

Illustration as Art—Shape

by Mary M. Erbach

Look around. Forms and shapes are everywhere in our world. Basic shapes such as circles, ovals, triangles, diamonds, rectangles, and squares can be altered or combined to create more complicated and less defined shapes. Three-dimensional forms such as spheres, cylinders, pyramids, or cubes can be translated two dimensionally into shapes on paper. This article focuses on the way shapes are used in illustrations by seven picture-book artists, ranging from simple painted and outlined shapes to complex and precise drawn and cut-paper compositions. As you explore these books, begin to develop a vocabulary with children to help them describe more clearly what they see.

Hands-On Learning

For “Hands-On Learning” activities designed to accompany a discussion of these books, visit the *Book Links* Web site at <http://www.ala.org/BookLinks> and click on “Web Connections.”



Also note that previous “Illustration as Art” articles are available for download on the *Book Links* Web site. To access them visit <http://www.ala.org/BookLinks> and click on “Archive of Online Articles,” then select “Subscriber Favorites.”



Bryan, Ashley. *Let It Shine: Three Favorite Spirituals*. 2007. 40p. Simon & Schuster/Atheneum, \$16.99 (9780689847325).

Award-winning author-illustrator Ashley Bryan cuts and arranges colored papers into lyrical compositions in this book celebrating three favorite spirituals. The pages explode with vibrant interlocking shapes and designs that interpret the words. In this verse from “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands,” break down the intricate composition by looking at the different-colored shapes. The animals’ eyes are made with circles, and sharp teeth and claws are made with triangles that stand out against contrasting backgrounds. Bird silhouettes are a single cut-out shape, while larger animals are constructed with many freeform shapes that fit together like a puzzle. The furry mane of the lion is layered with repeated spike-edged shapes that change in size and tone. Look closely for the green-striped hand supporting the scene.

Dillon, Leo, and Diane Dillon. *Rap a Tap Tap: Here's Bojangles—Think of That!* 2002. 32p. Scholastic/Blue Sky, \$15.95 (9780590478830).



Although it looks like cut paper, the illustrations in this Coretta Scott King Honor Book were made by painting shapes of flat color. In this illustration Bojangles leads a group of dancing children who are distinguished by their clothing. Striped and checkered shirts, a scalloped ruffled collar, and hats and bows are constructed with simple repeated shapes. Bojangles is dressed in a solid-colored suit painted as one shape, the edges of his jacket and pant legs flaring at the bottom. Shadows of his legs fan out at the knee, and swaying shoelaces indicate nonstop movement and speed. Bojangles' bow tie, formed by two black triangles, is placed in the middle of his white shirt, which is shaped like an upside-down house. As you look at this picture, invite children to identify the shapes with rounded and straight edges. Examine how layered rectangles in the background form buildings.



Goble, Paul. *The Girl Who Loved Wild Horses*. 1978. 32p. Simon & Schuster/Atheneum, \$17 (9780689845048); Aladdin, paper, \$6.99 (9780689716966).

This 1979 Caldecott Medal winner tells of a young Native American girl who has a deep understanding of horses. Paul Goble's paintings are full of detail and complexity, but upon closer examination, viewers will see that a few simple shapes, outlined in black or white, are repeated over and over and carefully arranged to create intricate compositions.

On the left side of this illustration, a simple tear shape is repeated many times and colored with subtle shades of yellow, orange, and brown to create leaves on a tree that cascade from the edge of the page. A flame shape is repeated horizontally to illustrate a school of small blue fish swimming in the water. A few horses drinking from the river are reflected in a mirror image. Have children examine a single cattail and see that it is a brown oval speared on a blade of grass and then duplicated many times until a field emerges, spread along the bottom of the page, camouflaging tiny birds.



Jenkins, Steve, and Robin Page. *What Do You Do with a Tail Like This?* 2003. 32p. Houghton, \$15 (9780618256280).

