

The Creative Process
As
Mastery Over Change

by

Peter Freund



Plate 1. Science and art are bound together by a common theme:
The study of change, the study of process.

Science and art share the study of process. The scientist wants to know the rules and principles of change by which the world of nature can be known and exploited. How nature is constituted, how it changes, progresses and evolves, is the broadly based discipline of the scientist. Scientific knowledge is knowledge of process because there are no static unchanging phenomena.

The artist studies the evolution of form. The evolution of form is the evolution of ideas. The process of development of a form which is novel and appealing is a field of exploration no less deep and no less complex than the scientist's exploration of nature: It is a search into the mind and heart of man.

Let us examine the artist's search. The artist's study of process is more vividly personal than the scientist's. The bare facts of the search, that is the study and the benefit that study has for society, is clearer in the work of the artist. How does a form evolve? By what process do lines and solids in space come to have meaning, and to evoke a response in the artist and audience alike? The transformation of aesthetic elements into a genuine work of art we call the creative process.

What is most significant in the creative process is that it is man-centered. The creation of art is uniquely human. And yet that process cannot be precisely defined or predicted. It cannot be explained or determined according to any set rules or regulations. The description of the creative process must yield ultimately to metaphysics because the science of physical laws of cause and effect cannot be constrained to fit the mold of the creative talent.



Plate 2. The artist studies the evolution of form.
It is a search into the mind and heart of man.

Creativity starts with a number of initial or antecedent elements. These are the elements of line, form, color, texture, hardness and weight; the elements of mood, feeling, maturity and wisdom in the mind of the artist; and the ingredients of the physical medium of communication which may be clay and water and the heat of the fire. The creative process is concluded with the production of a work of art in which all the antecedent elements have been brought together into a whole. The work of art is generated by the antecedent elements, but it cannot be predicted from them. Neither the laws which structure forms, nor the feeling and comprehension in the artist at the moment of creation, nor the clay which was formed can foreshadow what will result. These ingredients are brought together and made to relate to each other according to rules not existing prior to the creation of the work of art. The antecedent elements and their relationships give way to constituent elements and relationships which inhere in the newly formed work of art.

Every work of art is novel. This indicates that the rules or constituent relationships in each work of art are different, and without precedent, either in the established rules of aesthetics from previous works of art, or in the antecedent elements which contributed to it. The nature of the material, the essence of the mind and heart of the artist, and the aesthetics of line and form all contribute to the relationships which can be identified in the work of art after it has been made. The impact or message of the creative product is definable in terms of these constituent elements.

