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COMPARATIVE VISUAL ANALYSIS OF WESTERN PAINTING THROUGH TIME

Visual Communication Special Project

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the M.Des Degree in Visual Communication

by

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APPROVAL

The Visual Communication Special Project entitled-
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Guide

Rani Poorniah

Signature



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ABSTRACT

This comparative visual analysis is targetted at a period spanning almost 500 years in the Western civilization - from high Renaissance to 20th century Art. In this vast period of time only the major art movements have been selected for analysis. A wealth of research material already exists on these movements. However this material, mostly discusses artists and art movements in general, a logical comparative scrutiny of individual visual elements of painting is rare. This project intends to initiate this process of scrutiny with human figure as its patient. The figure has been selected keeping in mind its consistent appearance in paintings of all ages and its ability to give a comprehensive picture of any period. The analysis further breaks down the figure into its visual features (anatomy, color, tone, composition, technique) and Semantic features and compares them through the time span. This is followed by a series of paintings done by me on a common theme - 'Execution', in different styles. This gives a better understanding and a firm visual support to this analysis.

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THE PROJÉCT

1. THE PROJECT, THE APPROACH

The project is a comparative visual analysis of Western Painting through time. For a research of such a monumental nature to be effective in so short a span of time it is essential that a very specific period in art history be selected. The period chosen has been from 15th Century Renaissance to 20th Century Art. In this expanse of time painting has seen revolutionary changes in style and content. Volumes of material and research already exist analysing the artists, the paintings and the styles of these periods. However, such research takes into account all visual elements of these paintings. A comparative analysis of a few specific elements in the visual display down the ages is rare.

Keeping this in mind, the 'human figure' was chosen as the element to be analysed. But the question automatically comes to one's mind - why was the human figure chosen? There are several reasons to it.

One - my keen interest in figure drawing

Two - the human figure offers infinite possibilities which other elements of a painting do not. The artist's and the period's outlook can be better surmised using this element.

Three - The figure is one element which has consistently appeared throughout the art of all ages, hence is an inexhaustive source of information and insight.

Before the analysis begins it needs to be broken down into logical components.

One - Which all movements should be considered? It is not possible to analyse all the movements in the restricted time. Hence only the major movements are taken, i.e., Renaissance, Baroque, Romanticism, Realism, Impressionism, post-Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Dada and Surrealism.

Two - The analysis of the human figure has to be with respect to certain attributes (features). It is

essential that the features selected give a comprehensive view of each period. The following features are identified for analysis:

A. Formal Elements - Visual Features:

1. **The Figure:** The anatomy of the figure is analysed.
2. **Color:** The use of color on the figure. To what end is the color used and what does it convey.
3. **Tone:** How has the figure modelling been achieved. To what extent tonal gradations play a role in it.
4. **Composition:** How does the human figure fit in the composition, use of foreshortening, depth, perspective with respect to the figure(s). Are the figures in a balanced, symmetric composition or vice versa.
5. **Technique:** What technique of painting is used. How is the brush work, has chiaroscuro been used extensively, etc.

B. Semantic Elements: The significance and symbolism of the figure in the picture, choice of subject matter and what message is the figure used to convey.

No analysis or research is complete unless there is some original contribution from the researcher. The above analysis gives an introduction into the pictures and their periods. However, the number of artists in each period are so numerous and their individualities so strong that coherence (apparent) is not of a high degree. Thus, this necessitates a series of pictures which are coherent and would depict continuous development and changes over these periods. Such readymade material, however, does not exist.

Thus the second part of my project is the execution of a series of paintings - each painting depicting the synthesis of the common elements of one period; it is essential that the pictures do not reflect individual artists but the period itself. To achieve a harmony in all the pictures it is essential to select a single theme. The theme selected is: EXECUTION. This is a

topic which offers tremendous scope in figure drawing, animation of the figure, powerful expression and interesting composition. This part is my original contribution.

Thus to summarize the project is in two parts:

- (a) Comparative Analysis of various visual and semantic features of the human figure down the ages in painting.
- (b) Execution of a series of paintings depicting the typical characteristics of each period.

