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THE DEVELOPMENT OF PAINTING FROM CONCEPTUAL UNITY TO VISUAL UNITY.

The Ohio State University, Ph.D., 1961
Fine Arts

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF PAINTING FROM
CONCEPTUAL UNITY TO VISUAL UNITY

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

by

Darrell Marvin Johnson, A.E., A.M.

The Ohio State University
1961

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INTRODUCTION

Through the ages of the development of painting, philosophers and artists alike have pondered over what essential qualities are contained in a great work of art. A large number of painters, theorists of art, and historians of art agree on one commonality in great painting—the basic quality of unity. Even though the style of painting changes, the necessity of unity within the work remains relatively constant. But disagreement occurs when man begins to try to establish how to achieve unity. Structural organization of painting has appeared in numerous forms and variations and has been discussed under such names as "unity," "harmony," "equilibrium," "structural order," "form," "formal order," "composition," and so on.

For a number of years I have been striving for unity within my painting, but within the last two years there has been a decided change in my approach. This paper deals largely with this fundamental change in methods of achieving structural organization.

Two Methods of Attaining Unity in Painting

At the danger of over-simplifying the approaches to unity, I would like to compare two important methods and the way they
have influenced my painting. Over the last three years I have made a transition from what I will call a search for organization according to conceptual unity into a search for organization through visual or perceptual unity.

In Section I of this paper I will strive to explain conceptual unity, and how the use of this theory resulted in paintings with rationalized structure. A transitional phase in my work, involving principles from both conceptual unity and perceptual unity, will be discussed in Section II. In Section III, I will discuss the latest development in my method of pictorial organization as I search to attain relationships through perceptual unity.

This paper is partial fulfillment of the requirements of a Ph.D. dissertation, the other part being comprised of an exhibit of sixteen of my paintings. Twelve paintings are represented in this paper by color reproductions, each chosen to illustrate a significant phase in the development of my work. They represent the results of my research and exploration. This study is intended as an explanation of basic aspects of my paintings and of the developments in my methods of painting during the last three years.

In this essay I will use terminology based on the experimental psychology of visual perception. The study will cover
developments in my painting between 1957 and 1961. Most of the discussion of each painting will center on the methods used in attaining pictorial unity in that particular work of art. Some discussion of the painting medium used will be included, but only when it affects the creative process in the painting's development toward order.

To facilitate the discussion of my work, I have divided my painting into three basic phases of development:

1. During 1957 and 1958, I painted a number of Romantic-Cubistic landscapes. The paintings are structured through pre-planned, rational use of commonly accepted art and design principles, combined with traditional compositional methods.

2. In the transitional period of 1959, I did a number of experimental burlap collages and "found-object" collages. Their structural unity is based on a combination of sensitive positioning (according to commonly accepted design principles) and a partial use of perceptual unity.

3. In 1960 and 1961, I completed a large number of abstract still-life paintings and a few abstract landscapes. I attempted to attain unity in these paintings by using the processes of perceptual unity.

No painting falls completely within a "type," but I feel that these three general trends are strongly apparent in most of my work. As typical examples of each of these periods, three
paintings will be extensively discussed—one from each phase:

1. Blue Gothic, 1957 (Plate I)
2. Big Yellow, No. 3, 1959 (Plate III)
3. Red Still-Life, 1960 (Plate VIII)

Other paintings will be discussed briefly, but only as they show variations on the three dominant trends.
I. EARLY METHODS AND THEORY -- 1957-1958

Although admittedly it involves some over-simplification, one could distinguish two polarities in the methods of attaining unity in modern painting.

The first method, "conceptual unity," is often based on traditions, formulas, devices, and art principles. It usually involves careful planning and step-by-step analysis and rationalization.

The second approach is based on perceptual unity as it is attained by the artist who has developed an extreme sensitivity through his visual sense to the needs for pictorial organization. This method of approaching unity will be more fully explained in Part III of this paper.

It is probable that none of my paintings fall completely in either of the above categories because at times parts of both approaches have been used in a painting. Much of my early work was done under the influence of conceptual unity, so we must examine this method for attaining pictorial order.
Conceptual Unity in Painting

Structural theory, composition, and design were strong parts of my early art background and training. In this approach to painting, one strove for a compositional unity through use of commonly accepted principles of art and design and through a rationalized series of "devices" of composition. These methods had emerged from the academic study and analysis of works of the old masters. Too often something that had occurred quite naturally in a masterpiece was formulated and made into a system or rigid law. A few artists realized the danger of conforming to formulas or laws, and therefore tried to use the principles as "helping guides" in achieving greater unity.

An example of a commonly used device was the spiral organization of a composition. The ordering force in the composition was to be an alignment of forms and edges so that a large spiral would "carry the eye movement" from form to form toward a planned point of emphasis within the composition. It was assumed that the eye movement of the observer would follow this path.

Another quality of unity could be obtained by darkening the corners and outer areas of the composition, for this would contain the "eye movements" within the composition. A similar but reversed device is often used in watercolor painting (or drawing) when the outer edges are faded away to white. These devices concentrate and isolate the forms toward the center of the composition.
The method that undoubtedly influenced me most was one which involved the use of properties called basic principles of design, as these principles controlled the use of certain design elements. It would seem that there are unifying principles that are basic to most art forms in that they contribute to unity and order. Although all known art and design principles are not used in this method, the following principles are similar to basic properties found in most art forms. These design or art principles which I was taught to use could be simplified to the following basic list:

- dominance (emphasis)
- subordination
- limitation
- balance (formal and informal)
- rhythm (movement and repetition)

These art or design principles are properties that lead to unity and organization, since they control the artist's use of the elements of art. The art elements are those properties that the artist can manipulate and work with:

- line
- texture
- shape (or mass)
- color (hue, value, intensity)

Each of these elements is part of the artist's "repertoire" or
"vocabulary" which he can arrange on the surface of the canvas. Simply to use the elements at random would create chaos and confusion with no apparent unity. But, by applying one or all of the principles to each element, the result was expected to have qualities of unity and order. However, these were not meant to be rigid laws or ironclad rules, but were to be used as helpful guides. For example, in using color one would usually strive for a color dominance (tonality) and perhaps a color subordinance for opposition or relief. An attempt would be made to limit colors to a color scheme such as a complementary or analogous scheme to delimit choice and insure harmony.

