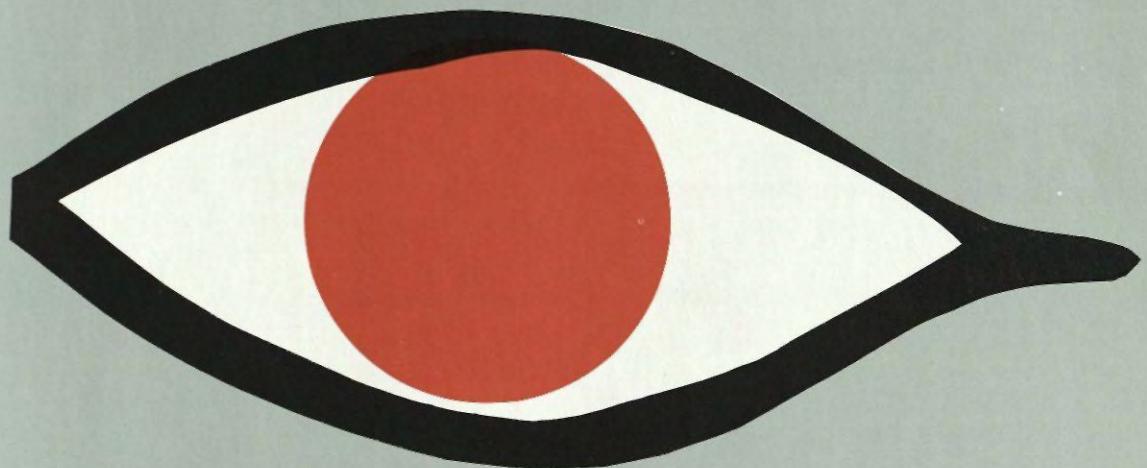


PICTURE THIS
HOW PICTURES WORK



MOLLY BANG

SEASTAR Books
NEW YORK

Contents

Preface	6
Building a Picture	8
The Principles	42
Arranging Shapes on a Rectangle	92

To Jim and Penny, my critics and consultants,
and to Monika, who started it all,
and with special thanks to Dick

Copyright © 1991, 2000 by Molly Bang.

First published as *Picture This: Perception and Composition* by
Bullfinch Press/Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1991.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form
or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording,
or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published in the United States by SEASTAR BOOKS,
a division of NORTH-SOUTH BOOKS, INC., New York

Published simultaneously in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand by North-South Books,
an imprint of Nord-Süd Verlag AG, Gossau Zürich, Switzerland.
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

The text for this book is set in 12-point Eras Medium.

ISBN 1-58717-029-9 (trade binding)

1 3 5 7 9 TB 10 8 6 4 2

ISBN 1-58717-030-2 (paperback)

1 3 5 7 9 PB 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America.

For more information about our books, and the authors and artists who create them,
visit our web site: www.northsouth.com

BUILDING A PICTURE

We see shapes in context, and our reactions to them depend in large part on that context. If this were an illustration for a story about the ocean, we could variously read the red triangle as the sail of a sailboat, a shark's fin, a volcanic island rising from the sea, a "red nun" buoy, or the bow of a sinking ship. We feel very differently about the triangle if we see it as a sailboat than we do if we see it as a shark's fin.

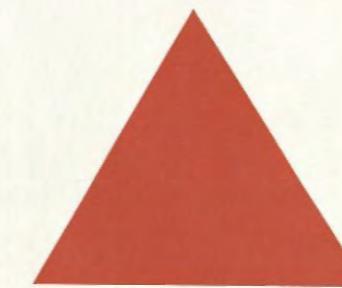
But I thought of all this much later. I first decided to represent Little Red Riding Hood as a little red triangle and then asked myself, "Do I feel anything for this shape?" The figure is not exactly fraught with emotion, yet I knew I felt things about it that I didn't feel for others.

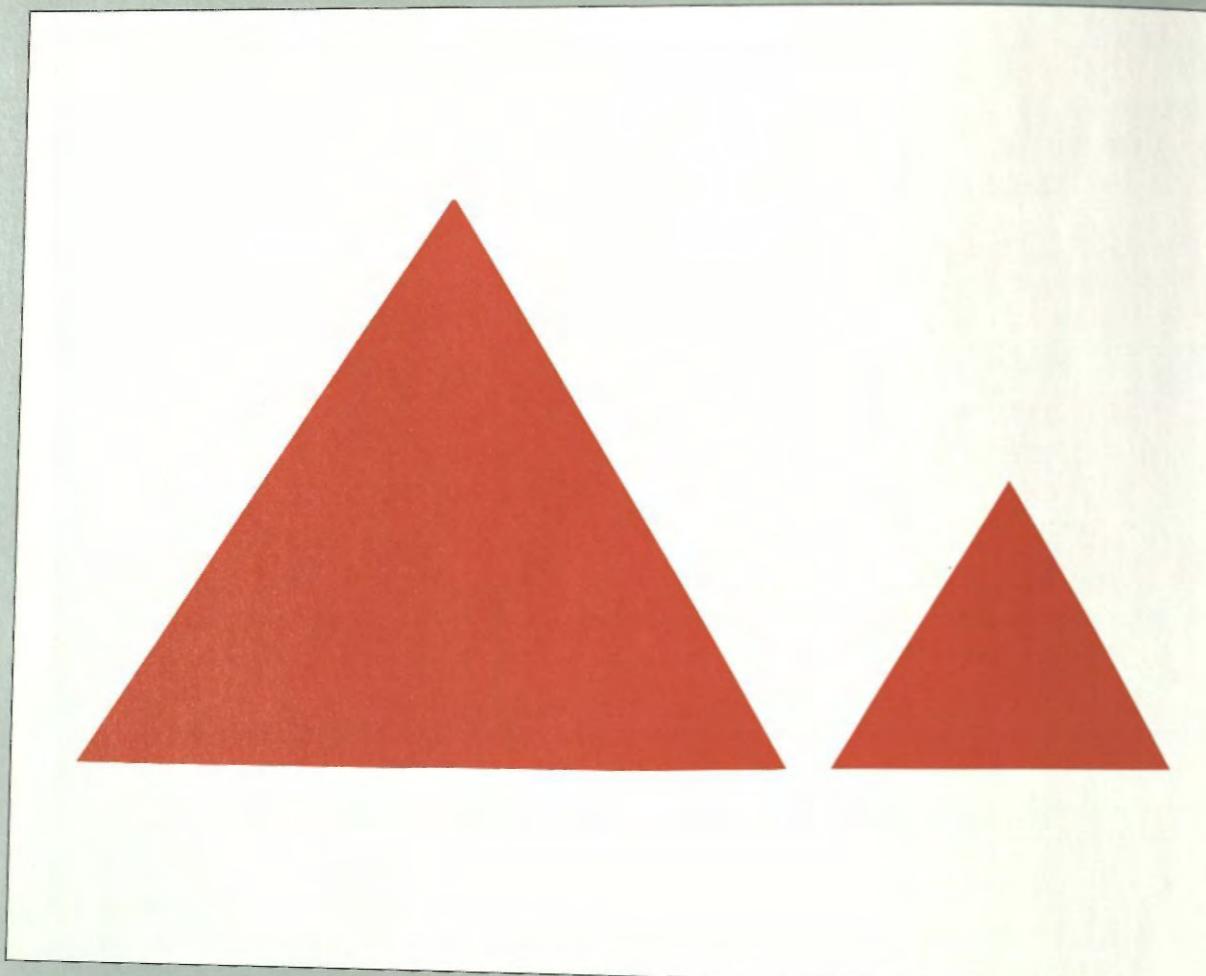
It isn't huggable. Why not? Because it has points. It makes me feel stable. Why? It has a flat, wide, horizontal base. It gives a sense of equanimity, or balance, as well, because its three sides are equal. If it were sharper, it would feel nastier; if it were flatter, it would feel more immobile; and if it were an irregular triangle, I would feel off balance. What about its color? We call red a warm color, bold, flashy; I feel danger, vitality, passion. How can one color evoke such a range of disparate, even conflicting, feelings?

What is red? Blood and fire. Ah. The feelings evoked in me by red all seem to be associated with these two things that have been red and only red ever since humans have been around to see them. Could the emotions brought by red be a mixture of my feelings about blood and fire? So far, they certainly seem to be.