With this we move onto the next section. This gives the actual analysis. However, each analysis begins with an introduction to the art movement and the major artists active during it.

This follows a series of slides which are a selection of some of the paintings of these periods. These have been included as an essential aid to the understanding and appreciation of the analysis. The last section is a chart which gives a concise and comprehensive picture of the whole span in one sheet. Sketches and visuals are included in the chart whenever needed.

THE ANALYSIS

2.1 RENAISSANCE, THE AGE OF GENIUS



High Renaissance was truly the age of genius. Michaelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Titian are all giants especially the first three. This was a time of conflicts, both of arms and ideas, religion. This was a time when old barriers were being broken down and new horizons opening up everywhere.- perhaps this gave men a better chance to stretch their minds and have great faith in the powers of men. The human figure (perhaps for reasons mentioned above) never got so much importance; with Michaelangelo it reached an unprecedented monumentality and heroism.

A. Visual Features:

1. The Figure: Anatomy is very strong and extremely expressive. Figures are monumental (Michaelangelo).
2. Color: Coloration was not prominent. Homogeneous color areas were used and the pallet was mainly restricted towards earthen colors.
3. Tone: The modelling of the figure was mainly achieved by

varying the tones and evolving light and dark patches on the figure to suggest plasticity.

4. Composition: Strong geometrical compositions. Large frescoes involved in multitudes of figures in complex juxtaposition. Extreme foreshortening of figures to achieve depth. (Last Judgement - Michaelangelo).
5. Techniques: Sfumato - a technique involving softening of details was used to indicate depth chiarascuro - the use of light to focus on an object which keeping the ground dark minimal. Brushwork is very soft to give an impression of smooth finish at certain times - almost sculptural.

B. SEMANTICS:

The figures are almost solely mythological, biblical in content and themes chosen are also religious in nature.

2.2 MANNERISM



Mannerism is understood to refer to the artistic style prevailing in Italy and northern Europe for the greater part of the 16th century. After 1520, the confidence of the High Renaissance was no longer shared by the younger artists - to them, man seemed once again at the mercy of forces over which he had no control. This philosophy led to the development of a different style - Mannerism. The term is derived from the Italian word 'Maniera' originally meaning quite simply 'style'. In its broadest application, mannerism would include artists like Michaelangelo, Bruegel, Titian,

A. VISUAL FEATURES:

1. The Figure: The figures were unnecessarily elongated and artificial.
2. Color: Large expressive color areas were used. Strange, frequently shocking color renditions frequently cease

to represent local colors but abstract matching of the physically expressive requirements of the theme (Titian).

3. Tone: Tonal variations of color are used for modelling the figure. However, lighting is not uniform and gives way to almost strange unearthly chiarascuro.

4. Compositions: The development of Figura Serpentina where a series of figures spiral upwards. The figures are decentralised and crowded (Titian).

5. Techniques: Brushwork is little more open (Titian) and lively. However, chiarascuro is stronger.

B. Semantics:

The figures are still religious, mythological but more expressive of the artist's private world than the story itself.

2.3 BAROQUE: THE TRIUMPH OF LIGHT



The word 'baroque' was intended as a term of abuse, originally it meant oddly shaped, illogical, bizarre. The counter-reformation made the cardinals and pope more relaxed and confident in the powers of the church; hence they again became enthusiastic patrons of an art that should express their order and increased power. The confidence of this period is visible in the magnificence and sensuous visual beauty of many Baroque works. Caravaggio,

A. VISUAL FEATURES:

1. The figure: Highly naturalistic, superb draughtsmanship. Forms are bulky and exaggerated in certain cases, e.g., Rubens.
2. Color: The color in this period has a radiant glow, especially the figure - with unusually strong lighting and powerful chiarascuro. The figures seem to spring out of darkness (Caravaggio) in bright colors. Color is also used to suggest depth illusions.
3. Tone: Plastic modelling is achieved by tonal gradations; strong

variations in tone are used, due to unusual lighting the figure seems to spring out of darkness in a pool of light.