**Romantic-Geometric Landscapes**

From 1957 to 1958, I had been working with Romantic-Cubistic paintings that involved abstracted buildings and landscapes. A typical example of this landscape style is the oil and enamel painting titled Blue Gothic (Plate I). It makes a very interesting comparison with Red Still-Life of late 1960 (Plate VIII), for each represents perhaps a culminating point of the two widely divergent methods of approaching composition, through conceptual unity and through visual unity.

Blue Gothic seems to be basically "Cubistic" or geometric in quality, although the subject matter and its treatment is painted with a Romantic approach. Yet one might even say that
in spite of its strong Romanticism it has many "classic" qualities, for there is a feeling of formality, equilibrium, and resolution in its structure.

Pictorial organization in the Blue Gothic was obtained partially through a rationalized method of structural relationship and partly through an intuitive direct attack with little preliminary, exact planning. But to say that there was no preliminary work would be incorrect, for the entire nine years of my previous art experience was instrumental in its creation. I had finished a number of sketches, watercolors, and oil paintings previously, using this same linear and geometric pattern. I had made three or four sketches using a "grid" of near-horizontal and vertical straight lines, which were all variations on the theme of Gothic cathedrals and spires. Although I did not plan to copy any particular sketch, the general appearance and the grid structure were assumed before the painting began.

Method of Painting

The painting was executed in about three hours in a fast-paced, direct assault on the canvas. The first phase was the painting of a fast-drying ground of dark blues, blue-violets, red-violets, and blacks in an amorphous arrangement. These blurred-together and amorphous color shapes were unplanned and spontaneously applied. The canvas was placed on the floor to
enable me to attack it with more speed and to facilitate the applying and spreading of the mixture of pigments and enamels.

The second stage was deliberate and planned, however it was somewhat influenced by the shapes that were already on the canvas. The straight lines of the grid were worked-in over the light areas in the ground, and the shapes of Gothic spires and gables were brushed in. This second stage of the painting was executed more rationally than the first stage, with each shape applied after deliberation.

Pigments that were in harmony with the established range of colors were then brushed into the geometric shapes between the lines of the "grid." In some areas the line was allowed to be defined sharply, while in others they were slightly overlapped with the pigments so that the line lost its sharpness and nearness. Some apparent indication of depth seems indicated with overlap, but most of the colors appear parallel to the picture plane with few space cues apparent. This approach resulted in a surface pattern of geometric shapes.

Attaing Structural Unity

The strongest structural element in Blue Gothic is the over-all grid, which establishes shapes and directional commonalities through repetitions. Similar shapes create a pattern of forms that appear as lopsided rectangles. This basic shape,
appearing in many sizes and variations, serves as a unifying force through its repetition.

Among the combined larger forms, the largest Gothic structure and spire serves as a dominant shape in the left-center, whereas small spires and forms on either side serve as subordinant, balancing shapes.

The color structure in this work is essentially in terms of dark and light (value), and the color (hue) plays a secondary role as a limited, unifying harmony. At this period, many of my paintings were structured in terms of dark and light and not in color. In the color organization a strong hue dominance is established in the blues and blue-violets, while the reds are used as the contrasting oppositional color. The picture is limited to a split-complementary color scheme.¹ The bright reds in the "rose window" create an intense point of emphasis in that area and are repeated in more of a subordinate role on the right side. The more intense colors and stronger value contrasts which are located toward the center, and the darker, more neutral outer areas create a closed quality that has a decided concentric shape. This concentricity is focused on the "rose window," the point of emphasis in the left-center. A strong value contrast serves to create tension in dark-light configuration, whereas a contrast of opposites

is noted in the white spire in left-center and the black spire in right-center.

Line in the Blue Gothic was mainly limited to a straight-line dominance and a curved-line subordinance. In other words, most of the lines in the composition are straight, while the few gently curving lines and the circle were used for oppositional relief and variety. By eliminating most of the countless variations of line types and directions, the lines contributed to the unity and clarity of the composition. Here lies the great contribution of limitation—restricting confusion and chaos that result from lack of relationships. So the sense of unity in the picture is augmented by the dominance of the straight but slightly diagonal lines. Actually there are few, if any, truly vertical lines, but the opposed lines and angles counterbalance one another. It has a basically grid pattern of "near" horizontals and verticals, but the verticals probably dominate because of the strength of the subject matter—Gothic spires and towers.

There are a large number of forces contributing to the unity of this composition, but most of them were rationally applied. Admittedly, there are a number of weaknesses and drawbacks to this method of organization. These weaknesses will be discussed in Section III of this paper.
II. TRANSITIONAL PERIOD -- 1959

During the summer of 1959, I began a new series of experimental works using burlap as a medium. In a few of the compositions from this period I used the traditional oil pigments on stretched and sized burlap, but most of them were collages with shapes cut and glued onto a painted burlap ground. This shift to a different medium presented many problems involving materials and procedures. Burlap is a frustrating material to work with as it does not have the versatility of oil paints. Once a shape is cut, the rigid contour is hard to change or enlarge.

Most of my discussion will center on the burlap collage, *Big Yellow, No. 3* (Plate III), as it is a good example of my collages from this period. However, before analyzing it specifically, I will discuss the materials and methods used in these collages and how they influenced the creative product.

*Materials and Methods Used in Burlap Collages*

Much of the burlap that I used was taken from old sacks. I found that they gave a more interesting range of color and weave
variation than did new burlap. Some sacks were faded or stained and some had interesting irregular holes in them.

The best paint for my purposes was found to be water-based, flat wall paints that were then tinted or toned with either soy bean paints or tubes of water-base paint. Super Kem-tone was also used for the ground coats to seal the fibers. When the occasion demanded it, I used casein colors and sometimes oil pigments over the dried water-base grounds. This approach to grounds seemed to work better and faster than rabbit-skin sizes and traditional grounds.

