

Late this spring the Metropolitan Museum, in cooperation with New York City's Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Affairs Administration, will launch its first mobile exhibition, a visual education project called Eye Opener. The exhibition is based on spiral shapes in nature, in everyday objects, and in art, and its purpose is simply to introduce the pleasures of seeing to people of all ages. Housed on a flatbed trailer that opens out under an inflatable dome, Eye Opener will tour New York City neighborhoods for two years. It is being financed largely through a generous grant from the Billy Rose Foundation.

Jane Norman, who created this first exhibition, has been an art educator for many years, both in suburban schools and in special projects in New York City. In addition to her work on Eye Opener, Mrs. Norman has given a popular lecture series at the Metropolitan entitled "The Art of Seeing."

How to Look at Art

JANE NORMAN

Crowded museums provide dramatic proof that an increasing number of people want to look at works of art. But watching visitors as they wander through the galleries is a disheartening experience. In general, they glance only cursorily at a work and then make a careful study of the label beside it. Packed lecture halls and the sale of thousands of art books are evidence that people want to understand the artist's message but have no confidence in their ability to do so.

Having learned to think in words, most of us must be re-educated to think in shapes and colors and spaces, for that is the only way to understand a work of art. There is truth in the old cliché that if an artist wanted to use words to make his statement he would be a writer, not a painter, craftsman, or sculptor. I believe we can teach people how to analyze visual data – how to really look at works of art. There is no substitute for a good ear in listening to music; a good eye is equally necessary for looking at art. Indeed, what is required is a creative eye, for creative looking is necessary to full comprehension of the ideas and feelings expressed through an art object. Communication with an artist must be through his work. It must be direct, not diluted by verbal translation.

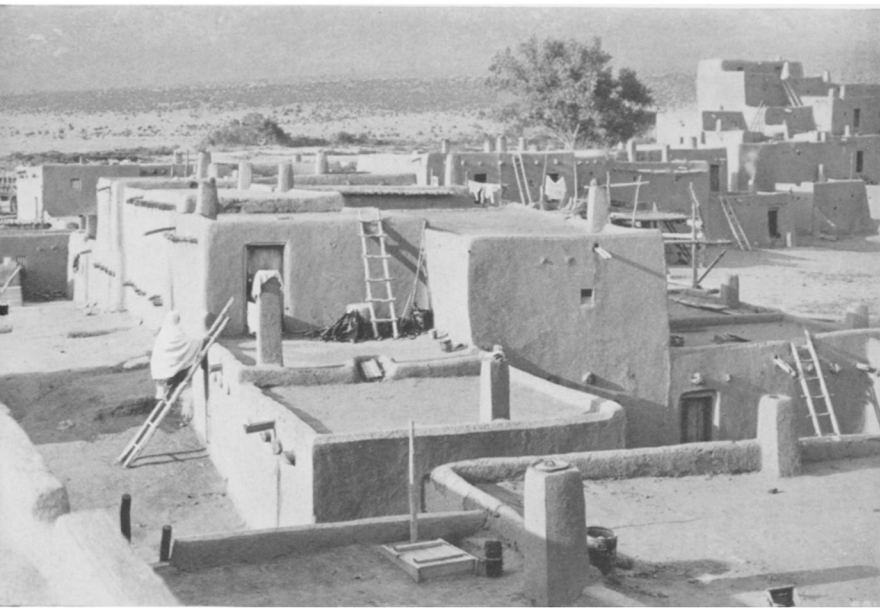
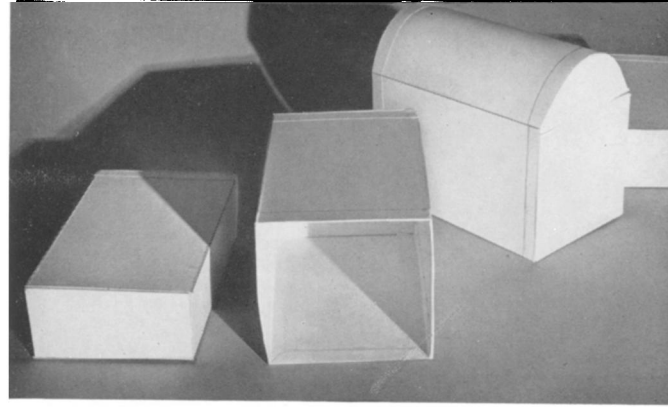
As a teacher I have two basic aims: first, to give people the courage to depend upon their own eyes, brains, and emotional responses to "read" a work of art; second, to provide them with a technique that makes it possible to concentrate on an object for a long time – long enough to be able to memorize its essential elements and the relationships between them. When you take away with you a clear image of the object, then you can analyze and compare its forms with those observed in other works of art and, in fact, with all other things, whether natural or man-made, commonplace or rare.