4. **Composition:** The figures are pressed so close to the frontal plane that the spectator feels as a part of the picture. Asymmetric, diagonal compositions are used, usually light is used to create the compositional bias for a particular figure.
5. **Techniques:** Brushwork has become much more loose and free, and contrast of light and dark texture is very strong. Chiarascuro as a means of dramatising, composing and modelling is at its height. Foreshortening of figures is used elaborately (Caravaggio).

B. SEMANTICS:

The counter reformation on one hand had brought renewed faith in the church, on the other hand people had got used to the exciting new ideas and discoveries of Renaissance. Hence, even though the themes are religious the figures are common men.

2.4. ROMANTICISM



This was the principal movement involving all the arts that flourished in Europe in the first half of the 19th century. It gained its epithet because the movement was understood to stand for an emotive and intuitive outlook, as against the controlled and rational approach that was designated classical. Romanticism was thus first seen as a revival of the fundamentally modern, spiritual and fantastic ethos of the middle ages. Its corollary was an anti-heroic, ironic view of the contemporary world. Delacroix, Gericault, Goya, Daumier, Constable, Turner, Corot are prominent figures of this period.

A. VISUAL FEATURES:

1. **The Figure:** The human figure gives way to landscape and nature in some cases (Constable, Turner). However, the figure still occupies the most prominent feature in most works. Anatomical distortions as a tool for expression have come in (Goya).

2. Color: Color employed as a psychico-expressive medium to lend 'mood' to the painting. Gleaming hot splashes of vibrant colors applied boldly is characteristic of this period.
3. Tone: Plastic modelling is achieved by color as well as dark tones. Tonal modelling is very strong in case of Delacroix, Gericault etc. while it is sacrificed to expressive broad brush strokes with color in case of Goya.
4. Composition: The paintings (as a whole) of this period have open and vast compositions. Elements of natural and man-made landscape are brought in with the figure. However, in crowded figure compositions (Delacroix, Gericault) there is no central figure (as opposed to Rembrandt) but a group of people attract the audiences attention. Geometrical compositions are used (Gericault - The Raft of the Medusa - a pyramid).

5. Technique: Brushwork is vigorous conveying the movement and rhythm of the figure.

B. SEMANTICS:

Important events of this period are the American and French Revolution. Also the Industrial Revolution has brought its own kind of human degradation. These led to a disregard for traditional distinctions. The figures are common-place and tangible, the themes are violent and has moved from heroism to sensationalism. There is a strong sense of sympathy with the human being.

2.5 REALISM



Realism is the age of machines. The ills of the industry, the poor peasants, the rural life, the dancers are in focus. The disillusionment with classicism and the nobility of man as a creature above everything else is complete. Manet, Courbet, Millet, Degas have very truthfully depicted this life.

A. VISUAL FEATURES:

1. The Figure: The human figure is drawn photographically. Anatomical details are precise and there is no exaggeration. This is the marked difference with the previous ages where the figure has always tended towards idealism. The figure is clothed in most cases.
2. Color: Color is mainly brown, black - dark earthy colors. The palette is restricted and monochromal.
3. Tone: Since color is applied in flat patches toning is minimal. Lighting too is uniform with minimal drama.

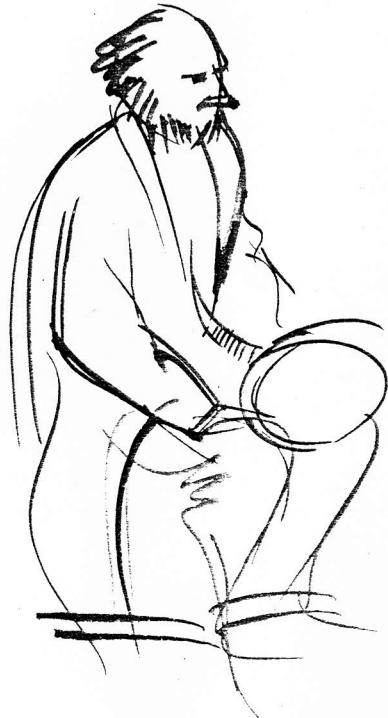
4. Composition: Simple geometric compositions are used where the figures stand in contrast to the landscape (Millet, Manet). Even crowded compositions are simple and lack any tension (Courbet).

