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# Iconology: An Alternate Form of Writing

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People approach writing from a traditional point of view because the very term writing implies letters into words, words into sentences, and sentences into paragraphs. We propose that there are many forms of writing and traditional writing is only one of them. Scientists write formulas and draw molecular representations. Musicians compose using musical scores. Mathematicians write equations and construct geometric drawings. Choreographers use the system of labanotation to record movement. The most obvious to us is the drawing of images, which we believe to one of the most primal forms of human language. In this paper, we will discuss how the artist uses drawing as a form of communication of ideas.

From what seemed to be unrelated fields, we, an artist and educator, met one afternoon to view and discuss a piece of the artist's sculpture. To explain the method of construction, the artist used drawings from his sketchbook that revealed more to us than just the construction methods. The notations, the language necessary to develop the work of art, revealed a complex process, and we recognized this process as a specific form of writing. In our discussion, this visual form of writing contained all the elements of the writing process. The process in writing and in iconology was identical but was labeled differently by each of us according to our disciplines. Brainstorming was explained by the artist as a combination of

random drawings, fantasy drawings, and drawings made during random encounters. Drafting, revising, and editing were similar to developing an image through a series of drawings where the intention was to clearly resolve the idea. Through this discussion, we came to the conclusion that there are many forms of writing, all using similar elements through different modes of expression.

This obvious form of communication is often overlooked. Yet, homeowners make drawings for builders, people draw maps for directions, and most people doodle while talking on the telephone. These are just a few of the forms of visual language we use daily without actually considering the images as language.

## **The Artist's Approach to Writing**

In the fine arts, this area of expression is explored in the form of a sketchbook, which is simply a collection of drawings. These drawings are notations on the development of ideas, the realization of ideas, and the storage of ideas. To the student and the mentor, these drawings are perfectly legible and can be read easily and accurately. Like poetry, the images contain many levels. The sketchbook is an artist's daily visual diary. Since its organization reflects a personal attempt at capturing and exploring thoughts, the book is multifunctional. It serves as a mental stimulus and repository for those visual events that the artist finds important to note: landscapes, still life, people in action, etc.

A very primal thematic imagery can be perceived over long periods of time. (Our study spanned only 12 years of drawings, yet we could see some strong basic themes emerge.) The sketchbook contains short cyclical images that are introduced, resolved, and abandoned, as opposed to long term images that are introduced, resolved, and revisited. We grouped the sketchbook drawings into these broad categories listed below.

1. **Practice Drawings** -- Drawings that reinforce skills in perception and hand-eye coordination. These are the simplest kinds of drawings. The drawings in Figure 1 show evidence of this fine-tuning skill process. The life class in which these drawings took place is a formal practice situation. These drawings increase the

range of skill the artist needs for expression and experimentation with new techniques.

2. **Random Drawings** -- Pleasure drawings, drawings for the "fun of it," doodles, and perhaps subliminal ideas. These often occur when one is relaxed and not thinking about a particular subject matter or image. The drawings happen very spontaneously. Figures 2, 3, and 4 are different kinds of random drawings. Figure 2 is the artist's "doodle" during a faculty meeting. There is evidence of playing with perspective, composition, and light and dark. Figure 3, the dragon, is the kind of spontaneous image that is difficult to identify in terms of its source. A word, a conversation, even a situation can trigger this type of drawing. In reflection, one may find the source, but it isn't apparent when the drawing appears. The dragon was drawn during a lunch break. Figure 4, the "Redneck," appeared from reflections about a paradox: the contemporary young man and the image of a '60s hippie. The drawing occurred long after the reflection.
3. **Fantasy Drawings** -- Fantasizing to realize an image, a playing with images, and/or recollections of images. Figure 5 reveals the very origins of a later sculpture called "Spirit of Flight." This image cannot be observed in nature, but the imagination allows the artist both to draw the image and to experience the sensation of flying while making the drawing.
4. **Developmental Drawings** -- A series of drawings whose primary aim is to bring an idea to maturity. In one case, the process is the focus. In other cases, it is the application of the image to a formal work of art, i.e. sculpture, painting, print. After the drawing of Figure 5 occurred, the sculptural possibilities of the flying figure were explored, as seen in Figure 6.
5. **Analytical Drawings** -- Study drawings which clarify ideas and are often very detailed, with scale, sizes, material considerations, construction, and dimension. Figure 7 is an example of an analytical drawing not drawn from life, but actually drawn from parts of an incomplete sculpture. The intent of this drawing was to assist the artist in seeing the unfinished parts of the sculpture

and make visual conclusions.

6. **Experiential Drawings** – Drawings made about life experiences. These drawings record the exploration of feelings, personal interest, and sentiments. These drawings consist of images which were of enough interest to compel the artist to make a visual note. The drawings in Figure 8 were drawn directly from the experience of attending a lecture at Stratford-on-Avon. The lecture was dull, but the participants attending the lecture were fascinating.

These example drawings were identified with some difficulty since often they contained elements of several categories. Their placement was made by identifying the most characteristic category.

Sketchbooks differ from any kind of formal prose but are most closely related to a diary. In fact, they are a visual diary. The images recorded in them are personal, intimate, and revealing. The intention of the sketchbook is to provide information solely for the artist.

## Content Analysis Evaluation

The sketch book is a diary of an artist's selection and compilation of ideas. The expressions found in the sketchbook illustrate key turning points of an artist's imagery in the journey from the moment to moment ideas to the broad periods of time required for major themes to develop. Recurring themes, although often separated by years, appear here. For example, the theme of "Flight" has appeared in this artist's work over a 12 year span (See Figures 5, 6) in drawings and sculptures of flying persons and images of birds and kites.

The handstand figure and the crucifixion (Figures 9 and 10) reflect this same general spatial concept. The outspread arms and arched back provide the artist with the same aesthetic concepts while introducing what seems to be unrelated thematic material. This idea of recurrent themes has also been seen in children's drawings as they progress from the process of labeling to narrative. Although this is a rudimentary example, it is interesting to note that the process, although more sophisticated for adults, remains substantially the same.

## Summary and Conclusion

In discovering that the sketchbook is a sensitive visual language that can be read by the artist as well as others, it seems appropriate that this concept of visual literacy be recognized in Writing Across the Curriculum programs. The way language processes — in this case drawing and writing — are used to reflect thinking and meaning should be the primary concern. The sketchbook captures the internal monologue of the artist. It is the “never seen” foundation for those formal public works.

There are many ways to approach the task of writing, and one should not impose artificial forms of writing on any discipline. It is not the form of language nor the amount, but that the form of writing is appropriate to the purpose. A Writing Across the Curriculum program must recognize and encourage all forms of expression. The differences in the ways to approach the task should be recognized as strategies used to process information and communicate meaning. Drawing should be recognized as a form of expressive language. It is not a substitute for written language, but rather an additional form, an augmentation to that form of communication.

The categories developed in this study are a beginning step in classifying the dimensions of meaning displayed in the sketchbook. Continued study of this visual literacy and the relationships among the language processes is suggested to help gain an awareness and understanding of the many features of communicative media.

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