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IN THE FABRIC OF THE BUILDING



Carved and painted horse. Christopher Alexander, 1985.

I want to go now, to a possibly surprising example: the process of drawing an animal or a plant, and its incorporation into a building. Such a thing may occur within a building — from time to time. That is immediately relevant. But what I have to say now, applies even to a case where the drawing is not part of a building.

When you begin to have a feeling for the unfolding process thoroughly, I think you may find — as I have done — that even the drawing of a single animal is an example of unfolding. The fundamental process has something to teach you, or to give you, even in the drawing of the space between a dog's legs, or the shape of the leaves of a lily, or in the shape of a human eye in a carved head, or in a human breast, or in a fold of cloth since each of these — the breast, cloth, eye, leg, leaf — are centers, and will be shaped most profoundly when you make them centers in their own right, and when you make the space between them centers, too.

The essence of the idea is this. If we want to make a lifelike animal, the usual idea is to draw it as accurately as possible, to try and copy from nature as exactly as you can.

But the strange thing is that making a lifelike bird, in a drawing, has nothing to do with copying exactly. To make a lifelike animal, in a



Invited competition design for the Mountain View Civic Center, with frieze of blue ceramic bas-relief horses around the main courtyard. Painting by Christopher Alexander, gouache on paper, 1987.



Romanesque lion, Ravello, 11th century. An elaboration of the surface of the stone.

drawing or an ornament, we have to make the animal out of centers. If the centers are good centers, then the animal starts to get life. The greater life in the animal comes from the field of centers which is created there, not from copying or “realism.”

This has a strange and paradoxical result. If when drawing a bird, I concentrate on the centers only, not so much on the bird, I may get a bird which is highly stylized, even abstract. Yet it is just this kind of stylized or abstract bird which can sometimes have the penetrating life we admire in works of art.

Look, for instance, at this bird I made for a frieze in a school building. I made it by trying to assemble the bird from bits of tile set in concrete. I cut, shaped, fired, the bits of clay, and I made the whole drawing of the bird work so that the



*Bird for insert into wall panel at the Pasadena Waldorf school, blue tile fragments set into red plaster.
Christopher Alexander.*



*Hand-painted ornamental frieze painted in the Linz Cafe.
Christopher and Pamela Alexander, 1981.*

concrete surfaces between the bits of tile also had life, also existed as centers. As a whole the bird is completely unrealistic. It is what some people would call a stylized bird. But it is a bird which has at least touches of intense life, only because it was made by someone who was paying attention to centers.

Copying a real bird is invaluable, if it inspires an understanding of the deep centers from which its life is made. In that sense, being near a real animal is always inspiring. But then building a living structure out of centers is an entirely different process from simply trying to draw a realistic or naturalistic bird.

Thus even in this case, which seems so remote from the theory of centers or from the theory I have presented, it is the *centers* and the process of creating living centers which give life to the bird.

The real bird, the bird that flies in the sky, gets its life from the centers it is made of. The clay bird, made in tile, gets its life from its cen-



Flowers painted on the walls of the Linz Cafe.

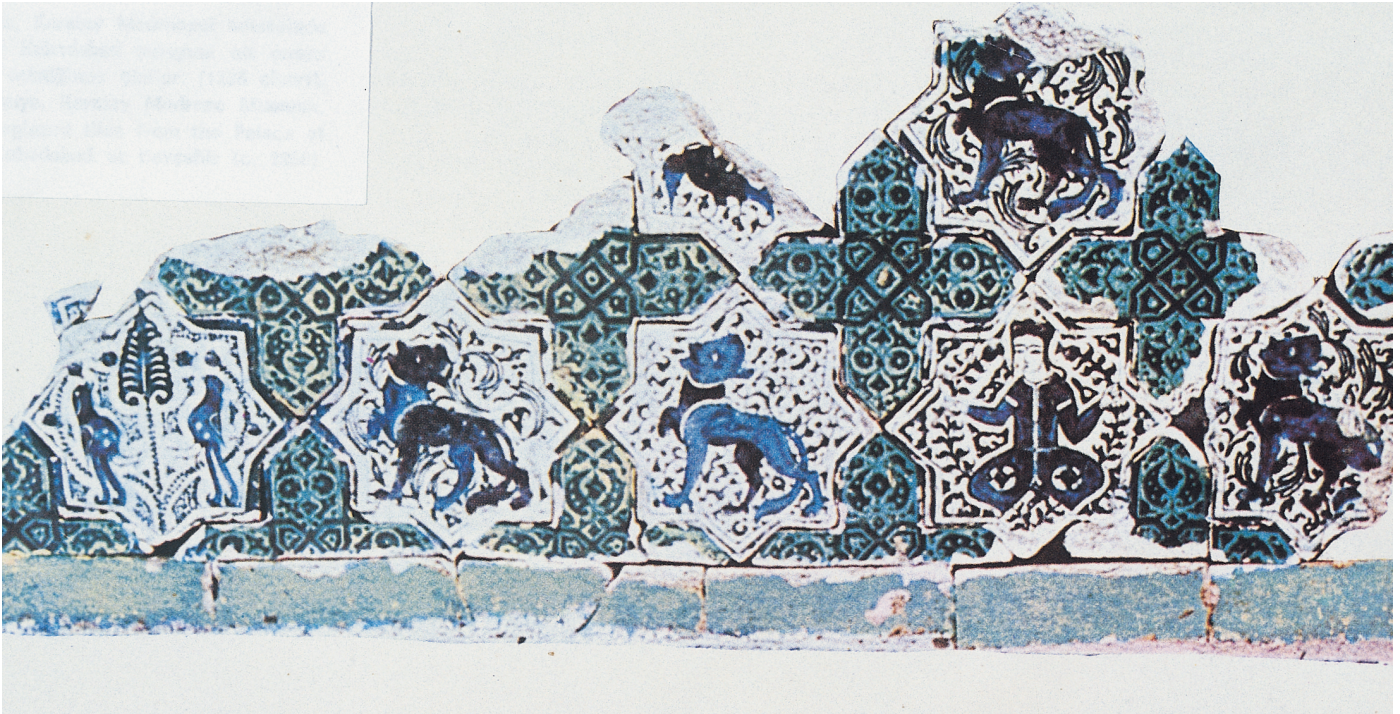
ters, too — not when it imitates the real bird, but when, *like the real bird*, it is a profound and intense field of centers in its own right.

In the history of art and architecture, the great periods almost always have something which we may call stylization in their animals

and figures — not naturalistic ones. The super-realistic animals and people we are used to as “normal” come mainly from the nineteenth century when a wrong-headed sophistication made people begin thinking that super-realistic drawings were somehow more true to life.



Mycenaean vase with hand-drawn lilies painted on it. Each lily flower, stem, leaf is shaped, sized and placed on the surface so that each one fits its larger situation perfectly.



Hand-painted Seljuk tiles of animals and plants, Palace of Dyakbedir, Anatolia, 12th century



Ceramic leopards I placed in concrete floor of the Sala's second house.



The cutout wooden leopard I made as a template for the mold from which we then made the clay leopards for the floor.