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# Slow Looking

*The Art and Practice of Learning Through Observation*

**Shari Tishman**



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contexts—in the arts and humanities, in science, and in everyday life. I sought out research projects where I could learn more about slow looking, and I increasingly incorporated slow looking into my own university teaching. I became interested in the presence of slow looking in historical ideas about schooling, and in the history of museums. I grew curious about the connection between slow looking and the history of scientific observation, and about the connection between slow looking and literary description. Throughout, I continued to try to understand the learning benefits of slow looking and the educational practices that supported them.

This book is the story of where these inquiries led. I've written it with educators in mind, and if you are looking for practical ideas and strategies to use in the classroom, you will find several of them here, particularly in the earlier and final chapters. You'll also find some exercises that invite you to try slow looking yourself. But many of the ideas and examples discussed in the book go far beyond the classroom. My hope is that the book will be of interest to anyone who is curious about slow looking—what it is, how to do it, and why it matters.

## Slow is in the air

I am definitely not alone in my interest. An appreciation of all things slow is part of the culture these days, and there seems to be a date when it started. In 1986, an Italian food and wine journalist named Carlo Petrini organized a demonstration on the Spanish Steps in Rome in order to protest the intended opening of a MacDonald's restaurant on the site. The event was credited with sparking the slow food movement, which celebrates local foods, sustainable food production, and the slow enjoyment of the traditional pleasures of the table. The movement has since spread worldwide, and continues to thrive today. It is part of what seems to be a growing appetite for "slow" in contemporary culture. To give just a few examples: There is "slow art day"—an annual event held in museums around the world, with very simple rules: go to an art museum, look at five pieces for 5 to 10 minutes each; then have lunch with someone and talk about what you saw. There is also a slow education movement that eschews a fast-food model of schooling designed to deliver what it calls "packages of test-shaped knowledge" and instead argues for schooling that encourages in-depth learning and quality interactions between teachers and students.<sup>1</sup> And there's "slow journalism," practiced by a growing number of journalists who refuse to feed the public craving for instant information and instead emphasize moving slowly through the world, listening carefully to its stories, and reporting at a human pace.

Not all of these slow trends foreground slow *looking*, but they all involve moving beyond first impressions toward more immersive, prolonged experiences that unfold slowly over time. To some extent, this book is part of that trend. But there are some features of slow looking as I define it that may not fit with the larger trend. One is that I don't believe slow looking is necessarily characterized by a quiet, meditative mood. As I learned when I walked into that fifth-grade classroom, prolonged observation can be an energetic, lively affair. Of course, it can also be peaceful and tranquil, and, even spiritual for some. But it needn't be any of these things. I come back to this point in a later chapter, but I mention it now because I want to be clear that I lean toward an expansive rather than narrow view of slow looking; people of almost all ages can do it, and it can happen in many moods and at many tempos.

Nor do I believe that slow looking is necessarily anti-technology, even though the speed of digital life can pose a challenge to "slow". We live in the digital age. Immersive social media, omnipresent news streams, endless information at the tap of a finger—all have the potential to fracture attention spans. But digital technologies and media can also be powerful tools to help people look closely at things they may otherwise overlook. For example, thanks to NASA's social media presence, at this writing millions of people recently spent quite a bit of time looking at pictures of rocky, barren comets as they hurtle through space. Through digital crowd sourcing, thousands of people now aid scientists in their careful observations of the natural world. Through media images gone viral, hundreds of thousands of people carefully scrutinize the actions of public figures. Our fast-paced, digitized culture may present challenges to slow looking, but it also offers opportunities.

There are three main reasons why it is important to pay attention to slow looking. These reasons may feel especially pressing in the digital age, but they are not unique to it.

