In 1919, at the age of ten, Norman Lewis declared his intention to become an artist after watching a woman paint war scenes outside a shop at 133rd Street and Lexington Avenue in his native Harlem. By his mid-twenties, he had variously supported himself as a house painter, elevator operator, cook, taxi driver, professional gambler and merchant marine (traveling to South America and the Caribbean), yet his commitment to painting and drawing was unwavering. In 1933, he took studio space at the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts on West 143rd Street, operated by sculptor Augusta Savage. Soon after, he studied with Raphael Soyer and Arthur Young, a cartoonist and writer for The Masses, and assumed a teaching role with the WPA at the Harlem Community Arts Center. Like the majority of his American contemporaries, Lewis’s initial artistic outlook was largely shaped by prevailing trends in social realist painting and sculpture.

In 1935 Lewis attended the exhibition African Negro Art at the Museum of Modern Art. Deeply inspired by the forms he encountered, he executed colorful pastel drawings—some on sandpaper—of masks from the Baulé and Dan cultures. A typed statement in Lewis’s archive reveals his clear understanding of the severe distinctions between the “striking effects” of African sculpture and the Greco-Roman model of naturalism that had informed his work and teaching to this point. Certainly the MoMA exhibition resonated deeply in the cultural sense, as it had with his compatriots Romare Bearden, Charles Alston, and Gwendoline and Jacob Lawrence, but most clearly for Lewis, African art opened a path to the aesthetic possibilities of abstracted “plastic effects.”

Over the decades that followed, Lewis ventured more daringly and completely into the transcendent and spiritual possibilities of abstraction than any member of his formative circle. Simultaneously, he remained deeply involved in addressing the social and political inequities faced by black artists; he co-founded of the Cinque Gallery in Harlem, as well as the activist Spiral Group. A deeper reading of Lewis’s statement on African sculpture and its Western counterpoints, then, might also be read through this dualistic lens. Noting the role of the Other for defining the familiar and advocating that one can “learn to tolerate and even like these shocks,” Lewis understood that as a counterpart to the diversity of society, “No one who has followed the arts at all can have failed to notice that some things which at first seem (sic) ugly come to be pleasing on further acquaintance.”

Norman Lewis (1909–1979), Dan Mask, 1935, pastel on sandpaper 18 ¼ × 12 ½”, signed and dated. © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY
Norman Lewis (1909–1979), *Carved Bobbin (Guru)*, 1935, pastel on sandpaper, 14 × 8 3/8", signed and dated. © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY
If Negro sculpture is to be enjoyed at all, it will probably be through its plastic effects. In other ways it is apt to be meaningless or even disagreeable to civilized people. But in shapes and designs of line, planes, and mass, it has achieved a variety of striking effects that few if any other type of sculpture has ever equaled. These effects would be impossible in a representative of the human figure if natural proportions were strictly adhered to. They would be impossible in an ideal figure like Greeks conceived.

In most sculpture today that is popular, the artist relies on certain kinds of appeal that are lacking, or most lacking in the art of the Negro. Anyone who looks at the latter expecting to find these same sources of enjoyment is sure to be disappointed. Therefore, it is important to remember what not to expect as well as what positive qualities to look for.

No one who has followed the arts at all can have failed to notice that some things which at first seem ugly come to be pleasing on further acquaintances. Unfortunately, standard and habits of beauty tend to become fixed so that unaccustomed forms are hard to like, regardless how beautiful they may seem to someone else. There are those who remain limited to a few forms, who go through life quite happy and satisfied with them, but if he or she can learn to tolerate and even like these shocks, he will have done in sculpture or painting something like enjoying a new kind of music.

Few people make the effort to see clearly what's in a statue or a picture, they take a sweeping glimpse of it, experience a vague feeling of like or dislike, dream a little about the subject represented and pass on.

But no design can be really appreciated unless one sees how its parts fit together, otherwise it's a blur, a shapeless mass.
One cannot feel or enjoy any effect of rhythm or contrast in a work of art without distinguishing it from other things that are present at the time.

There is often a certain pleasure in looking at a thing vaguely, all at once, without trying to analyse it. There is even a thrill of mystery about a thing we don't understand.

The quality of a design is not purely objective. It depends on the observer's power of perceiving relations of conternity resemblance and contrast between visible things.

He must be able to select and organize, to disregard some parts for a moment, to notice only the resemblance between distant parts and the pattern they form, to follow curves with the eye, to feel a series of similiar lines, planes, or masses as rhythmic.

Whether a certain groove or set of projection outline a triangle, whether that triangle is repeated elsewhere on the figure, is a problem capable of being answered beyond much doubt. One had only to look and see.

Based on such perception, aesthetic feeling toward an object is firmly grounded, organized and nourished with reality.

Typed statement from the Norman Lewis archive. © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY