nature grew in the same way.

Summation is a relationship of whole numbers of about 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 33, 44, etc.\(^5\) This is called a summation series from the fact that each term is composed of the sum of the two preceding terms. These numbers can be used to show the relationship of nature to composition. Plate I

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 17.
\(^4\)Ibid., p. 4.
\(^5\)Ibid., p. 3.
illustrates this.

Drawing a rectangle measuring five inches by eight inches, and then drawing a diagonal and crossing this diagonal with a line (one end which rests in the corner and crosses the diagonal line at right angles continuing through to the opposite side), results in an oblique cross. Drawing a line parallel with the side where the short crossing line touches the side of the rectangle so as to form a square on one end will produce a similar form of the rectangle, but in a smaller proportion or sequence on the other end. As the original form measured five by eight inches, the smaller form will measure three by five inches. If another line is drawn across where the diagonal meets, it will result in a smaller form which will measure one by two inches. By this method, the smaller forms in the large rectangle, or forms in sequence, will measure in the summation or 1, 2, 3, 5, 8. This could be compared to striking high "C" or low "C" on the piano. The sounds are the same; however, one has more vibrations than the other.
CHAPTER III

DISCUSSING COMPOSITION I

Composition I was started by first drawing a diagonal (A) from the opposite corners and crossing it with an oblique line (B), one end of which rests in the corner and crosses the diagonal line at a right angle, as illustrated in Plate II. Where these two lines crossed became one of the artistic centers (1) of the rectangle. Then drawing another oblique line (C), one end resting in the opposite corner and crossing the diagonal line at a right angle, resulted in a secondary artistic point of interest (2) in sequence. In placing the objects at the principal point of interest, the lines of compositional construction, namely the diagonals and the short crossing lines were used.

Composition I stresses the importance of the arrangement of values based on possible conscious and intuitive feelings. These feelings are based on previous experiences, either physical or mental. Plate IV shows how the light and dark spaces of circles 1 and 2 are almost touching and can create an illusion in the viewer that the two bodies are about to collide. This same sensation can be felt when looking at circle 3, which is about to strike the frame.
Circles 4 and 5, and circles 6 and 7 overlap. The subconscious mind might associate this with an idea that the two which have overlapped have passed over one another. Circle 5, cut by the frame, continues indefinitely, possibly suggesting the infinite. In other words, this painting has arrangements which subconsciously the viewer might want to complete for himself.

These light and dark spaces are broken up by light and dark lines. The lines can also create conscious and intuitive feelings. Vertical lines like tree trunk (A) in Plate IV can express dignity and strength, while horizontal lines like the shadowed and light areas in the road might express rest or relaxation. The diagonal lines (B), (C), and (D) should convey action.
CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSING COMPOSITION II

Composition II stresses the placement of masses or weight to get balance as shown in Plate V. Dynamic symmetry was employed in this way. Diagonal (1) was drawn from the two far corners and crossed with line (2) to form a right angle. Where line (2) touched the oblong, a vertical line (3) was drawn. Line (4) originated at the intersection of lines (1) and (2) and continued horizontally across the canvas.

This placement seemed to create a subconscious feeling of tension that something was going to or should happen to make mass (a) in Plate VI balance on horizontal line (4) if fulcrum (f), the reflection in the water, were placed on line (3). Either fulcrum (f) could be moved farther to the right to balance the weight against distance (x, y), or another weight, mass (b), could be added as a subdivided weight to gain this needed balance. This is another example of possible satisfaction with completeness of form. Once this balance is obtained, the subconscious mind should feel more at ease.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSING COMPOSITION III

