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art & man

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• **HENRI MATISSE** • *Creating with Shapes* •

You were born to simplify art" was one of the last things that his teacher said to Henri Matisse on the day he graduated from art school. Neither Matisse nor anyone else took these words seriously at the time. It took the world 50 years to realize what this teacher meant.

Matisse is known as one of the first "modern" artists. He didn't try to exactly imitate nature, as artists had been doing ever since the Renaissance. Instead, Matisse saw the world as *shapes* of flat color. To him the *shape* of an object or person was its most important quality, and he spent most of his life creating

hundreds of paintings in order to capture this essential element. And during his last years, Matisse began to create shapes in another new way that would revolutionize modern art.

Henri Matisse, born in a small French town more than a century ago, started out as a lawyer. He had already begun working in a law office, when he suddenly became ill. He had to stay in bed for months and even though he wasn't interested in art, he tried painting. Once Matisse picked up a paintbrush, he couldn't put it down and when he recovered, he gave up law and enrolled in art school in Paris.

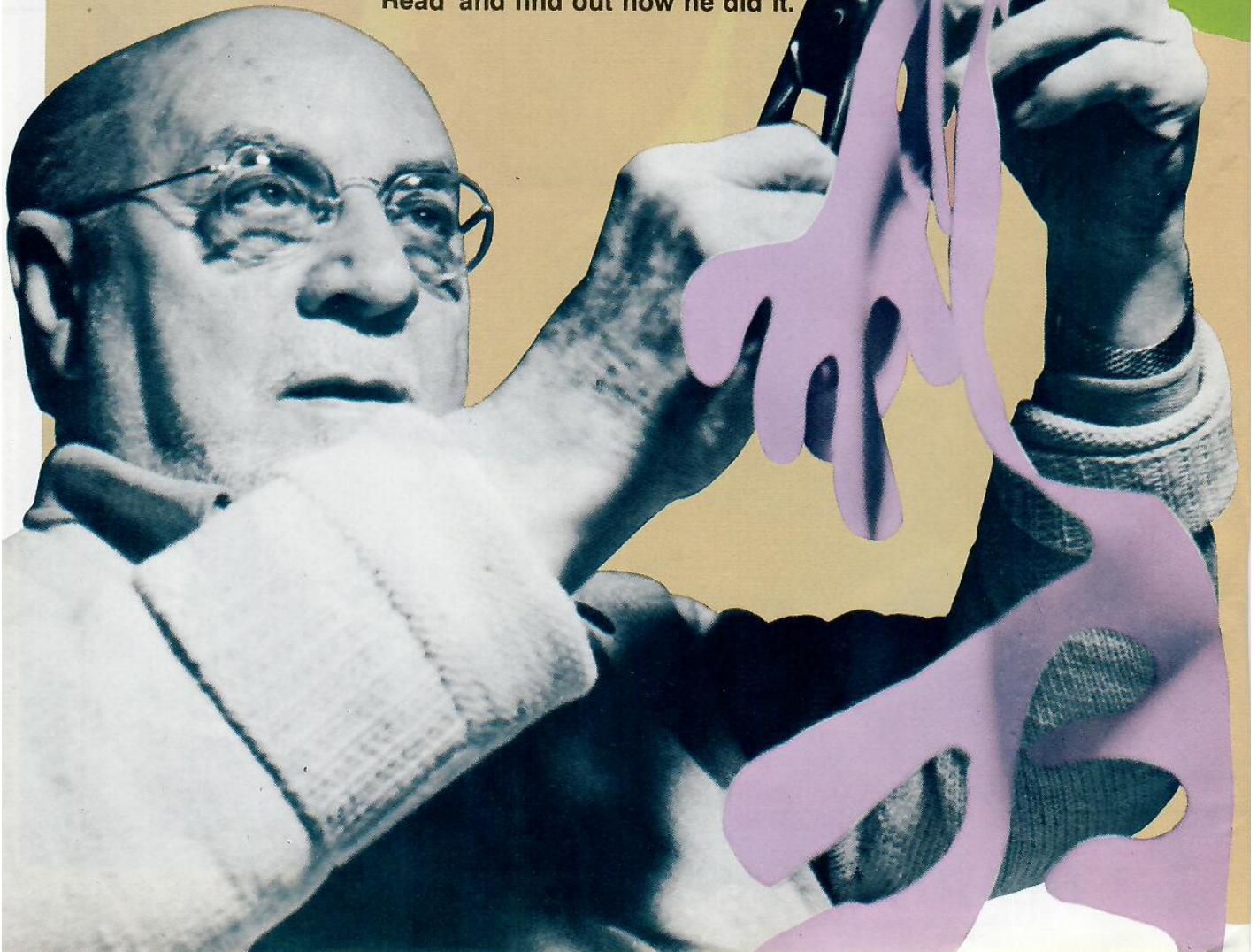
For an artist, Paris in the

1890s was the most exciting city in the world. The Impressionists Renoir, Degas, and Monet had opened the world's eyes to color and light. Vincent van Gogh and Paul Cezanne had been doing new and disturbing paintings, and an intense young artist, Pablo Picasso, had just arrived from Spain. Matisse saw the work of all these artists and he began painting day and night. He used the bright colors of the Impressionists, but, according to Matisse himself, "mere color sensations" weren't enough for him. He thought that