These, then, are the feelings I have for this medium-sized red triangle: stability, balance, a prickliness or alertness, plus warmth, strength, vitality, boldness, and perhaps some sense of danger. Now let me look at the triangle as Little Red Riding Hood. The shape and color, of course, relate to her clothes, but can I apply the feelings I have about her as a red triangle to her as a person? Yes: the figure suggests a character who is alert, warm, strong, stable, balanced, vital, and with perhaps some sense of danger.

If this represents Little Red Riding Hood, how might I show her mother?



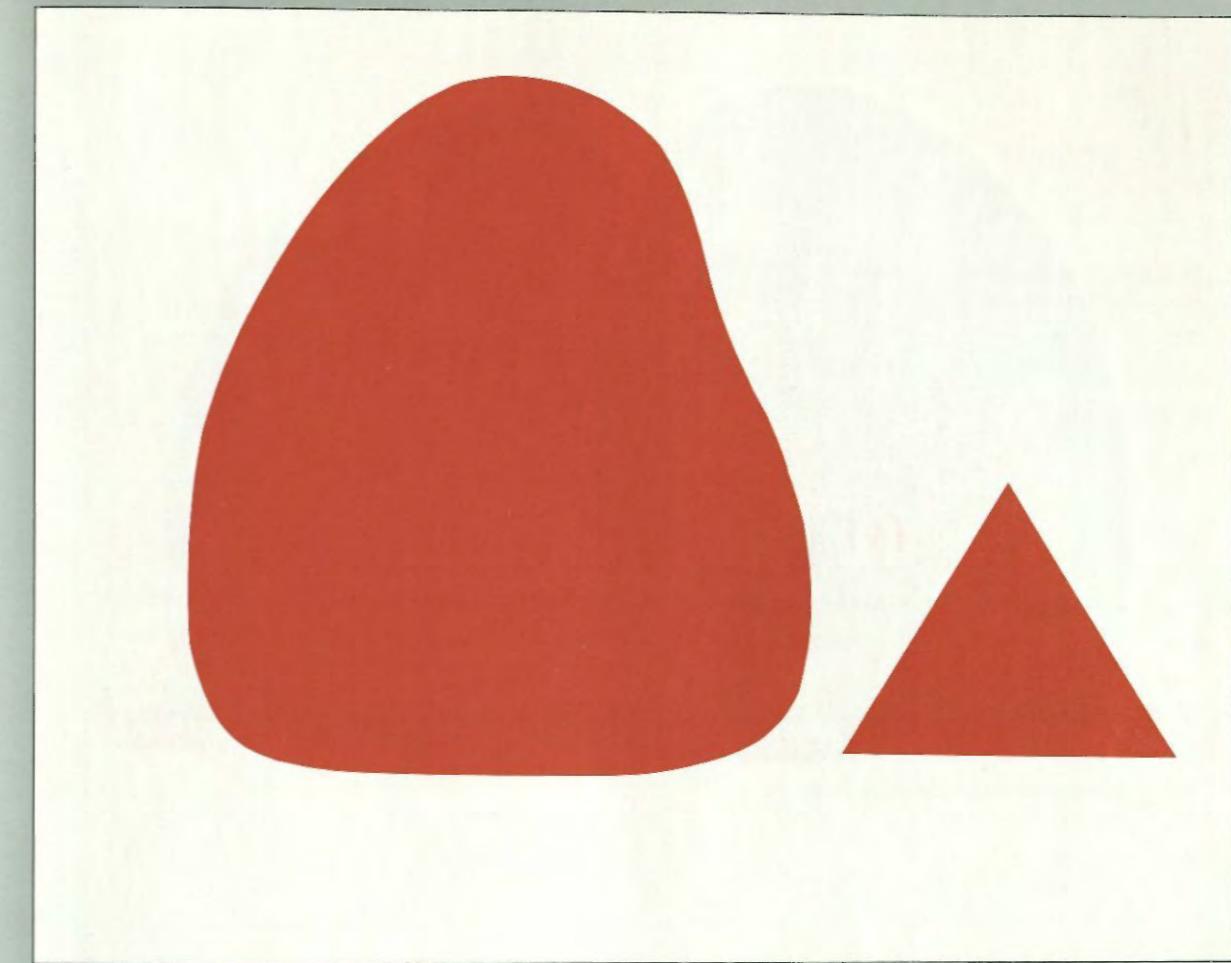


I could simply show her mother as a bigger red triangle, a bigger version of Little Red Riding Hood.

But what has happened?

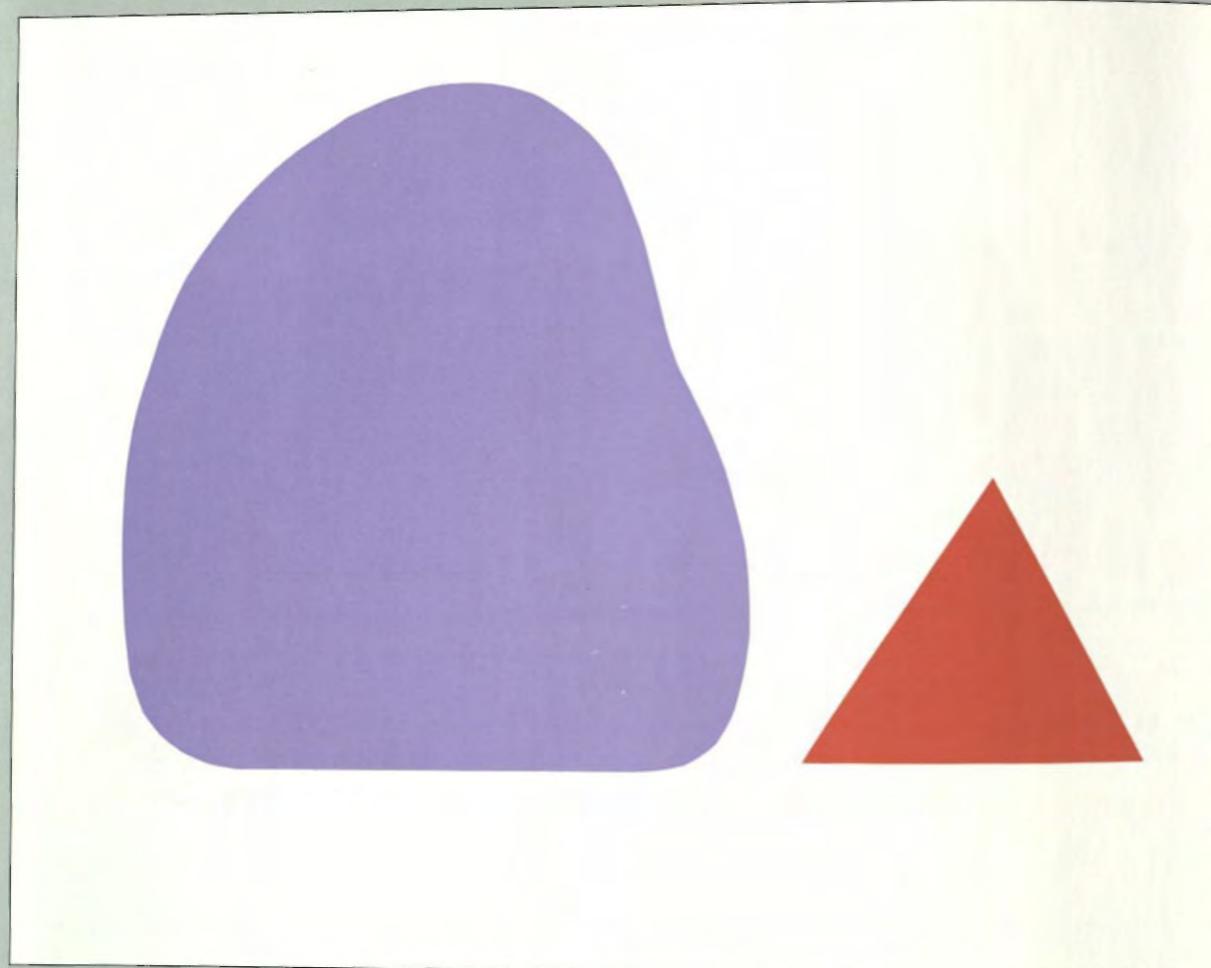
The mother has become the more important object in the picture and has overwhelmed her daughter. Little Red Riding Hood no longer appears to be the main protagonist. In addition, though this shape implies a mother who is warm and strong and vital, she is also overbearing and decidedly not huggable.

