

Shaping the Visual Universe

On how we learn to see — and what quietly shapes the way we look

“Seeing, hearing, and touching are not neutral activities. They are shaped by history, culture, and habit. To pay attention is already to take a position. What we choose to notice, and what we train ourselves to overlook, forms a tacit ethics — a way of being in the world.” — Susan Sontag

At the risk of sounding like Brian Cox (b. 1968) on a particularly lyrical evening, by way of framing, the term “visual universe” most commonly refers to the observable cosmos: that ever-expanding “dynamic bubble” of space and time within which we sit—rather flatteringly—at the centre. Yet closer to home, and of rather more immediate relevance to those of an aesthetic persuasion, there exists another version of this phenomenon, one that’s no less complex for being internal rather than astronomical. Each of us operates within a far more intimate, microcosmic visual universe: a personal constellation formed not simply by what we see, but by how seeing itself has been shaped over time, by the accumulation of images, forms and perceptual habits — a delicate cartography that guides attention, revealing details, colours, and relationships that might otherwise go unnoticed. Art, in this sense, functions as one of the most powerful instruments within this system, both as a catalyst and disruptor, recalibrating perception and inviting us to inhabit a world rich in nuance and subtle complexity.

One of the enduring marvels of great artists is that their work grants us fleeting access to *their* visual universe — a way of seeing that can feel revelatory, disorienting or even magical. In this sense, art does not merely represent the world; at its best, it actively reconstructs our understanding of it, introducing new perspectives, unsettling inherited assumptions, and giving emotional form to what was previously unarticulated. As Paul Klee (1879-1940) succinctly observed, “Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible.” Unsurprisingly, this way of thinking has long positioned art in uneasy opposition to science. A culture war, played out ad infinitum within academic circles, has historically divided the artistic and scientific disciplines. Yet beneath the polemic lies a curious and often overlooked commonality, one that complicates any easy opposition between intuition and empiricism. Both modes of inquiry rely on a technique of objectification: the ability to detach from instinctive perception and analyse the world in unfamiliar terms. Each, in its own way, requires a distancing from habitual seeing in order to grasp underlying structures, relationships and forces. This shared impulse underpins the scientific mastery of nature and, perhaps less obviously, the practice of visual art itself.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the act of learning to draw. Drawing is not, as is often assumed, a manual skill, but a perceptual one — a discipline of attention as opposed to dexterity. To draw well is, in essence, to learn to see differently. Consider, by way of example, the humble leaf. For most people — those entirely without artistic pretensions — it exists as an archetype. It’s glanced at briefly, registered as green, leaf-shaped, recognisable, and swiftly filed away under a simplified mental image first encountered as a child, a shorthand reinforced through repetition rather than scrutiny. The artist, by contrast, does not see *a* leaf in its conventional sense, but as an aggregation of visual problems: contours, tonal shifts, negative space, irregular edges, and subtle chromatic variations. The leaf becomes not a symbol, but a visual problem to be solved, resisting

shorthand and inviting sustained contemplation. This mode of looking is not unlike the scientific impulse to break systems into forces, cycles and component parts, searching for underlying patterns beneath surface appearances. In both cases, the practitioner is trained to look beyond the layperson's intuitive outlook — that is, in a Darwinian sense, the default perception shaped by evolution, designed to favour speed over exhaustive detail. Our brains are, by necessity, economical devices, perpetually balancing efficiency against fidelity. Scientifically speaking, they have limited storage and are predisposed to supply us with stereotypes and simplifications. We evolved this way for good reason. When threatened, we must make rapid, heuristic decisions. To stop, absorb the light, and contemplate a leaf in artistic or philosophical terms would have been a disastrous indulgence for prehistoric man.

Only later, culturally speaking, did we evolve to a point where we could indulge in such luxuries as sustained looking, abstraction, and aesthetic contemplation, activities that privilege insight over immediacy. As a result, anthropologists place both art and science under the banner of “behavioural modernity,” seeing them as cultural achievements rather than pre-programmed genetic traits. While the brain equips us to navigate our environment competently, scientific and artistic mindsets far outstrip these basic survival functions. They represent a conscious effort to override biological hardwiring in favour of a deeper, more nuanced understanding, a deliberate resistance to the tyranny of the obvious and an attentiveness to what might otherwise escape notice.

