

Profound Issues Posed by Asymmetry

The Joy of Making Both Art and Kites

By Ben Ruhe

Istvan Bodoczky, of Budapest, Hungary, is a painter of beautiful abstractions. As professor of art and pedagogy at the Hungarian University of Craft and Design, he is also a committed teacher. Born into a family of lawyers, he instead chose to be an artist at the age of 14. "I'm considered a rebel by my family," he says.

Father of three sons, he took up kiteflying in the 1970s to amuse them. It was hard going for him at first because he couldn't get his homemade kites to fly. "The children were upset, so I kept at it," he recalls. He not only persevered, he became "obsessive," he says.

He experimented, studied books including Pelham, and duly became an expert, even writing a book on the subject in 1983. Making an old warhorse Boxkite was what finally changed things for him. "My then wife's father had been a pilot during World War II and he suggested I make a Gibson Girl-type kite of the sort stocked on life rafts for emergencies. It flew beautifully. That was my breakthrough."



Istvan Bodoczky

"My pictures and kites came together when a Hungarian television crew challenged me to fly one of my oddly shaped paintings on exhibition in an art gallery. It was a work on paper framed by bamboo with a free-form, highly irregular outline. I was rather annoyed at the challenge.

"But I did take up the challenge and luckily that first painting cum kite flew. It flew so easily and so well that it made me believe I could fly anything. Then I found out it was not so easy after all. But I remained convinced that if I had luck and patience I could make any of my paintings fly and this has proved to be the case.

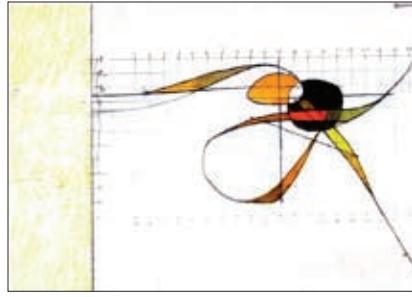
"Combining painting with kites kept me from developing a split personality, which I did not want to have. By making paintings that fly, I get the joy of doing both art and making kites."

Soft-spoken, reflective, serene, Bodoczky confides that most of his asymmetric creations do not fly well immediately. "I go to a faraway, hidden spot to test fly them. I'm not an expert at aerodynamics. I use trial and error. I add beeswax to change the weighting, change the bridling which I have only guessed at to begin with. And of course I use tails. Almost all my kites fly at the end. I never give up. But I am not fond of some of them if too much struggle has been involved."

Selling works of art to live is hard scrabble, as almost any artist will testify, but Bodoczky's skill is so obvious and his work so appealingly imaginative he early on began to be exhibited-----first in Budapest, then nationally, then internationally.

Bodoczky became renowned in the kite world when he won the major design prize at the prestigious Dieppe, France, kite festival in 1989. "That put me on the international kite circuit," he says. "Invitations to travel to festivals around the world followed." Steady sales of his art have followed as both museums and kite collectors have joined in admiration of his work.

"When I do my paintings on paper, stretched on bamboo frames, with asymmetrical outlines," he says, "I never think of what I am doing in terms of kites. That would ruin the painting. I only consider the possibility of flying



All photos by Isvart Bodoczky

Left, a Bodoczky kite with extreme asymmetry. Above, drawing for a kite. Right, the simple Ribbon kite, for beginning fliers. Note that everything Bodoczky does has a light, original touch.

the work if it pleases me as a painting.” He says something beautiful next: “I believe if the painting is good as an artwork, it will fly.”

Bodoczky’s asymmetrical kites pose profound philosophical issues. He defines symmetry as similarity, correspondence, or balance among systems. It is an exact correspondence in position or form about a given point, line, or plane.

“When talking about symmetry, we usually think of something visual,” says the artist. “Most often it means mirror symmetry, or perfect balance, which induces positive feelings, feelings of security. Repetition is a form of symmetry, but can be boring, even unbearable. Mirror symmetry is closer to eternity than real life, for life is movement and movement is induced by the lack of balance.

“Compare the traditional European flat surface kite with the Indian Fighter. European Flats can be tied to a pole and left for hours. The Indian Fighter, on the other hand, needs constant attention. It stays in the air only as long as it moves. The maneuverability of the kite is due to its capacity to lose and regain balance.

“When teaching, I tell my students asymmetric makes a composition dramatic. It is like balancing a stone with feathers. While this would not be a symmetrical arrangement in visual terms, the weight could be. As another example, a small yellow spot in a painting can counterbalance a large black spot. It is not the shape and size of elements alone that count; their other qualities and meanings might be more decisive. It is the complex interplay of the different qualities and context that forms the balance of the painting. The balance is not optical symmetry, it is the symmetry of ‘effect.’”

