

Gombrich's Visual Construction

Gombrich vs. Hoffman

How does Gombrich apply Hoffman's notion of "visual construction" to art?

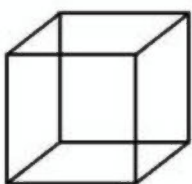
Hoffman and Gombrich approach perception in two very different ways. Hoffman discusses very comprehensive, scientific rules, rules that build on each other, whereas Gombrich talks about schemas as our way of visual construction. Schemas are "mental sets," mental rules for (in this case) how to draw something. Still, the two end up supporting the same view of perception.

Gombrich argues that we see relationships in the world. We see variations of light, not objective colors. For example, when we see a white handkerchief in the shade, it is still a white handkerchief to us. However, if we saw that same handkerchief through a peephole through which we could only see the color and not the object or scene, that handkerchief would look darker than a piece of coal in the sunlight (p 52).

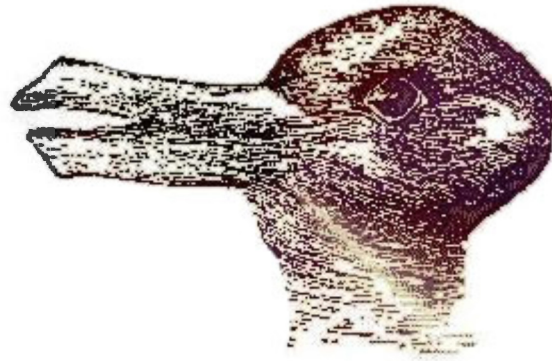


Take this Monet for example. In it we see the contrasts of colors, it is easy for us to tell where the sun hits the cathedral and where there is shade, because we see the relationship between the bright pink and darker blues. Gombrich says that the artist's dilemma is a psychological one, "that of conjuring up a convincing image despite the fact that not one individual shade corresponds to what we call 'reality' (p 49)."

Hoffman, on the other hand, describes perception more scientifically. He discusses how we perceive lines, shapes, contours, and colors. We perceive all of these systematically thus creating our world. He discusses perception as a bottom-up process. "What happens when you see is not mindless process of stimulus and response,...but a sophisticated process of construction" (p 1). Hoffman argues that we construct everything. For example, the Necker cube:



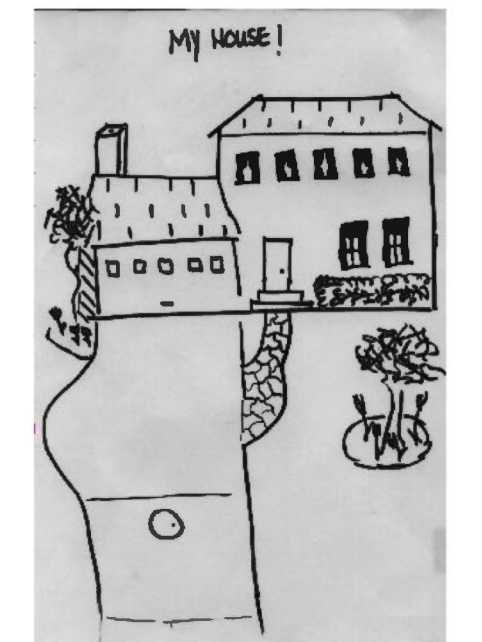
This cube is perceived as three-dimensional, *but* there are two different cubes to see...We can see both, but neither at the same time. This principle is exactly the same as the one in Gombrich's book, Art and Illusion, with his picture are the reversible duck and rabbit:



Hint: rabbit, or duck?

gests something like Gombrich's schemas when he says, "our visual friendly icon interface with those things we relationally see" (p 7). " that both Hoffman and Gombrich believe our visual system to be t ape some sort of mental map, such as a schema.

My House

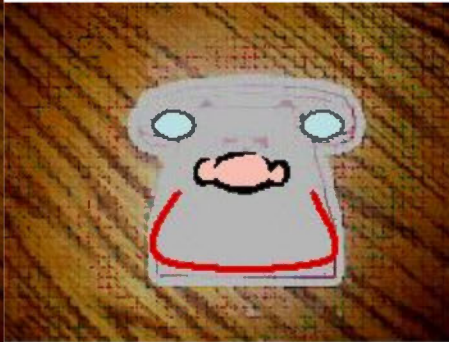


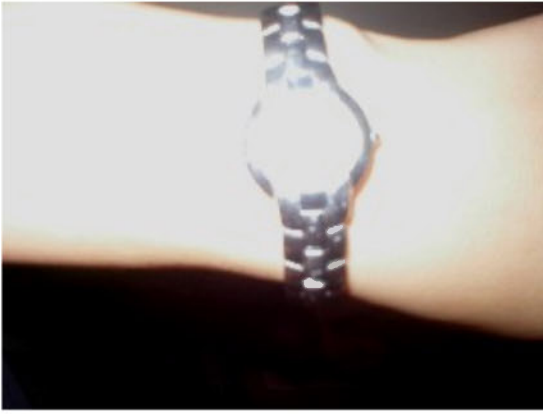
In Chapter II, Gombrich begins talking about stylization. He refers to a story from Richter when he and his friends all draw the same structure and how when they compared, they all had different drawings. As you can tell, I am *not* an artist, but I try! What is also quite apparent is the discrepancy between my drawing of my house and the actual picture of it.

Gombrich contends that this discrepancy is due to my schemas. An artist must first make his piece of art (using his schema), then match it to the scene he wishes to portray (correction); thus, making comes before matching. So, for me, I had a basic schema about how to draw a house (which has not been revised since the fourth grade!), and I drew that. Then, I remembered my house, which was the only thing I had to match my drawing to, and changed my schema accordingly.

Gombrich argues that this "procedure is always the same." First, the artist classifies the subject into a familiar schema (that was the assignment, so that was the easy part). Then draws, he must first MAKE his art, and then changes it by matching it to the real thing. The interesting part is that each artist will make corrections differently, based on his world view and perspective. For instance, Gombrich uses an engraving by Garland of Chartres Cathedral. Compared to a picture, it is very realistic, however, Garland still did not show the Romanesque windows because he loved the Gothic structure. Nonetheless, Gombrich does point out that "if we had pointed out to the artist his mistake, he could have further modified" (p 73).

Faces





These are a few things that reminded me of faces. In Chapter III, Gombrich discusses this human phenomena of seeing faces in random places. "Whenever anything remotely facelike enters our field of vision, we are altered and respond" (p 103). Like the beginning of his book, he believes that we have a schema for faces, but this one is very fluid, and many things can engage it. "The recognition of the human face...is based on some kind of inborn disposition." In psychological terms, this is called projection (projecting something onto an ambiguous stimuli).



He continues his argument, and agrees with Alberti, that these projections are the "roots of art." There is a transition from life to image, and in this transition art is made. For example, Gombrich uses skulls from Jericho. The shells are eyes, even though everyone knows shells are not eyes, they represent them because "they belong to the same class because they release a similar response" (p 110). So, there is a "continuous link between finding and matching" here. We see objects, and in them we find a resemblance of faces, which we then match to a more exact face.



