

Design Language



Tim McCreight

Acknowledgements

This is primarily a picture book of wonderful objects, so the first and largest thanks go to the artists, known and anonymous, whose work is shown here. The effort of collecting and presenting these lovely artifacts is tiny compared to the vast wealth of imagination and talent they represent.

On a personal level, I want to thank the friends and colleagues who have played a vital role in bringing this book from the corner of my mind to the reality in your hand. This list would certainly include Lissa Hunter, Robert Diamante, and most of all, Abby Johnston.

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Cover

Kuba cloth

Maker unknown (Congo)

Raffia, 22" x 56"



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Layout by the author.

Foreword

I am pleased to provide a foreword to Tim McCreight's interpretive edition of *Design Language*, the logical follow-up to the engaging, useful, and friendly version that preceded it.

After looking at and writing about decorative art, craft, and design for three decades, I am more and more aware of the power of words to influence the way we see things. In the world of design, words and meanings—definitions and interpretations—interact with our perception and understanding of form, our expectations about function, and our delight or disapproval of decoration. Words give us a means of recording, transmitting, and exchanging information about things, like when they were made, who made them, why they were made, what they were made from, and what they do or do not do. At the same time, the words we choose to describe our tangible world are loaded; embedded in words are powerful associative meanings that express our personal and cultural contexts. When carefully chosen words are paired with compelling visual images, the results are memorable.

Dictionaries of terminology in the arts, and specifically in the decorative arts and crafts have been around for centuries, beginning as early as the twelfth-century *De diversis artibus* ("An Essay Upon Diverse Arts") by the German monk Theophilus, a tome which examined painting, glassmaking, and metalwork from a technical, aesthetic, and religious point of view. From Theophilus to Denis Diderot's magnificent *L'Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, published in Geneva from 1754-1772, an illustrated encyclopedia of the arts of fabrication and manufacture, to *Materials and Techniques in the Decorative Arts* (2000), edited by Lucy Trench, there has been a long sequence of publications attempting to codify the materials and techniques used by artists and artisans in the fabrication of their work.

While these seminal encyclopedias and dictionaries provide important factual material about the melting point of copper, the structure of a turning lathe, or the family of ornament subsumed under the category "arabesque," they all rely heavily,




if not exclusively, on nominal terms—persons, places, things, actions—to define the territory. McCreight’s volume is centered on terms familiar to any first-year design or art student, words like *contour*, *grid*, and *balance*. These foundation-course terms are interspersed with others of more culturally-driven ideas, such as *dialogue*, *elegance*, and *closure*.

The page grid designed by McCreight is basically simple and includes five standard elements: a dictionary-style definition of a term; a short etymological sketch of its origins and derivations; a selective conversational meditation on some of the meanings of the term as seen from the author’s point of view; a quote from a well-known author, artist, scientist, or philosopher that serves as a counterpoint to the description and interpretation; and provocative images that range from a Navajo chief’s blanket to a child’s drawing.

It is in the mix that the magic of this comfortable volume reveals itself. For casual readers, opening a page at random presents language on all levels, including the visual. For artists or designers, the book is a welcome stimulus for pondering what ideas mean and why they matter. This is not a “how-to” book, but rather a “why-to” journal that takes the reader on a voyage into the intersection of words, ideas, and images.

In the past decade, the boundaries that separated art, craft, and design into a triangular hierarchy that placed Art at the top, buttressed by the handmaidens of Craft and Design, have been eroded. This has been primarily the result of behavior patterns and aesthetic choices made by the creators and makers themselves, expressed through works that boldly and unabashedly violate traditional expectations and demands. Artists are moving from field to field with energy and grace. They are no longer married to a single material, but easily move from one medium to another as needed, while new technologies further challenge the boundaries between art and science.





Those of us who view these exciting and often controversial forays into a “blur zone” between art, craft, and design cannot but be enthused and encouraged by these developments, which sometimes appear to define a second renaissance in which the arts evolve and flourish with exceptional speed. However, resting at the base of all of these activities is the reappearance of profoundly humanistic concerns that inform much of the new work. Artists and designers today are exploring the relationship of what they do with their lives within the context of global economics, the natural environment, issues of ethnicity and, ultimately, the ethics of culture and art. We are responsible for our actions and intentions, and both are determined by the language we choose to express our identity and visions.

