

Stylized or Interpretive Sculpture, defining a moving target.

Even though I have been carving stylized sculptures for over three decades, I find defining the term stylized, or in some circles interpretive, very difficult. To present this definition, without hand motions or pictures, is even more of a challenge and to adequately define it without comparing it to realistic and abstract carvings is beyond my reach. So, I will attempt this without hand motions, but with plenty of pictures and frequent comparisons.

Since most readers of this magazine are very acquainted with woodcarving competitions and the different categories the carvings are placed in, I will draw from that familiar territory for terms, descriptions, and visuals.

Let's take three basic categories; realistic, stylized and abstract. Now imagine the three categories placed on the color spectrum, realistic on the far left, abstract on the far right and stylized somewhere in the middle. The left side of the spectrum contains the ultraviolet, purples, and blues. Coming in from the far right side are the infrared, deep red, and crimson. The center is composed of greens, yellows, and oranges. Since there are just three primary colors; blue, yellow and red, all other colors on the spectrum are combinations of two primary colors, and not self-defined or pure, like the primary colors.

Even though the human eye is capable of distinguishing six million different colors, no one can make an exact distinction of where blue turns to green or orange turns to red; it gets very subjective, and we get to using the all too popular term "ish". Greenish, yellowish, reddish.

The same holds true in carvings only the "ish" changes to "kinda", "a little bit more", or "not quite as...". But it all plays the same, comparative terms.

So, since color is not the issue here, what is? The main qualifying term in defining stylized is detail. Detail must also be used in a quantifying manner, how much detail constitutes realism, how little detail should a piece have before it qualifies as stylized or abstract? What kind of detail are we talking about here? Is there a distinction between specific details and implied details?

What percentage of the details need to be interpreted through imagination? When is a carving so reliant upon interpretation that it then becomes an abstract. Does abstract mean void of specific detail?

I think some key words used in the questions above can give us insight into our dilemma of finding a good definition for stylized, perhaps even a standard definition. **The key words are; detail, specific, implied, qualify, reliant upon, interpretation and perhaps percentage.**

Using these key words, I am going to compare or slide our carvings across the spectrum using our various "ish" synonyms. For the sake of our analogy we'll say the carving is a falcon in a dive.

Realistic carvings are much more reliant upon specific detail to depict a falcon. Specific details such as individual feathers, the shape, size, color and numbers thereof, help define such specifics as, species, sex, and even age of the bird. These are very *blue* areas of the spectrum. Moving into the *teal to green* area are details stylized can share with realistic. These details are less specific, they include such things as, definition of feather groups, profile or silhouette, body posture, volumes, curves, and planes, both concave and convex. A good realistic carving has all of these, but somewhere in the *green* zone, we lose all or most of the *blue* as we progress toward, pure *yellow* or undisputed stylized.

Details convey information, hence the more information we place in a carving or sculpture, the more specific we can be with our message. It takes more specific information to convey the concept of Prairie Falcon, than just to convey falcon. A stylized carving is not as dependent on specific detail to depict a falcon. As we move from *blue* to *green*, our ability to convey specific information declines, but even in the green zone detail is still at work.

There are certain essentials that define a falcon. Thicker body, an almost parrot like beak, longer tail, sharper tips on the wings. These same essential details are necessary for the brain to register

falcon when viewing either realistic or stylized. Yet a stylized carving can successfully depict a falcon, without the use of color or other individual feather details.

As we move across our spectrum to the right, the carving becomes less reliant on specific detail “information”, to convey the idea of falcon. As we move further to the right on the spectrum the sculpture loses more information, we can still tell it is a raptor, but not what kind. As it moves still further right, we can tell it is a bird in a dive, but there are not enough specifics to tell us what class of bird.

From pure *yellow* we begin to move into *orange*. Once in this realm we have the ability to convey a different type of information, the surrealistic.

This is accomplished through a new set or types of details. The information they convey is processed more by the right side of the brain and is more implied than clearly defined. These concepts need more interpretation, hence we use the classification term, interpretive when speaking of sculptures that contain a high percentage of this class of details.

This is the area of the spectrum where distortion comes into play. In this realm where mind becomes more dependent on imagination and interpretation of the details provided, a negative space may invade the bird removing a portion of wing, yet our minds still see falcon. Wingtips may begin to distort and details become elongated or exaggerated. This straying from the concrete details that define a falcon, prods the mind toward the use of imagination to interpret the lines and forms before the eyes. In this realm, certain intangibles began to unfold before the eyes. Movement, the elongated wingtips, and tail now translate the movement of a falcon in a dive, something stark realism cannot convey because distortion of detail is required to convey that movement. [see photo of falcon in a dive](#)