How can I make her feel less overwhelming and more huggable?



If I keep her triangular shape but round off her corners, she does seem softer. But she still takes over the picture. She draws attention away from the heroine, Little Red Riding Hood, because she is a bigger mass of red.

How can I keep her large (since mothers are larger than their young daughters) but give Little Red Riding Hood prominence in the picture?

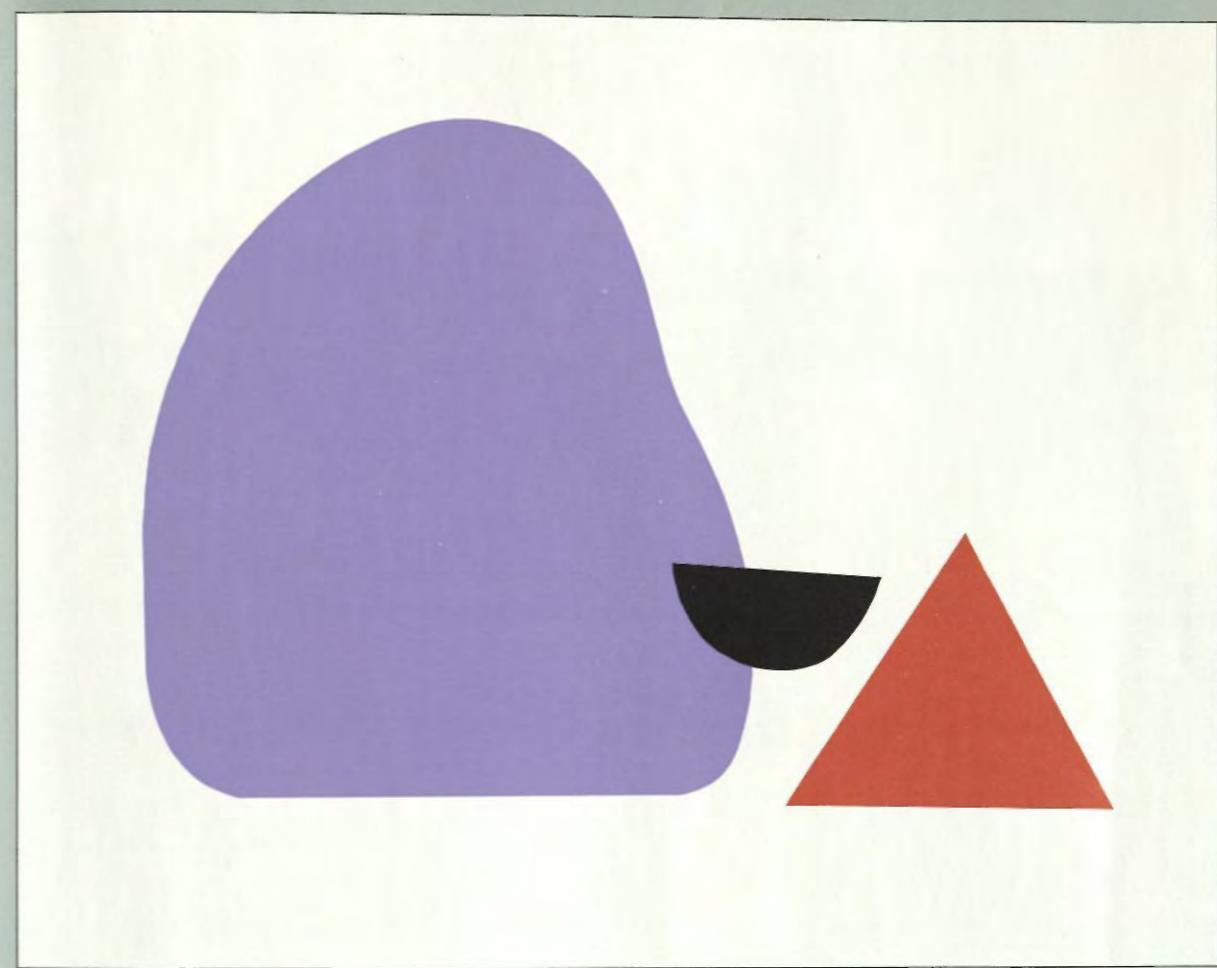


If I make her a pale color, she and her daughter are more equal in the picture. Little Red Riding Hood feels comparatively perky and bold.

The mother could just as easily have been made pale blue or pale green, but then her color would not be at all related to that of Little Red Riding Hood. Since purple has red in it, the mother and daughter are related by color as well — as they would have been if the mother had been pink or pale orange.

What do I feel about the mother now?

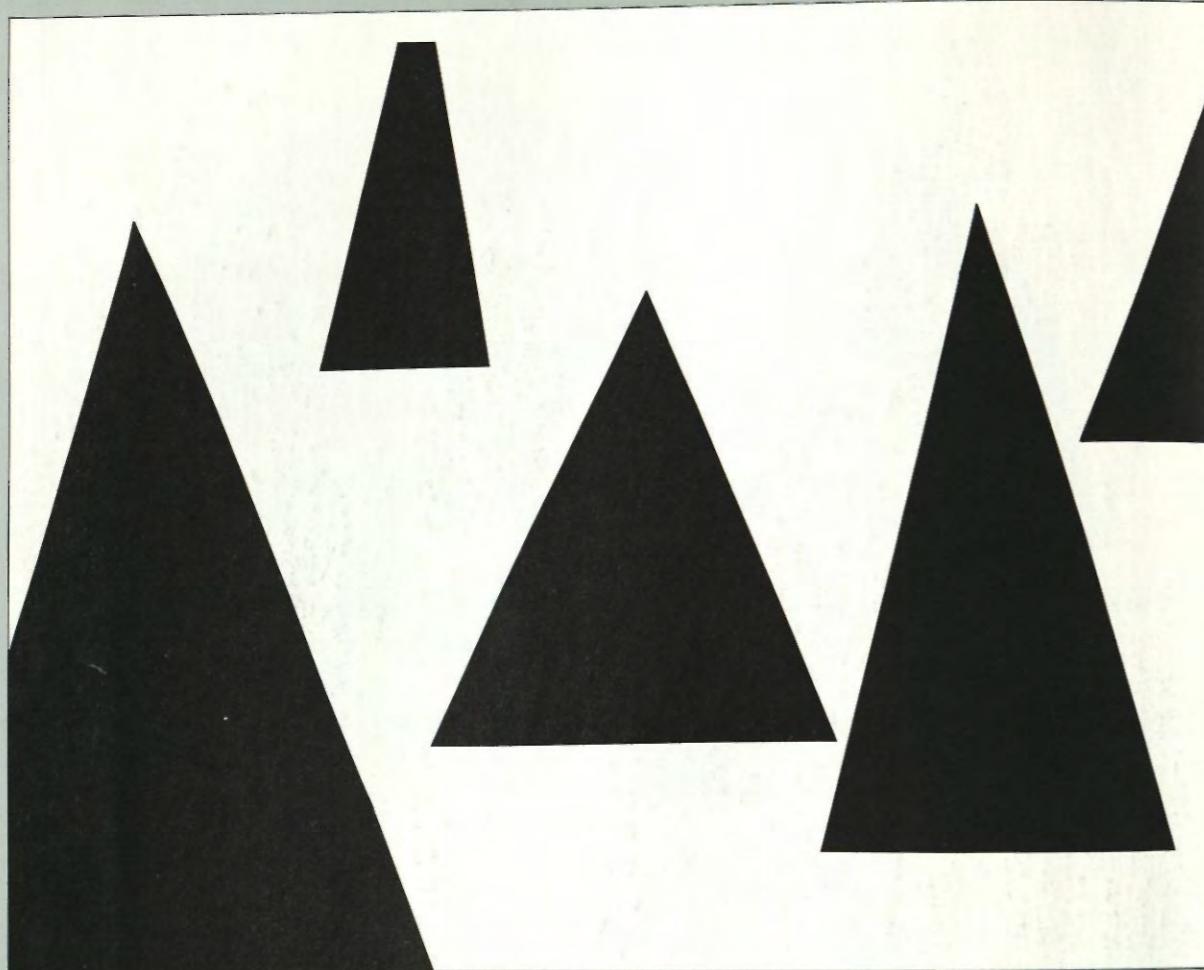
She seems huggable and stable, though less strong and less warm than before. But she is still motherly, and the emphasis of the picture is now on Little Red Riding Hood as much as if not more than on her mother.



