

Memory Lane 5

NID days

the story teller Leo Lionni

His talk was going on. Every 15 minutes he would stop and say “Tomorrow is a kite flying day”. It captured every body’s imagination! Leo Lionni, the graphic designer and animator was the one in front of us and the year was 1967 - 68.

He was a natural story teller and would always end up his talks with a story! “Swimmy” the animated story which used to appear often on Indian T.V later, was his creation with Gianini as his main collaborator. It is available on you tube now.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7Q-mi1bE4>

Swimmy Directors: Leo Lionni and Giulio Gianini

Students of the first batch of graphic design at NID assisted them.

Leo Lionni was carrying a beautiful book with a cloth stitching(you can see below)



Coming from South, I had never seen such a book. Later we found out that, it is a standard account book used by Gujarati traders. Old printed ‘Sari Cloth’ is stitched on a thick, soft card board. The stitch lines with white thread made beautiful lines!

This was the benefit we got that time at NID. Most of the designers coming from ‘West’ were very sensitive to indigenous good design.

Often we become immune to its 'beauty', living in that culture! Experience of beauty demands a psychic distance from 'your-self, as you get conditioned in the culture you grow up! This is the advantage you get when you move out of your 'State; or 'Country'. You get a chance to look at your culture from a distance. You suddenly realize the beauty of traditional products and practices which you might not have paid attention till then.

We learnt that Leo Lionni was a post graduate in Economics. He abandoned a career in 'Economics' to become a graphic designer. He told us how studied design. He would put a small black dot (circle) on a square white sheet and pin it on the board. He would watch it for weeks looking for its meaning?

For a week the 'dot' would be in the centre. Then he would change the position of the dot and again look at it for weeks! 'The compositions slowly started revealing their 'meanings' to him!'. I was mesmerized by what he said but could not fully understand the significance of his 'learning'.

Much later when I was teaching at IDC, I came across the book 'Hidden Dimension' by Edward Hall. When Hall Talked about space and its meaning in his book. suddenly things fell in to place. 3D space got mapped onto 2D space!

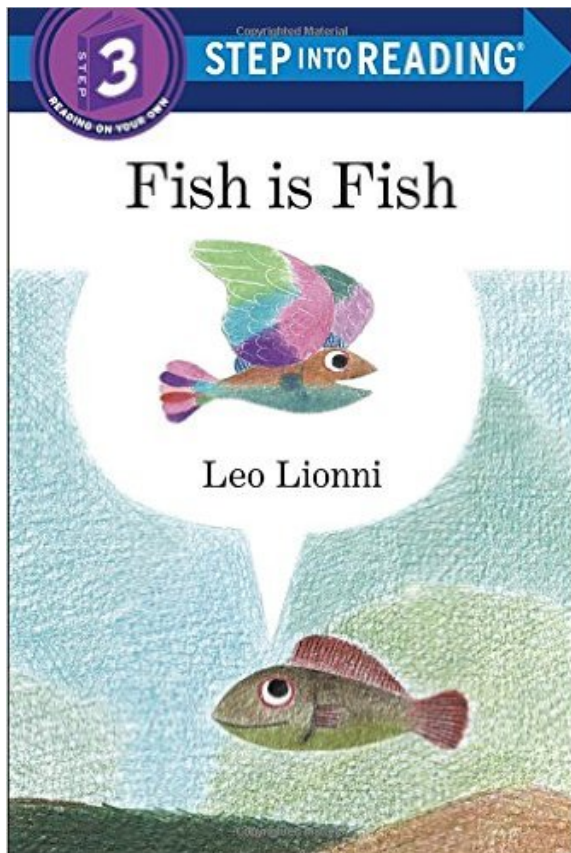
*A dot in the centre of plain sheet was 'boss'!
A dot in one corner, a person lost,
..and so on.*

Experiential reality gets transferred metaphorically into the graphic language in a 2D space. This understanding gave me a 'hold' in teaching basic design at IDC, later.

Leo Leon ni's books for children are remarkable. He developed a story on little blue and little yellow when he was travelling with his grand children in a train. Recently I came across a reference to his book in a scholarly article, how we perceive anything unknown in terms of ourselves.

In the book called 'Fish is Fish', a frog keeps

telling about the World on the ground to his childhood-friend, when he was a tadpole! His friend who grew up into a fish, imagines all beings which the frog tells about as fish becoming that.



The beautiful illustrations of fish becoming a bird, a cow, etc make the book a classic!
