

Design by Metaphor

—An Essay on Form and Meaning—

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Most discussion of design is limited to its obvious visual and functional properties. We recognise the abstract interplay of light and form in a landscape photograph by Ansel Adams; the dramatic use of perspective and scale in a strolling English garden; the culinary arrangement of color and texture served to us on the Provençal dinner plate; the elegant proportions and engineering of the 1961 E-Type Jaguar; and the easy usability of an intuitive and efficient software interface. However, we needn't limit our dialogue to just the look and functionality of things. The vocabulary of design may also apply to music, dance, poetry and other "non-visual" art forms. Indeed, most creative endeavours rest on some structure of design, seen or unseen.

This essay broadly examines design within four diverse areas of activity of long-standing interest to the author: the commercial, as seen in modern consumer advertising and television programming; the socio-political, as seen in monumental state architecture; the aesthetic, as seen in Japanese tea ceremony; and the mythical, as seen in ancient cave iconography. The examples presented here represent creative accomplishment spanning diverse cultures and time periods. As different as they may be, each of them rests on the use of metaphor to draw association to meaning and ideas which elevate their original form. Whether in the service of spiritual, artistic, social or commercial goals, metaphor has been a symbolic tool in the repertoire of human expression from the very beginning.

By comparing what is seemingly unrelated, by discovering similarities across creative ideas old and new, we may often discover shortcomings in the assumptions that shape our work and lives of today, and hopefully find meaning and inspiration in new understanding that arises.

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Introduction

Design broadens perception, magnifies experience, and enhances vision.

—Paul Rand¹

What does an eye-catching computer advertisement, a prominent federal building housing the seat of U.S. government, a popular science fiction television program, the graceful performance of Japanese tea ceremony, and the ancient animal etchings on the walls of a French cave have in common? The comparison may appear remote, however, at their core they all attempt communication and understanding. Although they speak to us in different languages and contain different messages, they are all work of inspiration attempting to transmit inspiration. Their form and structure comes to us through design. Further, through deft handling and craftsmanship, they inspire relationships to concepts and ideas that go beyond their visible and physical properties. With this, they are also created of metaphor.

What is design? What is metaphor? The prominent graphic designer and educator, Paul Rand, wrote the elegant description quoted above, and also added, “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.”² In a trilogy of books written at the end of his illustrious career, Rand highlighted design as both a message and a means of creative activity.³ Contrary, then, to the common notion of having exclusively visual and plastic qualities, design is much greater in scope and complexity. It occurs broadly in many incarnations—in the graphic arts, sculpture, religious iconography, architecture and painting, as well as in less “visual” forms as dance, literature, drama and music, to name a few.

Design employs many aesthetic considerations. Some of these include scale, proportion, rhythm, color, texture, depth and contrast. There are also conceptual considerations, such as metaphor. Metaphor combines separate elements which frequently are not literally related in order to suggest an association or resemblance. In doing so, objects and ideas are enhanced with new, more sophisticated and deeper meaning.

Metaphor is very commonly cited in literature. An example is the well-known Christian hymn containing the line, “A mighty fortress is our God.”⁴ We know God to be a spiritual force without

physical qualities, yet throughout the ages, we find the spiritual world cloaked in Earthly form. How else can we describe the ethereal? Through effect of association, this example assigns solid form to one's faith which stands impermeable and everlasting.

Commercial Metaphor

Think Different®

Successful design offers clarification and meaning. We see both good and bad examples everyday in the bombardment of consumer advertising from billboards, the TV, t-shirts, the internet, neon signs and magazines. Most are unmemorable, but from time to time something may excite and inspire us. Few advertising campaigns are as successful as this first example.

After years of misdirection and product stagnation, Apple® Computer was nearly up for sale. When one of its founding partners, Steve Jobs, returned to assume leadership, a fresh company mantra was needed to reinvigorate corporate moral, and also reignite brand recognition in the marketplace. In its massive Think Different® campaign of 1998, Apple® reintroduced itself by borrowing the likeness of Mahatma Gandhi, Picasso, John Lennon, Albert Einstein, Miles Davis, Martin Luther King and other



Diagram 1: Apple's award-winning advertising featured inspirational figures such as Mahatma Gandhi in its "Think Different" campaign.

heroic figures well-known to baby boomers to honor those "creative geniuses who strived to change the world" ⁵ (Diagram 1). With just a large black and white photograph, a simple slogan and a logo (surprisingly, there were no products in these ads), Apple® boldly reasserted its claim as industry innovator and creator of the world's revolutionary PC — or rather, the *non-PC*. As represented by some of

the most influential figures of the 20th century, these images remind us of the importance of fearlessness, and speak to the unique, creative urges within.