The water-based paints were usually applied with paint rollers while the burlap was laying on the floor, although I often worked directly on the stretched burlap composition with the rollers. They seemed to work better than large brushes, as the amount of paint and the quality of impasto could be controlled over large areas. The time element was critical here, and I found that quick time-saving tools such as the rollers kept the creative process from "bogging down" into a myriad of frustrating techniques.

Glues were also critical to the rapid and smooth functioning of the creative process, and I experimented with a number of products. The best was found to be a glue called Roll-tite, which is available in gallon sizes. It has a poly-vinyl-acetate base and is very strong and permanent. I could also mix water
and oil colors with this glue when the occasion demanded. I usually brushed the glue on the small fragments of burlap, however on large collages I used a small paint roller and roller-pan to facilitate the covering of large pieces. Regular animal glues proved to be unsatisfactory as they were too brittle for permanency.

My compositions generally began with spontaneous and unplanned shifting of combinations of colored and painted burlap shapes. I tried to establish from one to three large ground areas and worked from these into overlayed shapes. On a few occasions I tried working from preliminary sketches, but this was usually unsuccessful. The best results were obtained while manipulating and switching around a large number of irregularly shaped pieces of burlap. My brushes and rollers were kept handy so I could adjust the color quickly as it was needed.

I worked most often on the floor and the gluing was done there after achieving the basic structure that I wanted. Various weights of bricks and boards pressed the pieces down flat until they were dry. This method had its drawbacks however, for I could not step back any distance to make the important visual judgments as to the state of its structural relationships. The weights and boards also got in the way, preventing me from seeing the composition and dangerously delaying its emergence. Without being able to see the entire composition, feedback cues which were to direct my next steps were stifled. This problem
was partially solved by working on a soft pressed panel of Upson board. The glued pieces were put in place and held down firmly with thumb tacks until dry. In this way, I could set the panel up on my easel for a distant view at any stage in the process.

Characteristics of the Burlap Collage

The burlap collage, Big Yellow, No. 3 (Plate III), is a typical example of flat two-dimensional shapes, parallel to the picture plane. Although there is a slight bit of overlay, the basic grounds and figure-shapes are seemingly compressed into a single plane, or at least a surface with an extremely limited implied depth. The structure of this collage tends to be a harmony of colored shapes on a surface—an arranged pattern of related flat geometric forms. Therefore, most of its relationships are on the surface, for there is no weaving in and out of the picture plane to create dynamics and contradictory tensions. It is a decorative, harmonious composition with few interlocking forms, tensions, or dynamics. It contains a series of juxtaposed geometric shapes that do not overlap. This tends to create a decorative pattern which is pleasing merely in terms of its arrangement. Shapes are related in a visual spotting in terms of distances apart and through repeated colors and textures. For example, the large brown area on the left is related to the brown spot on the right as a repeated color a certain distance
apart; but these two do not read as an integral unit, nor do they read as parts of the same form partially covered by other colors. They do read as two separate forms, unrelated except in color and value repetition. There is a certain limited tensional relationship within the arrangement in that each shape is carefully placed according to a "felt need" for that particular color-shape-size at that exact spot. Each form was cut out, painted, and repeatedly shifted around the composition until just the right spot was found for an equilibrium. This feeling of visual equilibrium is probably the major contribution to the unity of the composition. During this early stage of shifting shapes around before gluing, it was largely a search for precise position of form which was critical to attaining the pictorial unity or equilibrium. This of course involved asymmetrical balancing of form, with each shape controlling or resolving its area in relationship with the rest of the composition. A hierarchy of importance is set up according to size and color, with the large bright blue shape standing out as dominant in size and also in intensity of its hue. The large dark shape on the left was balanced by the dark brown shape in the lower right and the lighter shapes above it. The sewed-in yarns on this large dark shape are repeated on the right, in a smaller area. Although nothing is formally balanced, there is a general feeling of resolve and equilibrium in this composition.
Much of the aesthetic quality of this collage comes from
the textural qualities of the burlap used as the basic medium.
I have always been fascinated by heavy, unusual textures, and
the nubby-grained burlap in combination with irregular impastos
of paint naturally had a strong appeal to me. However, I found
that only certain types of paint and only a few methods of paint
application gave me the exact textural quality that I wanted for
each composition. Water-base paints applied by rollers allowed
me greater control on textures over large areas. On the large
warm ground on the right, the first paint was a thin layer that
somewhat soaked in, but I was careful to leave a general "flicker-
ing through" of the original burlap color. The second rolling
may have been a cool color such as a neutral grey or grey-blue
and it was just "feathered" into certain areas. The third color
was a warm toned impasto that was a few shades lighter than the
first coat, and the roller just put it on the high spots and
ridges. This gave a warm shifting ground of varying textures
and impastos that was visually exciting in itself. Some of the
textures remind me of ancient or primitive parchment or cracked
walls. The large white ground on the left has the tactile
beauty of an ancient cracked plaster wall. So the aesthetic
quality of time--the patina of age--has its influence in these
textures. This is perhaps a Romantic quality, but it seems to
be an important part of the expressive mood of the whole.
Unfortunately, at times I became so distracted with these unusual textural effects that they weakened more important structural parts of the composition. This was a case of becoming parts-centered rather than field-centered. In spite of these few structural weaknesses, the Big Yellow is successful in its own way, for it has a harmonious, decorative quality that is rather striking.

Much of this composition is structured on my then-limited knowledge of figure-ground relationship. Arbitrarily, I established three large ground colors: dark brown, white, and a neutral yellow or tan. On the opposite part of the picture each color emerges again as figure, so there is an attempt at relating figure and ground and having the figure emerge from the ground. However, as I pointed out before, these figurative forms are somewhat isolated from the ground except by repetition and balance.

The use of color in the Big Yellow is somewhat based on traditional complementary theories of color harmony, but I did not make out a color wheel and plan how to do it. Colors were selected because they looked right together and it seemed that an over-all warm tonality of yellow, tans, and browns would work well together. After it was almost completed, I realized that the collage had a closely limited color harmony in the yellow-tan-brown part of the color wheel. Perhaps that is why I chose the powerful light blue for the dominant shape on the left. It
stands out strongly (as I wanted it to) because of its oppositional color and intensity. A similar value relates this shape to the rest of the painting. This complementary color was meant as a jarring contrast and not as a clashing color. So the color scheme is basically rather traditional as a complementary scheme with a strong oppositional relief.