McCreight’s entry for “Elegance” could serve as the definition for *Design Language*: “There is a sense of economy in elegance. We use this word to describe the reduced, essential movements of an athlete, or a melody stripped of anything extraneous. In science, a solution that resolves inconsistencies without complex artifice is called an elegant solution.” This volume is spare and disciplined in the selection of terms, and does not promise to be comprehensive. Each entry is elegant in the extreme, giving the reader just enough information, but not too much. By opening doors of understanding into the language of design, and by encouraging reflection on the profoundly human meanings of what we create in the process of design, this handy and intimate volume of approachable insights continues to delight and inspire.

David Revere McFadden

Chief Curator

Museum of Arts & Design

New York

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verything that is made is the result of design. Whether you are whittling a tent stake or planning a cathedral, you will face questions of size, materials, and shape. In every case, some choices are better than others, and in special cases, the decisions are so very good that they result in objects and images that take our breath away.

People who care about design—and this includes artists and patrons—will sooner or later use words to enlarge the experience. For practitioners, language is essential to convey ideas to collaborators and customers. People who enjoy the arts will find that language can serve like the beam of a flashlight to illuminate delightful details that might otherwise have been missed. As with any form of appreciation, from ornithology to opera, each person needs to make sense of the ideas at play. This process begins with our common understanding of an experience and the words we use to share it. “Let’s call that color red,” we say. It could have been named “blue” or “apple,” but as long as we all agree, we can communicate.

This book is built around 60 words that describe the basic ingredients of design. In each case I have provided the etymological root and dictionary definition, then added a few personal observations of my own. In most cases, the words will be familiar, but perhaps seeing them in this specific context will lead to a new insight. And then there are the photos...

I have gathered a diverse collection of images that I hope will contribute to an understanding of the term. It is not my intention to deliver anything like a definitive “answer” to what constitutes these universal concepts. Instead, I have gathered work that I present as an idiosyncratic interpretation of the ideas contained in the words. If these images restrict or limit your understanding of a concept, I have failed and I apologize. If instead these lovely objects trigger associations and interpretations of your own, then I will be happy.

Tim McCreight

Portland, Maine

January 2006



Abstract

- 1 Considered apart from concrete existence
- 2 Not applied or practical; theoretical
- 3 Impersonal, as in attitude or views
- 4 To take away, remove
- 5 Having an intellectual and affective artistic content that depends solely on intrinsic form rather than on narrative content or pictorial representation
- 6 To summarize, epitomize; the concentrated essence of a larger whole



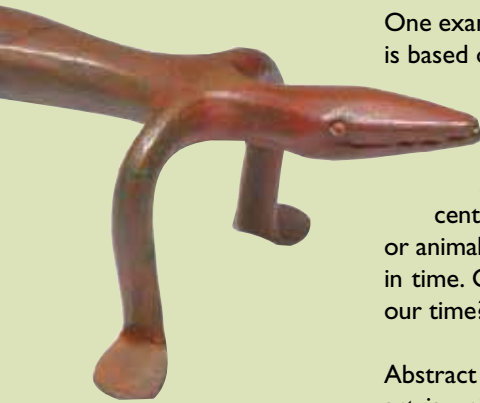
abstractus (Latin) =
“removed from (concrete
reality)”

Some people think abstract art just means something weird-looking; this is incorrect. Weird is easy but abstract work springs from, and must be responsive to a physical reality.

One example is the brief summary of a dissertation, which is called an abstract. It is based on the real thing but is a more concise version, getting immediately at its essential character.

Alienation is a dominant theme of all forms of art in the twentieth century. Humankind is seen as removed from nature, out of touch with inner or animal needs, disconnected from social bonds, and lacking a sense of continuity in time. Given all this, is it any wonder that abstract art is a central response of our time?

Abstract art comes from spirit rather than from nature and in this sense, abstract art is uniquely human. Because abstraction is rooted in humanness as distinct from “American-ness” or “male-ness,” it complements the world unity found in technology and science. A color-field painting, for instance, can speak outside the restrictions of language, culture, and geography.