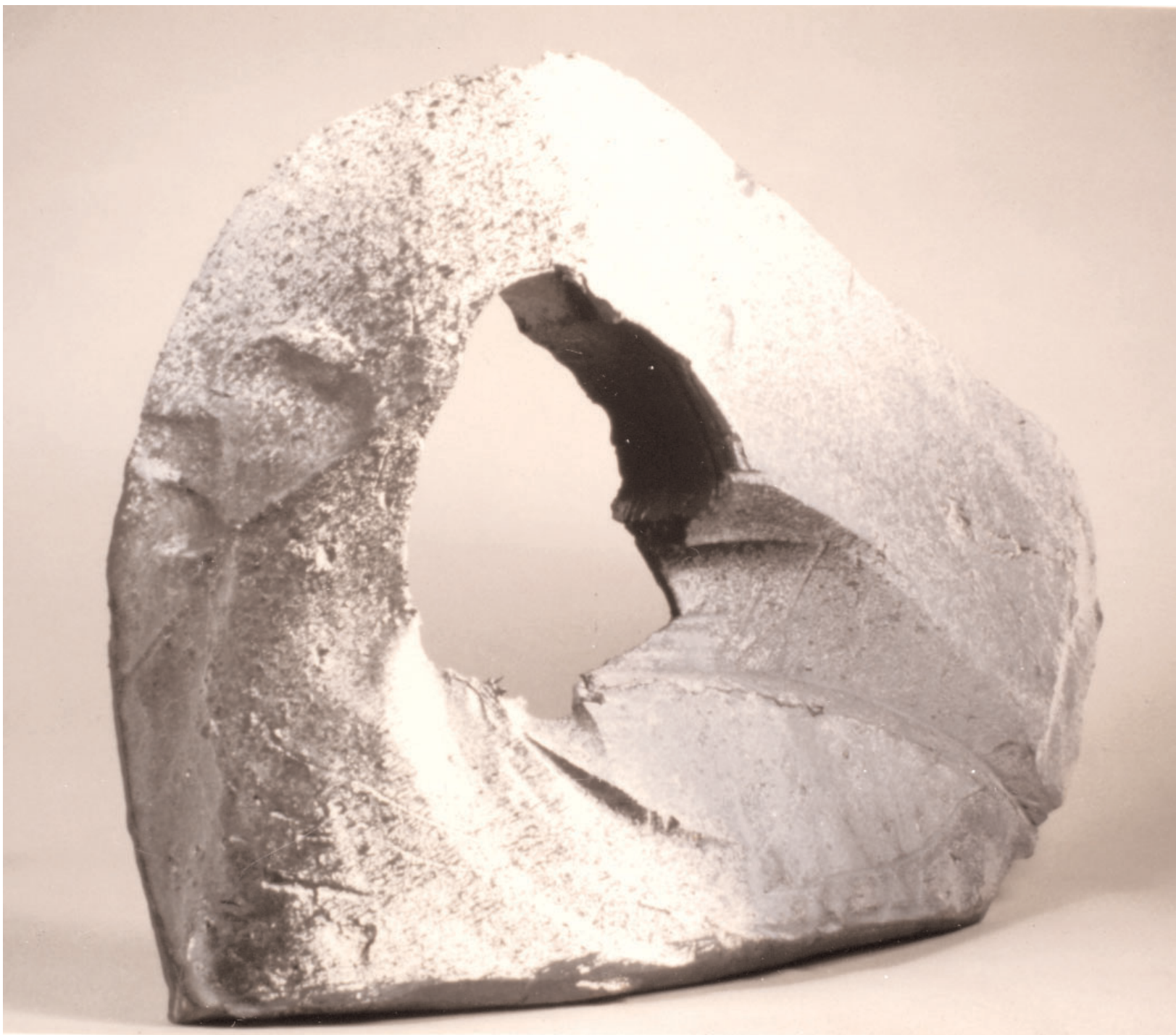


Plate 3. The creative process brings isolated parts together into a whole.

However, explaining creative work in terms of consequent elements alone is to accept it as a given, an object present in nature, and to disregard the contribution of the artist.

What is most essential in the work of art is the link between the antecedent and the consequent elements. The gap between the two is bridged by the creative process. More precisely, it is man, *Homo sapiens*, who is capable of connecting the antecedent and consequent elements. A set of abstract and indeterminate relationships are synthesized and recreated in a determinate and concrete work. The artist's search, the exploration into his own nature, and into the mysteries of the evolution of form, is an inquiry into the relationship between the before and after. The process which links the two is the field of the artist's search, and when that process is mastered a great work of art and a great artist is born.

What makes the creative process inimical to scientific or philosophical investigation--to any sort of investigation other than the artist's natural performance of the process of inquiry-- is the fact that the creative thought springs forth full-blown and complete in the creative moment. As Warren MacKenzie, a nationally known Minnesota potter and professor of art has stated, there is a magic moment when a pot springs to life—and it's an unknown moment. The idea comes of its own accord, and it comes complete. Suddenly all the antecedent elements are brought together in a new structure. And in that flash of insight, called "illumination" by some, there is no sequence. Time does not contribute to an idea which is born whole.



Plate 4. The artist studies the mechanics of change:
He inquires into the relationship of the before and after.

To what extent may we investigate the apparently sudden and timeless link between the antecedent and consequent elements in a work of art, without lapsing into metaphysics, religion or speculation? Our thesis is that the sudden appearance of the creative idea cannot be analyzed further. We may, however, take the creative process as a given phenomenon in man, with the following features:

1. There are antecedent elements which contribute to the creative process, and they are partly objective and partly subjective.
2. There are consequent elements which define the finished work of art, and which did not exist prior to its conception.
3. The link between antecedent and consequent elements is spontaneous and sudden, and without a logical or definable progression.
4. The relationship between antecedent and consequent elements is mediated by the human nervous system through the creative process.

Given these assumptions about the phenomenon of creativity, one principle question remains, namely, “Is there or is there not control exercised by the artist over the relationship or link between the antecedent and consequent elements?” This question is crucial because it strictly determines whether the study of creativity is to be fruitful or not. If the creative process can be controlled, then mastery of the creative process is a degree of mastery over change, it gives a grip on the transformation of life—processes which cannot in turn be defined or controlled. The consequent rules are not pre-existing, and are therefore rules handed down by the fiat of the artist; rules which follow no overarching principle beyond the mind of the artist.



Plate 5. The fundamental question is:
“Does man have control over the creative process?”

If on the other hand, the creative process cannot be controlled, then we are left with a phenomenon which is at best an oddity, an indefinable looseness in the structure of creation.

Our theme is that the creative process can be guided. Through the link between antecedent and consequent elements in the creative process man holds the reins of his destiny. This contention is based on the existence of the ideal of beauty, and in fact, on the existence of all the great ideals for which man aspires. It is the conception of beauty and perfection in the mind of the artist which motivates and guides the synthesis of elements into the work of art as a whole. And it is the character of that ideal of beauty which determines the quality of the synthesis which is generated. Synthesis is not blind, it is fully open to innumerable possibilities, innumerable synergies which can relate the before and after. The artist's standard of perfection, of beauty, whether it be strength, power, depth of concept, or timelessness, alone determines the direction and character of the integration of antecedent elements.

An example will make this point clear. Peter Voulkos was perhaps the most famous American twentieth century ceramic artist. Among other things, he was known for a shard-pile about a third the size of a typical university pottery studio. In the mid-1970's, he once made three or four hundred platters in the hope of being able to keep at least one hundred of them. An ideal of beauty had to be met in each piece. It was an ideal to which clay did not always measure up. If it is not the artist's ideal which determines the depth of beauty of the created work, what can determine it?