The only dynamics involved are in the mild shock of the intense blue being placed in the warm composition, but even this is placed against the white ground where it has less chance for a dynamic opposition. A strong value opposition is used where the dark browns play against the light buffs, but even here there is harmony and compatibility. Therefore, the color contributes to the harmony, equilibrium and decorative quality of this painting and is an important part of its unity. This unity was achieved partly through spontaneous emergence and partly through rationalized methods of unifying relationships. Certainly there are some tensions and subtle relationships in this collage, but the structure is simple, easy to read, and has little ambiguity. Although this is a very valid type of painting, it does not have the more complex relationships and dynamic tensions that appear in later paintings, such as 1960's **Red Still-life** (Plate VIII).

The **Large Burlap Collage** (Plate IV) was chosen to show a later development in methods of working with burlap collages. Much more freedom has been gained in the use of the medium, as is
seen in looser edges, less concern for contours, and more
kinesthetic application of the paint—all of which have led
toward a more dynamic and plastic painting. Continuity of edge,
carried from one shape on through other shapes to form larger
units, tends to create closures that contribute to a strong visual
unity. The tendency is away from a decorative harmony and toward
a more dynamic, complex unity.

The Found-Object Collage

Red Letter Day (Plate V) was a fascinating experiment with
a new medium—the found-object. Most of the aged wood and metal
for this collage were taken from refuse piles and old wrecked
houses. It required practically a new philosophic approach to
art, for here the artist is perhaps meeting his greatest challenge—
to make a work of art from objects discarded by mankind. Yet,
though this was a new medium with its own limitations of manipula-
tion, there are many similarities in aesthetic quality and struc-
ture between this collage and my earlier work.

Red Letter Day has a strong visual organization in that
each form is carefully placed in relation to the rest of the
composition. Planes of black, off-white, and greys are inter-
locked, since they are used as grounds that merge into figure as
they move across the composition. The same near-verticals and
horizontals that were used in Blue Gothic (Plate I) appear here.
Another unifying relationship of secondary importance is found in the over-all tonality of the wood and metal. A concern for the silvered, aged wood again indicates a strong interest in the element of time, for all of this collage's materials are weather-beaten, sun-bleached, and textured. This is a unifying quality, as a kinship of visual relationship is established throughout the collage. Even the metal is either tarnished or discolored by stains and rust. The mixture of materials gives this work many different qualities, for it tends to assume characteristics of both painting and sculpture.

A strong dynamic quality is established from the tension of the disparity between visual unity and the conflicting types and divergent functional roles of the materials. Although the material used forced me into slow and tedious carpentry work in its construction as I manipulated each piece in visual relationship to the whole, this composition emerged from process without any preliminary planning.
III. RECENT WORK -- 1960-1961

Most of my paintings of the last year have been structured by using the process of perceptual unity. But this new method of achieving pictorial organization was not assimilated overnight. It was a gradual change-over, for I found it necessary to "unlearn" or suppress much of my previous painting technique. An Existentialist tenet states that one must first destroy in order to create. This same problem faced me in regard to my philosophy of painting. After careful re-examination, I began to discard much of my earlier traditional compositional approach. Most of this re-examination centered on compositional conventions and laws, for certain operational weaknesses were evident in their use.

Weaknesses of Compositional Laws and Rules

A number of philosophers have deplored the use of laws, regulations, and even intellectual theories in the creative act, for they generally agree that this leads to stifling of the creative spirit and in the end leads to superficial art. This use of rules and devices also can lead to blind acceptance of a
standard of art or a style of art without really understanding why the device is being used. Many of the past theories of art were rationally based on composition or methods that seemed to work well in some great artists' work. Most of these rules resulted in compositional devices involving isolated sections of the painting, and very few took into account the integral unity of the entire work of art. Many theories involved parts of the structure, for example, a pyramidal basis for form arrangement, but ignored the interrelationship of the rest of the canvas.

It has often been noted by art historians that the students and followers of great masters have seldom achieved more than mediocrity. Some of this could be attributed to the fact that the followers tried to use techniques and methods of the master, but these "transplanted" qualities seemed to be only hollow clichés that were repeated over and over. The master had used these techniques as an integral part of his total unity, in a Gestalt-like sensitivity to interrelate the "whole." But by repeating a surface fragment, his followers, with their lesser talents, invariably failed. On rare occasions students were able to become sensitive enough to let this unity emerge and thus, through their own power and individuality, were able to transcend their fellow artists.

Too often in the past, art teachers came to rely on devices, methodology, personal bias, and current art clichés, and thus, evaluated a student's progress by the degree of conformity to the teacher's "instruction."
Laws, formulas, devices, and even principles are unavoidably misinterpreted by succeeding artists as the approved way to paint and create unity. In fact, these formulas establish a conservative, backward-looking tendency that actually imposes limitations on true creativity and generally hinders the introduction of anything fundamentally new.

In the past, it has often been our greatest artists who have had the strength and courage to resist conformity to mediocre standards and to assert their own individuality and their own pictorial solutions. Each painting is an entity in itself and requires individual structuring and organization. It seems foolish to assume that a set standard or formula could dictate the needs of each highly different work of art. Many important artists of the Nineteenth Century were at first rejected and misunderstood because few people could appreciate their departures from tradition. These artists were no longer moving in the old patterns but were striving for the unrealized in an adventurous departure from the known. Casting loose from tradition and security requires courage, but no great achievement in creativity has ever been realized without it.\(^1\) It is probably true that the faithful formalist has little chance of creating anything new.

Departing from tradition does not give the artist license to seek only the unusual or different effect, for the desirable

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end is not just an escape into novelty. Instead, it may be to
achieve something new which stimulates and augments the existing
possessions of the mind, for the mind's desire for unity within
art still exists and it must be met. The artist therefore is not
striving for established rules of order, but for a personal perceptual unity that emerges from the process and the needs of the
painting.

