

# The Secret Language of Form: Visual Meaning in Art and Nature

Book Review by  
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- by Van James (2007) Published by Rudolf Steiner College Press  
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When I read Van James' new book on art, *The Secret Language of Form*, I was immediately inspired to begin writing a book of my own called, "The Secret Form of Language." This is not the first time I have felt the synchronicity between Van James' work and my own aspirations for the arts of speech and drama. The first occasion was when Van James spoke at our conference in Christchurch, New Zealand on Art and Consciousness. It was here I heard him break down the word "responsibility" into the phrase, "response ability." I knew then that I had the inspiration to continue my own work. I thought: "Which one of the arts develops the greatest ability to respond to all the manifold demands of modern life?" For me it is drama – and live performance. So began my inspiring journey of looking into Van James' wisdom about the Spirit and Art.

As with Van James' previous book, *Spirit and Art: Pictures of the Transformation of Humanity*, the production of the book is pleasing both to the eye and to the hand. The pages are arranged with easy relationship of the text to the many illustrations. There is space on every page for someone like me, who makes notes and references to other places where the text sends me roaming.

Van James is interested in communicating. His investigation into art is about exploring the language of form and how it has both educated and shaped us.

The opening sentence in the foreword caught my attention completely:

*"There is a language that the people of all lands, cultures, and times have spoken to communicate their deepest truths and aspirations. This language is the same language Mother Nature speaks through all her creations."*

In his first book he describes the journey of art from ancient times, through many civilisations to our present time with its call to arms and its over abundance of things to look at. This new book delves deeply into the forms that surround us, in nature, in the things we build and create, in the rituals and scribblings of our children and our great artists.

Van James is not only an artist with a paint brush and colour, he shows once again in this book that he is an artist of the word, presenting his theories and his examples with clear but evocative language, leading us to an experience of the things we are seeing, and describing them to us in a way we can retain and examine for ourselves. He takes us into seven basic categories of form for easy examination: Curve and Straight; Point and Dot; Circle and Spiral; Chevron, Zigzag and Lattice; Ladder, Spine and Tree; Symmetry; Cross and Swastika. The book is also full of wonderful quotes that illustrate the formative nature of art:

*"The image cannot be dispossessed of a primordial freshness which ideas can never claim."*

- John Crowe Ransom

*"Art does not represent the visible, it makes visible."*

- Paul Klee

This is a book that should be read far more widely than in our Steiner School communities. It is a book which enriches our understanding of our human journey, rich with symbols to live up to and into. It is a feast of visual imagery and explanations of cultural forms and illuminations of modern life – even to seeing why some of our commercial products succeed more than others. The photos, reproductions, diagrams, drawings are beautiful and clearly shown. The text explores the things we see around us and the end result is that the reader begins to be mobile in a new visual language.

My own artistic endeavour is more directed to the word, but time and again I found that Van James' descriptions of form and the language within it elucidated my own studies and teaching. I have found that I am quoting him in my classes with adults and reaping the benefits of his clarity with rich responses from my students. I read the book in one sitting for the first time, but know I will return to it many times both to study the text and to engage with the pictures of form and shape. I am inspired to attend an art class or work on some of the forms in this book just to learn more about what surrounds me in the world as the Secret Language of Form.