

An Approach to Design

By Wesley Harris

Jeweller and metalsmith Wesley Harris's approach to design is based on the premise that design is a highly personal domain. In this article he illustrates a process whereby the very essence of our roots and sources may appear redefined in our art.

He concludes with thoughts on nature as a universal inspiration.

When I think about design, I think of it in terms of how we use expressive elements such as line, contour, form, space, colour, light, texture, pattern, and their combinations. These elements are the designer's raw materials. The way we manipulate an expressive element, such as line, can move a wide range of feelings in the viewer. For example, designs composed primarily of horizontal and vertical lines tend to feel stable, strong, secure, or even static, whereas those with diagonal

lines feel more dynamic. Angular or disjunct treatment of line can seem uncomfortable, reckless, angry, or chaotic, while smooth, flowing lines feel calm and are easily followed by the eye.

In my designs I instinctively strive for smooth continuation of line that can be followed by the eye in the same way that a long lyrical melody in music is followed by the ear. In both cases, the feelings we receive reach us instantaneously, directly through our senses.

This ineffable quality fascinates me. Good design, like any art

genre at its best, moves us immediately and viscerally, engaging our senses, emotions, and memories with no need for these reactions to be articulated. Again and again, I've had customers who are unable to explain or analyze why they like a design, but who say they can feel its correctness instantly upon seeing it.

So, how do we imbue our works with good design? The answer, I believe, begins by looking within ourselves. We need to soul-search. What are our sources—sources of inspiration, of intrigue, of well-being? What are our interests, our influences? What lies behind pivotal moments in our lives and thinking that gives rise to insights? What childhood fascinations do we recall?

In my case, as a child, I was passionate about watching birds. Then there was the significance I felt when I discovered the optical-illusion art of Escher.

I also recall "waking up" in high school math class to geometry and to the pure 2-D and 3-D forms as generated by Cartesian equations. And all my life I have loved nature.

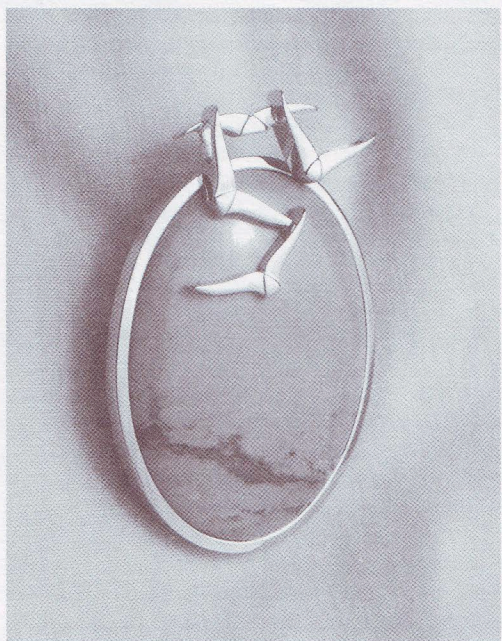
How might we relate such personal sources to our work? By reducing a source to its simplest terms. Try to reduce the aspects that attract you and express them relative to how they make you feel. For me, the work of Escher simplifies to smooth continuation and coincidence of line, surface, taper, and spiral (often to infinity). Mathematically generated forms boil down to a surprisingly similar list of terms. I think also of sea shells in nature. In each case the underlying feelings are centredness, calmness, lyricism, and coherence.

Next, consider a few of your favourite works of art. What feelings do those pieces give you? Three of my favourite finger rings are shown on the facing page. Each moves me in exactly the same way, as do certain sources when simplified in terms of feelings. Smooth continuation of line to infinity figures strongly in each and yields feelings that are centred, calm, lyrical, and followable. The ruby ring itself is in the form of a Möbius strip. The zircon ring involves one continuous taper that swings over the stone, around the finger, and spreads to encompass the stone.

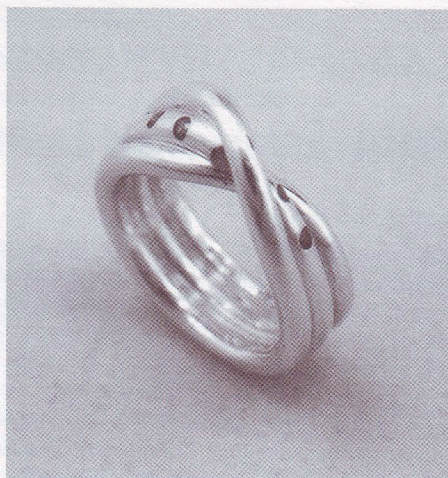
The process of how we relate our personal sources to our work is really one of discovering the common denominators in both. At the bottom line we find common feelings coming from our art and deep from within ourselves. By understanding this process we discover elements that we may consciously employ in subsequent designs. Let me continue with another example.