**Perceptual Unity:**

*Visual Demonstration Center Theory*

Professor Hoyt Sherman, in his book, *Cezanne and Visual Form*, said:

> An art form is said to have perceptual unity when its component elements (shape, contrast, etc.) are so established in
> space as to create an apparent unity through their mutual relationships.²

This unity then is considered to be a visual field structure.

The qualities of perceptual unity are emergent characteristics
that appear during the painting process, strengthening the re-
lationships in each canvas. In the sense of Gestalt Psychology,
each painting is viewed or painted for its qualities of wholeness
or totality. Emerging qualities that contribute to this unity
will be discussed in the remainder of this section.

²Hoyt L. Sherman, *Cezanne and Visual Form* (Columbus, Ohio:
The Ohio State University, 1952), p. 4.
The perceptual unity concept of painting has its roots in a variety of sources, such as Optics, Physiology, Physics, Genetics, Gestalt Psychology, and the History of Painting.

Much of this visual theory has been suggested and confirmed by disclosures obtained in optical phenomena at Dartmouth University and at Visual Demonstration Centers that are established at Princeton University and Ohio State University. At these and other Centers, investigations were carried on in this new approach to the problems of the nature and origins of perception. At Dartmouth, Adelbert Ames and his co-workers, spurred by the basic concepts of Gestalt psychology and Schrödinger's explanation of the "inner self" or native inheritance, began to explore the relationship of vision to action. One of the basic discoveries they made was that vision is a sum-total of our past experiences. They found, through experiments and demonstrations, that our perceptual vision is not direct from nature, but is a combination of three things:

1. Physiological stimulus patterns on our retina
2. The sum-total of our past experiences
3. Our native or "inner" self

So we tend to see our assumptions, which come from integration of these three.

Since painting is basically carried on through the visual sense, other concepts of perception as they relate to the action
of painting were discovered at the Visual Demonstration Center at Ohio State University. Some of the more important concepts will be noted briefly on the next few pages in their relationship to my painting.

When an individual focuses his eye on an object in his environment, a number of things occur. The light from the object creates a stimulus on the retina and this creates impulses that instantly go to the cortex (brain). Through past experience, the cortex establishes a purpose for the external object, and then an appropriate action, also based on past experience. For example, a person seeing a stool is informed by the brain (from past experience) that the stool is meant to support a person (purpose) and then the brain activates the body to go sit down (action). Thus, the normal function of the eye is to isolate objects in our environment for appropriate action.

Other concepts were based on discoveries by Gestalt psychologists, such as Koffka and Kohler. One of the more important Gestalt contributions was that the human brain seems to have a native (in-born) mind's-drive for unity. This has been of critical importance in formulating concepts, for it has been observed through great masters' paintings since the Fourteenth Century that the one basic commonality for great painting has been unity. This

strong inner desire for unity is used in our perception of our environment, and it was discovered that by becoming highly sensitive to the total field of vision this visual unity could be translated into pictorial unity in painting. Therefore, artists who become sensitized to see with perceptual unity can develop a highly related and integrated "whole" or totality.

An important aspect of this approach to unity is that it is an operational method that enables an artist to establish pictorial unity through his own vision. It is a process-centered approach that is dependent on action—not intellectual theories and laws—because, through kinesthetic action, feedback from the painting will tell one where the next color-shape must go. From this transaction the unified composition will emerge organically. This is the unifying force that great artists of the past have discovered and used. Since the Fifteenth Century, this field structure has appeared in the work of a large number of great artists, but perhaps most strongly in Rembrandt and Cezanne. Other recent artists who have been sensitive to field structure are Van Gogh, Ryder, Picasso, Braque, and Mondrian.

Braque's Use of Perceptual Unity

I have always been interested in the paintings of Georges Braque, for I have long admired his handsome color schemes and well-organized compositions. In 1960, while studying Braque, I
was very much impressed with qualities of his work that I had 
previously missed—namely, that of dynamics and tensions as well 
as powerful bonds of structural relationships. Reference to 
Braque's work is pertinent here, for I feel that his paintings 
have had some influence in my late still-lifes. I have never 
worked directly from a Braque painting, but I'm sure that qualities 
have emerged in my work that are similar to Braque's. The develop-
ing trends in my painting also seem to somewhat parallel the 
changes in Braque's work.

Braque was very sensitive to the importance of the ground in painting. As early as 1909 in his landscape, The Port, back-
ground (ground) played a role that equaled the importance of the objects (figure). The painting disregarded illusions of depth, 
for the background was "brought forward" to the picture plane and fused and integrated with the objects (buildings). So even at 
this early date, Braque was ground-conscious and was developing a field relationship within his paintings.

During the formative period of analytical cubism, Braque's work was usually organized and painted rationally and the shapes were rather rigid, geometric, and precisely placed. After the middle twenties his work began to emerge more spontaneously and became more irregular, fluid, organic, and dynamic. It no longer looked like a rationally planned, geometric puzzle; his painting technique became bolder and more vigorous (see Plate VII).
Many quotes from Braque in his later periods enlighten us as to his method of painting. They show that he worked in a spontaneous, organic way to attain a visual unity:

I discover my picture on the canvas the way a fortune teller reads the future in tea leaves.

The picture makes itself under the brush. I insist on this point. There must be no preconceived idea. A picture is an adventure each time. When I tackle the white canvas, I never know how it will come out. This is the risk you must take. I never visualize a picture in my mind before I begin to paint. On the contrary, I believe that a picture is finished only after one has completely effaced the idea that was there at the start.

Like Cezanne, Braque was always aware of the plane of the canvas and, when painting an apple, it was done as a flat color-shape within a series of interrelated units of shapes. His mind was not on a tactual awareness of an apple, but on how this color-shape would contribute to the composition. He was not concerned with volumes or masses in space, but with establishing a unity through integration of the pictorial pattern. In other words, he was plane- and field-centered and not object-centered.