5. Technique: Since the lighting is flat, chiarascuro is minimal. Brushwork has gone back to extremely smooth photographic finish.

B. SEMANTICS:

The Romantics had put freedom of feeling and imagination above anything else; but others thought this was just an easy way to escape from the realities of the time. The belief was that in a period of science and industrial progress art should only deal with contemporary subjects. Thus the figure gives factual depiction of contemporary life.

2.6 IMPRESSIONISM



In the broadest sense the impressionists belong to the period of Naturalism in their concern for making a record of their experiences and of the characteristic scenes of the world around them. The invention of the camera has forced the artist to realize the futility of 'photographic-naturalism' in painting. Instead the tendency is to depict the fleeting moment and play of light without paying much attention to painstaking realistic detail. Thus Renoir, Manet, Monet, Degas carry the light of Baroque a step further by flooding it with color.

A. VISUAL FEATURES:

1. The Figure: Anatomy is no longer of major significance. Clear, precise anatomical detailing and neat draughtsmanship present before is replaced by diffused; forms more indications rather than faithful depiction of the body.
2. Color and Tone: Color is all important feature of this period. The figures are modelled by creating contrasts

of pure color patches, points, dabs painted sided by side. Thus color in its pure form is used to suggest the form and space within the picture. Even the shadows are not darker shades but patches of pure color.

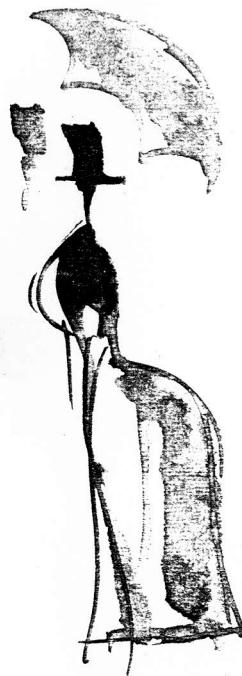
3. **Composition:** Compositions are apparently casual and un-organised. However its apparent casuality is part of a deliberate attempt to convey the sense of immediacy. Influence of photography in figure composition is obvious from the tight framing, unconventional angles and the tendency to create depth by keeping figures (parts of) on the surface in contrast with other figures in receding perspective (Degas).
4. **Technique:** Brush stroke is vigorous and paint is applied in quick vibrant, short strokes of pure color - thus conveying the sense of a captured moment. Chiarascuro is absent as the pictures are flooded with light.

B. SEMANTICS:

Since the themes are all mainly outdoors (exception Degas) and on day-to-day human activity, the story telling present in the previous moments is absent. The figure now conveys the immediacy of maybe a bath, wash, a dance, a theatre, etc.

2.7. POST-IMPRESSIONISM

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Post-Impressionism is a term used for a period in art history which came between impressionism and expressionism. Some of them were impressionists in their early days. There is a tendency to see beyond the possibilities of color only. Pre-cubist and pre-expressionist tendencies are prevalent. Experimentation in form and content is on. Cezanne, Seurat, Van Gogh, Gaugin, Tolouse-Lautrec are all striving towards something more than recording an event.

A. VISUAL FEATURES:

1. The Figure: Abstraction has set in, the body has started getting broken into geometrical components (Cezanne) or distorted to express a strong emotion (Van Gogh). Anatomy is of secondary importance.
2. Color: There exists a scientific analysis of color theory in the paintings of this movement. Seurat divides color areas into point elements of pure color which mingle only

in the viewer's eye while Cezanne uses continuous flat areas of color varying between cold and warm, light and dark or dull and intense. Van Gogh on the other hand uses extremely violent clashing colors juxtaposed to each other. In general experimentation with color continues.

3. Tone: Tonal variation is achieved like the impressionists with color patches, dabs or points.
4. Composition: Compositions are unconventional with a strong sense of movement (Van Gogh), odd angles are used (Toulouse-Lautrec). Monumental classicism still exists in case of Cezanne.
5. Technique: Technique of applying paint varies remarkably with individual artists. Seurat converts the painting activity into the calculated meticulous application of 'pointilles' of paint; Van Gogh's case is different - it is a frenzied application of dabs of paint while Cezanne gives geometrical paint patches.