Here is the basket.

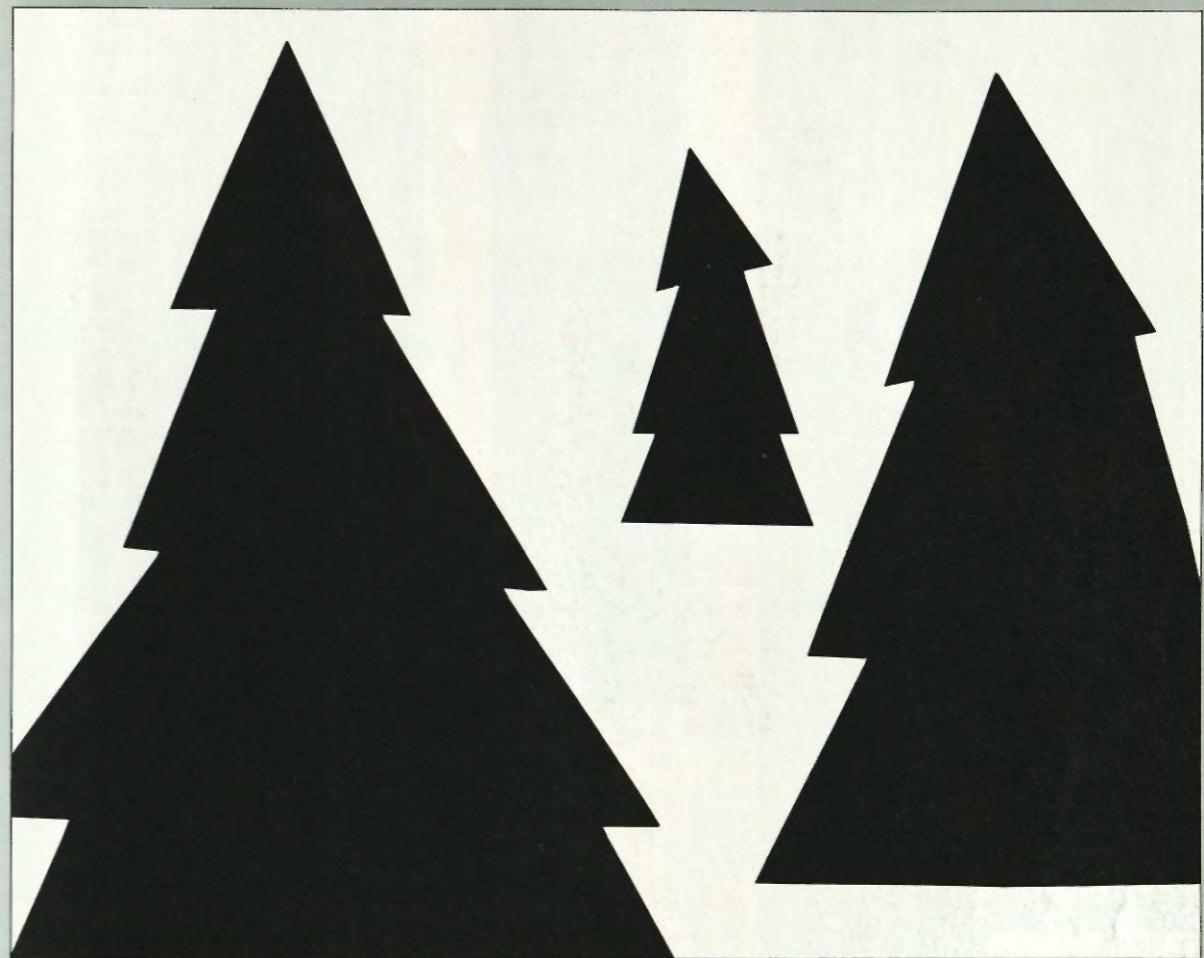
I chose black because it "worked." I think it "worked" because it drew my attention and because it gave me the widest possible range of feeling. Chartreuse would have been a better complement to the red (and I love chartreuse), but it was too close to the purple in intensity and feeling. Also, I feel I would still have had to add a really dark color to show the scary elements, and I wanted to keep this as simple as possible so I could keep track of what was going on. With these three colors, plus white, I had a wide emotional range, and each color was distinct from the others.

Now, so far this is not the most moving or inspired picture we have ever seen. But it has shown some of the ways that shapes and colors affect us emotionally. It also lays the groundwork for a better understanding of how to go about making the next picture, of

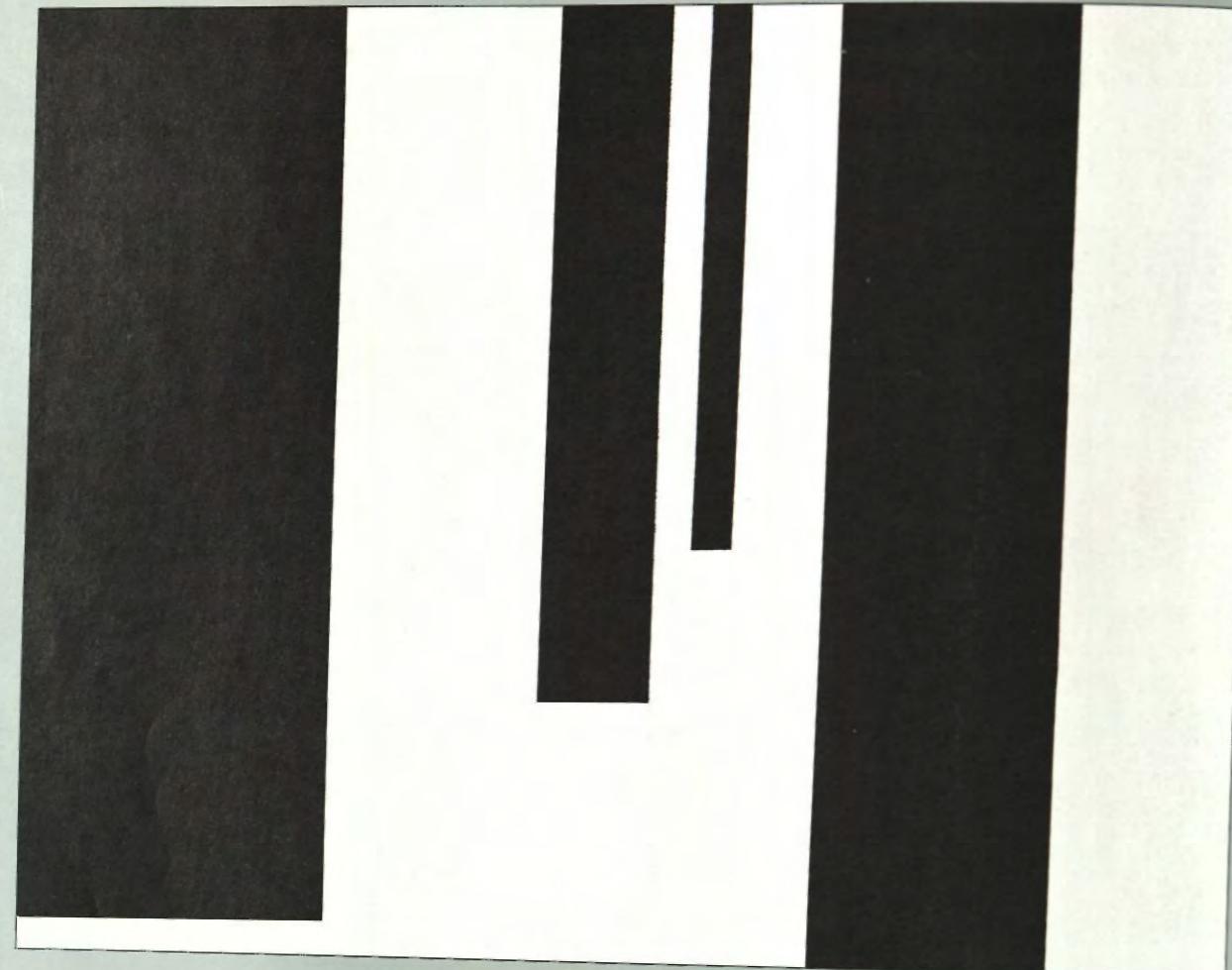


the woods.