Many of his works attracted me because of their beautiful and subtle relationships—in which every shape, line, or color is interrelated to the "whole." This "totality" or "wholeness"

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quality of Braque's work is brought about by his extreme sensitivity to the perceptual unity of his visual field, for his paintings have a substantial solidarity and "interlocked" quality that raises many of his compositions to near perfection.

Since I have always liked working with still-life subjects, it is interesting to consider why the still-life motif was so ideal for Braque's work. He tried some landscapes and figure studies, but his first love seemed to be the still-life. I suspect that this may have been due to the extreme versatility of the still-life theme, for it seems to be easier to subjugate the still-life subject to the abstract field-structural needs than another subject, such as the human figure. I do not feel that Braque was seeking an easy out, but perhaps he felt he could achieve more interrelationships, tensions, and interlocking forms with this type of subject matter. It lent itself very readily to manipulation, distortion, and abstraction of the elements to meet the demands of his optical sensitivity to the field structure.

Perhaps for these same reasons I have been attracted to abstract still-life studies. Many times while I have been manipulating abstract forms and colors, a still-life motif has suggested itself and has emerged organically from the painting process. A good example of this emergent process is found in the painting, Red Still-Life (Plate VIII). To sum up my late approach to painting, I will explain how this painting was done and what new approaches helped its emergence.
The Use of Visual Unity in My Painting

Red Still-Life (Plate VIII) was not executed in the traditional manner in which a composition is visualized, sketched, and planned through a series of intellectual, careful steps of development. Indeed, one could even call it unplanned and anti-rational in its organic emergence. This does not imply that it was just a happy accident in a series of failures, nor does it imply that anyone with a pseudo action-painter technique could achieve painting with visual unity. I feel that both my art training and my eight years of painting experiences played a very instrumental part in the execution of this painting. Yet I cannot study this painting and find any place where during its execution I stopped to rationalize or plan. Consequently, I feel that it was a synthesis of my past experience and knowledge with the spontaneous act of painting and its feedback of visual cues.

Visual Cues and Feedback

It seems that when time for choice and decision came the painting itself, through feedback, gave me the cues that demanded certain shapes, colors, and lines in a particular spot. In other words, the painting itself seemed to take on a vital growing "life" of its own, and my role was to be sensitive enough to judge instantly, through my vision, just what was needed next in each area. Here my background and experience were paying off, for I seemed to know
just what had to be done next to meet the demands of the inter-related elements already working as a field on the canvas. As feedback from the canvas pointed out a need in an area, my mind (through past experience) spontaneously supplied that need.

The unsearchable insight that we often call inspiration is sometimes given wholly at an instance. It will often appear in the painting itself rather than from an outside source. The visual cue which appears on the canvas is a direct result of the action of painting—of process, and not of calculation. Production of creative art by a process of pure conscious calculation never seems to occur. Although it is not impossible that creation could occur this way, the facts as reported almost universally from every field of creative endeavor have described a considerable part of invention or creativity as entirely spontaneous or involuntary acts.5

In painting, the spontaneous appearance of visual cues creates a feedback to which the artist must be extremely sensitive, for it will indicate new directions and new possibilities for the painting. Often these cues are mere glimpses of what could be developed, or they may be just fragments of the final work. Response to the painting in process is extremely critical in the painting's development, for the artist must seek in the stimulus

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that which most appropriately fulfills the transaction. This transaction between artist, stimulus, and painting is a continuous process that can raise the painting to new levels of realization.\(^6\)

While painting the Red Still-Life (Plate VIII), I was totally emersed in the creative process and was particularly aware of the feedback from the painting. At times I knew instantly that a certain energy equivalent was needed in an area, but the exact color and size needed was not clear, so then I had to experiment. It seemed vital that I keep on painting while completely emersed in the "gestalt" for I knew that if I would stop and begin to analyze it--part by part--I would lose my sensitivity of the inter-related and inter-weaving demands of the whole painting. Wrong colors-shapes were occasionally put down, but I could easily see that they were not adding to the organic emergence of the structure for they sometimes detracted from its unity through either a lack of energy or too much energy at that point. When that happened, I found it best to "hit it" again with another color, or wipe the paint off that area and look for a new feedback cue as to what was demanded.

Closures and Dynamics

The phenomenon of closure is basic to all valid painting and is highly conducive to the creation of pictorial unity. The artist who can control this phenomenon and put it to its greatest

\(^6\)Sherman, p. 19.
use has great potential, as the closure produces one of the strongest unifying forces found in art. In this procedure, separated areas of related color or shapes can be joined visually to "close" one with the other. A closure can make a wide unit across the entire width of a painting with an opposing or related shape.

Grouping, as a cluster of related forms, can create a visual unit because placement is extremely critical in composition. The eye and mind will read them as a unit even though they are separated by other forms or colors. Although these clusters may read as individual units, they can also be interrelated in several directions. A high degree of aesthetic unity is achieved this way for the dynamic stress of multiple closures is present. A field of stress may be resolved and held together with closures that will move across the surface, forming bonds of mutual relationship to another area through shape, color, or edge.

Overlapped shapes can develop closures that move in two directions. Transparency in the overlapped area can be tied in with either unit, so this creates a double duty for the overlapped shapes. This contradictory, multiple role creates a high degree of tensions and dynamics— in that there is a conflict of functions within the unity.

Rectilinear patterns are more conducive to closures than more amorphous forms. These rectangular shapes are more easily
related in units to larger rectangular units because the coincidence of edge is much stronger when it occurs. One strong form of closure can be created between two opposing, curved shapes—each curved towards the other so that the contour can be read as a related whole. The observer involuntarily fills in this empty middle area because of his natural inner urge to form units. The oppositional stress adds to the tension and dynamics of the picture.

Related areas of the same color in different parts of a painting can also be made to close as separated parts of the same form. In the Red Still-Life (Plate VIII), the black forms can be read as a large shape moving horizontally through the upper half. Yet the black shape near the red bottle also reads as part of the black form directly above it. This double role creates an interrelationship with dynamic stress and tension.

In this painting are small closures of units that can be related to larger areas, which create a strongly related expanding of units. The importance of closing forms in the Red Still-Life cannot be overstressed, for these close-knit, interlocking shapes play the major role in establishing its visual unity.

