CHAPTER THREE

CONVENTIONS AND THE GROWTH OF PICTORIAL STYLE

The claim that pictures depend heavily on conventions is problematic.¹ The trouble, or part of it, is that one cannot easily discern the conventional elements in a picture: one wants to know where these elements are to be found and what they are like. Not only this, for in addition one wants to know to what extent pictorial conventions enter into and govern the activity of depicting. My aim in this chapter is to answer these questions; and I shall begin by describing two different kinds of pictorial convention.

1. Two Kinds of Pictorial Convention

It often happens that a depictor follows certain rule governed methods or procedures when attempting to produce a picture of an object. Such procedures must be understood not merely as formulae for depicting one particular object, but as procedures arrived at by interdependent decision for depicting an indefinite number of (fictional or non-fictional) visible objects. Following Lewis, we may say that when these procedures become widely accepted among the members of a given population, they become conventional.² They are what I shall call ‘umbrella’ conventions since they provide a means of depicting not merely one or two, but a vast number of, visible objects. For instance, we could have an ‘umbrella’ convention whereby, in order to draw an object, we simply trace (on paper) the outline of the object from a ‘standard’ point of view. A picture of a dog produced under this convention would consists of a simple line drawing of a dog in profile; and one can apply this convention not only when depicting dogs, but when depicting cows, motor cars and many other visible objects besides.

which the procedures of multi-view and single-view drawing were disastrously confused, and ending with the orthographic methods of projection of the present century. Orthographic projection involves a point-for-point rendering of the structure of objects: a method which has proved to be remarkably successful not only in engineering, but in many other crafts as well.3

‘Umbrella’ conventions, then, provide a general guideline within which the depictor operates. In addition, as L. R. Rogers has pointed out, such conventions delimit the amount and kind of information a picture can be used to convey. We know, for instance, that we cannot accurately gauge local colour in an Impressionist painting, that we cannot hope to take reliable measurements of physical objects from a picture drawn in perspective, and that, in isometric drawings, we can only take measurements from isometric lines, and never, for instance, from non-isometric diagonals.

So far I have isolated only one kind of pictorial convention, but there is another which deserves attention. Each pictorial convention of this second type consists of a widely accepted method or formula for depicting some particular kind of object — for example, a face, a tree, a bird, an ear — and not, as in the case of ‘umbrella’ conventions, a vast number of different kinds of objects. In many discussions of this topic these formulae are referred to as schemata, and any picture produced in accordance with such a formula is a schematic drawing, a schematic image, or a schematic picture.

A schema, then, is not a kind of picture, but rather a method or formula for arranging lines and colours in a way which results in a picture of a particular object or kind of object. Certain schemata, moreover, are widely accepted as solutions to specific pictorial coordination problems, and may thus be regarded as pictorial conventions. Note, however, that not all schemata are conventional. If all were, an artist could never be said to develop a new, as yet unconventional, schema; but art historians have no hesitation in attributing such innovations to the great masters of the past. E.H. Gombrich, for instance, mentions Leonardo’s invaluable development of the naturalistic tree schema; as well as such conventional schemata as those of De Wit, Rubens and Van de Passe for depicting children, of Schöhn and Fialetti for heads and eyes, and of Vogtherr for the human foot.4

---