I wanted to stay as simple as possible, so I first made the woods with more triangles — both long and pointed individual triangles scattered on the page, or



fatter triangles piled on top of one another. We see them at once as a forest of spruce or fir trees. But these are too close to the shapes of Little Red Riding Hood and her mother. I didn't want to imply that the human beings were turning into trees or the trees into people. To avoid this confusion, and also to get relief from all these triangles, another possibility for the woods is



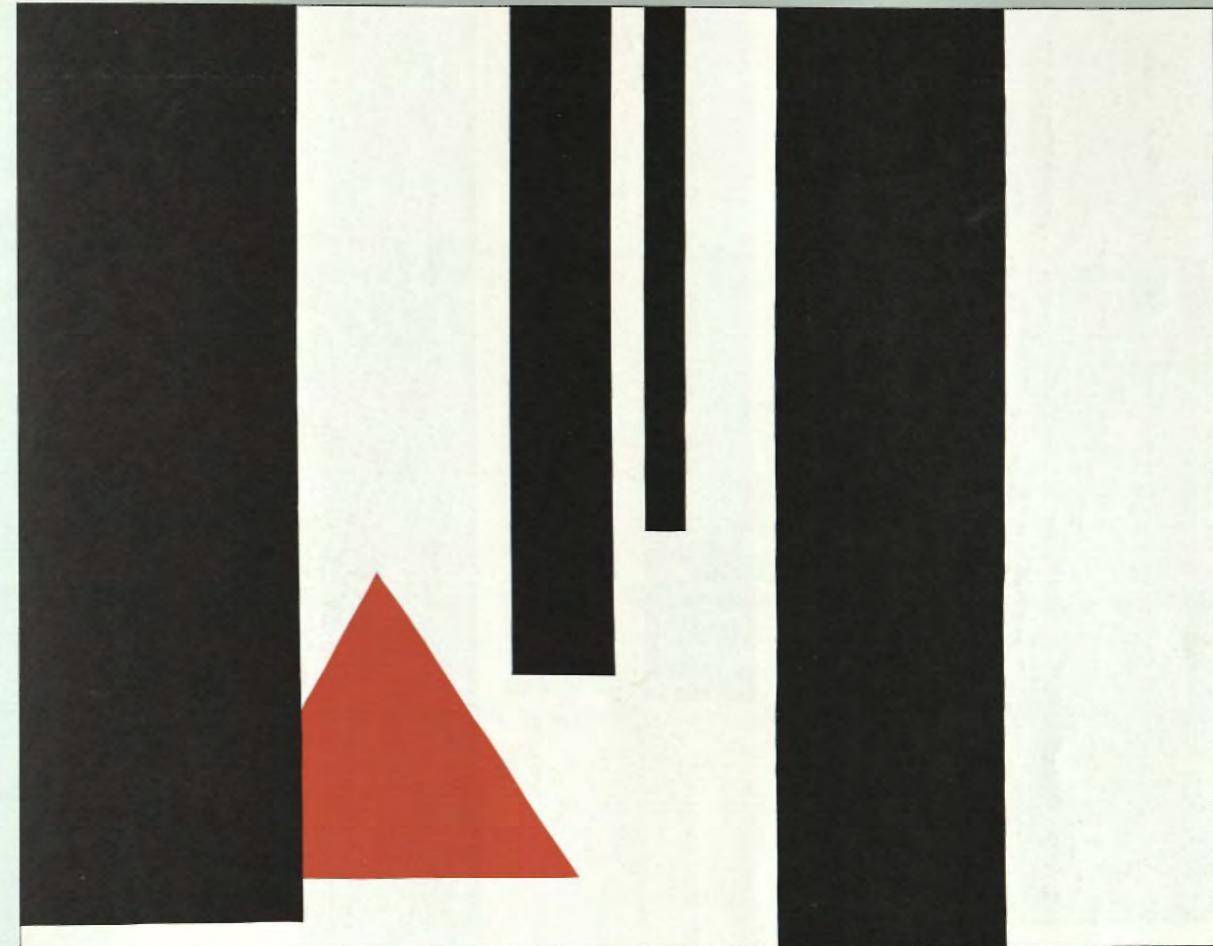
this one.

These are simply long, vertical rectangles of varying lengths and widths, which, in the context of this story, represent branchless tree trunks. Because we can't see their tops, the trees seem very tall. We are now deep in the midst of the woods, as Little Red Riding Hood will have to be.

The trees give the illusion of going back in space. This sense of depth is accomplished simply by arranging the pieces so that the thinner they are, the higher up on the page their bases are placed.

It was when I had made this much of the picture — when I had "set the stage" — that I began to feel more involved; it was time for Little Red Riding Hood to make her entrance into the woods.

16



And here she is.

This picture can easily be read as Little Red Riding Hood in the woods, especially since she has been connected with one of the trees and is partly covered by it. This makes her belong and be inside the woods.

It also makes me be inside the woods. As soon as I began playing with the figure of Little Red Riding Hood in the woods, I noticed how much I identified with her and "entered the picture."

But the picture should be scarier than this, as these are the woods in which the heroine meets the wolf who is going to eat her up. I need to imply some threat in her environment. I need to construct a scarier setup even before the introduction of the wolf.

What can I do to Little Red Riding Hood — ONLY to the triangle — to make the picture feel scarier? I could tip the triangle so it isn't so stable, cut off more of it with the trees, or

17

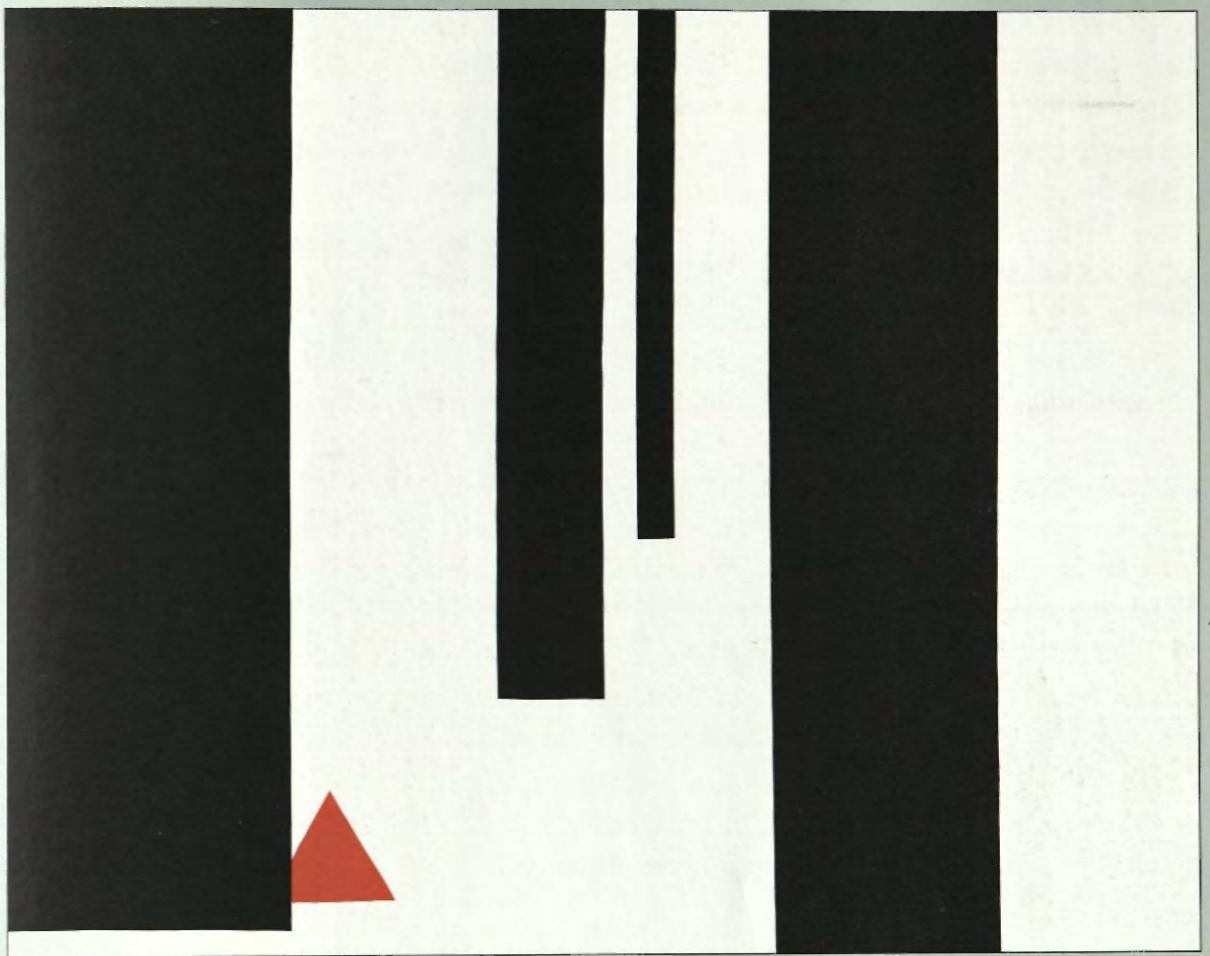


make it smaller.

