

Thinking Outside the Lines

The idea of “thinking outside the box” begs another question. Where did the box come from in the first place? “The box” is the current idiomatic phrase that implies “the conventional”. Conventions are the result of an attempt to order the various items and methods around us. In order to understand the myriad of items we encounter, our brains want to “chunk” things into groups. We label groups by the similarity of their contents. The virtue of orderliness is that it provides an avenue to fuller understanding and more easily retained comprehension. The danger of orderliness is that we just may miss something outside the box, and that, when something falls outside the box, we deny it is there at all.

Orderliness allows us to think of things linearly, one-at-a-time, in a nice sequential array. Finished with one orderly sequence, we can now move to the next. But the world is wilder, more random, and decidedly less linear than our artificial organization of it suggests. Nassim Taleb in *The Black Swan* (2007) reminds us that we once thought the natural color of swans was white until someone discovered a black swan in Australia. That forced us to widen our paradigm. Similarly, he argues, we want to make the world orderly—it is how we learn about it—but the frequency of unexpected events suggests that the world is not orderly and thus we do not really have the grasp on knowledge we thought we had.

Nothing learned, whether it be martial art, topography, or knitting, is presented *en masse* and mastered by osmosis. When you learn a martial art, you must learn it in some order. In budo, when we reach the level of black belt, master, or master instructor, we have taken in quite a number of sequences. Various items sit in our subconscious and we feel that we finally have a full grasp of our art. We may; but we do not necessarily have a full grasp of that which our art has been trying to teach us—self-protection. For many people, learning a martial art is like painting by the numbers. You end up with a recognizable representation of an image, and you may even learn something about color and shading in the process, but most people who paint by the numbers do not consider themselves artists. Unfortunately, in martial arts, those who end up successfully painting (or training) by the numbers not only consider themselves artists, but also artists who can defend themselves.

To vary this analogy, consider an art student having taken several courses in design and studio drawing now assigned to visit The Met in order to copy Bronzino’s *Portrait of a Young Man*. He sketches an outline and checks his proportions and then goes about filling in shades of pastels to simulate Bronzino’s oils. He goes home, downloads a photo of the portrait and works at duplicating the precise colors of the oils. Using his sketch and the photo, he comes up with a respectable duplicate of the Bronzino masterpiece. He clearly has artistic skill. But, can he put a blank canvas in front of himself and paint a portrait of another young man, not in Bronzino’s mannerist manner, but in a way that makes it clear that he is not just artistically gifted, but a master of portraiture? He is long past painting inside the lines via the numbers, but if he is not yet ready to create his own lines, he is fated to work within Bronzino’s.

The exercises that art students perform are meant not to simply create good art students, but also to create good artists. Similarly, the exercises martial artists perform are meant not to create good martial arts students but also good martial artists. Only when the artist does not need the lines of other artists can he create his own masterwork. Only when a martial artist can function outside the lines of her training exercises, her style, and her art, can she master her own personal protection.