Bodoczky’s third book on kites, *Hidden Symmetry*, published by the Drachen Foundation in 2000 and among the most beautiful kite books ever issued (Bodoczky designed it), makes the point that shape, weighting, and area of a kite need not be symmetrical, but the lift has to be, otherwise the kite will not fly. This is the hidden symmetry the book title refers to.

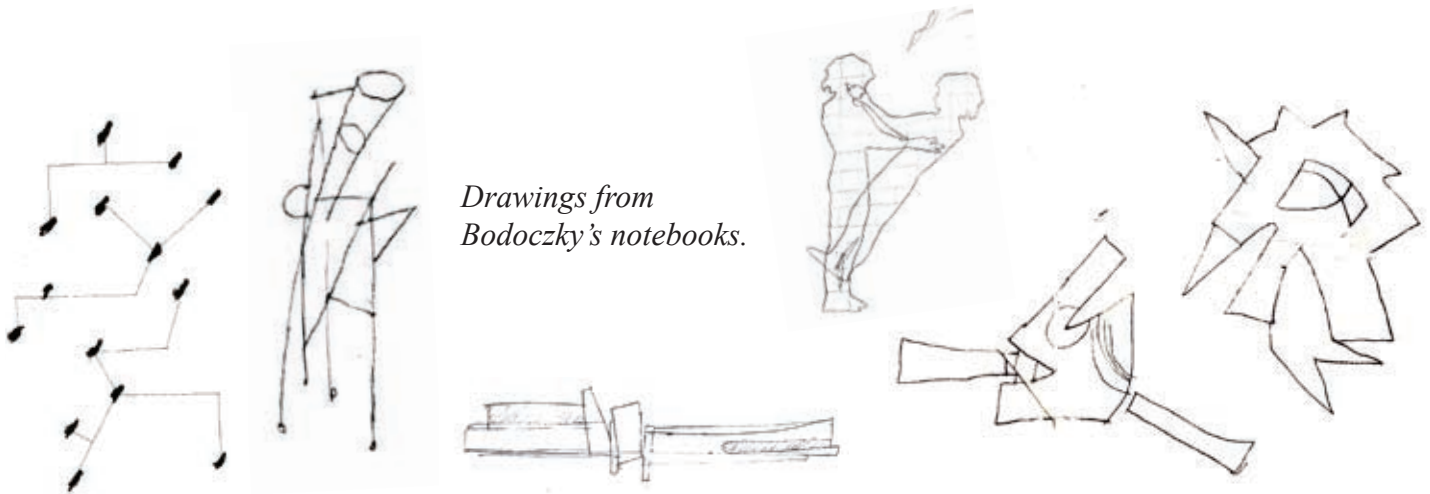
Bodoczky feels that apart from his color and design sense----he paints surfaces with now vivid, now reticent colors alternating with collage-like patches, newspaper cuttings, even photographs---- much of the appeal of his art is in the achievement of balance in a complicated way. This achieves tension. And tension creates the feeling of movement, making the work visually eventful, dramatic, life-like.

An interesting point has been made about the artist’s flying sculptures. Because they contain negative spaces, these spaces enhance the viewer’s interest by constantly evolving as the sky, clouds, and light changes. In these

creations the kite is never a static sculpture; rather, it changes constantly within its environment. Bodoczky offers the novice or advanced kitemaker a new perspective on these flying objects. He plants the seeds for creative thought.

Bodoczky recommends using paper as a medium for painting. “Although it has limited durability, paper is easily available and inexpensive, quick to work with, the creator needs no special equipment or skills, and it is an excellent surface for painting. It is highly suitable for making small-scale models of larger kites, experimenting with new designs, for improvisations. It allows maximum playfulness.

“But paper’s greatest value is of a spiritual nature. It makes people who are in touch with it a lot more sensitive. The fragile and vulnerable character of paper helps those who work with it accept the ephemeral nature of life.”



*Drawings from
Bodoczky's notebooks.*

The History of Kites in Hungary

“We don’t know for sure when kites first appeared in Hungary,” says Istvan Bodoczky.

“The word for kite in Hungarian is sarkany (dragon), which is probably a translation of the German drachen, for there is no evidence that the medieval European kite, the dragon-shaped Dracone, was used in Hungary. The first mention of kites in print in Hungary as a ‘light construction flying up in the wind’ appeared in the periodical Magyar Kurir in 1799.