The woods feel somewhat scarier here because they are proportionately larger in relation to the heroine; she is proportionately smaller.

Why does it feel scarier when she is proportionately smaller?

We feel more scared when we are little and an attacker is big, because we're less able to overcome the danger or control it physically. When we are little, we are weaker and can't defend ourselves as well in a physical fight.



I can reduce Little Red Riding Hood still more, to make her seem even more overwhelmed by the situation. Also, I have to prepare for the fact that she will not stay alone in the middle of these trees. I need to make room for the wolf.

I felt suddenly disappointed when I moved her up, and it took me some time to figure out why.

First of all, she looks smaller and farther away, even though the triangle is exactly the same size as on the previous page. She looks farther away because the trees have established a sense of perspective, of receding space, and Little Red Riding Hood seems to have moved back through that space just by being placed higher up on the page. That's fine.

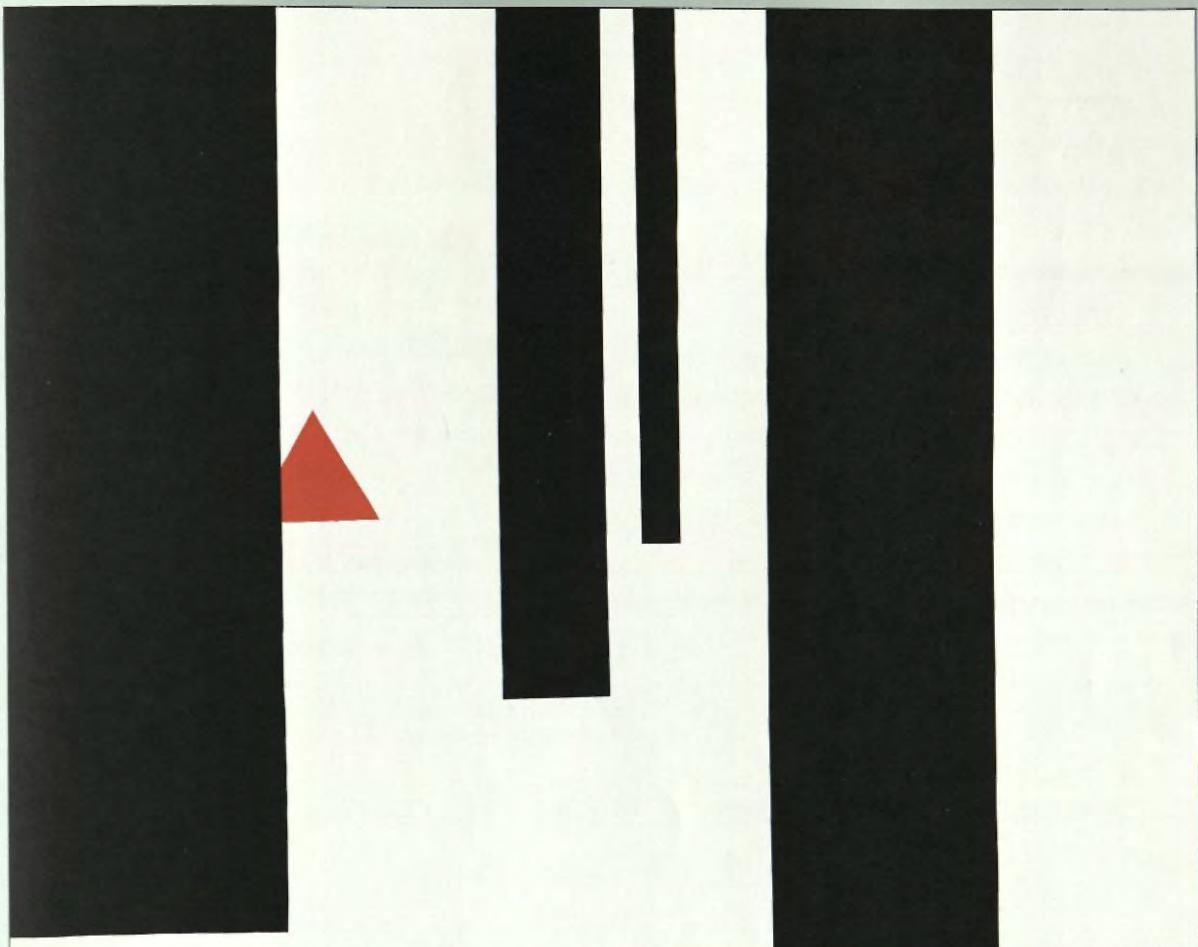
But the picture doesn't feel as scary as it did before. Why not?

I finally realized that when Little Red Riding Hood is more distant from me, I don't identify with her or sympathize with her so much as before. Distance makes the heart grow colder — not fonder. I feel less close to her, less attached to her. Also, the woods are proportionately smaller again.

Before I introduce the wolf, there is another aspect of the picture I can work on to make it feel scarier: the trees. How can I make the trees feel more threatening?

I could add many more of them, to make the woods darker and more like a prison surrounding her. I could add a lot of pointed branches, which would make the picture seem more threatening, since we are afraid of pointed objects.

I tried both of these, and the woods did feel very scary. But the picture became filled up, and when I put the wolf in, it became lost in the confusion. So I cleared almost all of the pieces away again and



tilted some tree trunks. Now the heroine is no longer in a forest of vertical, reliable trees, but in a woods where trees might fall on her at any time.

