
Images in motion

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Painters in Western society have learned to represent the sense of movement by studying the human body. A painter's ultimate goal might be to paint landscapes or still lifes, but the drawing of the nude would be fundamental to any exploration of rhythmic relationships—the organization of shapes, linear movement, solidity, stability, mobility, equilibrium, and expressive character.¹

Urban designers have no equivalent educational tradition, though the work of Gordon Cullen or Edmond Bacon has taught them that movement can be read and understood as a pictorial sequence. Critics of this approach argue that reliance on serial vision has led to overly picturesque designs. That claim is true if eye-level perspectives are the dominant form of imagining a place, but if these are combined with measured drawings such as maps, designers can learn important lessons about scale in city design. A designer who compares, for example, a plan view of a place with a pictorial sequence illustrating a walk through that place has a much better grasp of dimension.

The representation of pictorial sequences came late to Western culture. Chinese landscape painters perfected the representation of movement. The art historian George Rowley has written: "For the painters of landscape scrolls the principles of spatial design are conditioned through the isolation of motifs." For Rowley, motifs are picture elements a viewer can easily grasp in one single focus. The eyes, moving through the intervals between these elements, can overcome the isolation of each motif, tying adjacent motifs together. Thus the viewer is set free to "walk" through the landscape and observe the world in motion: "A scroll painting must be experienced in time like music or literature. Our attention is carried

along laterally from right to left, being restricted at any moment to a short passage which can be conveniently perused."²

The scroll tells a tale that can be interrupted and repeated. The walk through Venice on the pages that follow presents such a scroll, one that reads not from right to left, but from the bottom of the page to the top. At first, this direction seems counter-intuitive, especially when the accompanying written text is read top to bottom. But reading images is different from reading text. For the images to have the desired effect of pulling the reader into the space, the pictures themselves must be read from bottom to top. Western art traditionally represents conditions yet to be realized, the future and things associated with it—that is, hope, expectation, and so forth—in the upper portions of pictures. The present condition or position in space or time is shown in the middle of pictures; the past, what we have left behind, is shown at the bottom. An upward movement of the eyes implies progression; a downward movement, regression.³

In scanning the Venice images, the reader pieces them together and gains the illusion of movement through space. Reading the pictorial sequences quickly is similar to watching a motion picture film. Like a film, the pictorial sequences transport the viewer into the scene.

I walked along this route many times on the way to and from the Giudecca. Early in my stay, when one narrow alley looked like another, the bridges stood out as spatial elements, giving structure to my movements and expressing a rhythm. I remember the experience of rising at each bridge and gaining a better view for a few moments before "plunging" back to ground level. The squares along the walk defined