Composition III deals with the placement of objects. It was set up with dynamic symmetry the same as was Composition II, only in a vertical position, as illustrated in Plate VII. In this painting there are certain objects which can be subconsciously associated with ideas. In Composition III, Plate VIII, the arrowhead (a) directs the attention to the point which touches shape (b). Shape (b) is a square which gives the sensation of solidity and stops the eye. The eye moves back along the arrow shaft (c) and rests on the feather end (d). Now the viewer may feel that the arrow is flying away from, rather than toward him. This should bring the eye to triangle (e, f, g) which gives the sensation of rest and solidity with the idea of pointing upward. The eye then moves upward to circle (h) which gives the sensation of continued movement. The eye movement should revolve to where it is met, on the left, by circle (i), and then down to the negative circle (j). Negative circle (j) is composed of the three main values in the painting. The darkest value is that of the foreground trees, the middle value is that of the background trees, and the lightest value is that of the
almost white horizontal shape which cuts the circle in half. These three values should hold the viewer's concentration and give him the feeling of space enclosed with a revolving circle.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The conclusion reached after painting Composition I was that the compositional arrangement seemed too fixed or balanced, even though dynamic symmetry was employed. Distance \((x, y)\), as shown in Plate III, extended too evenly over the center rest or fulcrum \((f)\). The eye was so directed to the center, circle \((a)\), that it could not escape to the primary and secondary artistic centers. The value relationships were subtle and weak, so that any hope of noticing the subconscious light and dark spaces and lines seemed to be lost, along with any feeling of spatial distance. In total it appeared as an overworked painting on an extremely balanced plane. Composition II, the next painting, would need a more pleasing balance and would have to retain a greater contrast in the light and dark areas, if it were to be a stronger painting.

The conclusion reached after painting Composition II was that a balanced subdivided weight was more pleasing than the evenly balanced composition found in the first painting. A more interesting conclusion than this was how balance seemed to rely heavily on contrast. What made the fulcrum
was the contrast of the sharply delicate forms of the rocks and reflection against the blurred mass of foliage. The color of the green leaves contrasting the warm orange colors of the foliage beneath it created an interesting contrast. The value contrast of the sky and background against the foreground elements added strength to the painting, as did the dead tree branch contrasting the living ones. The moving river contrasted the still and quiet water as did the moody clouds against the clear blue sky.

Though these contrasts were important, the painting, as a total organization of composition, was weak. It seemed that dynamic symmetry might better utilize space, but it alone would not guarantee success of compositional organization. It appeared, then, that the placement of possible subconscious objects might better utilize the preliminary drawing laid out by dynamic symmetry. This was attempted in Composition III.

The conclusion reached in Composition III was that the painting seemed well organized. Simplicity of the juxtaposed objects with their definite value contrasts balanced each other. The eye seemed to move freely, but not entirely along the paths mentioned. Shapes like the square, which the arrow head pointed to, were possibly not definite or large enough, compared to the strong triangle shape of the two trees along the right side of the painting. Circle areas like the outline of the trees carried less importance
than did the shadows cast along the side walk. The total arrangement of the objects seemed to be more interesting than it was in the previous compositions.

The three paintings seemed to represent the three quarters of art spent at the University of Montana.

Composition I, representing Fall Quarter, relates to a tight, over-concerned state of mind about minute details and controlled balance, which was a carry-over from undergraduate painting.

Composition II, Winter Quarter, shows a more spontaneous method of handling and stronger value relationships, possibly due to exercises of turning out many paintings combined with an increased awareness of different techniques.

Composition III, Spring Quarter, represents a concern with the total whole development of the painting. Examples through slides, critiques, and books of how arrangements of shapes and masses in space juxtapose on one another could strengthen the paintings, played an important part of this quarter. Experimenting in arranging, moving, and shuffling around the pieces of composition until harmony was found among them also was most helpful.

In studying dynamic symmetry new concepts of compositional arrangements were discovered and this knowledge, hopefully, will strengthen future paintings. Using the knowledge based on personal feelings will also carry through into
future works and possibly enhance their compositional qualities.

This understanding, like an understanding of perspective, color, line, value, etc., can be helpful to the artist. Once he is aware of these rules or principles, he can use, change, or violate them. But no matter what he does, his work will reflect a knowledge of an awareness of these principles. It is hoped in the future that further exploration into compositional possibilities will add depth and increased improvement to myself and my paintings.
BIBLIOGRAPHY