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Art, Design and Gestalt Theory

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Abstract

ABSTRACT:

Gestalt psychology was founded in 1910 by three German psychologists, Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler. The author discusses gestalt theory's influence on modern art and design, describes its resemblance to Japanese-inspired theories of aesthetics and finds evidence of a mutual, if limited, interest between the gestalt psychologists and certain artists.

Art, Design and Gestalt Theory

Roy R. Behrens

Gestalt psychology began in Germany in 1910. While traveling by train on vacation, a 30-year-old Catholic psychologist named Max Wertheimer was seized by an idea when he saw flashing lights at a railroad crossing that resembled lights encoding a chequerboard. He got off the train in Frankfurt am Main, where he bought a motion picture toy called a "zoetrope" (Fig. 1). When a strip of pictures is placed inside and viewed through the slots in a zoetrope, a succession of stationary pictures appear to be a single, moving picture. In his hotel room, Wertheimer made his own picture strips, consisting not of identifiable objects, but of simple abstract lines, ranging from vertical to horizontal. By varying these elements, he was able to investigate the conditions that contribute to the illusion of motion pictures, an effect that is technically known as "apparent movement" [1].

Yves arien, Wertheimer had studied in Prague with an Austrian philosopher named Christian von Ehrenfels, who had published a paper in 1890 entitled "On Gestalt Qualities" in which he pointed out that a melody is still recognizable when played in different keys, even though some of the notes are the same, and that abstract forms attributes such as "squareness" or "angularity" can be conveyed by a wide range

of specific elements. Clearly, argued Ehrenfels, if a melody and the notes that comprise it are independent, then a whole is not simply the sum of its parts, but a synergistic "whole effect," or *gestalt* [2]. Likewise, Wertheimer concluded, the effect of apparent movement is generated not so much by its individual elements as by their dynamic interrelation.

Wertheimer remained in Frankfurt for more than 5 years. He continued his research of apparent movement at the Psychological Institute, where he used a sophisticated projector called a "tachistoscope" that enabled him to flash shapes on the screen successively for precise increments of time. He recruited as subjects two younger psychologists, Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler. After gathering data for about two years, he shared the results with his colleagues, then published his findings in 1912 in a paper titled "Experimental Studies of the Perception of Movement" [3]. This was the first important arena in the history of gestalt psychology, a movement that grew from the subsequent work of its prodigious triad: Wertheimer, Koffka and Köhler.

The three founding gestalt psychologists were separated by World War I, then reunited in 1920, when Köhler became Director of the Psychological Institute at the University of Berlin, where Wertheimer was already a faculty member. While maintaining contact with Koffka, who continued to teach near Frankfurt, Wertheimer and Köhler established a graduate program, located in the abandoned Imperial Palace, and began a research journal called *Psychologische Forschung* (Psychological Investigation). For the most part, the students did not learn by attending lectures but by actually conducting research using fellow students as subjects and by preparing articles for publication. The success of the method is evidenced by the number of teachers and students at the Institute whose names are now familiar in psychology, including Rudolf Arnheim, Kurt Lewin, Wolfgang Metzger, Hans Vaihara, Bluma Zeigarnik, Tanaka Trench, Karl Dürcker, Maria Oshitskins, Herta Kopfermann and Kurt Gottschaldt [4].

Koffka left Europe for the United States in 1924; Wertheimer in 1933. By the early 1930s, the Psychological Institute had begun to erode. When the National Socialists came to power in 1933, among their immediate marching orders was the dismissal of Jewish university professors, from

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Fig. 1. Engraving of a zoetrope, a motion picture toy invented in England before 1840 by W.G. Horner. This is the toy that Wertheimer bought when he left the train at Frankfurt am Main in 1910.



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