

[Voiceover] Does the right angle have meaning, or is it just a repeat of the picture frame? In answer to this question, Michigan State University presents The Language of Art with James McConnell. This program is a presentation of the Department of Art. [James McConnell] This evening we're going to have a real scholarly approach to our presentation. In short, we're going to have footnotes. I've been leafing through this book on the early cave paintings found in Lascaux and we're talking about the right angle and we find even at this very early stage in man's history - the beginnings of art as we know it now - we find recurrences of the right angle. Here's one here and another in this page. Perhaps the thing we're most familiar with is a very remarkable handling of animals and occasionally the human figure is shown just as a little sort of stick figure but these rectilinear symbols recur throughout the the cave here and there. No one of course knows what they mean or what they relate to but it's fortunate for us in art that they're there because it gives us an example of the use of this particular device at the earliest possible time in man's development as an artist and we don't need to know their literal meaning. Now in this program we tried to make the point that art is a unique language, that it has no exact counterparts in the spoken language or the written language but the elements that the artists use have meaning in themselves and having made this point or I hope we've made it now let's at the moment depart from a minute. The horizontal line and the vertical line are something that we can attribute a general meaning to, a meaning that accrues from their actual existence, and their appearance in art. The horizontal line for example it's constant steady movement suggests the horizon which is somewhere always about us and generates a feeling of repose, of stability, it gives us a sense of security, We know we stand on the floor that's not perfectly level we feel insecure so that we're acting with our Eustachian tubes maybe. The vertical has another meaning I think it represents man's striving upward for things beyond his immediate environment, as almost a religious significance and the gothic cathedral is an excellent example in which man tried to go as far up in those days as he could. Now put together, they give us a framework of general stability that furnish a uniform control to the artist when he uses them. Now before we go any farther, I'd like to sort of go over the ground again. How are they used mechanically? Technically? Well this is familiar to you now I'm sure. As we see the horizontal and vertical line or the right angle as the frame of the picture, then we see it as lines perhaps - we've studied many Mondrians - the right angle couldn't be visualized as the edge of a shape and related to other right angles and so on. This is very easy to understand. It also occurs well for example if we have some formless impulses arranged on the page in some way or another their combination produces another kind of horizontal in that it's an implied or felt horizontal movement or if it's some kind of a crazy shape that has no definite beginning or end but if its proportions are lengths greater to width we again feel that it has a direction and it may have an axis or a backbone that in itself is a right angle. So that this can be put into relation with a frame or with naked perfectly expressed lines or shapes that have edges that are easily identifiable as being rectilinear and in that way work together in a scheme that is in itself strongly rectilinear. Now when does the right angle occur in art? Well we see it's occurred at the beginning and without trying to explain that let's move along a little closer into our own time, a little closer. This is 13th, 14th century, the beginning of the Renaissance which in turn was the beginning of modern art and this is Giotto, one of the earlier painters, who makes for us kind of the bridge between the Byzantine school and our present approach to art. And here I don't think it's necessary to point out the way he is using verticals and horizontals to lock his design in place, the use then of the horizontal and vertical stabilizes what he's trying to show us and gives him freedom to experiment with in this case a new way of presenting the human form; it's personal and humanized and