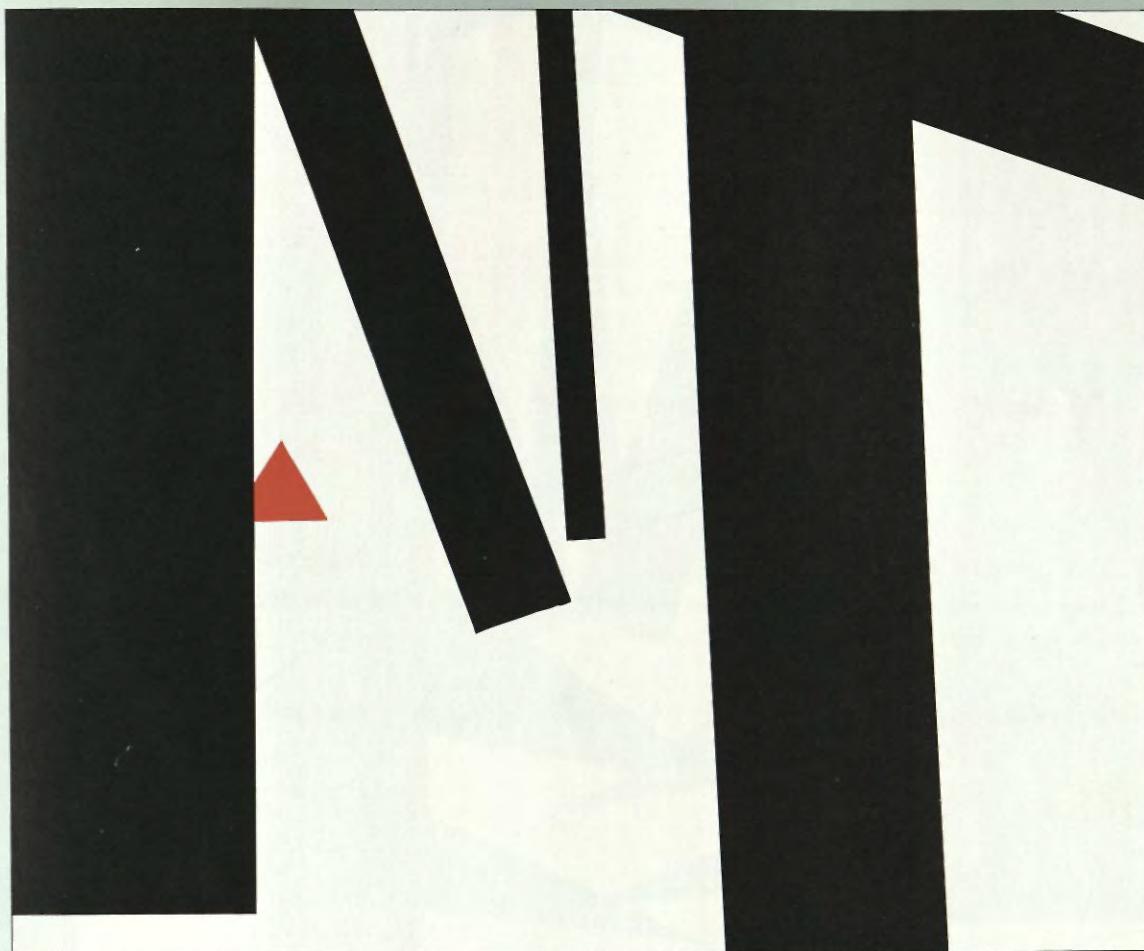
I notice that something else has happened to Little Red Riding Hood: she is visually trapped underneath a pointed arch made by two trees. Rationally, I know that she is far back in the distance and not under the trees at all, but on the plane of the picture — that is, when I see the picture as a flat, two-dimensional space — her vertical escape is blocked by the arch, and this makes her situation feel scarier.

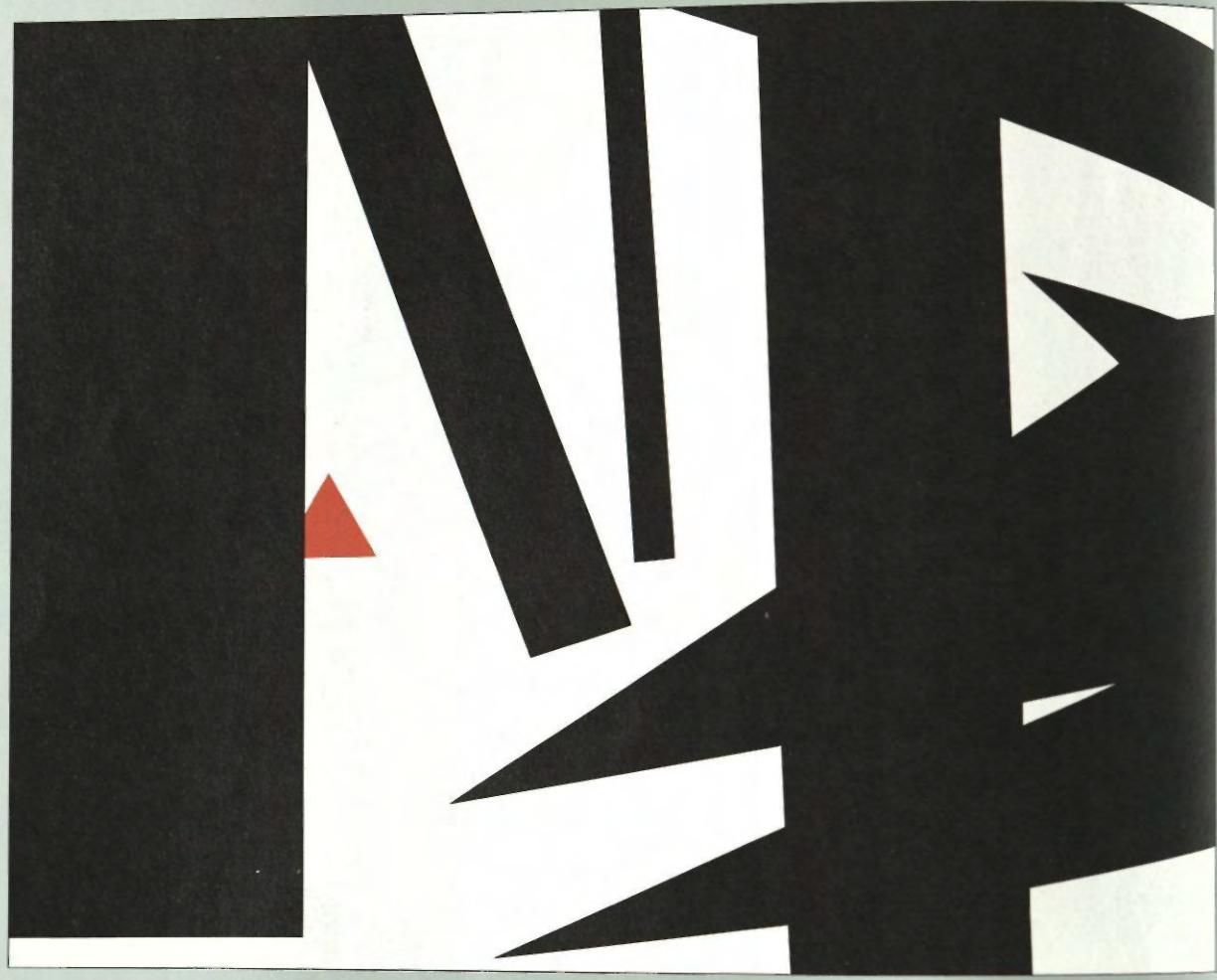
Also, the trees have all been tilted toward Little Red Riding Hood, effectively pushing her back toward the left-hand side of the page. When I tilt the trees away from her, they seem to be opening a path, leading her up and to the right.

The two aspects I want to point out here are:

1. Diagonal lines give a feeling of movement or tension to the picture, as with the leaning trees that seem to be falling or about to fall, and,
2. Shapes that lean toward the protagonist feel as though they are blocking or stopping forward progress, whereas shapes leaning away give the impression of opening up space or leading the protagonist forward.

Enough of this forest business. It's time for the wolf.





What shapes make the wolf?

Just three long black triangles.

Why do these triangles feel so scary?

Partly it's because they lean aggressively toward the left, where Little Red Riding Hood is tiny in comparison, and half hidden. Partly it's because of the context: we see the triangles as a wolf.

But I think mostly they feel scary because they are so pointy and sharp, because they are dark, and because they are so big.