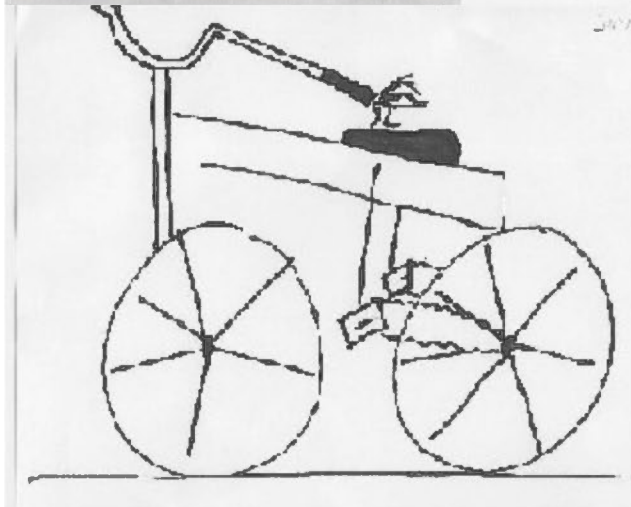
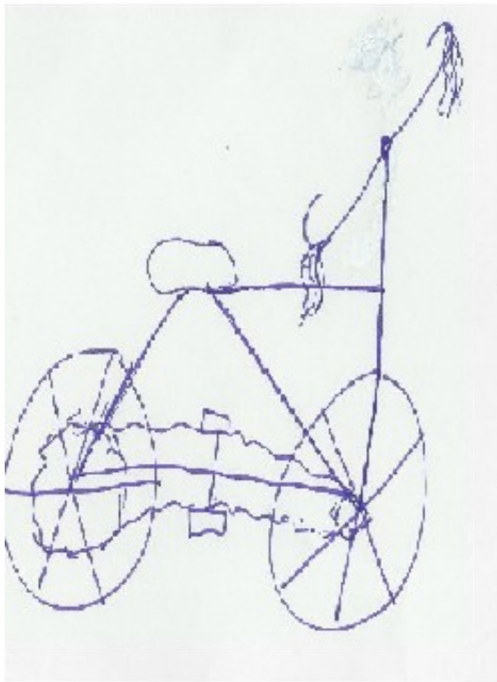
Take for example, the basket:



I saw the basket, and made two flowers resemble eyes and the other a mouth, making the circle in the middle the nose. This is very rudimentary, but it was quite easy to find things that reminded me of faces. Once I knew it looked like a face, I decided what kind of face it looked like to me. This one happens to look like a woman to me, a sort of movie star with big eyes, pouty lips and a button nose. ..Of course, that is just me, and going back to the previous point, my interpretation is based on my own stylization of the face.

Bikes

In Chapter five, Gombrich further discusses schema plus correction, but expands this argument and talks about classification. He says that we have a "need for acquired formulas" (p 150). To illustrate this, he sites many examples of how-to-drawing books. In these, the author gives the student the classification and subsequent schema of how to draw them. For example, a Chinese instructional drawing book classifies drawing plants into bamboo and orchids. Then it instructs the student on the proper steps to drawing an orchid. He then discusses how this leads to a problem: that of the distinction between universals and particulars. He contends that universals (ordinary nouns) are like our schemas and denote concepts in our minds. Once an artist has his universal or schema, he then makes corrections until it becomes a particular. "Without some standard of comparison we cannot grasp reality" (p 178), concludes Gombrich. So, in order to *live* we need a classification system (based on comparisons, like his relationships between light reflections argument above), therefore in order to produce art, we must have detailed schemas about what we want to draw.



Above are five bikes that my friends drew. Each one of these sketches started with a basic idea of what a bike looks like. They began to draw it and then made corrections based on whether they wanted it to look like a girly bike (with baskets and ribbons) or a racing bike, or whatever their particular idea was. Gombrich would argue that none of them would have been able to draw this

bike if they did not already have a universal idea of a bike in their mind. Once that is accomplished, they can mold it however they chose to fit what they want their final product to look.

Schemas

What has this taught us about schemas in general?

In summary, Gombrich argues schemas are the basis of art and our perception of reality as well. He believes schema plus correction is done by everyone in art, and they make their art before they can match it to the environment. Hoffman agrees that rules govern our perception.

I think that schemas govern our perception and consequently influence our world view. For example, Gombrich talked about stylization, and how because we all have different schemas we will all produce something different. I believe the same holds true for our world view in general. For instance, if I grew up in an inner-city slum and then went home with my roommate from college for spring break to her home in Bel Aire and country club, she would think nothing of it, whereas I would be stunned as well as cautious. Perhaps Gombrich believes this too, but it was not the topic of his book, however, for me schemas govern all aspects of life and our perception- from sensory perception to philosophical perception.