It's within this cultural framework that societies have come to celebrate those with particularly distinctive visual perspectives, placing artists such as Picasso (1881-1973), Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010), Salvador Dalí (1904-1989) and Balthus (1908–2001) on a pedestal, not merely for what they depict, but for how they compel us to see. Their work exemplifies a visual approach that departs radically from perceptual shorthand, inviting us instead into worlds constructed through sustained looking and deliberate estrangement. This tension between appearance and reality has long troubled philosophers. Plato (b. c. 428–423 BC, d. 348/347 BC), most notably in *The Republic*, famously dismissed art as mere imitation — “copies of copies” — insisting that imitative works, by reproducing appearances rather than essences, risk seducing the soul with illusion and distracting it from the pursuit of higher truths. For Plato, true reality exists only in perfect, eternal and unchanging forms, the ideal “chair,” for example, of which the material world is already an imperfect imitation. Artists, in replicating this flawed physical manifestation, were therefore producing works thrice removed from the truth, a charge that has haunted visual culture ever since.

This notion resurfaced centuries later when Jean-Michel Frank (1895-1941) set his Parsons students the task of designing the archetypal table: not merely a table, but *the* table. Rather than a physical object, the Parsons table is a Platonic ideal — a simple, unadorned form, proportioned with elegant restraint, adaptable to any material, and capable of taking multiple manifestations while retaining a singular essence, a model whose conceptual clarity challenges us, like artists and philosophers, to apprehend essence rather than surface.

And yet, for many artists, the very act of being schooled in perception, particularly when it imposes specific ways of looking, is, in itself, suspect. Picasso, characteristically, captured this paradox with brutal elegance: “It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child.” The statement gestures towards an enduring tension at the heart of visual culture: between learning how to see and unlearning what we've been conditioned to see, between expertise and innocence. Marcel Proust (1871-1922) articulated the same dilemma from a literary and philosophical vantage point when he wrote: “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.” This leads us, inevitably, to the question at hand. If our visual universe is neither fixed nor innate, but shaped through culture, cognition and experience, then what, precisely, has influenced the way we see the world visually? To explore this, we asked those from the worlds of art and design to choose up to three things — tangible or abstract — that have shaped the way they

perceive the world, and to reflect briefly on why these left such an imprint. Their answers, as the following voices reveal, are as varied and idiosyncratic as the visual universes they inhabit.

Nicolas Schuybroek, Architect

My daily work is perhaps one of the most tangible professions there is: walls you can touch, spaces you can walk through, doors that open to a sequence of rooms. Yet when I reflect on what has shaped the way I see the world, I end up in the opposite territory: not bricks, mortar, or even drawings, but the invisible, the ephemeral, the unmeasurable. A constant paradox I very much enjoy. Although I build with concrete things, my general “holistic” perspective, so to speak, has been profoundly shaped by the intangible.

Three “things” have stayed with me: light and quiet, craft, and place. None of them tangible, and yet all essential, always guiding me toward a clearer, more grounded way of shaping the very tangible spaces of daily life. Light, in its endless variety, is a great and tough teacher. It can be generous or ruthless, can reveal or conceal, and sometimes mocks the architects who thought they had everything under control. It’s capricious, impossible to fully master, and something you simply can’t buy. Silence, too, is underrated. In a world of constant noise, true quiet feels like a luxury. Together, light and silence form the architecture no one can draw, yet everyone can feel. They’ve taught me that what matters most in design is often what can’t be fixed in place.

There’s something profoundly moving in the trace of a human hand. Perfectly engineered finishes may impress, but it’s the slightly irregular joint or the stone slab that reveals an imperfection which truly delights. Those imperfections are not flaws but signatures of life, like the wrinkles in a good shirt that make a person more approachable. Craft reassures us that buildings, like people, are not machines: they are alive, textured, and warm.

Certain landscapes stay with you: a coastal horizon, a dense forest, the stillness of a courtyard at dusk. They shape how you move through the world, and in my case, often shape a memory I gladly return to from time to time. Architecture at its best listens to that spirit of place, the *genius loci*, and responds without shouting. For me, the greatest discipline is restraint: letting the site and context speak, allowing the building to belong rather than intrude. It’s a lesson I keep relearning.

Max Zinser, Designer

I never connected to divinity deeply through organised religion growing up, and it wasn’t until my early 30s that I began exploring alternative paths toward spirituality. One book in particular, *The Seat of the Soul* by Gary Zukav, offered me a new lens through which to integrate our daily human experience with a greater, transcendental purpose. This awakening of sorts ignited a quest to find a spiritual practice that worked for me, and through this process, I became clear about my values, identity, and purpose. These lessons have guided me in all aspects of life—the most public-facing being my work. Mysticism has become a North Star in my creative process, and I try to convey the same feelings of connectivity I’ve found through my spiritual practices in my designs.