B. SEMANTICS:

The meaning the figure conveys varies from commonplace activity to impressionistic moods. It is incidental in case of Cezanne where the main objective of the artist is the form only (in fact Cezanne's nudes are also like still-life paintings).

2.8 EXPRESSIONISM



Expressionism has been interpreted as a movement giving primary importance to the inner world of emotion in contrast to impressionism which remained enslaved to the external world. The anguish over First World war and subsequent political thoughts formed a major influence on expressionistic painting. Beckman, Munch, Picasso, Van Gogh are all part of this art movement.

A. VISUAL FEATURES:

1. **The Figure:** Anatomical details are freely distorted in order to create the right effect and mood.
2. **Color:** Color is again used to depict the inner-feelings rather than the actual natural color of the figure (Munch).
3. **Tone:** Tonal variations are minimal and modelling is achieved by pure color.

4. Composition: Compositions are dynamic and strong use of perspective (Munch). Unbalance and asymmetry help in creating restlessness (Beckman).

5. Technique: Texture variations are created by the brush. Strokes are strong and powerful conveying the anguish of the picture.

B. SEMANTICS:

As has been already said, the figure is mainly an expression of inner emotion - anguish, fear or hatred mostly. The strong influence of the horrors of the war are obvious.

2.9 CUBISM



Picasso, Braque and Gris form the core of the cubist movement in art. They brought to a climax what was initiated by Cezanne - viz., the geometric abstraction of the figure. The artists probed the limits of depicting multiple viewpoints of a figure on a two-dimensional, time independent surface. Thus the Cubists intended painting to take into account the shifting sometimes irrational and random nature of human experience of things and places, and time and space.

A. VISUAL FEATURES:

1. The Figure: Finally, the human figure has broken bonds with realistic modelling and precise anatomical detailing. The figure has become a collage of planes, angles, lines, etc.
2. Color: The color scale is gradually reduced from a basically green to brown palette to an almost monochromatic range of warm grays. Color is more or less rejected as a

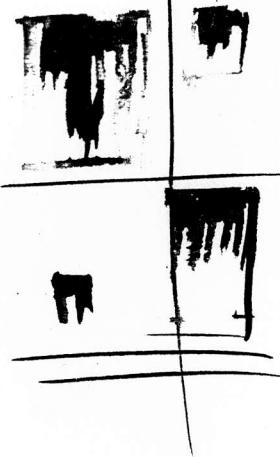
means of expression as it is found to be distracting to the form.

3. Tone: Tonal variations exist between planes and angled surfaces rather than on parts of the figure. Variations are achieved by various scales of gray.
4. Composition: Images are composed in a densely crowded relief; perspective is absolutely flattened. Different viewpoints are assembled together to give a totality of view.
5. Technique: The brushwork has become a series of vigorous cross-hatches.

B. SEMANTICS:

The figure (broken down into geometric shapes) is used to convey various shifting viewpoints of a 3-D space and time on a 2-D surface. Form is overpowering and meaning as to emotional play is non-existent.

2.10 ABSTRACT ART



Cubism had paved the road to 'Abstraction' which was finally carried to its peak by Mondrian, Kandinsky, Picablia, Joseph Albers. Painting has been totally liberated from recognizable form. Thus 'Abstract Art' is the generally accepted term for certain works of 20th century painting and sculpture which have no representational or symbolic function and yet are not simple pattern making. Since the human figure is generally absent from this style a detailed analysis is not attempted.

2.11 DADA



The first quarter of the 20th century was full of tensions and intensely lived. The rapid development of technology had a menacing aspect for man. There was all-round poverty due to capitalism, a paralysis of previous religious beliefs, morale was low; also in painting the 'formal' possibilities had already been exhausted. Naturalism had given way to photography, experiments in color (Impressionism) and form (Cubism) had reached a stage beyond which there seemed no further possibility. Even Abstract Art had reached the basic limits of its possibilities. Thus innovation was possible by turning towards new thematic levels. This led to Dada. The experience of the First World war had made the artists considerably sceptical and more distanced. Dada's attitude was on one hand negative, destructive and on the other gingerly seeking for new structures. The general tendency was to 'shock' the public (Marcel Duchamp - LHOOQ). Duchamp, Hans Arp, Tristan Tzara, Andre Breton form the key figures in the Dada movement.