I feel very differently when



the wolf is made much smaller,



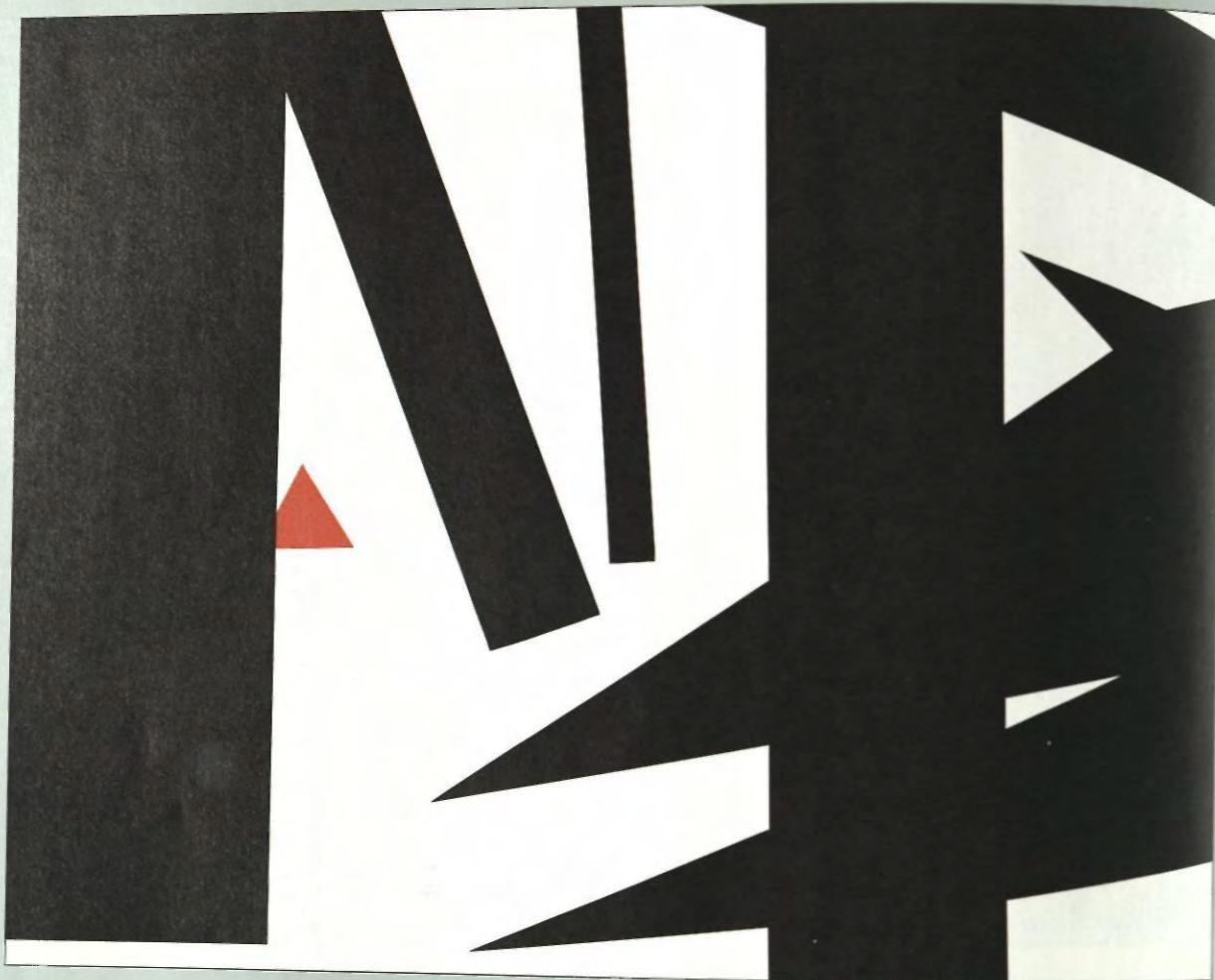
or the points are changed to curves,



or the wolf is made from a paler color.

This purple-colored wolf is a bit disturbing. I've used purple once before, for Little Red Riding Hood's mother. Making the wolf purple therefore connects it with the mother. Does this make the wolf look motherly, or does it feel more evil because of the association? Maybe this would be a more appropriate color if the story were about a ghost wolf?

Certainly the color distinguishes the wolf from the rest of the scene. The picture has three separate parts made from three different colors, with very little cohesion. It needs to hang together better.



Before developing the wolf further, I need to look at it for a moment. It is scary partly because these menacing shapes could be anything now — even something much scarier than a wolf. When I add wolf details, that unknown menace will become specific, and therefore slightly less scary. But the story requires a wolf.

What are the features of wolves that make them so frightening to us? Those are the elements that I need to concentrate on if I intend to make the wolf frightening.



Teeth are one scary feature.

These are nothing but seven small, sharp triangles irregularly placed in the wolf's mouth. Imagine how much less scary they would be if they were rounded.

In reality, both the snout and the teeth of wolves are rounded; they are not honed to a sharp point as in these pictures. However, when we are in a scary situation, we see the scary elements in an exaggerated light: the attacker looks much bigger when we are afraid; the teeth or weapons look much sharper, just as when we are in love we tend to see the world "through rose-colored glasses."

When we want a picture to feel scary, it is more effective to graphically exaggerate the scary aspects of the threat and of its environment than to represent them as close to photographic reality as possible, because this is the way we feel things look.

What else does the wolf need in order to look more wolfish?

It needs an eye.

I cut the eye out of the purple paper, since there are three colors available in addition to the white, and the new color attracts our attention. Also, I wanted to use all three colors plus white in every picture.

I made the eye a long diamond or lozenge shape, emphasizing the pointiness of a real wolf's eye but getting rid of the curves.

But even though wolves' eyes are often pale blue, it didn't look right.



Why is this eye so much scarier?

The obvious answer is that it is red, but why should a red eye be so much scarier than a pale-purple eye?

Purple is a milder, less aggressive color than red, but why? Part of the reason may be purely physiological: somehow red excites us. Psychologists have found that people tend to get into more fights in bright-red and hot-pink rooms and tend to eat more in rooms with red walls than they do in rooms with paler colors. Part of the reason may be that we associate red with blood and fire, so this is a bloody, fiery eye rather than an eye associated with flowers or with the evening sky. Maybe it's because we've seen drunken, bloodshot eyes, or eyes reflected in a campfire, and those were red. In some fairy tales, the eyes of witches are described as being red. Whatever the reason, red eyes are scarier to most of us than purple eyes.

But I notice something else with the replacement of the purple eye with the red, something I wasn't expecting: I immediately associate Little Red Riding Hood with the wolf's eye now, in a way I didn't before. They go together. The eye is looking at her.

This strong association is almost solely due to the color; I made the eye round but still red, but I associated it with Little Red Riding Hood the same way.

What happens if the eye is made exactly the same color and shape as Little Red Riding Hood?





The wolf looks stupid now, or maybe happy. Its glance is no longer pointed at its prey. Certainly it is not nearly as evil-looking as it was before. The picture feels very different, and yet all that has been changed is the shape of the eye.

A more disconcerting effect to me is that the two red triangles are now so alike, and I associate them so much with each other, that they disassociate from the rest of the picture. They are no longer meaningful elements. I see them not so much as Little Red Riding Hood and a wolf's eye now, but more as two red triangles that float up and out of the picture.



I return to the wolf with the more pointed red eye. What feature could I add to the wolf to make it yet more frightening?

A tongue.

Now it looks as though Little Red Riding Hood is being drawn right down into the wolf's mouth, just by the force of the large red mass there. I associate her even more with the tongue than with the eye now, because the tongue is a bigger mass of red. There seems to be some sort of gravitational effect here: the larger the mass of color, the more our attention is drawn to it.

My attention is also attracted more to the wolf than to the trees — partly because the wolf is the larger mass, partly because it breaks through the verticals of the trees, and also to some extent because it is to the far right of the picture, and our eyes tend to go from left to right on the page. But its blackness keeps it "hidden" in the trees much more than when it was purple.

I see here, in a way I didn't understand before, that when two or more objects in a picture have the same color, we associate them with each other. The meaning and the emotion we impart to this association depend on context, but the association is immediate and strong. Red goes with red.

There is one more aspect of the picture that can be changed to make it feel scarier, which is



that the background can be darkened.

In the third picture in which Little Red Riding Hood was shown with her mother, purple was used as a soft, or gentle, color. It is also gentler here, in that it is less of a stark contrast with the black than the white was. Then why does this picture feel more threatening?

Because in this picture the purple implies nighttime, or the approach of night, and night feels scarier to us than day because we see well during the day and poorly at night. Darker backgrounds can also imply a storm or overcast weather, neither of which feels as "sunny" as a day of sunshine.

I tried using purple for long parallel diagonal shadows protruding from the bases of the trees, but then I got involved in how the branches, which are out of sight here, would be cast on the ground, and the shadow pattern became disconcerting rather than helpful. I went back to the simpler solid purple.

Now that the background is purple, how can I use white as a positive element? (By "positive element," I mean here an object rather than a background.)





The teeth.

These white teeth aren't any scarier per se than black or red or purple teeth; quite the contrary. Black teeth dripping with red blood would have been rather effective here. However, what has happened now that the teeth are white?

They pop out at us more. We notice them more than we did when they were black.

I see how powerful white is here because it shows up so strongly against dark backgrounds. White is effective when used with restraint.

This first section has shown how a picture can be built up element by element to produce specific feelings in the viewer.

This picture was supposed to be scary because of its context: a hungry wolf wanted to eat a lone girl in the woods. But the picture was made to feel increasingly scary to the viewer because of the colors, shapes, sizes, and placement of the pieces of construction paper that make up the picture.

Our feelings arise because we see pictures as extensions of the real world. Pictures that affect us strongly use structural principles based on the way we have to react in the real world in order to survive. As soon as you understand these principles, you will understand why pictures have such specific emotional effects. You will understand how pictures work.