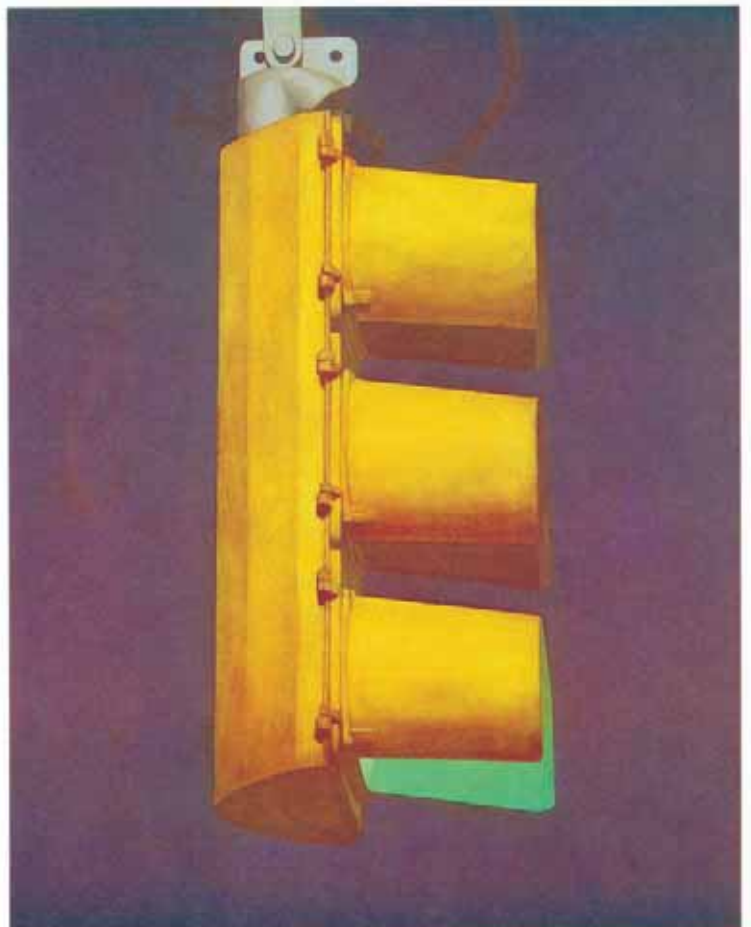
This Caldecott Honor Book focuses on the remarkable characteristics of various animal body parts. Steve Jenkins cut out a variety of different paper shapes to “build” each animal, giving his two-dimensional pictures a sculpted quality. Have children

examine this double-page spread and look for circles and ovals. The eyeballs and pupils of these animals are round. How do eyelids change the shapes? Identify three-sided shapes that resemble triangles. Look for shapes with curved edges, such as the eagle’s beak, the gill of the fish, and the horns on the lizard. What other shapes repeat?

Johnson, Stephen T. *Alphabet City*. 1995. 32p. Viking, \$16.99 (9780670856312); Puffin, paper, \$6.99 (9780140559040).

