

Modern Design -- Free-form or Abstract?

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When well done, no two modern arrangements are alike. All of them are free of the geometric patterns and design rules that characterize traditional arrangements. This allows an almost infinite range of design possibilities. With this freedom, however, there comes a challenge of placing components into patterns of lines, forms, colors, textures, and open spaces, which are exciting, yet adhere to the six principles of design. (Those principles are best remembered by the mnemonic phrase BaD CRoPS: balance, dominance, contrast, rhythm, proportion, and scale.)

Within the boundless freedom of modern design, there are also classifications of design styles. Two of the most popular are labelled free-form and abstract. Learning these two styles will carry you through 99% of the modern classes in rose shows today.

What do these two styles have in common?

They contain a minimal amount of material, creating an uncluttered look.

- They feature strong, dynamic lines, conveying a sense of movement.
- They incorporate space, within and around the design.
- They utilize bold colors, forms, contrasts and/or textures
- They showcase roses of exceptional quality.

So, what makes them different from each other?

Free-form design takes its inspiration from nature. Just look at the twists and curls, zigs and zags, loops and spirals of natural line materials. Look at the colors and textures and forms available, and imagine how they can be used in bold and intriguing combinations.

A free-form design might display some traditional qualities, like a general line-mass structure, and yet be distinctively different because of the unusual materials used or the presence of contrasting lines (vs. a single line predominating). In fact, some traditional characteristics, like lining up roses in a graceful curve through the center of the design, can create a sense of unity in the midst of contrasts.

Free-form designs may have more than one point of emergence, or more than one focal point (featured area). There may be parallel lines or repeated patterns in the placement of materials. The overall effect is surprising, fresh and new, but harmonious and natural.

Abstract design, on the other hand, takes its inspiration from other forms of art, especially painting and sculpture. For abstract arranging, do not think of materials as the objects they are (roses, leaves, stems, containers), but rather think of them as objects which have certain characteristics (shape, color, texture). Forget the identity of the object, just manipulate it for its visual qualities.

Abstract design is total concentration on space, line, form, texture, color, pattern, and contrast, to create a purely decorative or expressive design. Materials can be placed in unnatural positions, like the time-honored trick of hanging a rose upside-down. The arranger can exaggerate the sense of abstraction by knotting, twisting, cutting, curling, or tying plant materials. Man-made materials can also be used to good effect, but the roses must always predominate.

The most important aspect of abstract design is not performing unnatural acts on unsuspecting materials, but rather, putting materials to their best use for visual effect. For example, there was a design at the ARS National Show in San Jose, entitled Modern Art, composed entirely of feathers (which created a mesmerizing pattern), except for the single rose at its heart. A good abstract design first evokes the reaction of "Wow!", and afterwards, the question of "How did they do that?" There should never be a question of "Why?"

As stated in the ARS Guidelines for Judging Rose Arrangements, each arrangement is an individual's signature in plant material. This is true in the sense that each arranger develops a unique look and personal style. But it is also true, as in handwriting: poor penmanship (i.e., not adhering to the six design principles) can render the result indecipherable, resulting in a failing grade! So, rejoice in the expression of your individuality through the creation of modern free-form and abstract designs. But remember that freedom does not equal chaos. Let there always be a method to your madness!

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