

Typographic Anamorphosis

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Anamorphosis, an optical phenomenon meaning “return of form,” consists in the perception of a deformed figure as a normal figure. An example of letter-anamorphosis recently applied in Holland is discussed and illustrated.

Anamorphosis, an optical phenomenon, means “return of form” and consists in the perception of a deformed figure as a normal figure. If you slowly turn a portrait photograph (after viewing it from in front) on its horizontal axis so that its front is only just visible, you perceive a deformed figure of reality, a flattened figure, as it were.

Anamorphosis is exactly the reverse phenomenon.

Suppose you have a photograph of such a flattened figure and you turn it slowly on its vertical axis so that its front is only just visible. What you perceive then is the real figure of a distortion in which the original form returns. Thus, anamorphosis is perception of reality by means of a deformed figure.

This phenomenon was put to use in mural and other paintings as far back as the sixteenth century (Fig. 1). The figures applied are so much distorted that when seen from in front they become unrecognizable. If, however, you look from a distance at an angle you will see a clearly recognizable presentation in perfectly real figures. All kinds of curved and non-curved surfaces were thus provided with paintings. The particularly ingenious projections that had to be made for these purposes still deserve our admiration.

A Dutch traffic sign for bicycles is an example of contemporary use of anamorphosis (Fig. 2).

Another example is the letter-anamorphosis designed by the authors of this article which has been recently applied at the DSM (chemical industries) head office in Holland (Figs. 3 & 4). It was desirable for

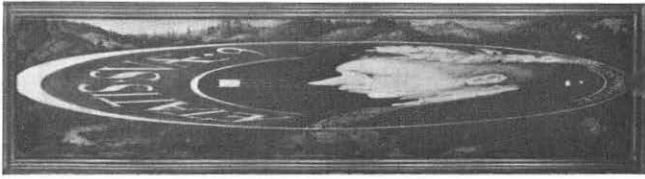


Figure 1. Anamorphosis portrait of King Edward VI of England (1537–1553). Artist unknown. Top: as seen from the front; bottom: as seen from the side. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

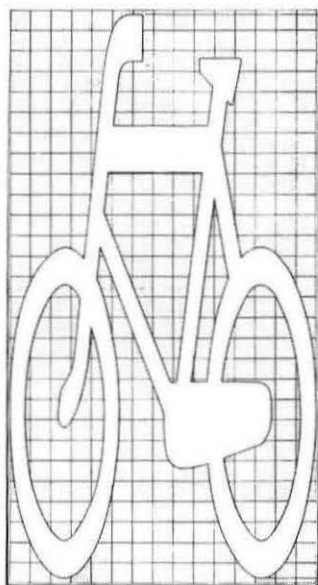
the monotony to be relieved in a long (36 meters) and narrow (1.4 meters) communication passage between two divisions, e.g., by hanging photographs. However, nothing would come of viewing wall photographs in such a busy passage while passing at a distance of barely one meter. By applying the letter-anamorphosis “DSM,” the disadvantage of an elongated space was turned into an advantage. When you enter, the letters “DSM” are clearly legible, and when you are passing, the letters themselves are not recognizable. This is a curious sensation which makes the space more interesting.

REFERENCE

Jurgis Baltusaitis, “Anamorphosis,” *Collection Jeu Savant* (Paris: Olivier Perrin Editeur, 1955).



Figure 2. Dutch road sign
(*Netherlands State Journal*, No. 3, 1967).



DSM

Figure 3.
Letter anamorphosis
at DSM, 1967.

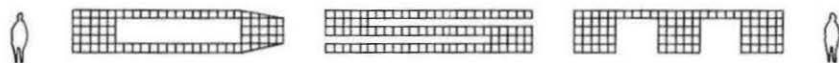


Figure 4. Letter anamorphosis
as installed at DSM.