*There is no abstract art.
You must always start with
something.*

Pablo Picasso

Aesthetics



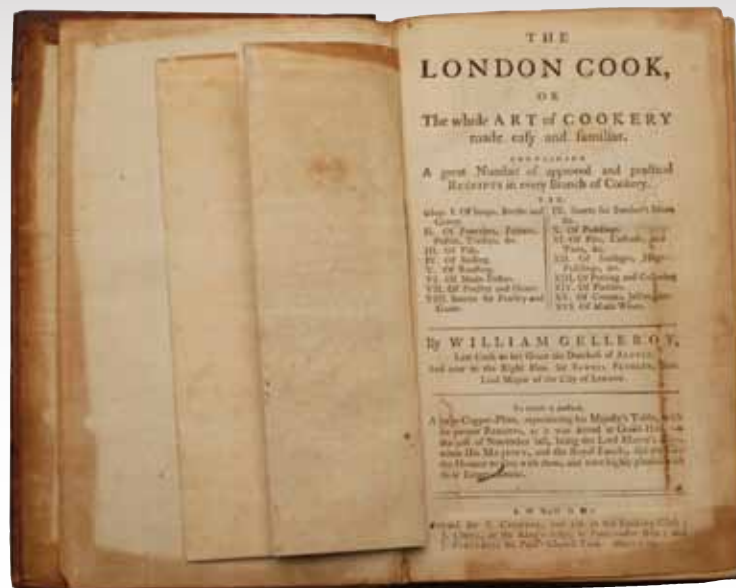
- 1 The criticism of taste
- 2 The sense of the beautiful
- 3 Having a love of beauty
- 4 (plural) A branch of philosophy that provides a theory of beauty and the fine arts

aisthetikos (Greek)
pertaining to sense
perception

In common usage, this refers to the large and general sense of a person's taste. Preferences of color, form, content, and scale add up to a person's aesthetic.

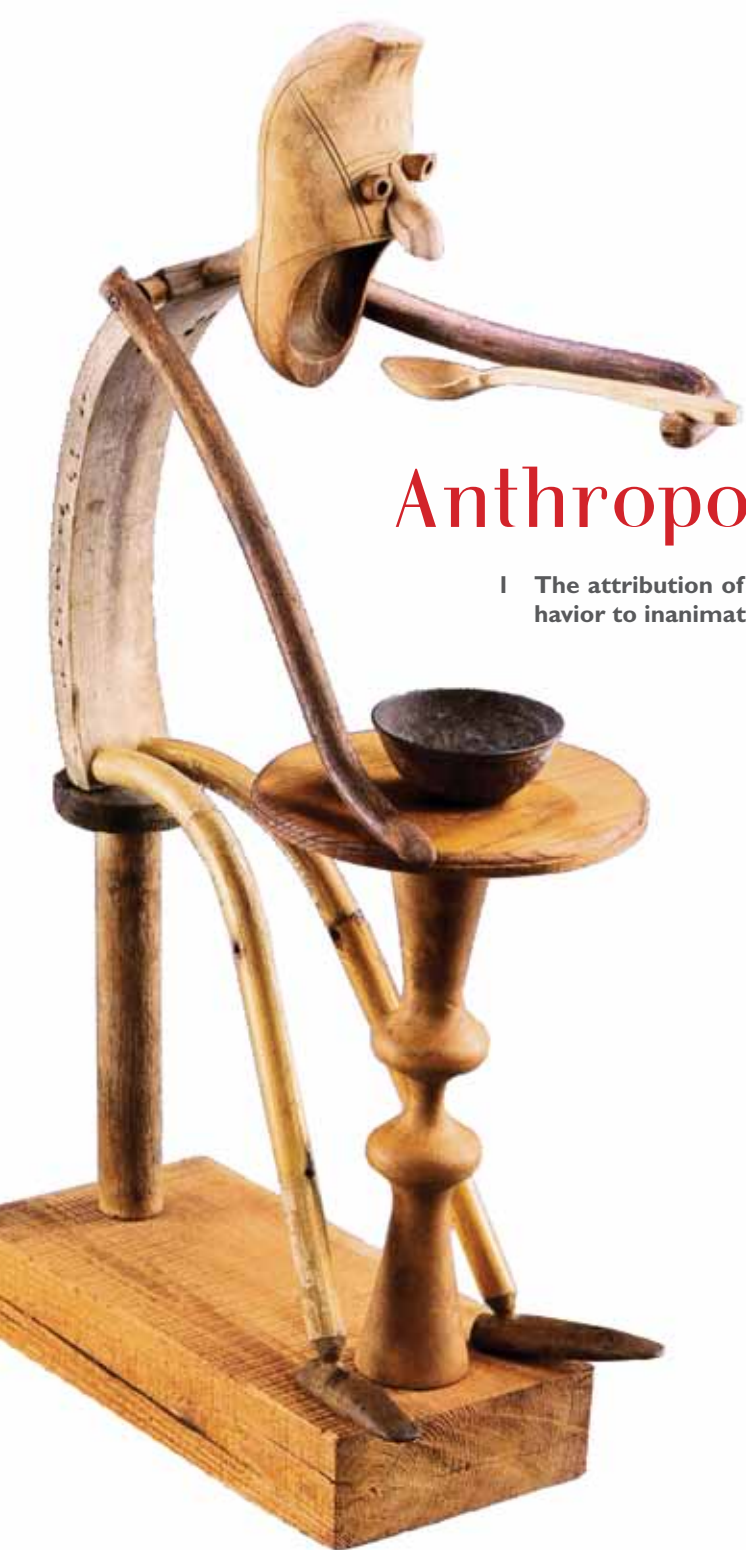
Taste, in contrast to aesthetics, is a more superficial description of preferences in art. It generally informs the larger issues, but is a more intuitive, sensual response. Aesthetics, while primarily related to sensory perception, can be trained and informed through intellectual processes such as instruction, dialog, and study.