Assuming that a source of inspiration for you is bird watching, what are the core elements of the activity that attract your interest? Try to express this simply and in terms of how it makes you feel. Birds are such freewheeling spirits of the wild. Perhaps you are attracted to feelings of freedom. Perhaps you are inspired by the very essence of flight—uplifting, anti-gravity, suspended, or hovering feelings. Or your love of bird watching may simply stem from how moved you feel by witnessing avian beauty—the beauty of birdsong, the birds' colour, pattern, shape, or literally the beauty of their design!

For the moment, let's assume that your underlying attraction to birds does indeed address feelings associated with flight. First, try to sense how those feelings might have intuitively crept into your designs in the past. And second, try to sense how you knowingly might treat the expressive elements in your current designs to yield similar feelings. The expressive ele-



Turquoise brooch, 14k yellow gold, 1991.



Left to right: Baroque pearl ring, 14k yellow gold (1987), five-ruby ring, sterling (2001), zircon ring, 14k yellow gold (1995).

ments need only be arranged in such a way as to feel airy, or to lead the eye upward. Or space can be used to create a suspended feeling. I think this is what people respond to in the hourglass piece pictured below, right, where the sand timer simply hovers in its circular space. In the Baroque pearl ring, the pearl is visually secure but also feels as if it is just floating. An actual reference to birds is okay, too. The turquoise brooch (pictured on page four), for example, literally shows feelings of flight, breaking free, and soaring upward.

Nature, I think, is the universal source. It is my main inspiration. Nature's endless diversity within order parallels my own choice to create one-of-a-kind yet familiar objects. The play of light in nature pleases me, as do the reflective and optical qualities of metals and gems which I have chosen as my medium of expression. I am drawn to universal forms—circles, spheres, spirals—and I strive to rework their centred, wholesome feeling. Nature offers countless examples of forms that function perfectly and forms that reflect the inherent logic of their growth pattern or internal structure.

As a designer of functional objects, I marvel at how often beauty in nature is synonymous with ability to function. Animals designed for speed—the falcon, the cheetah, the dolphin—are exquisite forms at one with their ability to survive. In the shape of an elm tree, structure and beauty are harmoniously one as it sweeps up and out, a continuous taper from trunk to leaf tip. Crystalline forms reflect the order of their molecular structure: snowflakes are always six-sided. A shell, a pearl, a feather, an egg, a dandelion seed, honeycomb—all are beautifully designed forms perfectly matched to their purpose. Certain forms are shaped by universal forces. Drifts and dunes, driven by wind, are ever-evolving free forms. Waves, clouds, and flames are nature's kinetic sculpture. Icicles and stalactites form under gravity's constant pull, and water bodies seek a common level under its force. Indeed, my feelings in response to horizontal and diagonal elements in design are absolutely parallel to how I respond to bodies of water as they behave on varying slopes. The stability felt in a work of art based upon horizontal elements can affect me in the same way as when I gaze out at the true horizon on the open ocean. My responses to a slow meandering river, a brisk mountain stream, white-water rapids, or a cascading waterfall all differ relative to the degree of diagonal involved. When I think of watching the morning mist rise off a lake, or of seeing an eagle effortlessly soar skyward, I experience feelings that are decidedly anti-gravity. Like an upward inflection in speech, anti-gravity feelings set up expectations, a lightness or suspended quality, that beckon to be resolved.

I hope the thoughts in this article have been of interest. This approach to design can help us understand our creative impulses. I have found it a valuable process to distill my own sources in terms of how they make me feel, and redefine them in my designs. I think it has led to a consistent body of work over the years. The public responds to a personal style and, I believe, they sense its sincerity.

PHOTOS: Wesley Harris



Hourglass in sterling, 18k gold, and labradorite, 9" high, 2002.

Wesley Harris earned an MFA in Metalsmithing from Cranbrook Academy of Art, Michigan, in 1981, and worked as a silver designer with Lunt Silversmiths in Greenfield, Massachusetts, from 1981 to 1985. He has freelanced as a jewellery artist and metalsmith in Newfoundland and Labrador since 1986.