he thus introduces an entirely new feeling in his art. And as I point out the horizontal and vertical permits him to do this with a certain amount of stability. Now moving quickly a great many centuries to Cezanne now this painting is I think 1905. He worked at the end of the 19th century and one might say that Cezanne was the Giotto of contemporary art, in that a lot of discoveries he made are being exploited even today. But immediately, probably the first thing you recognize is the horizon. And Cezanne has used that to give him the liberty to experiment with the other elements in this landscape. And what we have is almost a complete abstraction, in that all this recognizable, at least in black and white, is the presence of the sky and earth. His way of looking at form leads us to something a little more in our own time and jumping the Impressionists getting to Seurat, who is a kind of culmination of the Impressionists. The Impressionists used this technique of little dots of pure color to suggest atmosphere, vague space, and vague forms. Seurat has used this device but coupled with it a feeling a structure and the kind of structure he used is obviously based on the vertical and the horizontal. Now look for this division of the space again you'll see it several times this little strip of horizontal area, sometimes at the top, sometimes at the bottom. We've talked about Mondrian a great deal, he's a very handy painter in any discussion of art structure. Here's a portrait of him and coupled with one of his earlier works, which derives from Cezanne. He's using segments of line based in a horizontal and vertical scheme to give him the right to experiment with form. The Cubists, this is a Picasso from about 1914 or 18 experimenting with natural form, sort of exploding it, recreating it on the canvas and using this recurring horizontal and vertical edge to give him the stability he needs while he's making all these strange applications of human configuration. This is another, a still life, and you note that the horizontal and vertical is not adhered to too rigidly as he gains confidence begins to introduce variations. This is a collage utilizing pasted on strips of extra material in this case a newspaper and what could be more horizontal and vertical in the structure than newspaper arranged in a kind of a radiating design? This is a little later a Braque and you notice the departure from the rigid up and down is beginning to be felt a little more obviously in the diagonal pose of this guitar shape made out of in this case a piece of material that at least expresses parallelism, another variation of the right angle. There's a later Picasso. His experiments with form have led him a little closer back to natural form but he's still using in this case a vertical row of apples or a horizontal row of apples a vertical series of lines to form a pattern in the background to provide the basis for the freedom he needs to experiment with the shapes and colors that he's chosen for his subject. Think back for a minute to Seurat and compare it with this Paul Klee. There is great similarity in the surface he's using small dabs of color but with obvious horizontal and vertical breakups in his surface again to give him stability and recognizable design at the same time the right to experiment. In our own times in our own country this is Stuart Davis, a direct offshoot I think of Cubism and here's this little strip across the top of the picture again. But he's translated the American scene into flat shapes very much like the Picasso still life. And just to prove that art doesn't have to be deadly solemn he leaves us a message, it says "Dig this Fine Art Jive" in one corner. And an A Brattner in which the horizontal and vertical line is used a little differently - it relates both to Cubism and perhaps to Impressionism and then he's broken his color into small areas of the black line functioning somewhat like the gothic or the stained glass windows in a gothic cathedral. This time the breathing space, the horizontal strip is at the bottom. And finally a very late example of the French School at the style in which the horizontal and vertical elements have become enlarged and very simply presented in the total space. I think this makes more sense in color. Now to carry this a little farther and get into it a little more deeply, let's think a while about this example by

Picasso, The Three Musicians. This particular painting represents a long series of experiments with the elements involved in it, in this case the French clowns, the traditional European clowns using musical instruments which is a subject and within the painting if you study it you'll find that everything there has some basis on the subject matter. You can recognize the musical instruments, the anatomy of the individuals is all present in some form or another but has been translated into flat shapes that are very sharp edged and suggest rectilinearity, suggest the horizontal and vertical. And he also cuts a little strip off the top of his picture simply to emphasize stability I think. Now let's look at a couple of preliminary studies, one which will show some experiments in the act of flattening form out into planes so that it can be utilized and re-presented. These don't happen to be musicians but I think you see the similarity in the accoutrements involved. This is a clown over here and young lady here I guess which has dropped out of the trio. He made numerous paintings, numerous sketches and studies of which the following is a pretty good example involving this type of figure using the costume that we see so much of and carrying the idea along in his own way. This is a complete painting, an earlier one in the same series, there are only two figures but I think the horizontal and the use of the horizontal and vertical - the right angle - is very obvious and very effectively worked into the total scheme. Now let's get into it a little bit more...I said this is an example of the horizontal and vertical I think in this diagram I've made here you'll see that there are three major felt, implied vertical movements, a great deal of sharp edge shapes yes but I began to try and find real right angles in this whole thing and there aren't very many. They're represented by the darker lines and I didn't measure them with a triangle or anything but there aren't too many and yet it suggests and still uses a security that's inherent in the right angle as a means of design. Now this study from just one corner of the picture is interesting because again in an entirely new use of the right angle, these sort of dashes, stabs of line placed at right angle a relationship one to the other is simply repeated as a pattern and carries out the whole theme of the horizontal and vertical. It's a very small fragment from one small corner. And as we go along, I suggested that the right angle is a thing used at the beginning of a period. It isn't always. But I think the more the artist begins to leave it, I think you can interpret that as meaning that he is gaining assurance in the particular idiom he wants to use to express himself. And it's also fun to work with just as a design element, too. [Voiceover] You have been viewing the Language of Art with James McConnell. This program has been a presentation of the Department of Art. The associate producer and director was Bob Page and the producer Don Pash. This program has been presented over the facilities of Michigan State University Television.