My technique is to select a single visual element, one that is common in both art and nature, and ask students to search for it in its multitudinous sizes, shapes, and positions. I have asked them to explore such basic forms as the square and circle and to see how they are used in paintings, buildings, or household objects. The isolation of one element is an artificial technique and the selection quite arbitrary, but this method has been tested and it works. It makes looking a game of search, so students find it fun. It helps them look at things in a new way, so it is stimulating. Teachers can adapt the technique for their own purposes.

The traveling exhibition called *Eye Opener* is the Metropolitan Museum's new way of taking its visual education program out into the neighborhoods of New York City. Spiral forms in the art of all ages and cultures will be exhibited "live" and in photographs and slides; we'll also show spirals in nature – in shells, cones, nebulae; and spirals designed for man's use – in springs, bolts, ropes. Visitors will be able to make "op" spirals and to design wrought-iron gates and fences using curled paper patterns. Our hope is that visitors to the show will become "spiral minded," never again able to pass a spiral without taking note of it – and, more important, that they will become more conscious of the other universal forms that have always been the basic vocabulary of artists and craftsmen.

The following pictures pursuing boxlike shapes through many kinds of art illustrate this technique of introducing people to the art of seeing. Photographs are never a satisfactory representation of three-dimensional objects, and I hope you will go to see the things shown here. Most of them are in the Metropolitan Museum, others are elsewhere in New York. In the meantime, the pictures – the boxes – are the most important part of the story. I urge you to look at them *before* you read the captions. The objects illustrated here can serve as the basis for teaching programs for people of all ages and backgrounds. Children will look for shape and size relationships, comparing boxes they see every day with the caskets and sarcophagi they see in museums, and interior spaces in their own environment with the museum's exhibition rooms. At the same time, the most highly sophisticated observer can find in changing box shapes the visual expression of changing attitudes toward beauty, mathematics, and space – even of changing attitudes toward God and man.

These cardboard boxes could be models for matchboxes, sarcophagi, wagons, or barns. When they are stripped of decoration and all clues indicating their size and function, it becomes possible to examine them as abstract forms. We note the proportions of each side and the proportions of length to width to height. We become aware of the shape of the space that the six sides enclose. In other words, we become shape and space conscious.



Men have designed circular, pyramidal, cylindrical, even freeform buildings, but on the whole, buildings are boxes or clusters of boxes. The quality of their design is determined, to a large extent, by the proportions of the sides to each other. Although there have been times when the architect was expected to camouflage the boxy shape of his building, usually the underlying structure remains visible. There are no more boxlike houses than the pueblos of the southwest Indians and Philip Johnson's Wiley house in Connecticut. The irregularity of the handmade walls and the contrast of clay with the timbers supporting the roof give the pueblos great eye appeal. The pure lines of the machine-made glass house that makes possible total indoor-outdoor living give the Wiley house a magic elegance. Yet the opaque and the transparent house have one thing in common – to a large extent their beauty derives from the beauty of the proportions of their boxlike forms.

Pueblos at Taos, New Mexico, and the Robert Wiley house at New Haven, Connecticut, designed by Philip Johnson, 1953

Photograph: Ezra Stoller





Cubiculum from a villa at Boscoreale. Roman, third quarter of the 1 century B.C. Length of floor 19 feet 1 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches, width 10 feet 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Rogers Fund, 03.14.13

Though these rooms appear to have little in common, the proportion of the length to breadth is actually very similar. Comparison of the two interiors illustrates some ways in which designers and builders can manipulate a structure's appearance. The bedroom from a villa near Pompeii has been painted to represent a richly carved loggia facing courtyards and gardens, with a Roman metropolis in the distance. Though the painted walls do not fool us, and never could have, they do succeed in transforming the appearance of the room from an enclosed narrow place to a spacious airy one.

