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Designer Critique Paper:  
Charley Harper's "Asian Tiger"

Charley Harper, an American graphic artist whose own style he described as "minimal realism," spent his entire adult life as a successful artist. During the forty-plus years Harper spent as an artist, he produced a variety of paintings as well as magazine and book illustrations that held an almost universal appeal because of their simplicity, clean lines and bright colors. Although Harper passed away in 2007 at the age of 84, his work continues to be admired by people of all ages.

Harper's signature design style was both a minimalistic and also a stylized interpretation of objects occurring in nature, such as birds and other wildlife. Harper interpreted natural objects as combinations of simplified geometric shapes. Most of Harper's art was either painted or silk screened and consisted of geometric component parts brought together in shapes and patterns to depict a playful, yet easily identifiable representation of various animals.

Harper's design entitled, "Asian Tiger" is an excellent example of his minimal realism style. Although this design may appear simple upon first look, a closer examination of the piece shows viewers a complex, multi-faceted work of design combining elements of perspective, color and shape.

"Asian Tiger" depicts a simplified view of a tiger surrounded by bamboo. The tiger's face is large and symmetrical and it is the focal point of the work. Initially, a viewer might focus only on the design as a whole, without closely examining its component parts. Thus, it is easy to see that, without close examination, Harper's "Asian

Tiger” could be written off as too simple or child-like to be considered a design of a truly talented master of his style.

However, upon closer examination of the design, various elements begin to come into focus which challenges a viewer's initial interpretation of the work as overly simplistic. Although a quick consideration of the work might provide a viewer with only a head-on perspective of the tiger in the bamboo, further examination reveals far more complexity in the perspective of the design. For example, though the tiger's head is in plain view, it takes several seconds to realize that the tiger's body is slowly slinking toward the foreground as well. As the viewer focuses on the body as well as the head, perspective shifts so that focus is on the back of the tiger, rather than its more prominent head. It then appears that the tiger may not be looking at the viewer dead-on, but may, instead, be gazing upward from the frame. Harper achieves this shift in perspective through a subtle change in shape, from the rounded head and ears of the tiger to the more rigid lines of the body.

Another feature of the “Asian Tiger” design which adds visual interest through contrasting perspectives is the bamboo appearing in what seems to be foreground of the piece. Although the bamboo appears upon first glance to be in front of the tiger, a closer examination of the design demonstrates that the bamboo, too, is more complex than it initially appears. Though there are indeed bamboo leaves framing the face of the tiger, it appears that the bamboo leaves drape over the tiger's back as well. Harper achieves this shift in perspective of the bamboo, from foreground to background without any changes in light or color. Rather, the change is due to the placement of geometric shapes within the design.

In addition to achieving impressive changes in perspective through the use of shifts in placement of geometric shapes, Harper's talent is also demonstrated through his visually exciting, yet appropriate, color choices. In "Asian Tiger," Harper uses the complementary colors of orange and green to catch the eye. However, although these are the most prominent colors in the piece, the design employs a full seven colors -magenta, light orange, lime green, black, white, dark salmon and a deeper shade of orange.

Harper does an excellent job of color combination and placement in "Asian Tiger." The result of the interplay of the different colors is a piece which appears at the same time realistic and also playful. For example, the dark orange color Harper uses aligns perfectly with the analogic colors of the color wheel, including the various other shades of orange, the magenta and the lime.

Because Harper uses only solid colors with no changes in gradation, the depth of the piece must be achieved through other techniques, such as the previously discussed changes in perspective, as well as the use of geometric shapes in the tiger's face. Harper uses black and white accents throughout the otherwise orange shades of the tiger face to achieve a look which makes it appear as though layers stack upon one another, giving the face great depth despite a lack of shading. Similarly, the darker orange and dark salmon on the nose contrasted against the lighter orange shades on the tiger's face also add depth to the design and create the representation that the tiger's snout and nose are in the foreground.

In addition to his use of analogic colors, Harper's use of the lime green as a complimentary color to the orange has both a startling and a visually pleasing effect, which lures a viewer in by making it appear as though the tiger is staring back. The eyes

also share the same color as the bamboo; therefore, while the lime of the eyes may initially grab a viewer's attention, the tiger's eyes serve to push the eyes of the viewer outward, to observe the corresponding lime green bamboo on the fringes of the design.

In addition to creating visual interest through the use of many colors, Harper also employs the intentional placement of geometric shapes to achieve his design goals in "Asian Tiger." The shapes tend to be placed in a very symmetrical and orderly manner; however, in contrast to the symmetrical regularity of the shapes, Harper uses many different geometric shapes in unison, making the angles feel somewhat chaotic.

For example, although a quick look at the design may only reveal the overall representation of the face of the tiger, a closer look reveals that the face itself uses a multitude of different geometric shapes to achieve the minimal realism effect. Harper's design of the tiger's face uses many common geometric shapes from circles to triangles as well as rectangles and arcs. The shapes are lined up on the tiger's face in a fashion which makes use of verticals, horizontals, curves and angles. All the shapes tend to have a corresponding brother shape somewhere else found on the face, which creates a sense of uniformity in the face of the tiger, despite the "Busyness" of all the shapes being used at once. There is also a nice level of detail found in some of the tight spacing of shapes along the face. The detail is pushed out even more by Harper's choice of the smaller shape sizes. The smaller the shapes become, the more they begin to function as lines and borders. These lines/shapes set off implied lines and seem to align with one other, enabling Harper to achieve his signature geometric style. However, in some parts of the design, it becomes difficult to determine whether Harper's lines and shapes do, in fact, line up as well as they do in the face of the tiger. For example, it seems that Harper has

attempted to align the bamboo shoots and leaves with the shapes in the tigers face, but it is difficult to discern whether true alignment has actually been achieved. Additionally, the magenta background activates its negative space by utilizing the bamboo leaves' angles thus creating a colony of sharp tension filled triangles. While these triangles do complement those used in the face of Harper's tiger, there is not direct correspondence. The complete symmetry created in the face of the tiger is somewhat offset by the lack of continuity in the symmetry of the rest of the aspects of the design. The overall effect of Harper's consistent use of geometric shapes is to create an almost cubistic effect.

Harper's "Asian Tiger" is an achievement of the marriage of many different design elements, including the use of varying perspectives; playful, yet purposeful, color choices; and, an exploration of geometric shapes to achieve a design that is both easily identifiable as a representation of a real subject, yet also simplified in such a way as to make it accessible and fun for viewers of all ages. Because of Harper's combination of design elements in pieces like "Asian Tiger," Harper's iconic style has remained popular for over half a century and his work continues to be highly regarded today.