Although the major function of closures is that of creating a sense of unity, an equally important role is found in its creation of tensions and dynamics. Almost all closures create certain tensions of relationship and attraction from one area
or form to another, but the greatest tensional or dynamic quality is obtained through use of the incomplete closure. If the closure is complete, everything is resolved and obvious in its equilibrium, but if there is an area that does not quite close or is "off" slightly it creates a feeling of incompleteness, of unrest, of tension. The observer's inner drive for unity will cause him to seek out the rest of the unit of closure and if it is not there he will fill it in mentally. This is an important part of the incomplete closure, for it draws the spectator into an active role in completing the missing sections, thus creating visual unity and equilibrium within the composition.

Incomplete or "off" closures are evident in the Red Still-Life (Plate VIII) in numerous areas, but perhaps it is most obvious in the black ground that is broken by overlapping reds and oranges. One can read this black as one large form moving across the composition, but broken up by overlay and penetration behind and through other shapes. This interpenetration and re-emergence is very important in almost all the color grounds that interweave and fluctuate across the composition, tying the grounds and figure together into a large unit of strength and solidarity.

Yet there are ambiguous contradictions here, too, that are deliberately left to give the feeling of tension and stress. The incomplete closure is just one of these tensions. In Red Still-Life forms appear in such a way that there is "almost" a
continuity of edge that occurs between shapes, especially re-emerging shapes of the ground colors. For instance, in the black forms one cannot quite visually line up the edges into a continuous line, for the edges are deliberately aimed slightly astray, yet they are close enough that the observer's eye still reads all the black forms as part of one continuous form, or at least as closely related separate forms. Yet the edges are contradictory to the suggested "oneness" of form, and this sets up a tension between unity and disparity of shapes. This ambiguity, which I found occurring organically while I painted, was left as it was put down, except for a few areas where I changed direction of the edge because of closures that were too "pat" or too complete. And so the tension of contradiction sets up powerful dynamics within the composition. Perhaps this could be considered as a move away from Classic equilibrium to more of a Manneristic or Baroque-like structure.

Another tension is set up where ground forms or colors such as the red area in the upper-center emerges as figure in the red narrow-necked bottle or jug. Here the figure is an emergent from the ground, so the observer is never quite sure whether he is looking at figure or ground. The observer is therefore discouraged from isolating an individual shape or part, but is almost forced to see the entire painting with its relationships. The viewer who is following his acquired purpose-action drives of
vision will strive to isolate a recognizable object just as he
does in his everyday vision. Thus, the average person will be
frustrated when viewing a painting such as this, for he is un-
consciously trying to force himself to isolate objects for action,
and therefore he is neither seeing relationally nor is he looking
for visual unity.

Use of Art Background

I have often felt that my own background of theory, design,
and methodology was sound and valid when used for analysis and
understanding of works of art; but it has not always been applic-
cable when used as part of the painting process. For instance,
in early years compositional devices that I had struggled to
achieve—because "that was the way the Old Masters did it"—
ever completely came off. The technical device of structure
usually worked in itself, but it was often unrelated to the rest
of the composition; for example, while the "spiral rhythm" was
all right, the color or hierarchy of size seemed to be neglected.
Whenever I focused attention on separate aspects of the painting,
other elements suffered, for I was parts-directed and could not
work for the total needs of the entire visual field at the same
time. In other words, I was too concerned with individual elements
and not sensitive to the "gestalt" of the whole. It was extremely
difficult, therefore, to get everything going at one time so as
to achieve the best use of each of the elements.
I must admit, however, that compositional methods and devices have appeared in my work even while painting with visual unity, but they have been used in an entirely different way. I have strived to cram all of this information—color theory, devices, and methodology—out of my active mind and into my inactive or subconscious mind. In this way, I can keep an open sensitivity to the individual demands of the emerging pictorial structure. Compositional methods and devices are therefore not arbitrarily applied, but to my amazement the "right" structure seems to emerge from my spontaneous painting in a way that is far more organically related to the whole. By later analysis, one might think that compositional devices had been used deliberately, but they are valid as integral parts of the process of emergence inasmuch as they are essential to the pictorial field relationships.

This trick of crowding acquired knowledge, theory, and experience out of the active mind and perhaps into a "secondary" level, or even into the subconscious, has been fascinating to many writers on creativity. Brewster Ghiselin has discussed this in the introduction of the book, The Creative Process. He feels that many creative minds in a variety of fields have struggled with this same problem. Some have tried going into a trance-like state to open the way for creative thinking and invention. Others

7Ghiselin, p. 19.
have resorted to drugs or alcohol to liberate the mind from its own past experience, but of course they then run the risk of degeneration through harmful side-effects.

**Figure-Ground Relationships**

One of the basic revelations of the Visual Demonstration Center was that a normal function of perception is to isolate subjects in our environment for appropriate action. Thus, the average person is continually focusing on and isolating an object from its background. However, the artist painting with visual unity is more concerned with the ground (field or background) than with the figure (object). He is concerned with the total field and its relationships. The artist therefore has to overcome his acquired method of seeing, and learn to see with visual unity—with all points in a motif having a relation to the total field. The artist must be able to see the whole field at which he is looking and paint it in terms of a two-dimensional picture plane.

It often takes much practice and training to be constantly field- or ground-conscious, so that the figure can emerge from the manipulation of the ground. It seems much too easy to fall back on being figure-centered, with the resulting lack of relationships and the isolation of the figure from the ground. Another danger is that of becoming enamored with isolated areas of the

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painting, such as a textural passage. I have found that when one pays too much attention to an effect there is often an attempt to repeat it artificially in another area, whereas it should just emerge from the process. Many contemporary artists have been lured into creating weak, compositional qualities through too much attention to effects, tricky textures, and unusual media.

**Unity From Freedom of Process**

The artist is drawn by the unrealized toward an ordered realization. This apparently stems from an inborn drive for perceptual unity, for the painter tends to work toward clarification, consciousness, and order. Yet, paradoxically, although painting is conscious and unified, it should emerge from freedom-- from dissociation with conscious planning.