Whereas the walls of the Roman room seem to dissolve, the walls of the medieval one—a modern construction in the style of French Gothic chapels—enclose and protect. The stones from which they were built are essential elements of the design. The individual blocks are evident—we can see how they were placed for maximum strength (note the ones around the niche at the left). Their smooth surface provides an exciting contrast to the intricate carvings of architectural detail and sculptures, and their pale coldness provides dramatic contrast to the warm jeweled tones of the stained-glass windows. If the bedroom looks wider and longer than it actually is, the chapel looks higher. This effect is achieved by the use of narrow windows, pointed arches, steep ribbed vaults, and clusters of narrow piers that lead the eye from floor to ceiling.

The Gothic Chapel at The Cloisters

Photograph: Hans Namuth





The marvelous little reliquary at The Cloisters, ten inches high, resembles a Gothic chapel, while the Ste. Chapelle in Paris looks like a huge reliquary – which is what it was intended as: St. Louis ordered its construction to receive the rare treasures that he had brought home from the Crusades, pieces of the True Cross and the Crown of Thorns. Margaret B. Freeman, Curator Emeritus of The Cloisters, believes that in its original state the reliquary had a steeper roof and central spire. If so, it must have looked even more like the Ste. Chapelle. The boxes are the same shape, architectural details are similar, and the walls of both are divided into panels depicting biblical scenes and figures. Both have walls aglow with color: translucent enamel and silver-gilt adorn the reliquary, and the drabness of the chapel's exterior is amply compensated for by its interior: its walls are stained-glass windows supported by narrow piers of stone.

OPPOSITE

Reliquary shrine. French (Paris), about 1340-1350. Silver-gilt and enamel, height 10 inches. The Cloisters Collection, 62.96

The Ste. Chapelle, Paris. French, 1246-1248

Photograph: French Embassy Press & Information Division

RIGHT

Document box (bunko). Japanese, XVIII century. Lacquer on wood, encrusted with pewter and shell, height 6 inches. Rogers Fund, 36.100.46

BELOW

Cassone. Italian, second half of the XVI century. Walnut, length 65½ inches. Gift of Ann Payne Blumenthal, 45.67.2



Boxes can be representative of the art of their cultures. A historian, anthropologist, or psychologist could, for instance, draw interesting conclusions about the difference between East and West by comparing the form, subject matter, and style of decoration of the ones shown here.

What did each craftsman think about design? The Italian was very much concerned with the boxiness of the chest. He carved each side as a separate, balanced composition, and set the relief in an ornate frame with particular accent on the corners. The Japanese craftsman was a painter. It looks as though he drew a delicate design of flowers, leaves, and butterflies on a sheet of paper, then wrapped it around the box, and painted the design in lacquer. But did he? Though he ignored the solidity of the three-dimensional box that was his canvas, he did plan a composition that works in two ways, both as a single unit with figures flowing across edges and corners, and as five beautifully balanced, asymmetrical compositions within a rectangle.

