

LIGHT



YUGEN



Consider this picture.

When you see the word “LIGHT” or the picture of the apple, a concept (a category) immediately comes to mind. It happens so fast you cannot stop it. In a sense you see abstractions. You see “light” as a meaningful word and the apple as a fruit; you see them both as types of things.

YUGEN and the picture below it do not, for most people, bring a concept to mind. Both the letters and the picture are associated with concepts only in the minds of people who know what they are.

“YUGEN” means (in Japanese, I am told) “a profound awareness of the universe

that triggers feelings too deep for words” (ironically, it is a word for something too deep for words). And the picture is a picture of a fruit from Indonesia and other parts of Southeast Asia called rabutan.

Note how much more aware you are of the sensuous qualities of the rabutan. This is because you do not know it as a category. Your ignorance is a gift, an entry to another form of knowing. Many of us take the look and feel of the apple for granted—somehow, see it less—than we do the rabutan.

Note also that the letters in “light” are closely associated with the category of light for English speakers. We do not pay much conscious attention to the individual letters. However, the word “light” above is written in a typeface (Algerian) that is not common. In this respect it gives the word a certain sensuality that more normal typefaces do not.

In the case of light and the apple we see abstractions. In the case of YUGEN and the rabutan we see and feel sensual properties. The quick trip our mind takes to abstractions makes much of the world close to invisible. A picture like the rabutan above stops the process and makes us aware of how our mind struggles to find a concept that will in the end eclipse the rabutan. When we very young almost all the world was like rabutan to us.

Note now how the layout of the picture (and the capital letters in, and the

holding of, the words) makes your mind quickly categorize this picture as a table of objects with their names (labels) on top of them. But, of course, this is not true of the rabutan.

The power of seeing this picture as a table of labels is so strong that I bet some people will later, if they ever see the word “yugen” again, remember it as the name of a rare and strange fruit. By the way this is typical of human memory. Human recall is often as much constructed and false as it is a veridical record of fact.

It is a core function of art and science to make the abstract and taken for granted new, strange, and seen again. Art and science do this by short-circuiting our quick expectations about what things are. They ask us to think—and even more to feel—again in a different and new way.

Note ironically how abstraction, both in art and science, can be used to create this “making strange again” effect. Picasso’s abstract paintings of fractured faces and bodies caused us to see the human form again in a new way. The abstract theory and math behind quantum mechanics issues for many people, even some quantum theorists themselves, in wonder and a whole new vision of reality and a concomitant sense of the unreality of what we have taken for granted and categorized.

Seeing the world in terms of expected categories, rather than abundant sensuous properties, is effective for action and survival, until it isn't. It isn't when the world is changing much faster than we are. Then we need to return to sensuality and begin to think (abstract) again and anew and, perhaps, too, this time find a way to stop categories from effacing sensuality.