

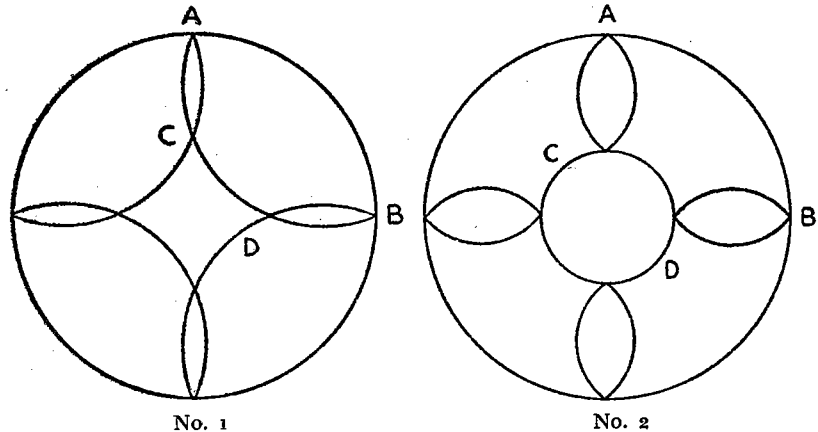
A PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY OF FORMAL BEAUTY

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The pleasure one gets from the perception of a painting derives from two sources, the subject matter and the form. The aspects of form in art are several: the colors, shapes, lines, and their arrangements considered both abstractly and in relation to the subject matter, and the manner of presentation such as the use of perspective, three dimensional form and the like.

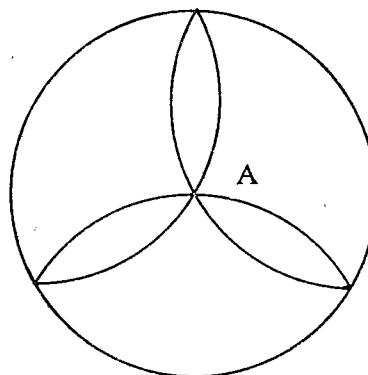
Freud, in his discussion of art, analyzes the effects of the subject matter but has little to say of the formal aspects of painting. He does say, however, that formal beauty in some way affects the spectator so that he may more readily receive the pleasure offered by the subject matter. In his book on wit, Freud makes an analogous statement concerning the function of formal wit techniques, viz., they often allow the emergence of pleasurable sexual or aggressive tendencies which could not otherwise be expressed. His discussion of wit contains many hints for the understanding of art—hints which will be utilized throughout this paper.

An analysis of children's designs may serve as a starting point in establishing a connection between wit and art. Compare these somewhat similar designs:



A large majority of the people whom I questioned as to which they preferred, chose the first. All the relationships between lines and points that hold in the first design also held for the second. The only difference between them is that in the first, the line that joins points C and D is a continuation of arcs AC and DB, whereas in the second it is not. This suggests that the difference between the designs which gives the first greater æsthetic value is the economy of the means used to produce it, for in the first, one continuous arc connects A and C, C and D, and D and B, whereas in the second three separate arcs are necessary. In the first design, then, one line is serving in three capacities at once. This pictorial economy is the analogue of a verbal economy operating in wit technique which Freud calls 'condensation'; one word replaces several words in the witticism, one line replaces several lines in the design.

The principle of economy explains the beauty of this children's design:



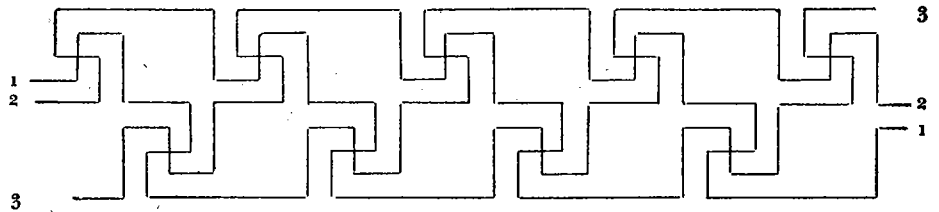
Here one large arc serves as a boundary for two enclosed spaces and just three arcs enclose three separate areas. Also point A serves as the vertex of all three areas and so represents an economy in points.