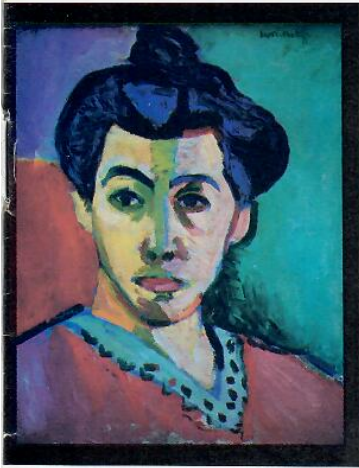
paintings must have *structure*. For Matisse, structure meant the arrangement of the *shapes* he painted and the *empty spaces* between them.

In 1905, Matisse painted a picture of his wife (*right*) which outraged the art world. "The Green Line" doesn't look very shocking now, but no one at that time had ever seen a portrait like it. The simple, flat shapes and the thick use of paint

**This man is creating a new art form.
Read and find out how he did it.**



Henri Matisse. *The Green Line (Mme. Matisse)*, 1905. Oil on canvas. Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Copenhagen. Rump Collection.



This painting shocked the art world in 1905.

were bad enough, but the green face was too much. Can you recognize anything in the background, or is it simply made up of red, magenta, and green shapes? Green may be an unusual color for a face, but the painting needs this green shape to balance it. In fact, "The Green Line" is not a portrait at all, but marks the beginnings of modern abstract art. The shapes and colors have become more important than the subject. Later in his life, Matisse would simplify his art even further, using *cut paper*. Try comparing the woman in this painting with the woman on the cover, done in cut paper. The paper figure has been

simplified to an almost abstract blue *shape*.

During his last years, Matisse worked mainly in cut paper. He used only simple, basic shapes. In cut paper, the form is *cut out* of a square piece of paper. In the work below, you can see that one of the dark shapes has been cut out of the square paper in the upper right. Matisse has used *both* the shape and the left-over paper. Both shapes are similar but both work very differently.

At first this cut-out looks totally abstract, but all of Matisse's art is based on familiar objects. The work below is called "The Knife Thrower." The bright, dynamic shape of the knife

thrower, left, contrasts with the pale, soft shape of the human target on the right. The two are surrounded by a field of flowers. And, as Matisse put it, the figure on the right's heart is "like a flower because she is confident that the knife will miss her." It has been suggested that the knife thrower is the artist; the other figure is the model; and the work itself symbolizes how difficult the creation of art can be.

In this issue you'll learn more about his unusual *cut-outs*, how he came to do them, and what Matisse's art means to modern artists. You'll meet a young designer working with shapes and you'll have a chance to do your own "cut-out."

HENRI • MATISSE

"Born to Simplify Art"



Can you find the knife thrower and his target in this cut-out?

COVER: Henri Matisse (1869-1954). *Blue Nude IV*, 1952. 40" x 30," cut and pasted paper. Private Collection, France.

Henri Matisse. *The Knife Thrower*, 1943-44. From *Jazz*, pl. XV. Tériade, Paris.

Adventures of the Artist

A World of Shapes

When Henri Matisse could no longer go out into the world, he decided to create his own private world.

December 31, 1949
Nice, France

As I stood outside the door of the large house in this small town on the southern coast of France, I wondered what I would find inside. I had an appointment to interview a great artist whose ideas had revolutionized modern art. But that was a long time ago. Now he was a sick old man. He'd been confined to his bed for nearly a decade and no one had spoken to him for years. I felt like leaving, but it was Henri Matisse's 80th birthday and it might cheer him up a little to be interviewed again.

The housekeeper led me up the stairs, down the long halls of the old house and into a large, bright room. I blinked as I entered and for a minute I couldn't imagine where I was. All I could see were large bright shapes—red flowers, green leaves, yellow birds. The walls of the room were covered from floor to ceiling with shapes. Some were tacked to the wall, some pasted on canvas; sometimes they dangled onto the floor or

traveled onto the ceiling. The floor was covered with piles of shapes. In the middle of all this chaos was a small bed in which sat an elderly bearded man wearing a faded gray sweater. He peered up at me through gold-rimmed glasses, gave a final snip with the great

pair of scissors he was holding and greeted me.

"Come in, come in. Now that I don't often get up, I've made myself a little garden to go for walks in. Everything's here—fruit, flowers, leaves, and a bird or two." He pointed upward. "They keep me company, too." I

looked up and saw three huge women's heads drawn on the ceiling. "It was no trouble. I had someone tie the charcoal to that fishing rod over there and I went to work. Here in the middle of my jungles I am never alone. Ask me questions as I work. I hate to waste time."

