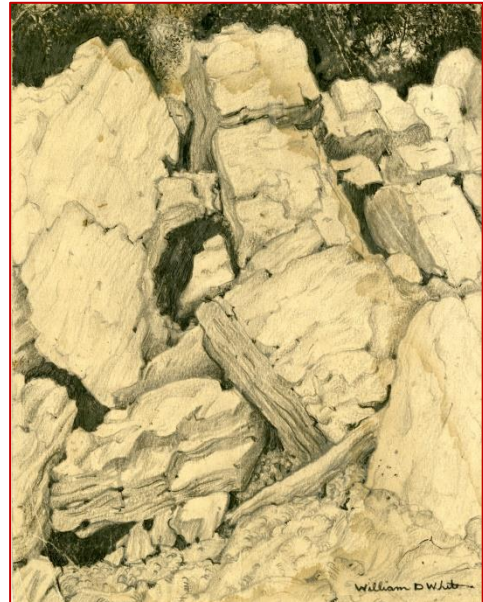


William D White: The Aesthetics of Natural Objects

By Nancy Carol Willis

Both artworks displayed on this page depict granite boulders from the piedmont woodlands near William D. White's home in north Wilmington, Delaware. They reflect White's fascination with nature closely observed. In *Spring Torrent* (below), the title and the emerging skunk cabbage plants inform the viewer that the season is early springtime. White pulls the viewer in close to view snow melt cascading over rocks in swirling eddies while trapping debris along the shoreline. The water, brown from churned-up sediment, contrasts against the light gray rocks. The largest boulder is centrally placed, anchoring an asymmetrically balanced design.

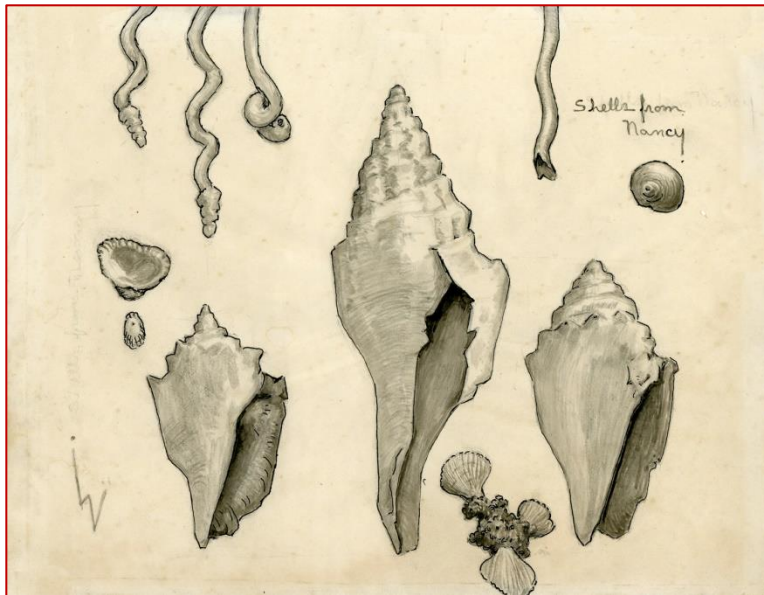
Untitled (woodland boulders),
n.d., ink & pencil on toned paper.



Spring Torrent, c1957, 30x40, oil on canvas.

In the drawing of stacked boulders (top, previous page), White describes their texture and geometric structure in depth. In both of these compositions, White crops out the background landscape, compressing space into a shallow depth of field. The rocks in both artworks appear stacked onto vertical planes rather than receding into space.