One could analyze similarly hundreds of children's designs. Almost everyone remembers his own pleasure, when as a child

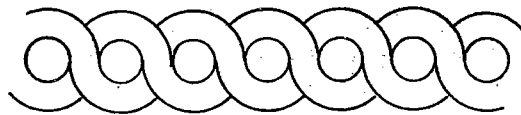
he was able 'to make things come out' by enclosing several areas with one line or by drawing an arc through a series of existing points without creating any new ones.

The spiral and circle are two simple motifs that are found in the art of children and ancient peoples. Consider the line A——B, bent so that A and B coincide forming a circle: \bigcirc AB. This figure is more economical than a line, for now the same point serves the functions of both point A and point B. The spiral may be looked upon as a series of concentric circles formed with only one line.

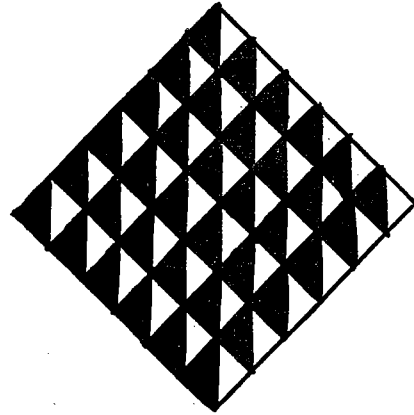
Below is a typical continuous design from a Greek sarcophagus. It looks very intricate, but on analysis one finds that the whole design is made with only three lines. This design, like many similar ones, strikes one as being 'clever' (again showing similarity to wit). One is surprised and pleased that so complex a design may be formed from so few elements.



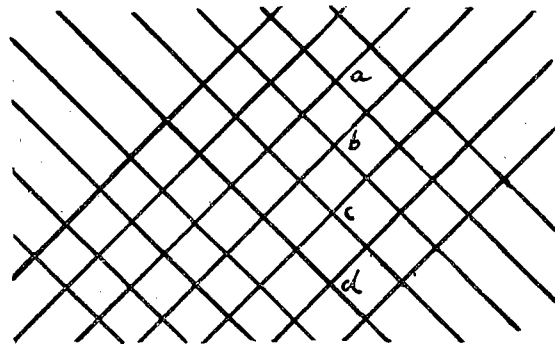
Here is another example of a continuous design (from a Greek floor pattern) which may be analyzed in a similar fashion. In this, as in all continuous designs, there is the additional economy of one section serving as both the beginning and the end of another.



In the following design the economy may be understood if one considers the steps by which the design might be made.



First perhaps, the artist drew two sets of parallel lines that intersected to form many series of points:



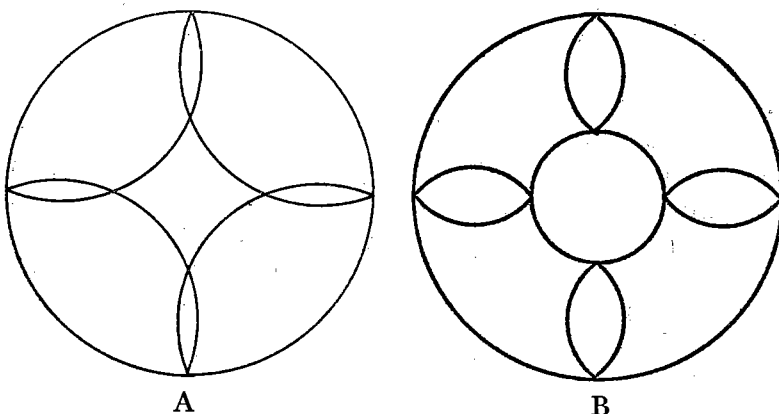
Then he saw that each series lay in a straight line. A new line drawn through A, B, C, D, E is straight and at the same time creates no new points—an economy, this time in points.

The economies that play a part in these simple designs are those in which one pictorial element serves several functions at once, or in which an apparently complex design is actually made with few elements. These principles may be generalized and given wider application. Two types of more general economies suggest themselves, simplicity (quantitative economy) and what may be called qualitative economy.