An assistant brought a huge sheet of brightly colored paper over to Matisse and fed it into his scissors. He pushed the large shears through the paper, never stopping until the entire shape was finished. He cut many shapes in just a few minutes, and didn't rework the contours once. "It's hard to explain, but when I'm doing the cut-outs, it's like the sensation of flight, like giving life to a form. In entering into the object, one enters one's own skin. I had to make this bird with colored paper. Well, I became a bird."

In 1941, when Matisse was in his 70s, he nearly died. He was so sick, he was told he'd have to spend the rest of his life in bed. He couldn't paint, so Matisse decided he would create in another medium. He hired a series of helpers and had them paint huge sheets of drawing paper with the

Photo of Henri Matisse, Nice, April 15, 1950.



Matisse worked like this for 15 years.

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How many "beasts of the sea" are in this cut-out?

brightest colors they could find. Then Matisse sat in bed with a pair of scissors and created a new art form. He cut shapes out of the brightly colored papers — dancers, acrobats, clowns, birds, animals, anything and everything he'd ever seen. Matisse had his assistants pin the shapes to the wall. They arranged and rearranged them. They pinned the shapes forward, backwards, upside down, reversed them, placed shapes within shapes, and pinned up the shapes made by the discarded pieces of paper.

These works became known as "cut-outs." Matisse called this new way of working "drawing with scissors." The cut-out form allowed him to simplify objects to their essential shapes. To prepare himself, he would do drawing after drawing until finally he could cut the shapes directly out of the paper. He worked on an enormous scale to keep the shapes even freer.

In the photo at the left, Matisse has pinned many different shapes up on the walls. Some of them appear in the finished work at the left. This work is called "Beasts of the Sea" and each shape is based on a natural object. Can you recognize a shark, a sea horse, waves, seaweed, and shells? The shapes and colors at the bottom of the work are darker than those at the top, like layers of ocean might be. The shapes *suggest* sea creatures, rather than showing them exactly.

Matisse himself said of this work, "The memories of my voyage to the South Pacific have only now returned to me in the form of obsessive sea shapes. I cut and put all these elements up on the wall. I no longer know what this will bring forth."

This interview is based on several interviews and articles with and by Henri Matisse.

CREATING WITH SPACE

How did knowing about *shape* help the artists on these pages create these famous paintings?

Henri Matisse invented new kinds of shapes using a pair of scissors. But artists have always used shape to create. Some works look “real,” like the two paintings below and right. Others, like the one on page 7, below, and page 8, are “abstract.” All these artists started out with shapes, but the results couldn’t be more different.

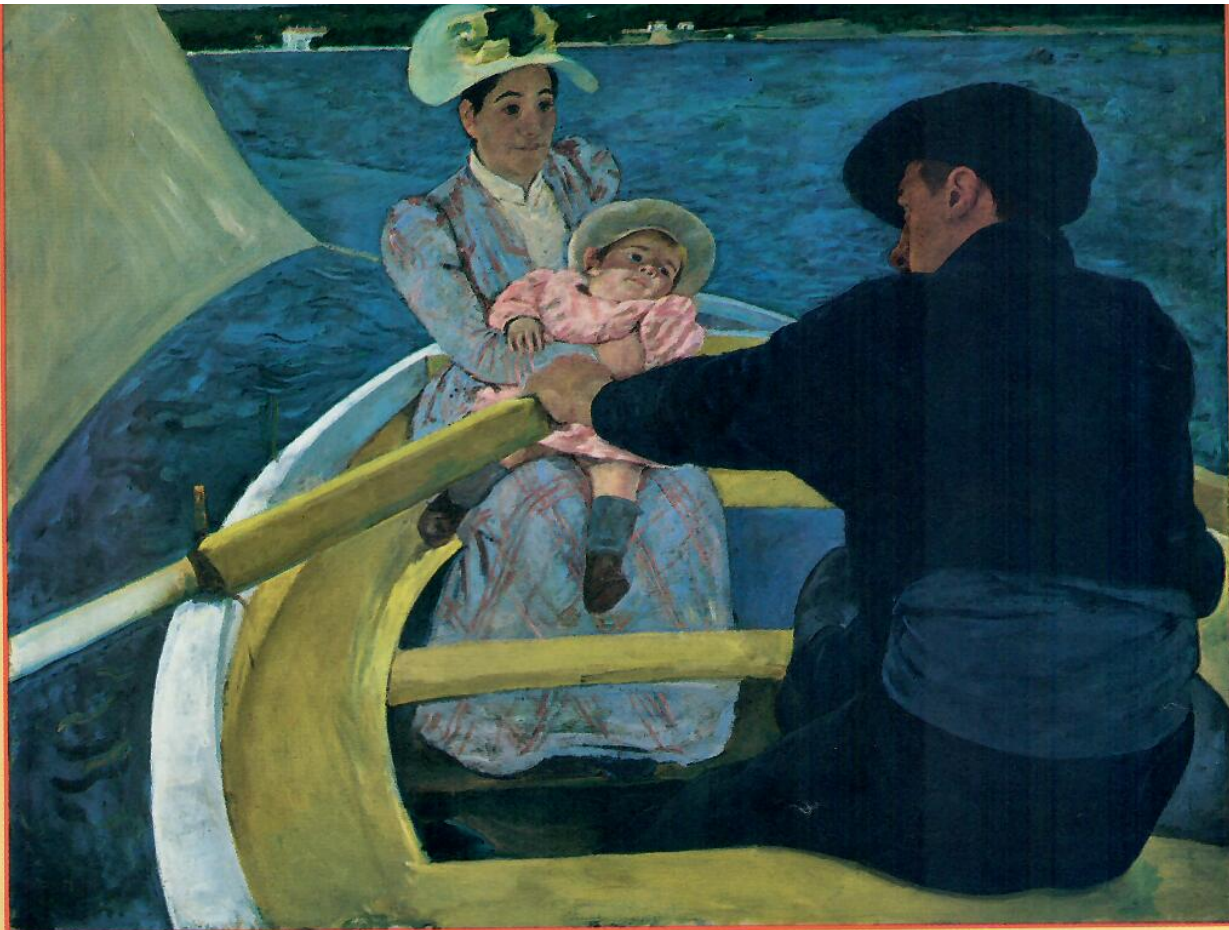
JOHANNES VERMEER: Real People in Real Places