There is an element of culture and experience in aesthetics. While it is probably true that people all over the world equally enjoy a sunset or a bouquet of flowers, we have different ideas about what tastes good, sounds pleasant, and functions best.



*Written truth is four-dimensional.
If we consult it at the wrong
time, or read it at the wrong
pace, it is as empty and
shapeless as a dress on a hook.*

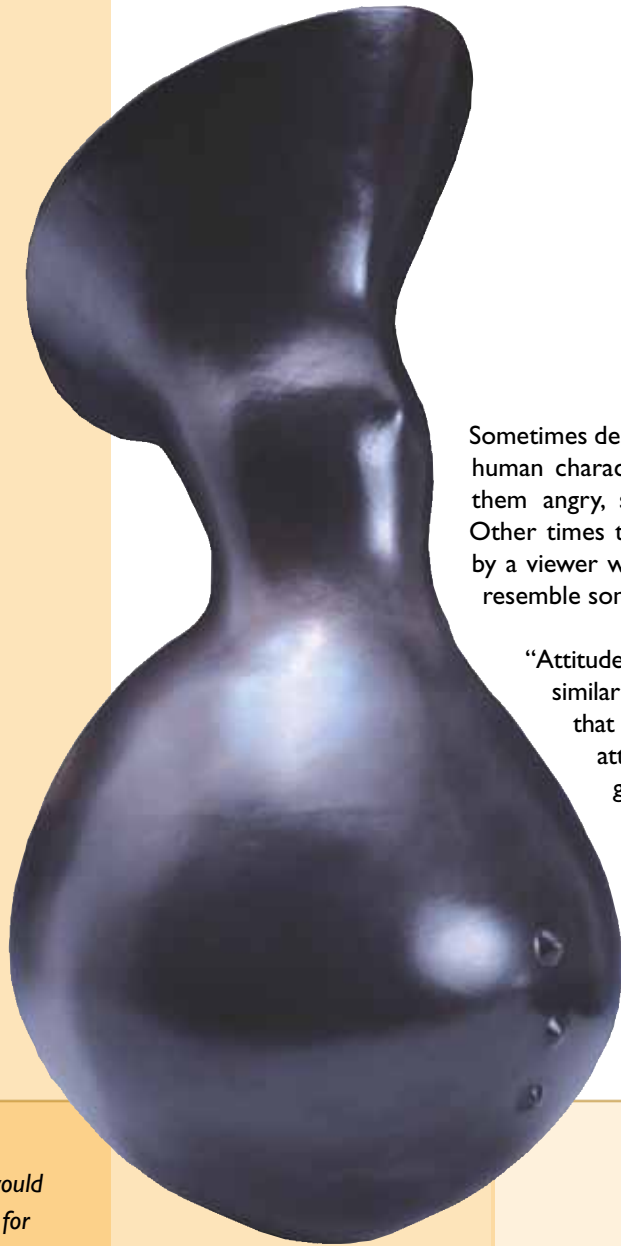
Robert Grudin



Anthropomorphic

- I The attribution of human motivation, characteristics, or behavior to inanimate objects, animals, or natural phenomena

(Greek) anthro (humankind) + morph (form) = of human form. Biomorphic is a similar term, but is more general and refers to anything living



Sometimes designers and artists purposely give human characteristics to their forms, making them angry, soothing, terrifying, and so on. Other times these qualities might be brought by a viewer who unwittingly wants a work to resemble something familiar.