Whether a Mac® is the true path to creativity or not, there is no debating that the message, through successful effect of association, suggests something appealing. Like Martha Graham, Mohammad Ali, Rosa Parks, Bob Dylan and Amelia Earhart, being different is heroic, daring and rewarding. *You* can be different too. And while you're at it, Apple® hopes you'll be different with one of their PCs, joining the alternative, rather than the status quo toting a mere Windows clone.

The Fruit of Knowledge

The Apple® logo itself is partly a contemporary resurrection of a metaphor drawn from the biblical book of Genesis. In this account of creation, Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden fruit of the Tree of the

Knowledge of Good and Evil, causing their expulsion from Paradise with God ⁶. The sin they committed was their fateful choice for self-knowledge and rejection of God's domain.

Artistic interpretation of this story has often shown the fruit as an apple. The Apple Computer® logo is a simple, stylized apple with a single bite removed from its right side. Apple® and the advent of the PC has become our new fruit of knowledge, albeit removed from all religious context.

This metaphor gains additional meaning by association to the 18th century scientist and mathematician, Sir Isaac Newton. It is said that Newton's interest in natural science began as a very young child when he first observed the effects of gravity as an apple fell in his path. This became the popular story of "Newton's Apple."

Later, in early America, a shiny, red apple was a prominent fixture on every schoolteacher's desktop. Each morning, classmates vied to demonstrate their diligence by presenting the gift of the day's apple—symbol of knowledge, growth, self-reliance and pride.

The Twilight Zone

You unlock this door with the key of imagination. Beyond it is another dimension—a dimension of sound, a dimension of sight, a dimension of mind. You're moving into a land of both shadow and substance, of things and ideas. You've just crossed over into the Twilight Zone.

—Rod Serling ⁷

In a reversal of the above advertising example, where metaphor is used to distinguish and promote an idea, it can also be used as a disguise, making the controversial more acceptable. In the late 1950s, as tensions over the Cold War heightened anxieties in the American public, paranoia, naivete, curiosity and old-fashioned adventure converged into an insatiable popular demand for science fiction. Within this world of fantasy and frontier, conflict could be resolved, enemies subdued, and the sinister technological threats of the day could be tamed. Indeed, one of the most popular attractions at the newly opened Los Angeles Disneyland was the area of Tomorrowland, in which technology of the future was securely and triumphantly domesticated. At the same time, television had become a permanent furnishing in the middle-class living room, and the large broadcasting industries that arose to produce programming began exerting a tremendous influence on public opinion and perception.

Seizing an opportunity in the early network wars, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) approved a new science fiction series written and produced by Rod Serling, an accomplished scriptwriter (later co-writer of the original Planet of the Apes feature film), which he called the Twilight Zone. Delving into the odd and unexpected, it was an immediate hit in 1959, eventually becoming an enduring cultural icon that continues to set a high standard for television writing to this day.

What made this series so exceptional, other than the quality of production, was its subject matter. As the conservative optimism and old-fashioned values of the 50s collided violently into the youthful

rejection of the 1960s, it daringly addressed topics far too unpopular and controversial for the times by subtly disguising them in the metaphoric cloak of the bizarre and otherworldly. These included such taboo subjects as racial inequality, state deception, bigotry, sexism, religious extremism, war, witch-hunts, death, loneliness and nuclear holocaust. Fortunately, the *Twilight Zone* attracted a lot of attention, persuading CBS to produce it for a total of five seasons. Many Americans fell entranced by its intriguing plots and characters, but also—even if for only one evening a week on their cozy sofas and lounge chairs—introspective on many of the divisive issues then affecting American society at large.

Socio-Political Metaphor

We the People

In politics too, metaphor is used to arouse philosophical, party and national identity. In designing the US Capitol Building in Washington D.C. (Diagram 2), architectural elements were incorporated from ancient Greece and Rome to evoke the governing ideals that inspired the American nation's founders as they framed the new republic. Construction on the original structure began in 1793.⁸ It was the first of the many federal building projects planned for the newly selected capitol city.

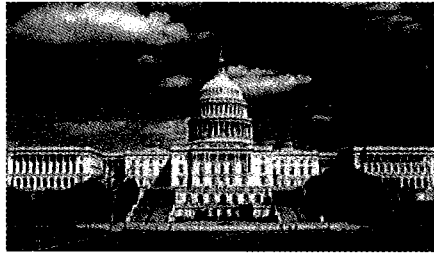


Diagram 2: US Capitol Building, west face

The architectural plans for this first symbolic structure had to reflect its many facets of purpose. This included a sense of historical relevance, stateliness, grace, and prestige at a time when the United States was not yet a country of 20 years. In giving stone-solid form to a new national identity, the founding brothers borrowed the archway and dome from the great Roman examples, the steady rhythm of the Grecian column, and combined them with vernacular ornament reflecting the original thirteen American colonies. At a time when most buildings were constructed modestly from wood and brick, the new Capitol (and later the rest of Washington D.C.), would be built from elaborately cut and carved stone, and would rise to an architectural scale not yet seen in the new land.