From the time of Michelangelo up to the beginning of this century, artists used shapes to translate the “real” three-dimensional world to the flat canvas. The 17th-century Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer did only about 40 paintings during his entire life, but each is a masterpiece of composition. At the right is a very “real” painting of a woman weighing gold on a scale. However, the arrangement of all the shapes and spaces is precisely planned. The large shape of the desk in the lower left *balances* the square shape of the painting in the upper right. The light shape of the woman stands out against the dark painting, making her face the *center of interest*. Her rounded shape *contrasts* with the square painting behind her. And the blank wall creates a neutral or “negative” space. Notice the small triangular tiles of the floor at the lower right. Cover them with your hand. Is the painting as interesting? It is said that Vermeer used an ancient version of a modern camera to capture the minute details in his paintings. What other details can you find in this painting that might have been impossible to see in the real scene?

This 300-year-old work is really an arrangement of shapes.



Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675), *A Woman Weighing Gold*, c. 1665. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Widener Collection.

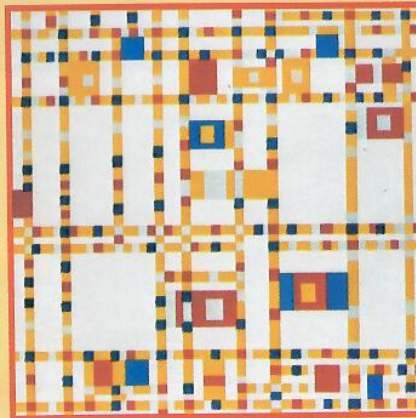


Mary Cassatt (1845-1923). *The Boating Party*, 1893-94. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Chester Dale Collection.

This painting had a great influence on today's art.

MARY CASSATT: Simplifying Nature

Mary Cassatt was a French Impressionist painter from America. She came from a wealthy 19th-century American family and could easily have spent her life going to parties and social functions. Instead, she chose to go to Paris and become an artist. As a woman, she had to work twice as hard to be taken seriously, but her work was so good, she became one of the most famous of the Impressionist painters. *The Boating Party*, above, shows how Cassatt used shape to create her tranquil, sunny pictures. The scene is very "real," but it looks much more "modern" than Vermeer's. We see only parts of all the shapes. The boat, the sail, the oar, the woman's hat and the man are all cut off. It looks as if he's rowing right out of the painting. Vermeer's woman looks real and solid, but Cassatt's flat-looking figures are hardly shaded at all. Notice how the dark man on the right balances the light figures of the woman and baby. And the line of beach and houses at the top stops your eye from going right up and out of the picture.



Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* isn't as "abstract" as it looks.

Piet Mondrian (1872-1944). *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, 1942-43, oil on canvas, 50" x 50". The Museum of Modern Art, NY. Given anonymously.

PIET MONDRIAN: A World of Squares

At the beginning of the 20th century, a new kind of art was born. The recently invented camera could record real scenes much more quickly and accurately than any painting. Artists realized their paintings would have to say *more* if they were to compete with photography, so they started to express things no photos possibly could. This kind of art, called "abstraction," has no connection with any "real" object. Abstract painters, like the American Piet Mondrian, were searching for a way to represent the essence of the modern age. To Mondrian, the 20th century meant skyscrapers, flashing lights, grids of city streets, fast tempos and jazz rhythms, and he used shapes that captured these things. Mondrian used only rectangles, four colors and sharp or "hard" edges. Even though the painting on the left, *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, is a pure abstraction, do the shapes remind you of anything real? These radical ideas introduced by Mondrian created many contemporary art movements, such as Optical and Minimal art.