“Attitude” is a slang term that conveys a similar notion. I might say, for instance, that a football is a basketball with attitude. A designer might purposely give an object a reference to a specific attribute, either for humor or satire. A chair, for instance, might be given a form that seems to slouch back on itself, reminding us of a person reclining.

*The worlds about us would
be desolate except for
the worlds within us.*

Wallace Stevens



Balance

- 1 A weighing device consisting of a horizontal beam with pans of equal weight on each end
- 2 A stable state characterized by cancellation of all forces by equal opposing forces
- 3 A stable mental or psychological state
- 4 Equality of totals in the credit and debit sides of an account

(Latin) bi (double) + lanx (scale)
= having two scales

*What I dream of is an art of balance,
of purity and serenity...
something like a good armchair.*

Walt Kelly



Our response to balance is linked to our earliest childhood discoveries of our bodies. We instinctively value balance because it is necessary to stand, run, escape. From this primal physical reality we derive our general preference for balance in composition.

Except for brief moments on a roller coaster, most people do not want to be off balance. Our sense of balance is so important, in fact, that it is one of the most delicate instruments of our skeletal system. Even a minor ear infection can distort the sense of balance so severely that we are unable to move.

In Taoist thought, balancing is the ultimate power and goal of the universe. The symbol for this is the familiar yin-yang, a circle divided into a black and white half, each side curving to penetrate and yield to the other.

The first requisite for balance is control. It is one thing to relinquish balance knowing you can achieve it again and quite another to be out of balance, adrift, or askew.

Most of us need balance in the large issues of our lives—things like landscape, architecture, diet, and relationships. Perhaps we look to art and design in the same way we enjoy a roller coaster ride, as an opportunity to temporarily suspend our sense of balance in a controlled situation. We know the ride will end, and we know we can turn away from the painting if the lack of stability becomes threatening.