No one tells a visual narrative quite like the fashion industry, and my years working on sets opened my eyes to an expansive world of storytelling that broke so many of the rules I’d learned in interior design. Without limitations like permanence and practicality, designing sets gave me permission to draw inspiration from anything and everything—an emotion, an artwork, nature, historical interiors, you name it—all with the goal of creating something captivating and relevant. As someone who works well with a constraint or two, learning that the ultimate rule is that there are no rules freed me from the self-imposed boundaries of what I thought was possible to create.

I recently took up ballet, which I liken to learning a language with your body. Part of class involves breaking off into small groups and performing choreography the teacher has just taught in front of your peers, which for me is challenging on many levels. In my work life, I can be meticulous and perfectionistic. Ballet class has doubled as a lesson in humility: I try my best to get the steps right, but it's not uncommon to flop—and be witnessed doing so. With persistence and practice, I've improved over time and now see how my imperfections and missteps have been the building blocks of my progress.

Juliana Lima Vasconcellos, Architect and Designer

I grew up in Minas Gerais, near Belo Horizonte, a region shaped by mountains and waterfalls. Nature was not a distant landscape but part of everyday life. Weekends at my aunt's country house meant climbing stones, following streams, and discovering hidden pools of water. Each descent along a waterfall revealed another basin where I could swim, and each discovery felt like entering a secret world. From those experiences, I learned that nature is never static; it moves in cycles. Birth, growth, blossoming, decline, renewal—everything follows a rhythm. There's also a sense of power beyond our control, as if nature carries its own force and order. To live close to it is to accept that we cannot command everything, but must respect and adapt. This awareness shaped how I see the world, instilling a feeling of reverence for what sustains us.

Beauty, for me, is not a luxury or an ornament; it is a way of seeing. Since childhood, I've felt a deep delight in observing the world through this lens. It's present in the natural landscapes that surrounded me growing up, but also in what is built by human hands: architecture, objects, and gestures. I'm fascinated by contrasts—the vitality of urban chaos, the quiet dignity of deteriorated buildings, and the way time leaves its mark on some materials while sparing others. To observe attentively is to discover beauty in places where it might easily be overlooked. I find beauty in permanence as much as in transience, in the solidity of stone but also in the fleeting moment of a flower opening, or the subtle expression on a face. Because my work is creative, I inevitably transpose this way of seeing into what I make. Through my own lens, I try to bring beauty into the world, interpreting contemporary culture, reimagining materials, and shaping proportions in ways that reflect my personal sense of harmony and delight.

Although I was raised within the Christian tradition, I grew up surrounded by relatives who encouraged a freer exploration of spirituality. From an early age, I was exposed to conversations about mysticism, symbols, rituals from ancient cultures, astrology, and, more recently, even quantum physics. These influences awakened a curiosity in me that never left: questions about why we are here, what purpose guides our lives, and what lies beyond the visible. Since childhood, I've felt drawn to practices that connect the physical and the invisible. When I enter the sea, I always dive seven times, a ritual I carry with me as a way of cleansing different layers of my energy. It's a simple act, yet it reminds me of something essential—that life has dimensions we cannot always explain, but which we can sense through gesture and ritual.

Laura Kugel, Head of International Projects, Galerie J. Kugel

I left Paris at 18, convinced I needed to discover the world and find freedom elsewhere. But you only really know where home is when you feel that spark upon returning. I walk everywhere, all day long, and I try to look up. The grey zinc roofs are synonymous with the Parisian cityscape. Like in a Caillebotte painting, they merge with the horizon, turning blue in summer and almost black during storms. To me, they mean home.

Each summer as a child, I went to Tuscany. My father took us through every museum, and like any teenager, I wandered with my Walkman in my ears, hands in my pockets, pretending not to care. But art is stronger than teenage indifference, and the day I finally looked up, I discovered what a

masterpiece feels like. The Florentine Renaissance produced many, but Pontormo's *Deposition*, in its dim little chapel, stands apart. A deposition without a cross, a scene of mourning in wild, acidic colours, its figures almost defying gravity, merging and teetering on tiptoe. That day, I think I finally understood the sublime.

As a child, money belonged to the adult world—except for those rare moments when the tooth fairy left a few coins. I still vividly remember the old francs, and one note above all. Like many children, I was captivated by *The Little Prince*, a story so layered that many adults still call it their favourite book. To me, the Little Prince belonged to childhood, while money belonged to adulthood. But on this beautifully designed note, the two met: the Little Prince standing beside the kind-faced portrait of his creator. It showed me that boundaries aren't always what they seem. I wish that note still existed today.