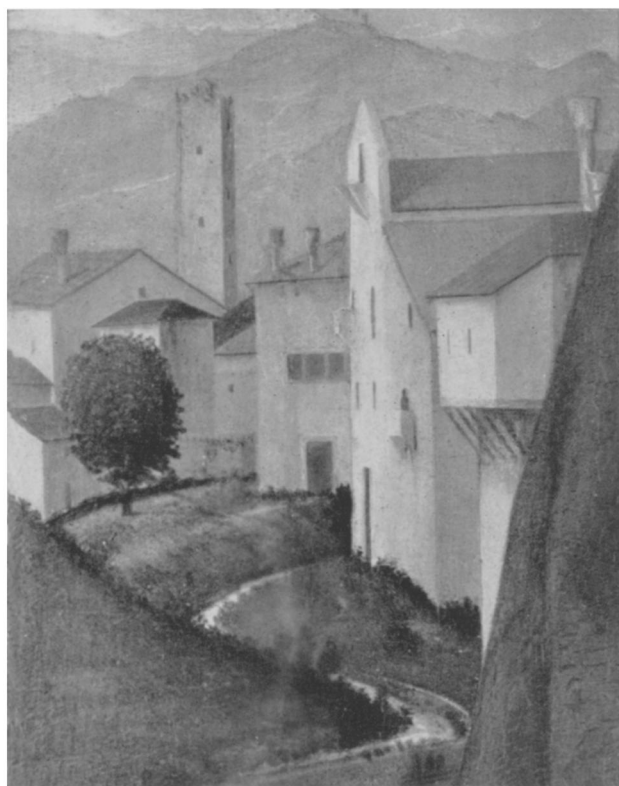




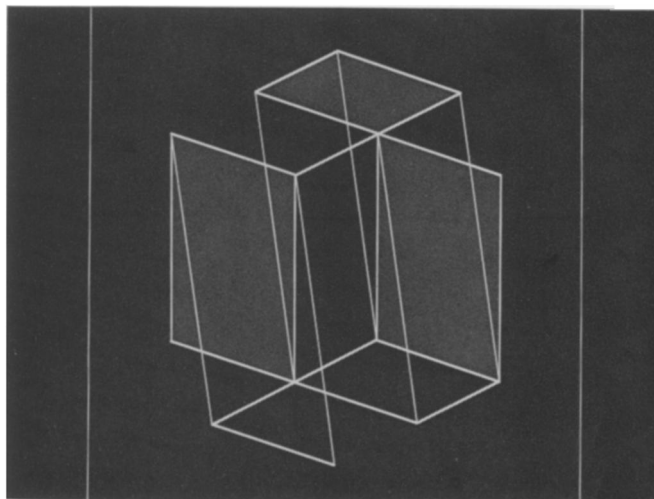
Renaissance artists were determined to make convincing pictures of the “real” world of volume and depth. They mastered the technique of modeling in light and shade, and worked out mathematical laws underlying perspective drawing. Although Bellini was painting a Madonna and Child, he could not resist showing off his ability to paint a group of houses to look as solid as stone blocks.

Many contemporary artists do not concern themselves with depicting the real world. They explore the strange and complex relationships between things and the way we see them, between the objective world and our subjective visual experience of it. Josef Albers uses Renaissance perspective in a revolutionary way: to dramatize the mystery and complexity of visual perception. A few straight lines and shaded planes look like an intricate arrangement of transparent boxes. Suddenly, just as we feel that we understand the relationship between the parts, the cubes turn themselves inside out, the volumes becoming spaces and vice versa.

Madonna and Child, and detail, by Giovanni Bellini (about 1430-1516), Italian (Venice). Oil on wood, 35 x 28 inches. Rogers Fund, 08.183.1



Transformation of a Scheme Series: No. 26, by Josef Albers (born 1888), American. 1952. Machine-engraved in laminated formica, 17 x 22½ inches. Collection of the artist, exhibited in New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970





Vermeer and Hopper organized space as architects do. With remarkable grace and subtlety each developed a system for manipulating line and color in order to transform the rectangle of the canvas into a convincing three-dimensional composition. In both paintings we see a corner of a room; the placement of objects and the gestures of figures are designed to call our attention to the boxlike space that is being represented, and all objects have been drawn and modeled to emphasize their underlying geometric forms. Note how often rectangles and boxes are introduced in the scenes. Note also that the proportions of many elements in the pictures seem to echo the shape of the canvas itself.

Young Woman with a Water Jug, by Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675), Dutch. Oil on canvas, 18 x 16 inches. Gift of Henry G. Marquand, 89.15.21

Tables for Ladies, by Edward Hopper (1882-1967), American. 1930. Oil on canvas, 48 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 60 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches. George A. Hearn Fund, 31.62





*A room in the
European paintings
galleries in 1954*

These photographs, taken from the same spot in the same gallery, look very different. The room apparently has changed in size and shape: the camera seems to respond to the differing decor of the room and art on exhibit just as we do. The “old master” paintings are meant to be looked at from a spot directly opposite the center of the canvas, and an ornate frame isolates each picture from the surrounding wall. Kenneth Noland, however, intended his paintings to “work” from any part of the room. His color stripes travel along a canvas that func-

tions as a transportable section of wall (it can easily be rolled up and moved to another location). The paintings dramatize the expanse of the wall on which they hang, making the viewer very conscious of the real space of the gallery. They are designed to be looked at from near and far, straight on or at an angle. Spectators walking past the paintings add to their vitality rather than detract from it. The photographer was right to have people in the picture—paintings, white walls, gray carpet, and gallerygoers are all important elements of a total spatial composition.

The same room, showing paintings by Kenneth Noland, in the current exhibition New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970

*Photograph:
Michael Frederick, Jr.*



