

A miscellany of archeology, history, biography, geography, political science, psychology, sociology, technology, entertainment, economics, marketing, and merchandising comprises the subject matter of most *art talk*. But this does not constitute *the language of art*.

Art is primarily a question of form, not of content. This explains Clive Bell's "significant form," often maligned and misunderstood by practitioners, philosophers, dabblers, and connoisseurs.\* Content is a passive and subordinate yet important partner in this relationship, which is fundamental to an understanding of the language of plastic art.

To discuss the appearance of things is to deal with matters of aesthetics. Aesthetics is the language of appearances — of art, design, the beautiful, and the ugly. Without aesthetics, talk about art is not about art.

To talk about, study, teach, or criticize a work of art focus must always be on problems of form in relation, of course, to a particular content.

An artifact is transformed into a work of art only when the conflict between form and content is resolved. The term art, has been bandied about so carelessly that it has almost lost its meaning. For example, it seems that one of the ways a painting earns its place in the pantheon of art is by being rendered in a particular medium: oil on canvas. The so called lesser arts — prints, etchings, graphic design, photography, etc. — are confined to this status by virtue of the mechanical means of their making. Consequently, the medium in which a work is rendered can become as important as its message or meaning. Symbolism has become the measure of value. The recent auction of Jacqueline Onassis's possessions is a prime example of the power of false values.

Form and content are assymetric. Formal values are very often independent of content. Time can, and does, erase meaning of once familiar artifacts, but time can never erase form. Spontaneity, fantasy, intuition, invention, and revelation also play an important part in the language of art.

Among the many aspects of form, problems pertaining to the principles of proportion, for example, are significant. The rules of proportion apply equally well to the Parthenon or to a can of Campbells soup. The same is true for all formal relationships: contrast, scale, balance, rhythm, rhyme, texture, repetition, etc.

In spite of the fact that aesthetics is the only language of art, the subject has been greeted with indifference and sometimes irreverence. For example, Gwilt's *Encyclopedia of Architecture* (1842) describes aesthetics as "silly, pedantic term, and one of the useless additions to nomenclature in the arts." These and other unflattering references have caused this subject to be brushed aside. On the other hand, such definitions as "aesthetics is the philosophy or theory of taste," or "of the perception of the beautiful in nature and art" (*Oxford English Dictionary*) are too passive, to be really useful.

Neil Postman,  
*The End of Education*  
(New York, 1995), 123.

"The Greeks considered all subjects a form of discourse, and therefore almost all education is a form of *language education*. Knowledge of a subject means knowledge of the language of that subject. Biology, after all, is not plants and animals, it is a special language employed to speak about plants and animals." Similarly aesthetics is not painting, design, or architecture; it is a special language designed to speak about these subjects, namely the language of interaction between form and content.

Confusion and misunderstanding is the result of the absence of a common language. In dealing with the subject of design, knowledge of the history of art and design is just as indispensable as the language of art. "Any subject," said William James, "becomes humanistic when seen from the stand point of history." Since both the history and language of art are not part of our common understanding, political, social and technological issues that may have only a remote connection to art are usually substituted for discussions about the real thing — aesthetics — *the language of art*.

Clive Bell,  
*Art*,  
(London, 1914, 1961), 23.

- ★ "What quality is shared by all objects that provoke our esthetic emotions? What quality is common to St. Sophia and the windows at Chartres, Mexican sculpture, a Persian bowl, Chinese carpets, Giotto's frescoes at Padua, and the masterpieces of Poussin, Piero della Francesca, and Cezanne? Only one answer seems possible — significant form. In each, lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call 'Significant Form'; and 'Significant Form' is the one quality common to all works of visual art.
- "At this point it may be objected that I am making aesthetics a purely subjective business, since my only data are personal experiences of a particular emotion. It will be said that the objects that provoke this emotion vary with each individual, and that therefore a system of aesthetics can have no objective validity. It must be replied that any system of aesthetics which pretends to be based on some objective truth is so palpably ridiculous as not to be worth discussing. We have no other means of recognizing a work of art than our feeling for it. The objects that provoke aesthetic emotion vary with each individual. Aesthetic judgements are, as the saying goes, matters of taste; and about tastes, as everyone is proud to admit, there is no disputing."

(Addendum to *From Lascaux to Brooklyn*)