Plate 6. The ideal of beauty guides the process of creation and thereby gives the artist mastery over the work of art.

Great artists are men of high ideals, ideals which they themselves often feel are not attained in their work. There is a desire in man to structure the transformation of old into new in his own image, by his own laws, and by his own control, and this desire succeeds and is fulfilled only in the creative process.

There are two significant restraints on the creative process in art which ensure that the work of the artist is fully uplifting and worthwhile. First is the antecedent element of tradition. The knowledge of tradition is the knowledge both of what can be done, and what should be aspired for. In art, tradition consists of those great works which withstand the test of time. Works which continue to reveal themselves, which expose a depth of concept and meaning which is not exhaustible are passed on from generation to generation and become the standards of beauty in culture. Through the works of art that are passed on, tradition provides insight into the ideals cherished in the heart of man that can endure the changing times. The artist identifying himself with tradition transcends the limited boundaries of his individual desires, and takes on the cultural aspirations for immortality and greatness in art. Tradition provides the knowledge of the role the artist can play which will be relevant and beneficial for society as a whole, and by which the artist can bind together his own life with the world in which he lives.

Society demands that the artist's work be relevant to society's ideals of beauty, and to the prevalent standards of appreciation of art. This demand from society represents the second constraint on the artist's work: It is a constraint placed on the consequent elements in the work of art.



Plate 7. Tradition provides insight into the ideals
cherished in the heart of man
which will endure through changing times.

The vision of how the artist can make his life and work relevant to society and to the world is learned by example from the great works of art handed down by tradition. The artist does not imitate tradition. Instead he gives renewed direction and substance to the enduring ideals in the vision of past masters, of what society can and should be.

Art is primarily communication between artist and audience. What the work communicates, and how effectively it communicates is the responsibility of the artist--and it is a responsibility that he holds toward society. The artist's message is his vision, of greatness, of beauty, of an ideal world. Society needs a vision of life which it can aspire for, grow into, and in time fully realize. Society needs direction. Between the idealism of what life should be and the realism of what society is and can comprehend and accept, the artist stands. Behind him are the great artists of the past who succeeded in reconciling these two conflicting poles: The vision of a better world and the perception of life based on its harsher realities. Ahead of him is the fulfillment of life in the reflection of inner perfection and idealism in the outer world. The successful artist binds society back to its own traditions, and at the same time directs it faithfully to the high ideals which represent the enduring visions of centuries and millennia past.

These two constraints on the creative process, the constraint of tradition past, and of society in the present and future, create a tension which is a challenge to the artist. It is an opportunity to give a direction to time. It is an opportunity to enrich and ennoble life.



Plate 8. Society demands a vision of life that is both lofty and practical.

It is a challenge to master the mechanics of process so perfectly, that the stability of the past is maintained steadfastly, without sacrificing dynamic progress towards a better, more ideal world. Training to be an artist is learning how to be true to traditional values without being bound by them; how to accept and promote change without destroying the past which is the firm basis of the present.

The study of process by the scientist is not different from that of the artist. Even though the artist is seeking inside, and the scientist is investigating outside, the creative process is identical in each. The scientist brings to the moment of discovery a set of antecedent elements, and he returns from that discovery enriched by a transformed model of the physical world, which has its own derivative or consequent elements, different from the antecedent ones. The scientist has the same relationship to tradition; he depends on the formulas and principles and mundane research for his knowledge of the world and how to look at it. The scientist has the same responsibility to society as the artist, namely to enrich it by supplying a vision of the direct mastery over the forces of change in the objective world.

If man is capable of governing the creative process, it is a capacity which must be developed and used. Whether in the life of the artist or the scientist, the need is there to give a direction for the growth of society. There is no such thing as “pure research” or pure science” any more than there is “pure art.” Research is always applied as a message or vision to society of what life could be. The scientist’s research must contain the antecedent element of the knowledge tradition, and the goals which



Plate 9. Both the artist and the scientist provide the vision of man's mastery over change. It is an ongoing vision of the fulfillment of life, and it has been the goal of artists and scientists throughout the ages.

scientists in the past have worked towards. And the scientist's research must contain the consequent element of responsibility toward society—because if the work is not intended for the benefit of society, of what purpose is it, either in the short or the long run?

“Standing on the shoulders of giants,” as Newton so aptly put it--the scientist steers a course toward mastery of the objective world. Just as much as the artist, the scientist must be a man of vision. He must have ideals, he must have a vision of a better world. Mastery of the creative process means giving a direction to change, ensuring that life continues in the direction of progress. The individual is required to present his vision of life, and to do what he can to bring that vision of a better future into the present.

That science and art have in common the study of process indicates that mastery over change is the most basic need of society. The need is to give change a direction so that man holds the reins of his destiny, and so that change does not destroy everything that countless generations of artists and scientists have devoted their lives to establishing and preserving. The creative process is the means to investigate changes in the world of nature, and in the mind of man, but the paramount need is to master the creative process itself, so that the direction that society gives to change is the direction of progress and fulfillment of life.



Plate 10. The paramount need is to master the creative process
so that the direction society gives to change is
the direction of progress and fulfillment.