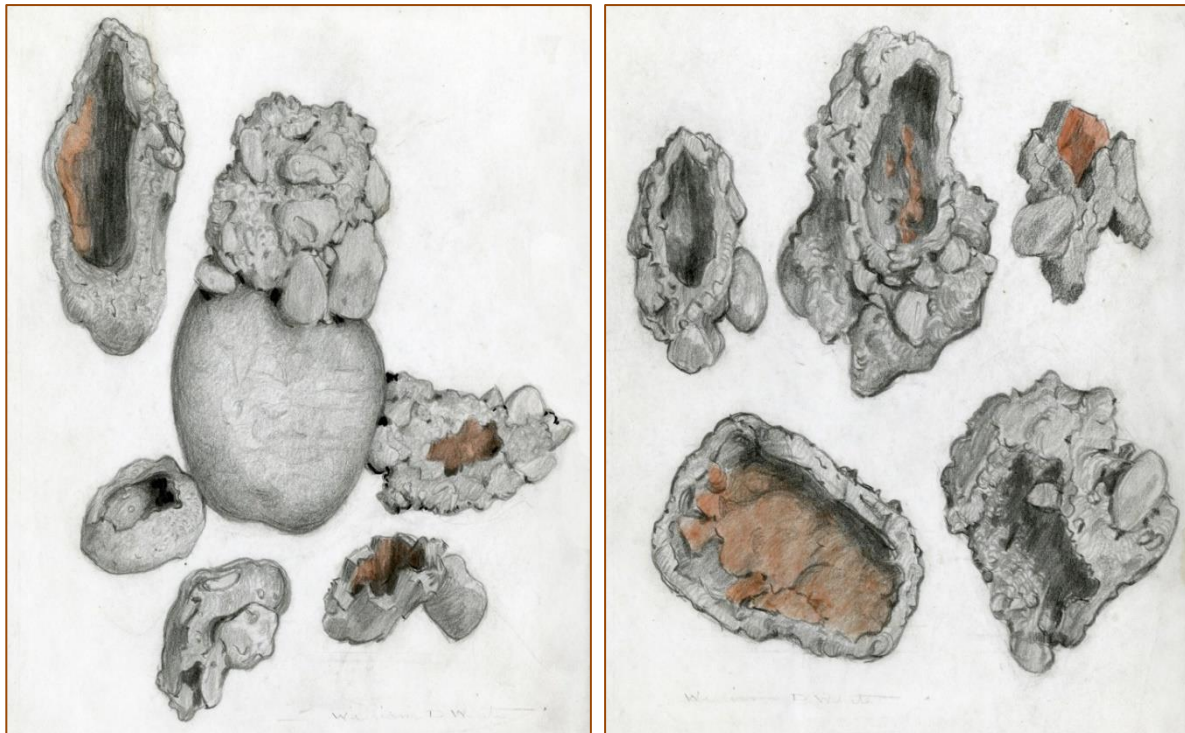
White may have adapted the Japanese concept of aesthetic simplicity for his representations of natural objects. He admired Japanese architecture, landscaped gardens, and woodblock prints. (See the end of the article for sources).



For example, the concept of *Kanso* refers to simplicity by eliminating the clutter. Clarity can be achieved by omitting the non-essential or, in White's drawings, the background context. The seashells and rocks in these drawings are arranged as if they were floating in space.

The Japanese concept of *Fukinsei* describes asymmetrical balance achieved through irregularity within a composition. Note in *Shells from Nancy* (left) how White balances the title in the upper right with his signature in the lower left.

Shells from Nancy, c1964, pencil and ink on paper.



Untitled, (iron ore geodes) n.d., 8.5x11, mixed media on paper.

According to the principle of *Shibui/Shibumi*, beauty is achieved through understatement; compositions should demonstrate an elegant simplicity. The drawings of seashells and iron ore geodes appear quite natural, as if White spread the objects onto his table and drew them where they lay. However, a key difference between Japanese and Western design is the concept of *Ma*, or negative space. Western art uses terms such as figure and ground, or positive and negative space to describe the objects against their background, often referred to as “empty space.” In Japanese design the *Ma* is viewed more like dynamic open space. A close look suggests that William D. White did not randomly place his objects. Instead, he carefully arranged them in terms of size, orientation, overlap, and whether they “bleed” off of the page. He considered the background as an active component of the overall design.



Compare William D. White’s lyrical colored pencil drawing of milkweed with the adjacent Japanese woodblock print for their design similarities: elegant simplicity, asymmetry, omitting the non-essential, and treating the background as an integral part of the overall composition.



Hercules Powder Company,
The Paper Maker. 1956 vol.2. cover.

Sources:

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