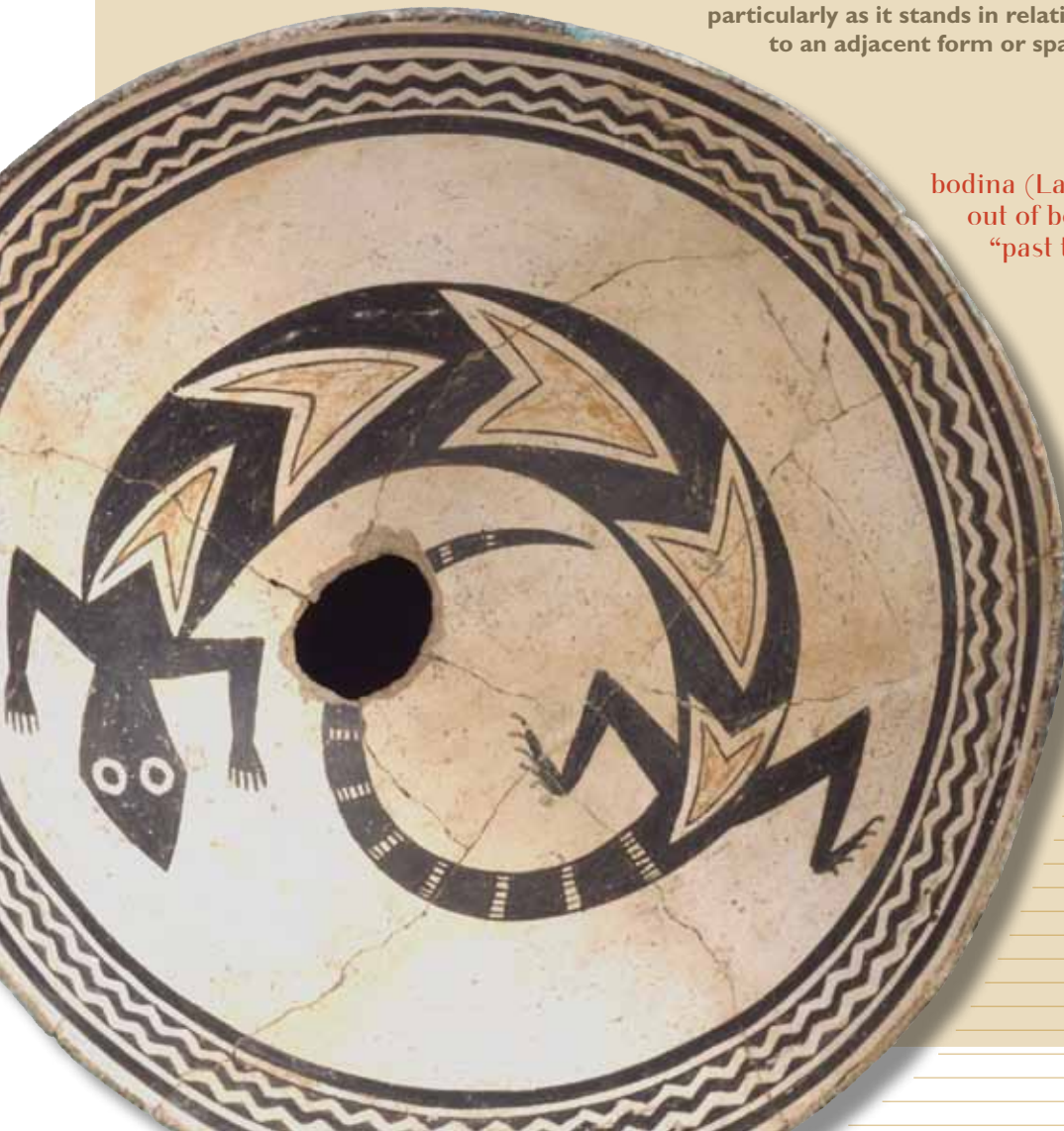
In music, balance might be analogous to a regular beat. While this makes an acceptable foundation upon which to build a melody, it has the possibility of becoming boring. Syncopation, a beat that is slightly out of balance, is one way to move beyond that.



Boundary

The outer limit, the edge of a shape,
particularly as it stands in relation
to an adjacent form or space

bodina (Latin) = limits;
out of bounds means
“past the limits”



Boundaries separate a “this” from a “that,” and a “here” from a “there.” A frame around a picture separates the image from the space around it. The frame is a boundary.

The visual strength of a boundary depends on its contrast to adjacent elements. A gray frame on a gray wall will not separate a print from its environment as much as a gold frame, for instance.

The boundaries of a two-dimensional composition are established by the edges of the paper, page or canvas. Rather than specific boundaries like these, three-dimensional work activates a volume of space in its immediate vicinity. This intuitively provides a frame of reference. In order to be called a boundary, the space must be relevant to an observer.

We set boundaries in our personal lives to help us control our relationships, jobs, fears, and hopes. These boundaries are usually changeable, like sticks we poke in the ground to mark out a playing field.



*To avoid criticism, do
nothing, say nothing,
be nothing.*

Elbert Hubbard

Center



- 1 A point equidistant from all points on the outer boundaries
- 2 The middle
- 3 A point around which something revolves; axis
- 4 The part of an object that is surrounded by the rest; core
- 5 A place of concentrated activity or influence

In the traditional rules of conventional Western design, the center is considered a static location, and therefore something to be avoided. In other cultural traditions, the center is possessed of great power, as for instance in a mandala.

The center of gravity is not necessarily the visual center. It is the specific relationship between an object's center of gravity and the center of the earth that constitutes stability. This is clearly illustrated in architecture, wrestling, and dance.

Clay must be centered on the potter's wheel before it can be controlled. This is also true of lathe turning. A gear wheel is generally required to be centered, but there are instances where it is precisely the eccentricity that makes it work.

When a person is stable, balanced, and free of stress we call him or her centered. This is the goal of meditation, yoga, t'ai chi and other personal therapies. Eccentric (off center), as applied to personalities, means colorful, unusual, and interesting.



kentron (Greek) =
sharp point,
stationary point
of a compass

*Perplexity is the beginning
of knowledge.*

—
Kahlil Gibran