



Composition: A Series of Exercises Selected from a New System of Art Education

Arthur W. Dow

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An excerpt from the Author's Note:

THE title "Composition" has been given to this book because the system of art instruction which it represents has come to be commonly known by that name. The term "Composition" is, however, too limited, as the system in its full development includes, not only so-called composition, but all stages of the creation of a work of space-art. But as the following exercises relate to the fundamental process in such a creation, viz., the putting together of lines and masses, we will, for the present, accept the popular name. This is the first publication of any consecutive series based upon the scheme of art education whose elements are here presented.

The history of the movement is as follows: Some nine years ago, after a course in the schools of Paris, I entered upon a comparative study of the art of all nations and epochs, in the hope of finding more light on composition in painting, and, incidentally, a better method of teaching than the prevailing nature-copying. While seeking for examples of Japanese art I met Professor Ernest F. Fenollosa, then curator of the unrivalled Oriental collection in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. He had had exceptional opportunities for a critical knowledge of both Eastern and Western art, and as a result of his research and comparisons, guided by a brilliant mind's clear grasp of fundamental ideas, had gained a new conception of art itself. He believed Music to be, in a sense, the key to the other fine arts, since its essence is pure beauty; that space-art may be called "visual music," and may be criticized and studied from this point of view. Following this new conception, he had constructed an art-educational system radically different from those whose corner-stone is Realism. Its leading thought is the expression of Beauty, not Representation.

I at once felt the truth and reasonableness of his position, and after much preparation in adapting these new methods to practical use, I began teaching a class in Boston, with Professor Fenollosa's cooperation. Here for the first time in this country, Japanese art materials were used for educational purposes. After a few years of quiet effort and experiment in this way, Mr. Frederic B. Pratt of Brooklyn became interested in the results attained by this class, and as a consequence, the work was transferred in 1895 from my Boston studio to Pratt Institute, where in a progressive atmosphere, with large opportunity and hearty cooperation, it has reached a development already well known.

NOTE: The art-instruction of modern days, an out-growth of the theories of Leonardo da Vinci, and the practice of later Renaissance and French academic artists, is too largely scientific. The pupil, from the very beginning, is forced to concentrate his energies upon acquiring a knowledge of various facts and processes. Self-expression is usually deferred till he has "learned to draw," till he has been through a course of cast-drawing, perspective, history, anatomy, history of costume, etc., — a thoroughly scientific drill related chiefly to Realism. After all this, he attempts to combine the knowledge and the skill in artistic expression, or in other words, a composition. Unless appreciation has developed despite the crowding of other things, the chances are that his work will lack the one vital element for which art exists, and to which he has as yet given slight attention — that is, Beauty.

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