“In other European countries, kiting was already a popular pastime for children. Many Hungarians studied in Germany, Holland, and England in the 18th century and when they returned home some of them became tutors or advisors to aristocratic families. It is highly likely that they brought the knowledge of the kite with them.”

Bodoczky continues: “A lithograph by Miklos Barabas, published in a book at the beginning of the 19th century, shows children kiting, with a typical 19th century house of the lesser nobility in the background. The figure standing in the middle is probably the children’s tutor. The shape of the kite is the English Archtop, but the decoration is Hungarian: a Turk wearing a turban. This is interesting because we know from nursery rhymes that children were still threatened by Turks at that time. (After 150 years of occupation by Turkey, Hungary became free from the Ottoman Empire in the early 18th century.) So instead of the frightening Dracone, Hungarian children painted Turks on their kites to make them scary.

“The sail was made of canvas. Paper was used only later, after 1848. Initially, paper kites, as we know from a poem, were pasted together from smaller pieces of paper----letters, bills, newspapers.”

The Istvan Bodoczky Story

Living in a Dangerous Time

Istvan Bodoczky picked one of the worst years of the 20th century to be born-----1943. World War II was raging and horrible post-war conflicts loomed.

His father was a law courts judge in Szolnok, Hungary, and the family was well off. That changed when the German invaders took over the family home as a headquarters. “We lost everything,” says Bodoczky. Relatives, friends, his father’s colleagues helped keep them alive.

Next the conquering Russians took over the house as a hospital. The family----father, housewife mother, brother and sister, and tiny tot Istvan----survived this new world, but barely. “My father was forced to become a member of the Communist party to earn a living,” says the artist. “Meanwhile my family remained religious. I was secretly taken to church.

“It was a dangerous time. In school we were taught there was no God. When I was a little boy, the secret police asked me whether my father went to church. I had been taught already to keep my mouth shut. Life at home and life out in public were two different things.”

The dangers continued. During the Hungarian Revolution, Istvan now 13 and with a boy’s curiosity watched the street fighting. A friend standing beside him was shot dead. “My father gave me a big smack,” he recalls.

Although the family tradition was the law-----both Istvan’s sister and brother are today sitting judges in Hungary---Istvan chose at 14 to attend art school, an education he continued until 27, with time out for work as a printer. “Schooling was free and I lived at home,” he explains of this extended education in the arts.

In 1968, Istvan married an Oxford-educated English eye specialist who had gotten to know him through correspondence and several visits to Hungary to visit him. They had three sons, Nicholas, now a musician; Peter, a flier in Florida; and Tony, a filmmaker and teacher. Istvan learned fluent English from his wife.

The union ended in divorce and Bodoczky subsequently married a fellow Hungarian, with whom he had a fourth son, Benjamin, now 17. When his wife died, Istvan raised Ben by himself.

“I have one grandchild, aged 10, son of my oldest son,” says Istvan to conclude a summary biographical sketch.



An asymmetrical kite happily flying in the blue sky.

Making Your Own Asymmetric Kite

Following are some hints by Istvan Bodoczky for making an asymmetric kite.



- *Start work only if you are in the proper mood for experimenting.*
- *Use inexpensive materials-----bamboo for the frame, paper for the sails.*
- *The bamboo should be very thinly split. It is better to use many thin elements as a grid rather than a few stronger ones. This makes the structure more flexible and also give more support to the paper sail.*
- *There is no rule on whether to make the frame or sail first. Try both.*
- *Use cotton thread for tying the pieces together, and secure the knots with glue.*
- *Don't think of the sail as the front of the kite, but rather use the frame for visual effect and put the sail behind the frame.*
- *To begin with, make a flat kite. A single sail kite with wild outline will be more difficult to fly than a complex one consisting of many separate pieces.*
- *Make the kite some two to three feet in diameter. Remember the rule: the bigger the kite, the more crudeness it will tolerate.*
- *Asymmetric kites almost invariably require tails. I use crepe paper. The longer the tail, the more chance it has, with its delayed movements, to make up for any lack of balance. On the other hand, the kite's weight-lifting ability limits the amount of tail that can be used. As with the bridle points, I guess where to fix the tails.*
- *Don't worry about calculating where to fix the bridle points. Simply test this out in a far away corner of a flying field. Go alone! Using a two-legged bridle gives more chance for the tails to find the balance, or help regain it.*
- *In addition to the tails, you may need some extra weight here and there to counteract the asymmetry of shape and size. For extra weight, try sticking some pieces of paper to the sail. Or use a weight on the end of the tail----a pebble may do the job.*
- *An asymmetric kite is not a badly made kite, it is not imperfect, it needs just as much attention to esthetic values as any other kite.*