

Vocabulary, Voice, & Vision

Written by Milton Townsend

We, as artists, must deal daily in the commodity of creativity. The aesthetic decisions that we make solely on the basis of what we think is the 'best', what we prefer, can be either objectifiable or mysterious. From where do these seemingly arbitrary judgments come? What is the source of our sense of beauty? We must draw from an inner, personal well-spring. We must make meaning of the world around us, editing, choosing, sorting, ultimately creating the reality that each of us inhabits. This comes from within us. No one else can be responsible for the artistic choices that we make.

This expression of our ideas and visions will be drawn from our own worldview, our own perspective on life. This point of view is primary, informing decisions of taste and style. A well-developed worldview will lead naturally to a clear and consistent expression of style. Style is an effect, not a cause - secondary, not primary. To seek style for its own sake will lead to slick, beautiful and empty work.

Pursue substance, and true style will appear, naturally, automatically, and without effort. If you try to make your work beautiful, chances are that it will only be pretty. If you seek to make the work honest, beauty is the much more likely result.

Our artistic vocabulary consists of the elements which we have found to communicate about our vision, or way of seeing and understanding the world. These may be a group of familiar and meaningful objects, a color family which we find particularly alluring, or something as simple and complex as the human form. These are elements that we need to attain a good deal of facility executing, implementing, interpreting, juxtaposing, in short, in using. This will lead to technical excellence, which is not itself sufficient to creating good art, but is one of the necessary building blocks. Through repetition of many differing configurations, we will discover certain aspects of the forms that are strikingly appealing, as well as developing inter-relationships that seem to work particularly well. This is the natural process which leads to the development of the elements of our artistic vocabulary, the individual components that, strung together, are the language, or set of symbols that we choose to use to express our ideas.

Our artistic voice is the way that the elements of our vocabulary are employed in the expression of the ideas that intrigue and interest us. The voice is the way that we have developed, over time, to speak to our audience. This voice may be delicate and

subtle, or loud and proud. You might like to address ideas directly, or create subtle allusions that imply or suggest, rather than presenting conclusions. This voice is as distinctive as each human being is unique. The tone of this voice is as much a factor in being able to effectively reach your audience, to move them with your ideas, as is the content of what you have to say. A profound idea, expressed crudely, will be less potent than a crude idea expressed profoundly. Once technical issues have been resolved and the your artistic technical skill level is superlative, you'll be able to make your choices based solely on personal preference and taste, informed by your own worldview and underlying philosophical principles. Fluency in the chosen language of symbols of your artwork is a necessary precursor to accomplishment of this level of expressive freedom. This is a powerful argument for mastery of the medium, so that your ideas can be well expressed and made accessible to your chosen audience.

Your artistic vision is the natural result of having thoroughly explored the ideas and areas that interest and intrigue you. Your artistic vision is often an epiphany, a complete understanding that appears fully formed in your mind's eye.

It is the natural result of poking and prodding and looking under and over every conceivable aspect of an area, on the foundation of a fairly comprehensive grasping of the relevant issues regarding the subject in question. It is parallel to the process of learning a new language... first you need to study pronunciation and grammar, then you memorize vocabulary, until finally you're able to actually think in your new language.

Vision is a gift, a transient and ephemeral apparition. While its appearance and coming cannot be predicted, its disappearance is as certain as the sunrise. If you are seriously interested in pursuing the development of your artistic vision, then you need to be prepared for the encounter. The best equipment to have ready is pen and paper, or other recording system that is convenient and familiar to you.

Once you have attained fluency, technical proficiency, expertise, and depth of understanding in your chosen area of exploration and expression, you begin to think in those terms. Ideas and images relative to and derivative of this set of concepts become the matrix within which you see and comprehend all things. Concepts, images, understandings, and finished work spring forth, making their appearance seemingly of their own volition...not as though you have created the images.

At this point, it is critical that you make a note of the idea or image, in whatever format works best for you, whether that be sketch, model, or written word. This notation is no mere physical act, no casual or small thing. This recording of ideas is the very process of

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transferring from the spiritual plane to the physical plane, the realization and substantialization of Man's supremacy as the only being that exists simultaneously in both worlds. Take seriously this opportunity, this responsibility, this doorway between the two worlds. Within the realm of spirit, the world of ideas, we can change and shape and mold our thoughts into anything, without the worldly constraints of space or time or money. All things become possible within this world, and we are able to bring that idea, that concept or image into this world, through the simple step of writing it down. To write an idea onto a piece of paper can change the world. Do not ever underestimate the power and the value of this simple act. In doing so, we ourselves become the gateway between the two worlds.

While these ideas and images may take only seconds to jot down on paper, they may well consume days, weeks, or months until the fulfillment of their physical creation.

In an odd way, no matter how much praise and compliment we receive for the work, we feel somehow uncomfortable taking credit for the idea itself. What we did was to sit or stand there and make the thing... That's all. I take full credit for sticking to it, but not for coming up with the idea itself. Good work has, in some measure, its own life force, separate from and larger than we who seem to have created it. I don't see this as either false or true humility, but simple recognition of a truth.

Everyone has ideas. It is only a few who actually implement them.

Townsend lives and works just outside a small village in upstate New York, with his wife Kiyoko and son Timo. He works with a small team of highly skilled glass artists to create the prolific output of his studio. His artwork can be seen at www.milontownsend.com. He is the author of many books which can be seen and ordered from www.thebluemoonpress.com.