Although the surrounding landscape has changed dramatically, today the Capitol remains a majestic and impressive part of the city skyline. Through use of metaphor—those shapes and lines of older civil ideals—its architectural inspiration provides a political measure for the governing activities occurring today within its graceful dome.

Aesthetic Metaphor

The Way of Tea

The Japanese tea master Sen no Rikyu built a teahouse on the side of a hill overlooking the sea. On the occasion of the first tea ceremony at the new site, his guests expected to find a structure that took advantage of the wonderful view. However, they were bewildered to find that a grove of trees had been planted to obstruct the panorama. Before entering the teahouse, the guests followed the custom of purifying their hands and mouths at the stone basin near the entry. Stooping to draw water with a bamboo ladle, they noticed a low opening in the trees that revealed a vision of the sea. In that humble position, they awakened to the relationship between the cool water in the ladle and the glittering ocean in the distance, between their individual being and the immense being of life.⁹

Perhaps nowhere is metaphor most pleasantly and perfectly refined than in Japanese tea ceremony—the essence of discipline, economy, and restraint. The performance and participation of tea alludes to an aesthetic ideal of harmony and tranquility with the world around and beyond us.

The Japanese philosopher Soetsu Yanagi spoke often of the universal significance of the tea ceremony. The vision of tea, he wrote, is “the reflection of the inner nature of things, the reality of things. They [the early tea masters] saw the thing itself, the whole, which is entirely different from the sum total of the parts”.¹⁰

Each experience is unique, but the tea ceremony may be simply described as follows: Guests are led away from ordinary, everyday concerns along a pathway of steppingstones arranged through perfectly tended gardens. The path may avoid a direct approach and instead meander left and right so as to create certain views at which a guest may pause in appreciation. Outside the teahouse, there is a stone water basin to wash impurities away. The teahouse contains a shortened, sliding door, forcing guests to enter in a low, humble stoop. Inside, they emerge into a most tiny, unassuming and unadorned room. The host's handcrafted tea utensils are similarly made of simple, natural materials. Except for the placement of one or two cut flowers, ornament may consist of a single work of calligraphy denoting some seasonal observation. A view of the surrounding garden may be carefully revealed through the hut's small, open window.

Through a meticulous performance ritual, water is heated, tea is whisked, served, and consumed. Tea bowls are held close and appreciated. At the appropriate time, the gathering moves to informal conversation, and, finally, to an unfolding of the moment.

For the newcomer, it may come as a surprise that such restraint of activity and embellishment is actually highly crafted and formally choreographed. This simplicity and modesty of means is intended to draw one deep into reflection of the present time and place.

Tea is an illustration of metaphor for aesthetic purpose. The story of Sen no Rikyu shows us this.

That is, through the design of tea, in the mundane act of cleansing hands we come to cleanse our souls as well. Starting with water, we are guided to new meaning through association with the sea, and then finally to notions of beauty, harmony, and the whole of life itself.

Mythological Metaphor

The Cave Walls of Lascaux

At the northern edge of the Pyrenees Mountains in southern France lies a fantastic concentration of Paleolithic limestone caves containing some of the earliest drawings, paintings, engravings and bas-reliefs known to exist. Most display a complete mastery of materials and exceptional aesthetic sensitivity. The most renowned site lies in Lascaux, discovered in 1940. It would prove to be one of the most stunning archeological discoveries of the 20th Century.

The work in Lascaux dates from about 17,000 years ago (other sites in France are believed to be about 30,000 years old). The iconography here consists of roughly 600 depictions, which are divided into three distinct themes: animals, humans, and signs. By far, the most prevalent are of animals, including horses, stag, oxen, bison and bear " (Diagram 3). Much can be speculated about



Diagram 3: The Painted Gallery of Lascaux

the exact meaning of these drawings, the people who produced them, and the context in which they were created, however, several facts are known for certain. One, these drawings are found in deep, dark, unaccommodating interior spaces. They were difficult to reach, difficult to navigate, and removed from areas of shelter and food. These were areas of sanctuary; they were clearly not part of ordinary life. Second, once inside, the time necessary to render this work would suggest long, extended stays—perhaps days. Aside from requiring great physical stamina, one's inspirational and meditative abilities would need to be highly disciplined. Third, none of the landscape outside or the vegetation of the region is ever portrayed, the animals are often larger than life-size, and left floating in space. This would indicate less interest in reality and natural appearance, and more interest on abstraction and symbolism. These considerations involve a high degree of individual interpretation.