The form of a work of art may be analyzed in terms of certain abstract elements such as color, line, plane, and various shapes such as circles, squares, triangles, etc. For a picture to have quantitative economy (simplicity) there need be no restrictions on the kinds of elements employed, only a limitation of the number of times these elements can be used. Qualitative economy, on the other hand, does involve a restriction of the kinds of elements which can be used while no limitation is placed on the number of times the chosen elements may appear. Thus if an artist limited himself to the use of lines alone he would achieve a qualitative economy—no matter how complex the picture or numerous the lines. Or if an artist chooses to use but three colors such as red, orange-yellow, and blue he is employing a qualitative economy. Some art such as a Persian rug design or a cubist painting depends very heavily on qualitative economy. The Persian rug design appears very complexly made up of a large number of elements. These elements, nevertheless, all fit into a common category. Thus a triangular shape is repeated many times or two or three colors are used over and over again. Thus also may the cubist picture be composed primarily of square shapes. Of course both qualitative and quantitative economy are very often found together.

Now how do these pictorial economies cause pleasure? To transfer Freud's explanation from the field of wit to art: pictorial economy results in an economy of psychic energy in the observer. All the pictorial economies so far considered make for ease of perception. Thus it is easier to perceive a design made of few elements than of many, or of a design made of only one kind of element rather than of several kinds. But how does ease of perception cause economy in perception? Ease of perception itself does not give pleasure; rather it is the comparison of the ease with which we now perceive with the difficulty we might have had without the economies. Economy, or saving, implies comparison with a more confusing or complex condition that might have existed and from which we are saved.

Consider again, our first example.



When we look at design A we are reminded of a design such as B, which is perceived with more difficulty, and the realization of the saving of effort in perception gives pleasure. We are similarly pleased when we perceive something that has been simplified, for we are reminded of how it would have looked before its simplification. Thus, mere paucity, such as a black square or a few straight lines on a piece of blank paper, does not give pleasure for it does not remind us of a more complex condition that would have offered greater difficulties in perception.

Some effective designs are simple yet appear complicated as in the example from the Greek sarcophagus. The appearance of complexity reminds us all the more forcibly of what we might have had to perceive and the energy which we are saving. The greater the contrast between our present ease of perception and the difficulty that might have been, the greater our pleasure from the design. This pleasure is analagous to what a man might feel the first few times he rode in an automobile to work when he had been used to walking.

Conversely, when the perception of a picture causes a comparison with a more economical treatment of the same material, psychic energy is not saved but wasted, and a disagreeable feeling is produced. Thus if two colors are too sim-

ilar, they can be perceived easily neither as one color nor as two separate colors. The resulting increase in psychic work causes displeasure and we say the colors clash.

Economy of pictorial means is not the only cause of economy in perception. Let us again consider some ideas from Freud's theory of wit. There is a greater pleasure, Freud points out, in aggressive and sexual wit than in harmless (purely formal) wit, for in the former a repressed sexual or hostile thought is expressed and hence an inhibition is overcome. Since the inhibition is overcome, its energy is freed and discharged as laughter. Pleasure is also derived from the fulfilment of the repressed wishes. Even the pleasure of the most harmless wit is derived partly from the discharge of overcome inhibitions and the satisfaction of repressed desires. All of us have critical faculties that decry nonsense, illogical thinking, relating things by word sounds instead of for logical reasons—the very devices used in wit. These are the ways in which children think, ways of thought which are given up as the reality principle replaces the pleasure principle. Our desire to gain pleasure through these childish devices still exists in a repressed state and we allow ourselves these methods of thought, when in a witticism, they take a socially acceptable form, or when alcohol has dulled our inhibitions. To produce a witticism, inhibition against such thinking must be overcome and, just as in aggressive wit, the inhibition once overcome is momentarily unnecessary and its energy may be saved or discharged in laughter.

These observations may be carried over directly into the sphere of art. Thus, just as we have repressed childish ways of thinking, we have repressed childish ways of perceiving and representing. A child knows nothing of the difficult system of perspective, a system that man learned only after thousands of years. The child and the primitive are not concerned with optical truths. They often tend, for instance, to represent things not as they are seen, but as they are remembered. This memory image differs from the adult perception of the object, for like all memories it is already simplified and

economical. The child perceives only the most vivid aspects of things or those that seem clearest or most important to him. The childish representation of an object is the easiest for the mind, is learned long before the adult, and is repressed by the adult in the process of education.

