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Slow Looking

The Art and Practice of Learning Through Observation

Shari Tishman



ROUTLEDGE

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through the use of comparisons. For instance, the visitors could identify two paintings that seem alike, then describe how their features are similar and different. They could look at a particular gallery as a whole and look for similar and different features across all the works. They could propose their own juxtapositions by identifying two or three paintings they'd like to place next to one another, and explain why. Each of these strategies would work. But the museum closes at 5:00 PM. It's time for the tour to end.

Strategy Anatomy

The observation strategies I've discussed in this chapter—*categories*, *open inventory*, *scale and scope*, and *juxtaposition*—are broadly applicable to all kinds of contexts. They are used by experts in advanced fields of study to make sophisticated observations, and they are used by all of us, young and old, in many settings in everyday life. For all their breadth, the strategies offer concrete, actionable guidelines. The use of categories tells the eye where to look. Making an open inventory provides a structure for capturing a jumble of perceptions. Altering the scale and scope of perception helps the eye see things from fresh perspectives. Juxtaposing objects makes subtle features discernible by bringing forward similarities and differences.

While each strategy has its own flavor, they all share two important features. The first is that they encourage people to go beyond first glance and to look at one thing closely, whether it is a painting, a patch of the natural world, a historical artifact, or an object from everyday life. Time is a precious human resource, and we should be prepared to spend it lavishly if we want to cultivate people's capacity for slow looking. Consider the museum guide's choice: instead of giving visitors a tour of the entire museum, making sure to point out its many highlights, as perhaps they expected, she resisted expectations and gave them ample—really ample—time to look.

A second, more technical feature of the strategies discussed in this chapter is that they provide what educators sometimes call "scaffolding", rather than stepwise instructions. Instructions tell you what to do; scaffolds support you so you can do something on your own. The strategies discussed here encourage people to make their own discerning perceptions rather than to corroborate what experts tell them they should see. This is more than a motivational nicety: when people look slowly at things for themselves, they tend to grasp complexities and make connections in a way that no amount of expert information can convey. This is one of the reasons that slow looking is a unique mode of learning. This theme—the

connection between slow looking and an appreciation of complexity—is explored in depth in Chapter 8. To begin to set the stage, the next chapter offers some real-life stories about the practice of slow looking in four quite different educational settings.

Notes

- 1 You can find the video on YouTube, but reading about it here will have spoiled it for you; you'll almost certainly see the gorilla: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo>.
- 2 Carson, C. (2007, Feb.). Writing, writing, writing: The natural history field journal as a literary text. The Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities. Retrieved from <http://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/article11.shtml>.
- 3 Scholz, J. (1960). Connoisseurship and the training of the eye. *College Art Journal* 19(3), 226–230.
- 4 See <http://eol.org/>.
- 5 Whitman, W. (1892). Song of Myself. Retrieved from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/45477>.
- 6 Curtis, R. (1999). Outdoor action guide to nature observation & stalking. Outdoor Action Program, Princeton University. Retrieved from <http://www.princeton.edu/~oa/nature/naturops.shtml>.
- 7 Ibid.

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