What do these clues suggest? Most likely, these fascinating images were produced within sacred rites, attended by a few to mark auspicious events, such as fertility and hunting ceremonies. Large migratory animals in this region provided the subsistence of life. Honoring and appeasing the great spirits of the natural world ensured their return year after year. This was not a daily occupation, since time and tremendous energy was required to develop the skills and materials. These individuals formed a

fundamental part of human existence, serving to spiritual needs and fulfilling mythological ritual necessary to ensure plentiful food and achieve a harmonious balance with nature.

The artisans and shamans of 17,000 years ago conjured up visions and ideas that exceeded the visual imprints left behind on darkened cave walls. They were aware of a world beyond the horse, the buffalo and the elk of their immediate landscape. They have left for us the symbols of their otherworldly beliefs. In Lascaux, we find evidence of metaphor in abstract thought for expressing the sublime mystery of existence.

Conclusion

Design occurs broadly in our world, in many forms and instances. Not all of its numerous incarnations are strictly visual and functional, as is popularly thought. We may discuss the design of a modernist 1960s Eames lounge chair, the design of Indonesia's ancient Buddhist Borobudur stupa, or an Apache Indian chieftain's grand headdress. Qualities of design are also evident in non-visual arts, such as music, dance and poetry. Design casts a structure upon all of these and more.

To highlight this diversity, four broad examples of design have been presented, serving a commercial purpose, a social-political purpose, an aesthetic purpose and a mythological purpose. Although these activities achieve different goals and use different means, their similarities lie in the use of metaphor.

Among the many considerations of the designer, the craftsman, the artisan, the architect and the engineer, there is metaphor—the focus of this essay. Metaphor is intended to inspire relationships between separate elements that are often unrelated or only remotely related. In doing so, objects and ideas are enhanced with new and deeper meaning that elevate and surpass their original forms.

When working creatively, it is helpful to compare things that at first seem unrelated. We may be surprised to discover similarities across ideas and concepts. We may also find fresh perspective in the challenges confronting our work and our lives, and hopefully benefit from new understanding that arises.

This essay is a broad introduction to metaphor in design. Future essays will highlight specific examples and discuss this subject in extended detail.

Photo Credits

Diagram 1. Gandhi Billboard. Photograph © 1998 Courtesy of Apple® Computer, Inc. Cupertino, CA, www.apple.com/pr/pics/thinkdiffads.html.

Diagram 2. The West Front of the Capitol. Photograph © 2001 Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol, Washington, D.C., www.aoc.gov.

Diagram 3. *Chinese Horse in the Painted Gallery, The Cave of Lascaux*. Photograph © 2000 Courtesy of the French Ministry of Culture and Communication, Paris, www.culture.fr/culture/arcnat/lascaux/en/.

¹ Paul Rand, *Design Form and Chaos* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 3

² Rand, p. 3

³ These three titles, published by Yale University, are among the most esteemed books written on the relationship between graphic design and the fine arts. They are: *Paul Rand - A Designer's Art* (1985), *Design Form and Chaos* (1993), and *From Lascaux to Brooklyn* (1996).

⁴ Words and music by Martin Luther, 1529 (Original German: *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott*, Trans: Frederick Henry Lodge, 1852)

⁵ Apple Computer Public Relations Website, *Apple's "Think Different" Ad Wins Emmy for Outstanding Commercial* (1998) <www.apple.com/pr/library/1998/aug/31emmy.html>

⁶ "Adam and Eve," Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia 2003 <www.encarta.msn.com>, 1997-2003 Microsoft Corporation, All Rights Reserved

⁷ Rod Serling, Opening narration from the TV series *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964), Rebroadcast by Lynn Neary (Producer) on National Public Radio, *Present at the Creation*. This is NPR's series on the origins of American cultural icons. Audio of this broadcast is available online at <www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/pat/twilightzone/index.html>, September 16, 2002

⁸ Architect of the Capitol <www.aoc.gov> Official website of the US government information agency, The Architect of the Capitol

⁹ Anthony Lawlor, *The Temple in the House* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994), p.ix

¹⁰ Soetsu Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman, A Japanese Insight into Beauty* (Tokyo, New York and San Francisco: Kodansha, Revised Edition 1989), p. 177

¹¹ The Cave of Lascaux <www.culture.fr/culture/arcnat/lascaux/en/> Official website of the French Ministry of Culture and Communication