The indispensable ingredient for success during the painting process is the freedom from established schemes of the past. The mind must be kept free, or "open," and uncommitted to any stereotype. This is a process-centered approach, for the "end product" is never in full view at the beginning, although glimpses of possibilities may occur in the process. This self-surrender of the conceptual side of the painter is very hard to achieve, for unless he is alert to new visual cues he will sink back into convention. These new cues can open his mind to a world of new riches, which excite and stimulate creativity.
Organic Emergence of the Painting

The painter should strive not to let his painting crystallize too early into rigid forms that are supposedly finished. It seems best to keep it shifting in a fluid, uncommitted way until, little by little, the right forms will begin to emerge from the kinesthetic process of painting. This will prevent any previous "pattern" or stereotype from reasserting itself; therefore, in this approach lies real freedom for the artist. Generally, it is best for the artist to keep his painting moving and unresolved, but on rare occasions a quick, visually organized statement may occur. In other words, there is no way to predict how long one must work, or under what conditions; for the creative act is a dynamic, unchartable, organic growth. Each artist must discover the best way for his own individuality to emerge in the configuration.

Organization is an essential part of the painting, for without some order it would not have a totality of its own but would be just another confused fragment. This order must not be enforced by will or plan; rather, it should emerge as part of the organic development of the painting—from the midst of process. The crux of the development must be guided by the organic need of the visual relationships within the configuration.

One must realize that it takes an extremely sensitive intelligence to follow the directions and needs of the painting,
and the artist must be alert to countless decisions that have to be made according to the needs of the whole. It is obvious that he cannot abdicate himself of all sensitivity and intelligent decision and thus paint in a blackout of chaos and anarchy. The intellect plays a great role here, for the artist's sensitivity, through his vision, will refuse some elements and welcome others. Under the conditions described, qualities of great art can emerge spontaneously from this transaction between artist and canvas. The time-honored characteristics of all the art principles can thus be found to emerge organically when needed. Balance, equilibrium, harmony, dominance, subordinance, rhythm—all might be found as they emerge organically, for during this creative act it is not necessary to arbitrarily apply them as artificial crutches of composition.
CONCLUSION

Over the past three years, the structure of my paintings has gradually changed from a grid pattern with harmonious colors into a more complex interrelated configuration with tensions and dynamics. In this gradual transition from the use of conceptual unity to the use of perceptual unity, I have come to this conclusion: Although both methods of attaining unity are valid and both can result in competent painting, I feel that the use of perceptual unity has the greater number of advantages.

As mentioned in Part III, painting with perceptual unity has allowed me to use a great amount of my acquired art background by bringing together techniques, devices, theories, and principles and letting them emerge organically in the spontaneous process. Thus, I feel that a synthesis of the two methods has been made. Qualities of dominance, subordinance, harmony, balance, and limitation become vital parts of the configuration. Yet these are qualities that are interlocked within the composition as integral parts of the painting, and they no longer need to be arbitrarily applied. In other words, the use of perceptual unity has made this background "operational" rather than analytical or rational.
Another important advantage comes from the stresses and dynamics that can be attained, as painting with perceptual unity will lead to more complex relations involving dynamics and tensions within the unified pictorial structure. This adds new and exciting qualities to a painting that are very difficult to obtain by planned steps.

The theory of perceptual unity provides a more deeply developed insight into the fundamental optical, physiological processes of creative painting, which can add to the efficiency of most artists. This insight gives a fuller understanding of the creation of great art and a deeper knowledge of the fundamental processes that can develop it. Perceptual unity provides an operational approach based on the function of the human eye and mind, and it tries to show the best methods of approaching and attaining pictorial unity. The Visual Demonstration Center and perceptual theory are meant to clarify the basic operational principles that lead to perceptual unity. It must not be considered an end in itself, but as a means to a more highly integrated and dynamic art.

The polarity mentioned in the first part of this paper was not meant to give the impression that there has been a development from "bad" to "good" painting, for actually the goal of the two approaches is almost the same. The process, however, is fundamentally different. My goal in painting--a highly
sensitive and unified composition—has not changed too much, although the style of my work has changed from a geometric cubism toward the spontaneous brushwork of the action painter. Undoubtedly the greatest change in my approach has been in method or process, for the act is extremely critical in obtaining visual unity. Timing, sequence, spontaneity—all are crucial aspects of this process. I have found that one must work at a certain pitch of intensity and speed or the old rationalized, cautious steps begin to reappear. The mind must be extremely alert for immediate decisions and choices. The intellect is a critical ingredient, but it should not be used to carefully study, rationalize, and plan the next step.

Perceptual unity cannot be thought of as just another "formula" to follow, for it is an operational approach that can lead to greater freedom and invention. Actually, the artist is liberated with this approach, for it allows for any style of painting and can give significance to a wide range of artistic expression. It can add to the versatility of the artist, for he may now be able to unify the total field with more surety and directness. This can vastly enlarge the horizon for an artist and enable him to escape his own set style or pattern, because he can paint either non-objectively or with naturalism—and still have visual unity.
The painter, in using perceptual unity, is actually freed from laws, formulas, and devices so that his main concern is the act of painting. In this process, the artist labors to the limit of his development and occasionally is able to take a step beyond and above his normal level of achievement. When the artist strikes into this upper level, the creation of truly great art is within his grasp.
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I, Darrell Marvin Johnson, was born in Denver, Colorado, July 18, 1926. I received my secondary-school education in the public schools of Greeley, Colorado. I was granted the Bachelor of Arts degree in 1952 from Colorado State College, Greeley, Colorado. After spending two years in the United States Army Counter Intelligence Corps, I returned to Colorado State College and received the Master of Arts degree in 1955. I held the position of Instructor of Art at Northern State Teachers College, Aberdeen, South Dakota, for three years and in 1956 was appointed Assistant Professor at the same institution. I spent the summer of 1957 at Denver University, Denver, Colorado, doing graduate work. During the summers of 1956 and 1959, I enrolled at Ohio State University, where I majored in Painting. I remained here for two years while completing the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree.