

DESIGN

The ABCs of Attention-Grabbing Art

Advertising artists use a tried-and-true design hierarchy—and you can too!

by John Roman

An artist's first priority when creating a painting or drawing is to get people's attention. That's the easy part. The next, more difficult task, is to hold their attention. Advertisers are well aware of this challenge. They know that the average human attention span is only seven seconds. That's all the time they have to convince people that the products they're selling deserve a closer look. That seven-second rule isn't limited to advertising; it applies to all the arts. As daunting as this time restraint may seem, the good news is that the design method used by commercial artists works for fine artists, too. Let's see what advertisers can teach us about how to attract viewers—and keep them engaged.

ABC HIERARCHY

Graphic designers implement a well-planned yet imperceptible order that manipulates how people react to ads. This time-tested formula literally tells the brain what to look at first, what to look at second and where the eyes should rest. It's a highly effective technique that all artists can apply to their works—and it's as easy as A-B-C.

Products all around us use the ABC hierarchy, and analyzing a few examples is a good way to become familiar with how this system works (see Study Your A-B-Cs, page 18). In your daily life, examine highway billboards, movie posters, package designs, book jackets and even magazine covers. In each case, ask yourself, *In terms of what draws my attention, what is the A item, the B item and the C item?* Take note that sometimes, although the A item quickly attracts your attention, it may not be the most important feature. See how the B item directs your eye away from the A item and into the main part of the artwork or ad. Then, become conscious of how the C item might either simply fill in a design or become the key part of the message.

VISUAL COMMUNICATORS

When designing their work, artists rely on a visual language—rather than a spoken or written one. In a still life or landscape painting, for example, artists don't include arrows with labels telling viewers where to look. Instead, they use pictorial clues.

What's more, artists who are good visual communicators compose their works so that viewers take in the full "message" a little at a time. They pilot their audience through a painting step-by-step. This is accomplished by first directing the eye to an attention-grabbing element within the artwork. Perhaps they place that component in a prime location or depict light shining on it or make it the most colorful item in the composition.

The human brain actually welcomes having a sequence to follow. It wants to be shown a starting point (A) and then led further along. By creating different levels of priority, the artist lays out a path for the brain to follow instinctively. Scale, lighting, composition and color are just a few of the tools that can drive the eye to the next item on the path (B), and then steer it to a resting place somewhere else in the design (C). When done correctly, the



James Big Slide
(watercolor on paper, 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ x20 $\frac{3}{4}$) by Don Weller (donweller.com)

viewer's mind is entertained for about seven seconds—and becomes engaged.

AESTHETIC ARREST

In explaining what happens to viewers when experiencing captivating art, philosopher John Campbell said, “The aesthetic experience is a simple beholding of an object. You experience its radiance, and you are held in aesthetic arrest.” This should be an artist's goal—to create works that arrest the attention of viewers and hold them in wonder. Don Weller's *James Big Slide* (above) captures a

stunning portrait of a horseman carefully descending a hill. Backlighting draws our initial attention. Dust kicked up by the horse and dazzling ground foliage expertly frame the horse and rider and lead the eye down and around the vista. Then, almost overlooked initially, we notice a distant cliffside touched by sunlight. We're surprised to realize the central figures are much higher in the mountains than we'd originally thought, and we're mesmerized by the distant cliff's scale in contrast to the foreground terrain. So accomplished is this work, it's difficult to turn away from it.

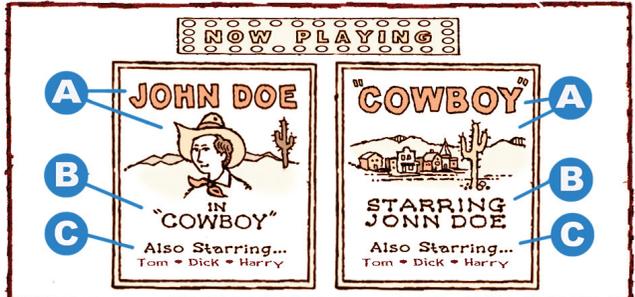
In *The Quarter* (page 19), Jennifer Annesley draws us into a dramatic room setting. A towering vertical

Study Your A-B-Cs

There are products all around us that use the A-B-C "Hierarchy of Design." Analyzing those examples is a good way to become familiar with how this system works.



Highway billboards only have 2 or 3 seconds to get our attention, so the A-B-C's need to be quick and obvious. Note the hierarchy here...and see how the "C" in this case is actually the most important!



Movie posters are designed to promote what best attracts an audience. If a very famous actor stars in the movie, their name and likeness will be the "A" selling-item. If there are no famous actors in the film, the title and a graphic will serve as the "A".



Newspaper ads are another good place to spot the A-B-C Rule at work. Here, a supermarket promotes this week's sale items with a design layout that graphically prioritizes those products.



Manufacturers use hierarchys on packaging to visually introduce consumers to their products. The name and picture of the item can sometimes share "A-B" status, while "C" s are reserved for specific product attributes and/or selling points.



Similar to movie posters, a book cover's A-B-C ranking is determined by the notoriety or fame of its author. A well-known writer's name will be the "A" selling-feature, while other books place the title and related graphics in the "A - B" position.



Retail magazine racks display numerous, popular publications. While a periodical's name and logo are important, the main attention-grabbing aspect on a cover will be what's "hot" in the latest issue. "C" items list additional features.