Helen Frankenthaler, b. 1928. *Flood*, 1967. Acrylic on canvas. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Gift of the Friends of the Whitney Museum.



Contemporary artists have found new ways to use shapes.

HELEN FRANKENTHALER:

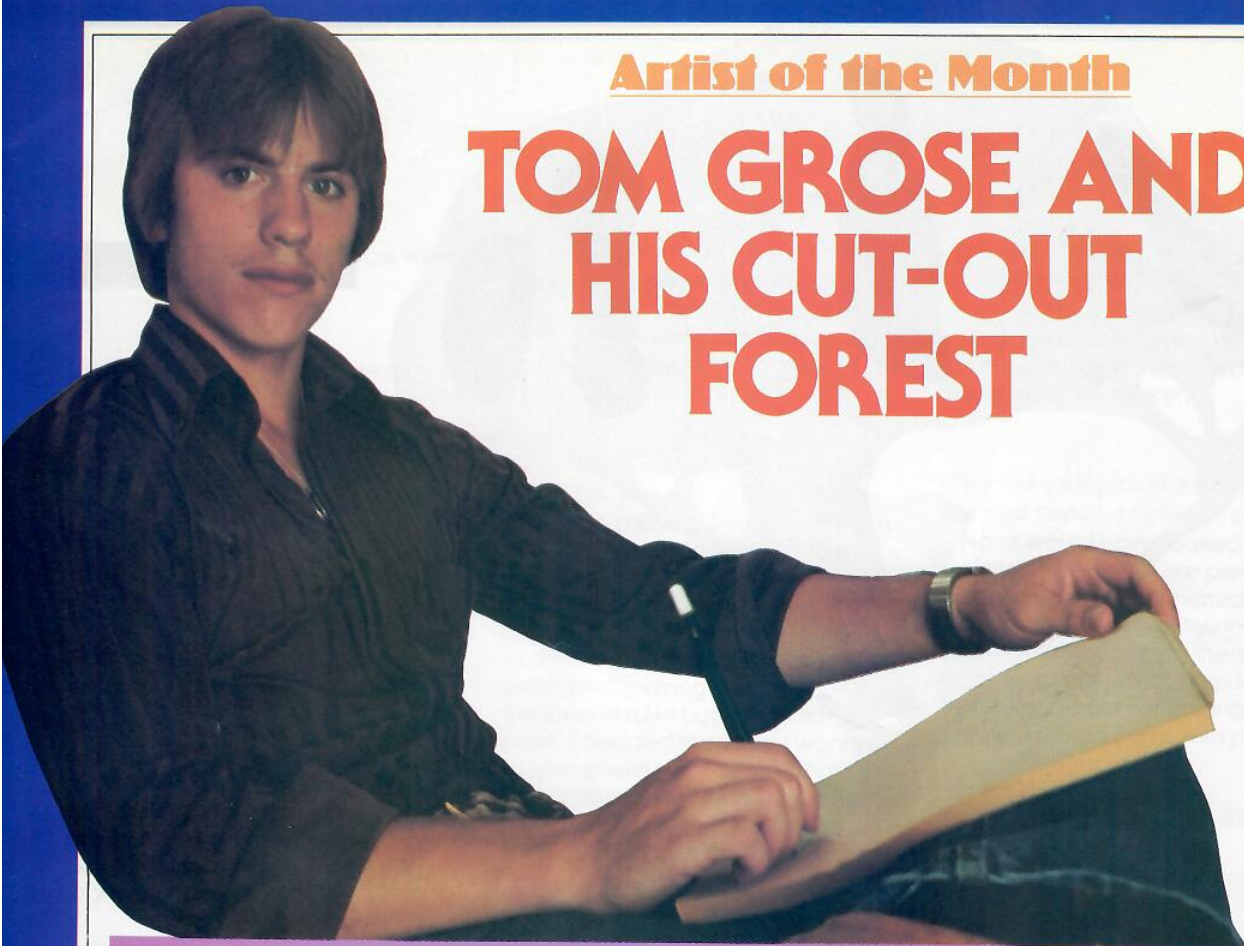


A Flood of Color

Helen Frankenthaler, a famous American “abstract” artist working today, paints using only *shapes* of color. Unlike the other painters on these pages, Frankenthaler doesn’t carefully plan her compositions, but puts down shape after shape. She places a raw canvas on the floor and pours thin layers of paint onto it, allowing the edges of each shape to bleed into each other. She doesn’t retouch spills, blots or other accidental shapes, but integrates them into the composition. Like Mondrian’s painting, the work above is “abstract,” but does it make you think of anything (clouds, a landscape, waves, layers)? Read the title. Now what do you think of? Which shape do you think is the center of interest? Look at the edges of the shapes and compare them with Mondrian’s edges. Now look at page 5 and compare Frankenthaler’s painting *Flood* with Matisse’s cut-out *Beasts of the Sea*. Do you see any similarities in the shapes?

Artist of the Month

TOM GROSE AND HIS CUT-OUT FOREST



Photographs by Janet Soderberg.