I know film is in the ash heap of history along with buggy whips and Edsels, but I’ll use the analogy anyway. I am assuming everyone has seen photographs of a hummingbird in flight. A slow speed film shows the clear detail and profile of the body but the wings are a blur contained within an arc shape. We have also seen the same bird photographed with super high speed film. The image captured on that film has the wings in clear definition, yet it looks stiff and strange to our eyes. Why? Because the human brain and eye working together can’t do what that camera and film did. In short, we have never in our experience with hummingbirds actually seen that image, our brains can’t process movement at that speed. So back to our falcon. When watching a falcon dive, our eyes and mind can only really focus on the leading edge, the trailing edge produces a contrail or tracer. Hey, I am doing a hand motion here, you do it too. Take your right hand, hold it out and slightly above your head. Now, quickly drop your hand to your left hip and then back up. How much of the hand’s detail did you focus on during the movement? Did you see a tracer? Maybe God gave my brain an old used 286 for a processor, but, I saw a tracer, and I’m sticking to my story.

When depicting movement of a subject in sculpture you must try to mimic what the eye is capable of seeing. If it sees tracers then carve tracers, that will give a more familiar image for your brain to relate to. In other words, it will look more natural. Tracers depict movement, some helpful techniques on putting movement into sculpture can be found by going to my website and clicking on the “carvers corner” button. But for now, in a nutshell, I have found movement is best accomplished with the use of “S” curves and the rotation of planes, especially concave planes.

If you look at the photos of my sculptures, you will see contrails, the use of “S” curves and plenty of rotating concave planes. You will also see that I put more detail on the leading edges than on the trailing edges, just what the eye is more accustomed to seeing. For example, the head and shoulders contain more detail, and less specifics as I move towards the back. I guess, using our spectrum analogy, my sculptures go from *turquoise* to *green*, to *yellow*, to *orange* and often right on into *deep*

reds. My bases are almost always abstracts or *reds*. They add habitat, feeling, motion and contrast, as well as keeping the subject from falling over.

I do think it is important to add this point. The base is counted as part of the sculpture and needs to relate to the subject or rest of the sculpture. This can be accomplished by several different techniques. My chief way is to use similar lines, mainly “S” curves in both the base and subject matter. Kind of like using paints off the same pallet. That is not a bad idea if you are doing realism and paint your piece. A little accent color to help “tie” the shirt to the pants, so to speak.

I don’t really know where to place this added aspect of stylized, so I will put it here. Stylized affords the artist the ability to transition and transform a subject into something more or different. As one picture is worth a thousand words, it may be easier to see this concept illustrated. In the picture of the sculpture ["High Note"](#) you can see a Barn Swallow transforming into an eighth note. Through gradual transformation from bird to note, using an emphasis on movement, I was able to mix the metaphors of flight and music.

However, something other than bird, flight, or even music is presented in the sculpture, a mood or some intangible, for lack of a better word, *feeling* is presented. This is a difficult concept for me to verbalize, maybe a word picture will help. There is a blank page present for the viewer to write on or see his or her thoughts expressed upon. There is room for private interpretation that falls outside the strict perimeters of stark realism, room for response. Something beyond the control of the artist’s intents occurs in the viewer’s interpretation process. Abstract art is “roomier” yet when I comes to this concept. Personally, I find the mixture of recognizable detail and fluid movement an easier page to write on, when I am the viewer, it is more familiar territory to me.

So, back to reality and the purpose of this article, defining the term stylized.

After saying all that and straying into a bit of philosophy, I will now try a succinct, word only, definition of stylized.

Stylized or interpretive sculpture is a style or art form that depicts a subject in a manner that is less dependent on specific detail and more dependent on the diminishing, exaggeration or distortion of specifics. Rather, relying more heavily on general or implied details, lines, planes, volumes, and forms, in its interpretation and representation of a subject.

How’s that for a mouthful, or a good run on sentence. Or as my collage age son would say “realistic, abstract“, short pause, hand motion.... “ish”.

One more point to add, truly successful stylized sculpture does not include in its definition, poorly designed and executed attempts at anatomy. Distortion of anatomy should be consistent and intentional. As my anatomy teacher, the late Lothar Kestenbaum, once told me, “it takes a better understanding and knowledge of the human body to distort it in art, than to depict it realistically.” While that statement is a little strong, I have found that knowing your subject very well is an essential to successful sculpture in any class.

In summary, stylized sculpture covers a broader portion of the spectrum than either realism or abstract, It affords the artist a greater ability to add movement, mood, and harmony, a more fluid blending of the beauty of the wood with the statement of the artist, than stark realism affords. Meanwhile, it contains enough information in its details, to give the artist a greater vocabulary with which to make his or her statement, than pure abstract provides.

Obviously, I have a preference when it comes to the three styles of carving, all three have their unique contributions to the world of carving. I have chosen to use stylized as my tool of choice with which to contribute. I hope that this article gives you a better understanding of what stylized is and, that it might bring a greater appreciation for this particular art form, perhaps even embolden you to explore a few new colors of the spectrum as you think about carving in the future tense.