Sophia Roe, Stylist and Content Creator

I learned early that looking is not neutral. I tend to look for too long—long enough for things to lose their charm, long enough for distortion to feel more honest than clarity. Man Ray shaped that in me. To bend form until it stops agreeing with itself—that's when it feels most alive. What stays interesting to me is rarely what behaves. I don't trust harmony; it feels rehearsed. Things that resist, interrupt, or misalign tend to tell the truth faster.

I've always been drawn to women who are sensed rather than revealed. Sofia Coppola gave me language for something I already felt. Femininity doesn't need explanation to be powerful. Her characters are aware, but not performative about that awareness—sensual without access, present without asking to be seen. That tension shaped everything in me: how I dress, how I move, how I withhold or release. Being a woman has always felt complicated. Not something I arrived at naturally, but something shaped and defined from the outside. I don't experience it as a performance, yet I remain aware of how much is expected. What I keep back often feels more precise than what I offer.

I played piano as a child. The hands learned before I did, and that stayed with me. Knowledge doesn't always come from thinking, but from repetition—from staying with something until it becomes second nature. I trust that kind of knowing. The body remembers patterns the mind forgets. Taste works the same way. So does instinct.

Time edits everything, but unevenly. Some things improve under repetition; others dissolve, and perspective is movement. I pay attention to what survives being looked at again and again. Wear is information. So is boredom. I'm less interested in novelty than in what holds once the initial attraction has passed. What remains after some time has done its work tends to matter more to me. Nothing important arrives whole. Most things I care about are built from contrast: softness and resistance, intimacy and distance, control and surrender. I'm comfortable there—in the tension, in things that don't explain themselves fully. I live best in my own rhythm, and I feel beauty where it isn't immediately offered.

Thomas Montier Leboucher, Viltier Founder

I'm a big dreamer—I dream every day, all day, in the car, on my bike. I imagine and tell myself stories. I believe this trait of my personality stems from my love of fashion. Fashion was the first medium that spoke to me instantly. Funny enough, my eyes and taste have evolved since, and my interests have expanded to different mediums and art forms. Yet fashion really made me dream as a kid. The beauty of the garments, the themes of collections, the music of the shows, the walk of the models, the campaigns—all of this made my little self imagine wonderful stories. Fashion was the first coin in my dream machine.

The second thing that really struck me was the retrospective of Richard Prince at the Guggenheim in 2007. I was twelve, and my mom took me there. It was one of my first encounters with contemporary art, and I adored it. I was really attracted by the notion of pop culture and the desire stemming from the works. My young eyes filtered naively, yet I loved the idea of creating a beautiful image linked to some commercial purpose. Think of the virility of the Marlboro Cowboys or a gorgeous pin-up drinking a can of Coca-Cola. That experience awakened in me a fascination with storytelling as a way to sell products.

Last, but most directly linked to my career today, was my first job at Cartier. There, I got to see up close the most wonderful stones and high jewellery creations. I was deeply impressed by the skill of the artisans, coupled with the beauty of nature and its marvellous gemstones. That experience cemented my desire to make a career in this field.

Halleroed, Design Studio

Christian: I grew up in the Swedish countryside, closely connected to nature through activities such as fishing, birdwatching, and quiet observation. My parents ran a small business and worked hard, yet their primary interests lay in Swedish craftsmanship. My father practised woodworking, while my mother collected plants, dyed yarn, and wove her own textiles. During adolescence, I became drawn to what felt like the opposite of this world. At eighteen, I moved to Stockholm to study cabinetry and encountered the vibrant urban culture of the 1990s — American hip-hop, fashion designers such as Helmut Lang and Raf Simons, and contemporary art. I've always been fascinated by this contrast, and I believe it continues to shape much of my creative work.

Ruxandra: When I was eight years old, my family and I left Romania for Sweden. Romania was, at the time, a highly restrictive dictatorship, and I did not miss it. However, the experience left me with a lasting sense of duality. I became aware early on that there are multiple perspectives and different ways of approaching problems. While this awareness has sometimes been challenging, it has also profoundly shaped how I perceive, analyse, and resolve questions — both in life and in my work as an architect.

Christian and Ruxandra: We met twenty years ago. Although we came from very different backgrounds, travelling together and experiencing all sorts of beautiful cultural and built environments — from classical Italian architecture to the many special stores in Tokyo, far too many to count — and attending a wide range of art exhibitions sparked a constant dialogue and reflection around what we encountered. That dialogue has continued into our work and has, over time, organically developed into a kind of “method” that forms a significant part of our process. Seeing things together and reflecting on what we see has created a common design language.