Book cover by Tom Grose, Winner, Graphic Design, 1979, Scholastic Art Awards.

Do the abstract shapes in this cut-out book cover look anything like Matisse's? Can you tell this is a forest?

Look at the light orange tree in the middle of this illustration. This is the first tree 17-year-old Tom Grose made when he began designing this abstract forest. It took him two weeks to create this single tree. To find out more about this unusual forest, turn the page.



How did you happen to design this book cover?

I didn't really know it was going to be a book cover until I'd finished it. The assignment in my design course was to create a forest out of cut paper.

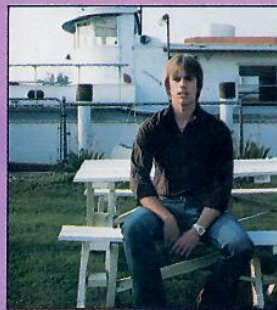
How did you decide on an abstract approach?

A lot of the others in class were doing theirs realistically—no abstraction at all. But I wanted to do something different. It took me quite awhile to come up with an

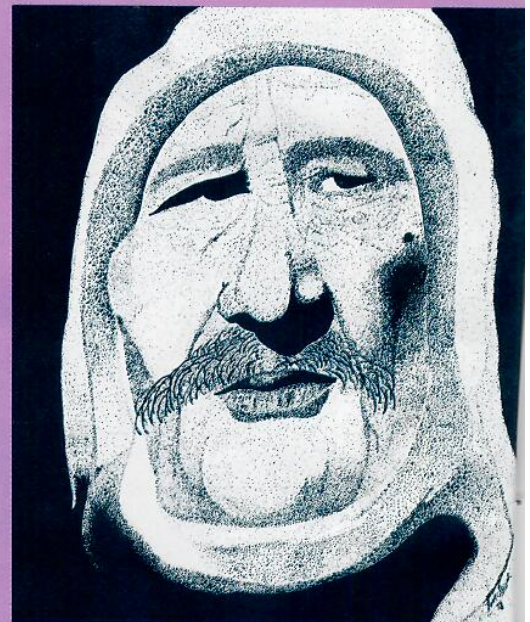
(Continued from page 17)

Thomas Grose first got interested in art in the eighth grade. From the very beginning he was interested in abstract shapes. He liked the way abstract shapes could simplify something real and still suggest what was important about it.

We visited him at his home in Mt. Clemens, Michigan, a boating community on the shores of Lake St. Clair. In talking to him about his artwork, we focused on his cover for a book called "The Artistic



Anatomy of Trees," which won him a medal in graphic design in the Scholastic Art Awards. He is planning to continue in art and probably will attend art school.



Tom Grose also draws realistically. Can you see how he emphasizes shapes even in this drawing?

idea. Most people in the class were done before I was.

How long did it take to get your approach worked out?

To design the first tree took almost two weeks. Every day I'd pull out the drawing I'd made the day before, look at it, and see if I could improve on it. I started out realistically, sketching trees from my imagination, and just kept going over them, making them more and more simple.

How did you know when to stop?

I was satisfied when it became more of a shape than lines. In the beginning I had broken lines like branches going up and stopping. It wasn't just one shape.

But how did you know you had the best shape?

I tried it different ways. First I made it flat on the bottom, but I didn't like that at all. So I came up with the idea of a hole in the middle with the roots coming down on both sides.

It makes a more interesting shape—the way you've left space inside the trunk and between the branches. And you've added smaller shapes to

go at the top of the tree.

I knew it needed something at the top. I tried some leaf shapes, but that didn't work out. So I made shapes that looked like a mass of leaves.

After you finished this one tree, what did you do?

I had to make different variations of it. That was pretty easy. It took maybe a couple of days.

Then I had to figure out a grouping, and I had to find some way to make it look like a forest. I did a lot of playing around. I tried the trees in rows but that was too plain. I decided then that I wanted to give a feeling of depth. That's why I grouped them in a triangle shape and made them smaller at the top—to make them look like they're going back.

As in any good design, the space around is just as important as the shapes. What were some of your thoughts about the "space" in this design?

I didn't think too much about it. I just did it. I know that I didn't want the trees to overlap. I wanted space around each tree. But there was too much space to begin with because I'd only made the larger trees. That's how I came up with the little ones—to fill in. Otherwise there weren't enough trees to make it seem like a forest.

I notice that every single tree in your design is different. Do you know why?

You can't find two real trees that are the same—so I decided to make mine all different.

Why did you pick these colors? Did you consider greens at all?

No. It would have looked too realistic. The colors were pretty hard to come up with. I'd finished all the shapes, and I just kept trying different colors, putting them together to see which ones looked best. I started out with oranges and reds and mixed them with purples.

What other kinds of art do you do?

What I enjoy most is abstract sculpture.

Do people have any trouble understanding the abstraction?

People who haven't seen a lot of art, like some of my friends—they can't understand some of my work. Some people think it's because I can't do things realistically.

What is it you like about abstract shapes? Why do you prefer it instead of realism?

