

Perspective is about challenging the way we put together what we see to interpret the world we see in terms of near/far, inside/outside. At a basic level, perspective is just converging lines, a way of telling us what is closer and what is further away. But perspective is really about carving the world into folds of meaning.

It is surprising that perspective had to be ‘discovered’ in art – one wonders what people thought they were looking at before.

Think of a dozen people viewing the same scene, each standing in a different place, with different light falling across what they see; the scene will also change over time as the sun moves, changing the scene as shadows and light close or open up vistas. Our very mood when we look at something can influence how we see it and what we see. The world is not stable; in fact it never was.

This says that efforts to capture a scene ‘accurately’ will ultimately fail for the world is constantly changing even as we look at it; as the philosophers have asked, “can you step into the same river twice?” Well, not really, as that water and that river have literally moved on.

The way our eyes are positioned on our head produce binocular vision, and that means we see the world as though we were looking at it through a letterbox — wider than higher.

The photograph of St Augustine’s Abbey in Canterbury shows the horizontal contour going from the older ruins on the left to the new buildings of the town on the right. Between the two sides of this image are many years of human history. Think about how a single letterbox image can capture that span of time but also of perspective.



St Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury, Kent, UK

Conversely, we rarely imagine looking at the world through a vertical letterbox as in the photograph of three friends on a beach (taken, by the way, with a leaky 1930's Kodak folding camera).



3 Friends at the sea

Images that are strongly horizontal or vertical are more like banners. Horizontal paintings we think of as landscapes, while vertical paintings seem more like portraits. The vertical offers a completely different sense of the world and this format pushed to an extreme length as way to touch infinity.

The photograph of the roofs of Canterbury Cathedral is about planes, angles and shapes. Roof-lines are interesting because of the intersecting of colours, shapes and lines.

Extracting the basic shapes, colours and folds in our three dimensional world offers a variety of abstract possibilities, but abstract paintings are often described as 'flat', as the artists usually try to avoid any sense of perspective, to remove any clues that the painting might be a landscape for instance, simply because it is painted wider than high. But our mind tries to make sense of the patterns in abstract paintings, and this can lead to novel interpretations of abstract works.



Canterbury Cathedral Roofs

What this can mean in creating an abstract painting in the first place, is that perspective can be suggested, without needing to be explicit or indeed intended. This opens up new ways to create interest and explore creativity vision.

THE LIBERATING POWER OF ABSTRACT ART: PERSPECTIVE

The painting is not about perspective, but may appear be landscape. It is about the idea of looking at a landscape, so perhaps it is.

If the picture is flipped over, though, it takes on a different 'perspective': which do you prefer?



Single Thought, Tremblay



Try this...



A mundane scene

A bit of analysis shows a variety of diagonal lines created by the trees in this rather ordinary photograph. We can see the edges of roads or fields and a sense of 'something' converging toward the upper right of the picture.

The image second photo is marked up to shows these lines, revealing five areas, within the photograph.



Same scene, with simple lines

There are other options in this picture, too.

Cover the picture with circles and see what patterns emerge, or try boxes and see what you can extract.