A. VISUAL FEATURES:

1. The Figure: There no longer exists any consistency in figure drawing. 'Ready-mades', collages, etc. are used extensively. Thus the figure varies from photographic to abstraction.
2. Color: The use of browns, blacks, greys and occasional warm colors is predominant.
3. Tone: Figure modelling using tonal variations is minimal as color is applied mostly in flat patches.
4. Composition: The compositions are extremely noisy with rudely cutting diagonals and verticals. Distorted perspective is often used.
5. Technique: Paper Collage, blending of text with visuals is extensively used. Brush stroke ranges from flat application to sketchy hatching.

B. SEMANTICS:

The figure is used for provocative contradictory images (Marcel Duchamp - LHOOQ).

2.12 SURREALISM



The idea of 'surreality' in Surrealism does not suggest a second reality lying 'above' the given reality, but the suspension of distinction between daily and dream reality, and the creation of a reality comprehending both.

Dada had fulfilled its task by relaxing the spiritual and intellectual spirit by their most varied provocative events which they put on. The Surrealists profited from this and went ahead to search and experience things which lay beyond the reach of mere intellect. Freud was a strong influence for them. Rene Magritte, Salvador Dali, Max Ernst, Joan Miro, Yves Tanguy, Giorgio di Chirico. are the heart of the Surrealistic movement.

A. VISUAL FEATURES:

1. The Figure: The human body gets a lot more importance now. Anatomical detailing varies from classical perfection (Dali) to extreme distortion (Ernst, Chirico and Dali).

2. Color: Color is mainly employed as a means of expression for the pictorial realization of the minds irrealities.
3. Tone: Tonal variations with strong chiarascuro and dramatic lighting are used to create weird, unearthly effects. Very sharp cast shadows are also used sometimes.
4. Composition: Open perspective is used in the pictures giving the illusion of an endless expanse. The figures populating these stretches may or may not follow perspective laws. In some pictures by Dali (Sleep) monumentality is achieved by perspective distortion.
5. Technique: Brushwork is highly smooth and finished giving almost a synthetic polish to the figures.

B. SEMANTICS:

The figure is mainly used to express the situations in dreams or of the subconscious mind.

IN CONCLUSIÓN

3. IN CONCLUSION

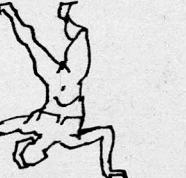
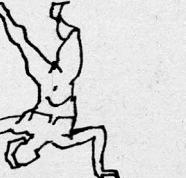
Tracing the development of the figure from Renaissance to 20th century art is analogous to experiencing the development of perception of man from childhood to adulthood. The human figure has thus come a long way from idealistic, through naturalistic form to abstract expressionism. How the figure has ultimately appeared on the canvas has been actually the summation of religious, political and scientific inputs to the artist at that time. In short the figure is an expression of its time. It is hoped that this analysis other than being a mere comparative documentary has been able to drive home the above point. The next steps, in future, would be to carry on similar research of other visual elements forming a picture. If such a comprehensive analysis is done it will truly give a deep insight not only to European art history but to painting in general.

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PERIOD	FIGURE	COLOR	TONE
RENAISSANCE		Naturalistic, idealistic, earthy	Middling by toning
MANNEРИSM		Color for mood, artificial	Stringing by lightening
BAROQUE		Naturalistic, exaggerated, splashing	Stringing toning
ROMANTICISM		Color for color, dramatic - expressive	Tearing adoo, toning adoo
REALISM		Photographic, full black, brown	flat, less toning
IMPRESSIONISM		merely of color, explosive	No toning
POST-IMPRESSIONS.		Color for mood, distorted to express	Less toning
EXPRESSIONISM		Highly distorted, color effects	Less toning
CUBISM		Motocycle, gray-green	Tearing planes in planes
DADA		Noe gray, brown, also warm	scribbles
SURREALISM		Classical or distorted or means for expression	Strong toning