I guess it's because I don't like to do a lot of detail. I like to keep things simple.

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CREATING YOUR OWN GIANT CUT-OUT

Try building your own world of shapes, just as Matisse did.



To the visual artist, an understanding of shapes is as important as notes are to a composer or words to a writer. Every painting contains shapes. They may be realistic ones, like the “shape” of an area of sky, or the shape of a tree or person. Or, the shape may be “abstract,” meaning that it has no connection to any real object.

Traditionally, artists have used shapes to transfer the real three-dimensional world onto the flat two-dimensional canvas. Let’s say that you were painting a landscape. The three-dimensional area of a field would become a two-dimensional shape on the canvas. The leaves or branches of a tree would translate into small shapes and lines (a line is a very thin shape) in your painting. Your painting would be an arrangement of large and small shapes, and we would “read” it as both a landscape, and an arrangement of shapes on a flat surface (the canvas), at the same time. This overall arrangement of shapes is how you “compose” or “design” a painting.

Often, artists repeat the same type of shape in order to achieve a

unified composition. Look at a painting and see if you can find repeated shapes. When the repetition of similar shapes becomes an overall quality in a painting, it establishes a pattern. By repeating the same flat shapes in his cut-outs, Matisse would establish a pattern that is similar to the effect of a brightly patterned wallpaper. But Matisse’s cut-outs go far beyond being decorative, and this is because of the shapes that he created. No matter how abstract they seem at first, his shapes always remind us of familiar objects. They all seem to relate to living things. Have you ever looked at clouds and thought that they looked like animals or real objects? The clouds are abstract shapes, but because of their general nature, we associate familiar objects with them. Matisse’s lively, flat shapes function in the same way.

This month, our workshop focuses on creating a large cut-out using flat shapes. The class featured decided not to overlap the shapes. They wanted a uniform sense of depth, in which all the shapes seem to float on the surface.

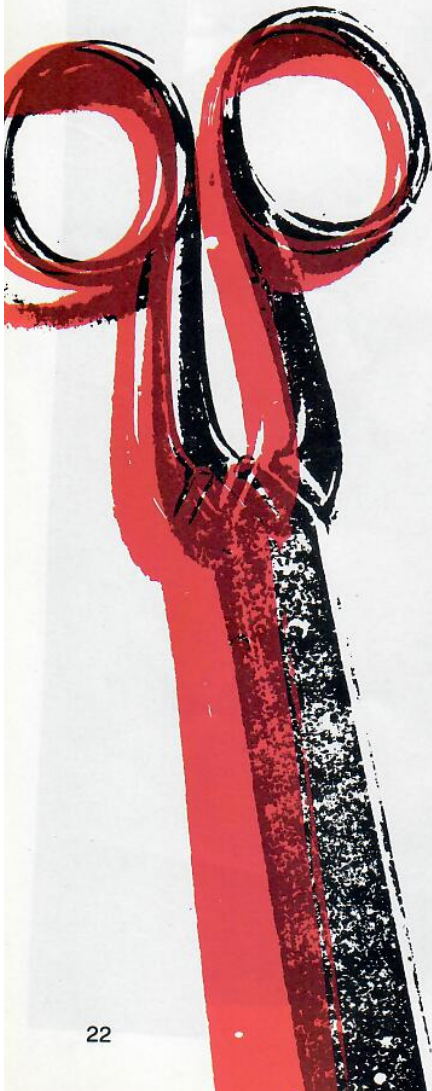


Special thanks to the Packer Collegiate Institute, Brooklyn, NY. Photographs by Richard Hutchings.

STARTING OUT

Materials:

- Magic markers
- Small sheets of white drawing paper
- Colored construction paper
- Scissors, rubber cement, straight pins
- Large "CRAFT" paper or photographic "no-seam" paper. (Each roll is 30 feet x 10 feet for background.)



1

Create some unique *abstract* shapes. They can be based on familiar objects. Set up a *pattern* by repeating the shapes. The shape itself is the "positive" form, while the white paper surrounding it is the "negative" space. At this point, you may want to continue making your own individual cut-out. Or you can work with other students to create a single large piece.



4

Similar shapes in different colors will give a unity to your cut-out.



5

Hang the "no-seam" paper. Arrange your shapes before putting up.



8

Glue the shapes down. Will parts of your composition be "symmetrical" like the shapes at the right of this photo?



9

A very different shape, like the red pointed one, can give special emphasis.



2 Plan your color scheme. Then select construction paper. Do you want your colors to be highly contrasted (different in light and dark), color opposites (complimentary), or do you want them to be harmonious (colors of the same intensity)?



3 Draw the shape on the top piece and cut several at once.



6 Use pins to compose the cut-out. With which shape will you start? Will you put it in the center, or in a corner? Will your shapes overlap?