1. *Slow looking is an important counterbalance to the natural human tendency toward fast looking.* Most of the time, we scan our visual environments rapidly, unreflectively taking in whatever surface information is readily available and briskly moving on. We make first impressions quickly, and they tend to stick. Moreover, when we're in this fast mode we tend toward fill-in-the-blank looking. A few well-placed brush strokes and we "see" a whole face, just as we get the gist of a song by hearing just a few lines. Usually fast looking serves us pretty well. It would be absurdly inconvenient to have to look at things over and over again in order to recognize them. Intuitive, visual sense-making is necessary in order to move through the world efficiently. But some things take more than a quick glance to fully apprehend. When you look at a map of an unfamiliar city you can see quickly that it's

a map, but you'll need to study it for a while in order to make use of the information it offers. You can often get the gist of things by looking at them fairly quickly, but uncovering their complexity takes time. A brief glance at a tree tells you that it has a trunk, branches, and leaves. But it takes time to notice the variegated pattern of lichen on its bark, the irregular shape of its canopy, and the myriad creatures that are part of its ecosystem.

2. *Slow looking tends to be under-emphasized in general education.* The mind's most productive work doesn't always come naturally. Shifting gears from fast looking to slow looking parallels how cognitive psychologists talk about the fast mind and the slow mind.<sup>2</sup> The fast mind is characterized by rapid, intuitive, automatic judgments—including judgments made through visual first impressions—and it is the mind's most prevalent operating mode. The slow mind is characterized by deliberative, careful thought. Its hallmarks are reasoning with evidence, analytical thinking, and careful decision making. The rewards of slow thinking are huge (consider the entire projects of modern science and Western philosophy), but slowing the mind down and getting it to forego fast intuitive judgment in favor of slow deliberation takes vigilance, willpower, and training.

In educational circles, most people agree on the value of training the deliberative mind. Educators (including me) espouse the importance of teaching young people to reason with evidence, to analyze and evaluate arguments skillfully, and to make judgments thoughtfully. We regard these capacities as general thinking skills that are useful in all subject matters and in everyday life. Many school curricula purport to teach these essential skills, and developing the capacity to think critically is part of what people often mean when they describe a good general education.

The teaching of slow looking, on the other hand, tends to be a more specialized affair. A high school student might get a chance to practice slow looking in an art history class or a science lab. But developing the capacity to observe the world slowly isn't usually put forth as a core educational goal. This is unfortunate, because slow looking has the same wide applicability as slow thinking, but the skill sets are somewhat different. Slow thinking involves analyzing information, weighing evidence, and making careful inferences. Slow looking, on the other hand, foregrounds the capacity to observe details, to defer interpretation, to make careful discernments, to shift between different perspectives, to be aware of subjectivity, and to purposefully use a variety of observation strategies in order to move past first impressions. There is overlap, of course. For example, both slow thinking and slow looking emphasize the capacity to look at things from different perspectives and to seek information from a variety of sources. But neither area subsumes the other, and giving educational attention to one area won't fully develop capacities in the other.

3. *Looking closely is a shared human value.* People disagree about many things, but few people disagree about the value of careful observation. Most of us intuitively understand that the world is a complex place, and that we often rush to judgments about how to resolve or untangle its complexities a bit too quickly. Slow looking is a healthy response to complexity because it creates a space for the multiple dimensions of things to be perceived and appreciated. But it is a response that, while rooted in natural instinct, requires intention to sustain. This is easier said than done. Often, the most important moments to slow down and look carefully are also the hardest: political disagreement, personal disputes, conflicting values—all have to do with clashing beliefs about how things are or should be. But conflict is often a symptom of complexity—a sign that there is more to things than meets the eye. Imagine an education that trained us to recognize conflict as a cue to examine complexity rather than a cue to dismiss it.

A key argument of this book is that slow looking is, to a large extent, a *learned* capacity. The problem isn't so much that people don't believe in its importance; it's that they haven't been helped to develop the skills and dispositions to support it. Contemporary Western education emphasizes the role of rational, critical thought in the pursuit of knowledge. Slow looking may not typically be identified as a core educational value, but its contribution to critical thinking is foundational: before we can decide what is true and right, it's important to simply look closely at what's at hand.

## Notes

- 1 See, for example, [http://www.slowmovement.com/slow\\_schools.php](http://www.slowmovement.com/slow_schools.php).
- 2 For the most comprehensive review of this work, see Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.