That adults have inhibitions against representation in the direct simple manner of children is demonstrated by the resistance they show towards drawings lacking perspective, three dimensional appearance, etc. That artists themselves may only overcome these inhibitions with effort, is shown by the following statement of a modern American abstract painter, Stuart Davis (quoted in *Time* November, 1945).

"I resolved I would quite definitely have to become a modern artist. It took an awful long time. I soon learned to think of color more or less objectively, so I could paint a green tree red without batting an eye. Purple or green faces didn't bother me at all, and I even learned to sew buttons and glue excelsior on the canvas without feeling any sense of guilt. . . . The result was the elimination of a number of particularized optical truths with which I had formerly concerned myself with.'

Stuart Davis was having trouble representing as a child and forgetting learned truths. But when an adult is able, by looking at a picture, to break through his inhibitions and enter into the psychic processes of the child, he perceives with much less expenditure of psychic energy. Thus again the comparison of the amount of energy expended when perceiving as a child to that necessitated in adult perception, causes pleasure. It is for this reason that cultivated modern man enjoys the paintings of ancient man, modern primitives and children, and that modern artists have learned so much from them.

How is the adult modern artist related to the child and the primitive? Simply in that he is himself part child and primitive. The childish ways of perceiving and thinking are, as Freud has shown, merely repressed and forced into the unconscious. And from a study of dreams and memories, Freud has demonstrated that condensation (economy), the first device we

considered, is a process originating in the unconscious. Since economy and primitive methods of representation are both found primarily in the unconscious, and since these properties are of great importance in formal art, one may deduce that it is to the unconscious that the artist goes for inspiration.

All artists, the modern and the old master alike, draw inspiration from the unconscious. Modern art has laid great emphasis on the formal aspects of painting and hence has utilized blatantly certain childish devices that are not seen in academic painting. However, the formal beauty of even the works of the old masters rely on certain economies that find their source in the condensation of unconscious thought. To prove their use of qualitative economy, it is only necessary to notice the limited number of colors employed by them. Only two or three colors give the impression of many more. The modern artist often is more concerned with how he paints than what he paints. He is not forced, like the old master, to concern himself with the representation of reality. It is only natural that, having no inhibitions against painting in an unrealistic manner, he may allow himself much greater freedom in the use of certain devices that make for economy.

The theory that the sources of inspiration even for the formal aspects of art come from the unconscious explains why many artists assert that self-consciousness is the greatest barrier to be overcome in artistic production. For self-consciousness implies the examination of the artistic process by critical reason, and this hinders the flow of inspiration.

The question may perhaps be raised, why do we not laugh at beauty? In wit, the unnecessary energy is discharged as laughter; in art, it is not discharged but perhaps channeled for use in some other capacity. Freud points out that it is only because of certain special characteristics of wit, such as its novelty and ability to surprise and misdirect the listener's attention that it causes discharge (laughter). For the mind, if on guard, is always ready to channel energy for some use at hand. Wit is able to misdirect the attention by an interesting idea expressed before the word which plays an economical

part is spoken; or the meaning of the sentence or the speaker's intention may not be clear until the sentence is complete. On the other hand, a work of art does not depend on a misdirecting situation in which it is seen, and though all parts of a picture may not be seen at one moment, there still remains little opportunity for surprise. Certainly that we do not laugh at art is not reason to discard the idea of economy in explaining its effect. Thus poetry contains all the economies found in wit—rhyme, double meaning, condensation, and illusion—and these are no doubt a source of much of the pleasure. Yet we laugh at wit, but not at poetry.

Freud completes his theory of wit with a series of formulas: wit is the economy of expenditure of psychic energy in inhibition; comedy is the economy of expenditure of psychic energy in thinking; humor is the economy of expenditure of psychic energy in feeling. We may perhaps add a fourth: formal æsthetic pleasure is economy of expenditure of psychic energy in perception.