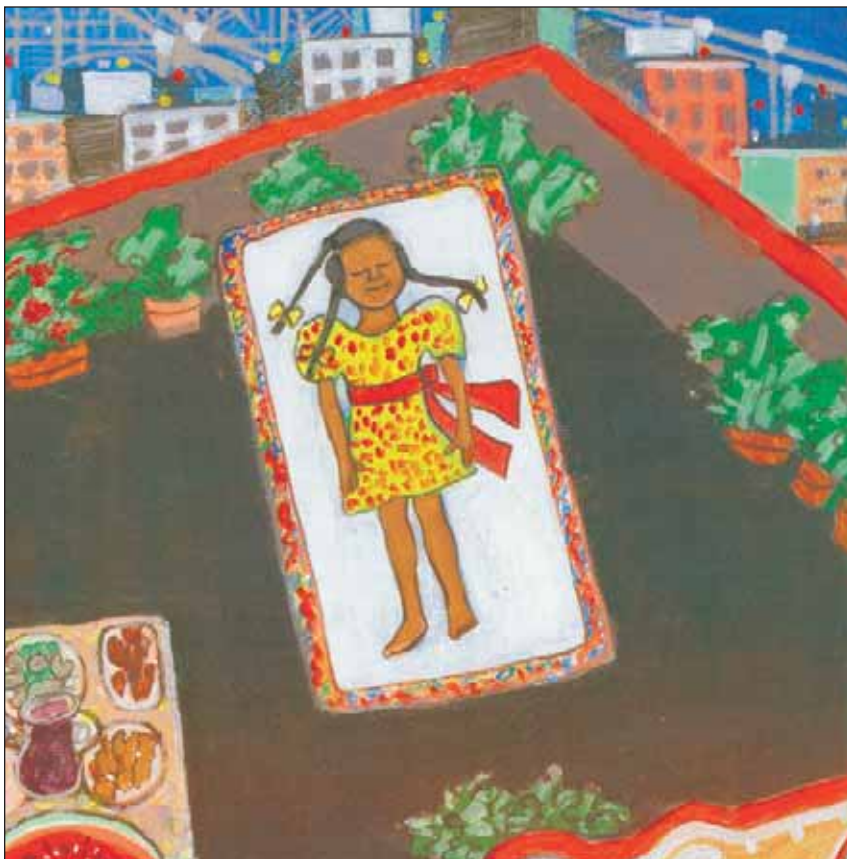
It’s difficult to believe that Stephen T. Johnson’s precise city scenes are not photographs but hand-drawn by the artist with paint, charcoal, and pastel. In this Caldecott Honor alphabet book illustrated with pictures of objects, a yellow traffic light made of round canisters flattens into a capital *E*. The vertical part of the fixture is a series of parallel lines that curve around into a half cylinder. Help children see how dimensional objects in outdoor and indoor scenes become flattened into shapes when drawn or photographed. On paper, a circle can represent a ball or sphere, a square can represent a cube, and pyramids and cones become triangles.

Other illustrations in the book also heighten awareness of three-dimensional forms that are represented as two-dimensional shapes. On the opposite page of this book, the terra-cotta bricks representing the letter *D* become a series of rectangles and triangles.



Lehman, Barbara. *The Red Book*. 2004. 32p. Houghton, \$12.95 (9780618428588).

Clean, simple pictures illustrate this charming, wordless Caldecott Honor Book featuring a city girl and an island boy who become aware of each other through an enchanted red book. The illustrations are composed of flat tones outlined in fine black lines, reminiscent of pictures in a coloring book. Vantage points change from page to page as the artist leads us through the story by zooming in and out of scenes. This illustration is divided into four squares, suggesting the windowpane of a classroom with tiny dots of snow falling outside. The children have discovered each other on the pages of their books and are expressing surprise. Their round eyes, mouths, ears, and heads are contrasted with the rectangles and squares of the windowpanes and the pages of the children's books, as well as the shape of Lehman's own book.



Ringgold, Faith. *Tar Beach*. 1991. 32p. Crown, \$18 (9780517580301); Dragonfly, paper, \$6.99 (9780517885444).

This Caldecott Honor Book is based on a story quilt Faith Ringgold made also called "Tar Beach." The brushstrokes here are relaxed, and the shapes have soft, sketchy edges. Here, the main character, a little girl, is lying comfortably on a building rooftop in 1930s Harlem. The white mattress she is lying on highlights her yellow dress, red sash, and braids with bows. Surrounded by a colorful border, the mattress contrasts with the black surface of the roof, as does the picnic on the left. A red border outlines the roof, flowerpots decorate the inner edges, and in the distance, buildings are represented by rectangles spotted with brushstrokes of gray. Small circles of light on the distant bridge glow in the night sky.

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