The Quarter

(watercolor on paper, 42x24) by Jennifer Annesley (@annesleystudio)

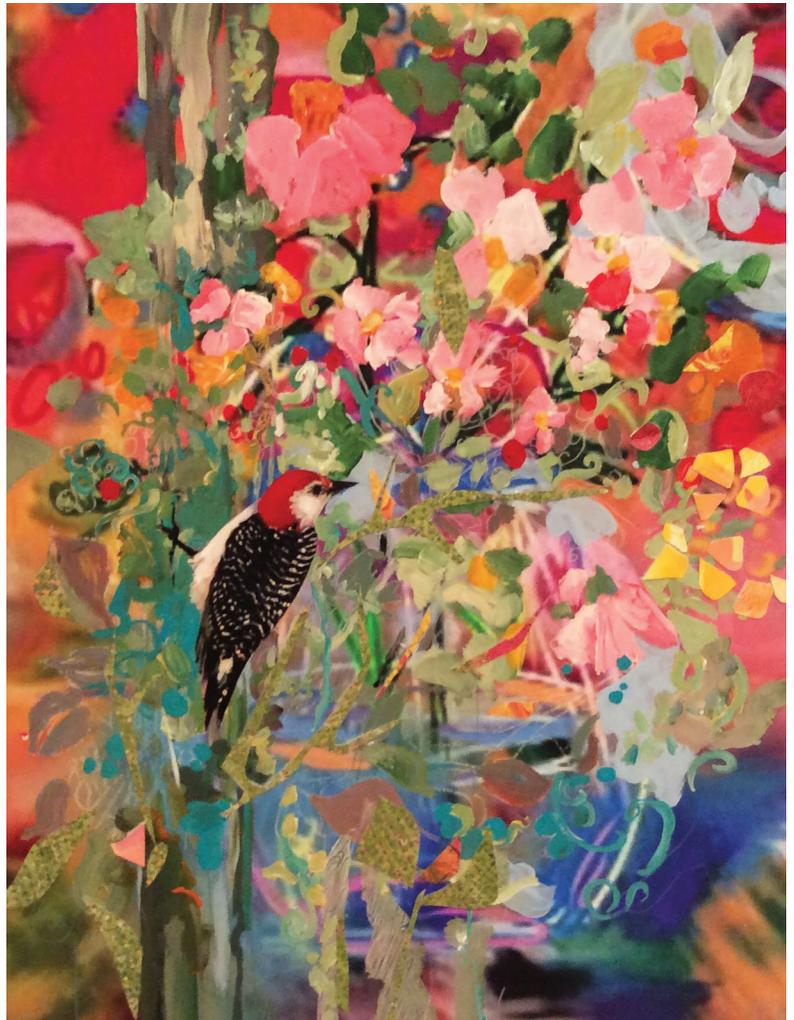
picture-plane accentuates the room's 16-foot-high ceiling, and Annesley's superb handling of the accoutrements and contrasting lighting holds our attention. The eye is then gracefully escorted down the classic drapery to the oval table, then into and around the gently curved chairs. There, a small detail catches our eye: a woman's Venetian mask sitting on the table between the two chairs. We might think this is an odd placement, but then we notice the Creole-style architecture outside the window. This gives the final clue that we're viewing the interior of a distinguished Southern mansion during Mardi Gras. In this masterful work, Annesley has staged a performance for a hierarchy of ABC players, and in the process, she's given our brains a distinct narrative to follow.

Although the ABC rule is associated with modern-day advertising, history provides evidence that the blueprint has been in use for a long while. In the mid-1600s, Netherland artist Dirck de Bray created *Flowers in a White Stone Vase* (page 20). This clever composition reveals de Bray's hierarchy with his use of a bright white flower set against a dark background and accented by other flowers. We're drawn toward the left side of the vase by way of a drooping stem, then over to smaller, fallen petals. Finally, upon close inspection, we discover a ladybug walking across the tabletop.

The hierarchy principle isn't restricted to representational art. Abstract collage artist Marcia Ballou is conscious of a visual order in her intricately designed creations and gives the eye plenty to do and enjoy. Her ABC ensembles are so tightly woven, the brain is captivated.

RIGHT
Spring
(mixed media on museum board, 30x20) by Marcia Ballou
(marciaballou.com)

BELOW
Flowers in a White Stone Vase
(1671; oil on panel, 24x17)
by Dirck de Bray
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



For example, the bird and the vibrant color in her collage *Spring* (above right) literally vie for the viewer's attention, pulling the mind back and forth between the two. The floral patterns, the cut and torn papers and the painted gestures are all assigned a background role while continuing to support the tension going on between the main players. Ballou's clever disguise of priorities makes her art all the more mysterious. Onlookers realize they're witnessing a pictorial symphony that makes its own statement but is also open to the viewer's personal interpretation.

ABC HUNTING

Now that you're acquainted with the ABC hierarchy and have seen it in action, you can continue to study works to find the hidden ABCs artists and designers have worked into their concepts. Again, a good place to begin is with commercial products, which need to get your attention quickly. Also, take a long, hard look at your own work

to see if a visual hierarchy is lacking—or if, by instinct, you've been incorporating the ABC rule all along.

Keep in mind that there are an infinite number of ways the ABC formula can be applied. Be on the lookout for cunning artists who intentionally bury a hierarchy in their designs—and do it so skillfully that deciphering their method of engagement can be baffling. On occasion, you may be unsure whether the artist has manipulated you with this technique, but there's one surefire way to tell whether you've been snared by a cleverly hidden hierarchy. Simply ask yourself this question: *How long have I been looking at this painting?* 🍷

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