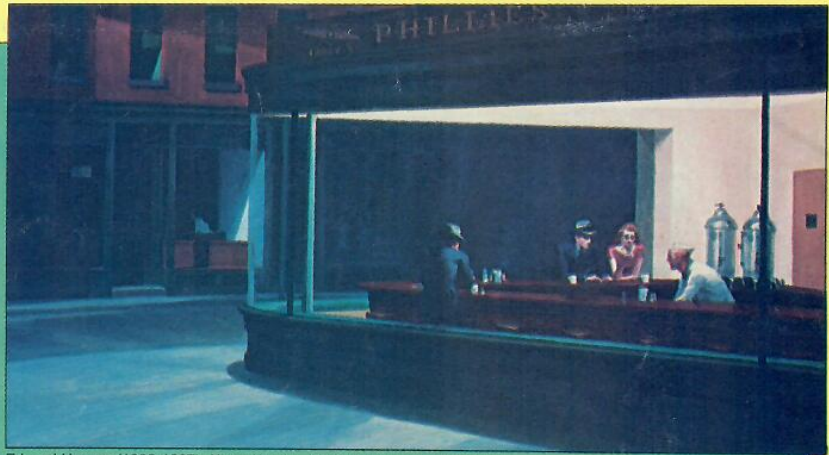


7 Maybe you'll want to start with a border. Remember that the white "space" is as important as the shapes. Keep rearranging the shapes until you are satisfied.



10 When you finish, discuss the work. How do you feel about the composition on the left? One of these artists felt it was too "decorative," without a strong direction. Another suggested that there should have been a few very large dominant shapes. A third felt more "pattern" was necessary. When you create your cut-out, don't hesitate to change it, even after it seems finished.

ARTS ALIVE



Edward Hopper (1882-1967). *Night Hawks*, 1942. Art Institute of Chicago.

NIGHT HAWKS

Next March you'll be reading in *Art & Man* about the modern American painter Edward Hopper. He is best known for his realistic city scenes like *Night Hawks*, above. What feeling do you get from this painting? How does

the artist's use of light create this mood?

Hopper wasn't always a well-known painter. He started as a commercial illustrator, doing book and magazine covers. You will see more than 200 of these early works in a large show now at the Whitney

Museum of American Art in New York until Dec. 9. It will then travel to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, from Feb. 5-March 16, 1980; the Detroit Institute of Arts from June 10-July 20; the Milwaukee Art Center from August 7-Sept. 21; and the Seattle Art Museum from Oct. 16-Nov. 30.



BLACK IRIS

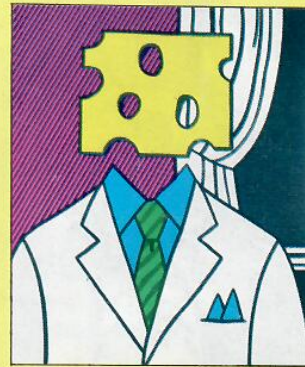
"Finally, a woman on paper!" was what the famous photographer Edward Steiglitz said when he first saw Georgia O'Keeffe's sketches in 1916. O'Keeffe, who has lived in the New Mexican desert for years, enlarges small objects, such as the flower, above, in her paintings. "People will have to look at them," she says. You'll learn more about Georgia O'Keeffe in the February issue of *Art & Man*.

O'Keeffe's paintings, along with those of 30 other contemporary artists who choose to live and work in the western United States, will be shown in the *First Western States Exhibition* from Oct. 26-Dec. 9 at the San Francisco Museum of Art.

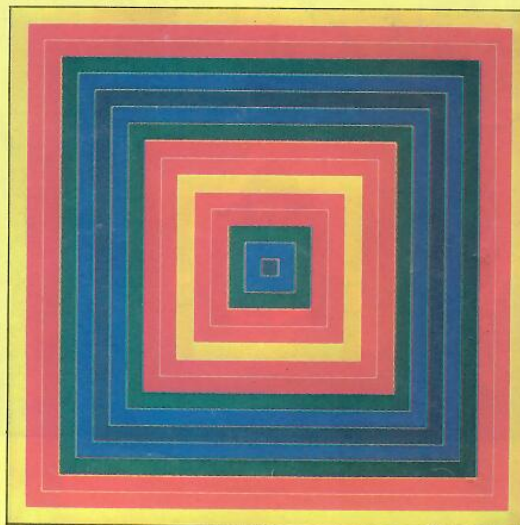
SIX POP ARTISTS

Is this portrait (*right*), a little unusual? What do you think the artist, Roy Lichtenstein, might have been saying about humanity?

Lichtenstein is one of the most famous American "Pop" artists. He gets many of his ideas from comic strips and billboards. His works and those of five other contemporary artists, such as Andy Warhol and Frank Stella (*below*), will be exhibited in four cities beginning with the Milwaukee Art Center from Oct. 11-Dec. 2; the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Jan. 15-March 2, 1980; the J.B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky, April 1-June 29; and the New Orleans Museum of Art in Louisiana from July 25-Sept. 14, 1980.



Roy Lichtenstein (b. 1923). *Portrait*, 1977. Private Collection.



Frank Stella (b. 1936). *Honduras Lottery Co.*, 1962. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC