Renoir's "Luncheon of the Boating Party:" A Study in the Visual Elements and Compositional Principles

In last week's lecture, we looked at how differences in the **form** of Giotto and Titian's "Madonna and child" paintings produced remarkable differences in the **content** of the two paintings.

This week, you read chapters 4 and 5 in the text, "The Visual Elements" and "Principles of Design." The **visual elements** – **line, shape, mass, light, value, color, texture,** and **space** – are the building blocks of art. The **principles of design – unity and variety, balance, emphasis and subordination, scale and proportion, and rhythm** – describe the ways that artists arrange the visual elements in order to create organic unity.

So how does it all work?
In this week's two lectures, we will look in depth at a painting by Renoir, as well as a work of architecture, in light of the concepts introduced in chapters 4 and 5. We will make a close visual analysis of each piece, gaining in the process a more concrete understanding of how the elements and principles of art *work.*

Tip: for easy reference, print out a copy of the Renoir painting to have beside you as you read through the lecture.

Pierre Auguste Renoir, *Luncheon of the Boating Party*. 1880-81. Oil on canvas, 51" x 69." (The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.)

Renoir's painting presents a summery scene of friends enjoying a picnic by a river on the outskirts of Paris. The bright, light color palette and light-hearted **subject** make the painting seem almost deceptively simple. At first glance, we may feel ourselves drawn to it through the of the appeal of its colorful **palette,** and the sensual appeal of the **subject matter** - the food spread invitingly on the table in the center, and the youthful, attractive men and women occupying the painting.

As we spend more time, however, we discover that the breezy sense of movement and delight in the painting comes about through subtle and masterful **compositional choices** made by Renoir.

In the interest of clarity, we will examine the elements one by one, keeping in mind however that in our visual experience, shape, color, line, texture, and tone are generally seen *as one*. For example: the arm of the man in the right foreground is both a shape and a light-value color area, and it also functions as a line that directs our eye towards the center of the painting. This arm is what we would call a *linear shape.*

Line:

Most of the line in Renoir's painting is present through *shape edges*, *linear shapes* (such as the arm discussed above), and *implied lines* that carry across and between forms.

Implied Line

"Luncheon of the Boating Party*"* is *full* of implied lines. ***Follow almost any line in the painting and you will find it continues past the edge of the form where it starts to be picked up and continued in another form.***

One example of implied line starts with the red-brown railing the young woman in near the middle of the painting is leaning on: look at how the line is picked up and continued through the black nose of the little dog at left and into the red lips of the woman holding the dog. From her lips, our eye travels to the next closest red shape, her dress collar, which carries us down across her chest and then makes a sharp turn to the right. Next, the line is picked up in the light-value linear shape of the woman's pinky finger, which follows the same angle as the bottom edge of her red collar. From the pinky, our line is picked up by a linear highlight in the white fabric just behind the dog, which is in turn picked up in the white highlights on the wine cask, and then, more subtly, by dark brown shadows behind the railing, and then by the same value and color shadow in the shoulder of the man in the brown hat with his back turned to us.

Why does all this matter?

Renoir is "knitting" his painting together like a tapestry, creating pathways of movement for our eyes to travel. **Visual movement relates to the compositional principle of *rhythm. The same way a song moves along with a rhythm, a painting unfolds over time as our eyes trace movement across the surface***.

When we look at Renoir's painting, we most often sense **movement pathways** like the one detailed above very quickly, even instantaneously: describing them in words is slower and more laborious than our actual visual experience of these implied lines. Shapes and lines in this painting are so thoroughly connected and interlocked that if we "pull" one thread in Renoir's "tapestry" we find that it connects to every other "thread."

If we keep following this line, we find it continues through blue collar of the women in white behind the man in brown; it is picked up in the profile of the man to her right; curves up through the reddish hair of the man immediately to the right of him; is picked up by the moustache and red hat ribbon of the next two men, and finally by the top curving edge of the woman's hat in the top right corner of the painting. ***This single implied line***

travels diagonally across the entire width of the nearly-seven-feet-wide painting.

The purple dotted line shows examples of implied line creating movement across forms and between foreground and background.

Another example of **implied line** can be found if we look at the collar of the woman in the yellow hat leaning on the railing near the center of the painting. Look for a minute at the red trim of her collar where it falls across her left shoulder (to our right): the red diagonal line of the trim is picked up immediately to the right by a subtle dark line in the foliage behind the girl. Where does the line go next? Move your eyes to the collar of the young man in the brown coat and black hat in the background to the right of the girl. There is a dark shape formed by his tie and a shadow across his upper chest – and this shape picks up exactly the angle of the line in question.

With these implied lines, our eye is subtly directed to move in certain ways across the 2D surface of the painting AND back and forward into the illusion of depth.

And where next? See if you can trace where this *implied line* travels from here.

Shape and Value

Luncheon of the Boating Party, color removed. Purple lines show implied triangles; pink and yellow lines show pairs of similar shapes.

By now you probably sense that each visual element could be the topic of a whole lecture. There is so much going on in this painting! We will look more quickly at shape, value, texture and composition in "Luncheon of the Boating Party."

How does Renoir use **value** (light and dark) and **shape** to create **rhythm**, **balance, unity and variety** in his painting?

- The image above shows our painting with the color removed. This makes it easier for us to see value relationships and shapes.

- **Balance:** focus on the foreground of the painting a moment. The figure groups to the left and right of the table balance each other fairly **symmetrically**. The seated woman at left and seated man at right also form the base of two **implied triangles,** whose peaks are located in the hat of the girl leaning on the railing and in the man farthest back in the painting in the dark cap (see diagram above). Triangles are usually very **stable** compositionally. With all the movement and atmosphere of bustle in the painting, Renoir has rooted his composition with these two large implied triangles.

- **Rhythm:** the white tablecloth in the foreground is one of the largest single-value shapes in the whole painting. Look at how an **implied** circular shape is formed around the table by **repeated light values** in the clothing of the men and women. The repeated light shapes of their shirts create a **rhythm,** as our eye generally travels naturally between things that are **similar**, whether the similarity is of color, shape, size, value, or texture.

- **Balance, Unity and Variety:** Look again at the white tablecloth. Where else do you see a large shape that is more or less one value? The shape of the dark foliage in the top right corner of the painting is of a similar size to the tablecloth. The two shapes form a visual correspondence through being opposite in **value** but similar in size and **shape type (**irregular, organic). Along the diagonal from upper right to lower left, we begin to sense a visual "conversation" between these shapes. Shaped almost like brackets, they provide a visual "resting place" from the frenzy of small, contrasting shapes in the crowd between them. In their relationship we find both **unity** (shape type and size) and **variety** (contrasting values). The shapes are not identical, which could be boring, but they are similar enough that we sense them together.

By now you may be wondering... Did Renoir think consciously about all this while he was painting the picture?

The answer is probably *yes and no*. Some choices may have been thought out, planned, and conscious, while others were likely made spontaneously as the painting was in process. In other words, we could say that Renoir "knew" in a flash many of the things we are talking about, just by looking. He may not have verbalized them to himself, but he was *thinking visually.* Most artists use a combination of both planning and spontaneity in the process of creating.

Color, Texture and Space

- **Color, Rhythm and Balance:** Can you see colors creating rhythm and balance in the Renoir? Look at the yellow hats that repeat across the canvas. Also notice how many of the people have auburn or red-brown hair. These repeated colors all contribute to movement/rhythm and balance in the painting. The two women in blue dresses in the right and left foreground also balance each other and the repeated blue **hue** strengthens the implied triangle shapes we talked about already above.

- **Texture and Unity:** **What kind of texture is in this painting?** In the detail image below, we can see the texture of Renoir's **brushwork** more clearly. The soft, feathery brushstrokes that Renoir uses in most areas of the painting create **unity of surface texture.** We can tell that the glass bottles are glass by the way he has painted the highlights, but they seem softer than real glass due to Renoir's **paint handling.**

Detail: Texture of Renoir's brushwork in "Luncheon of the Boating Party"

- **Space:** with painting, because it is a 2-dimensional medium, we are talking about **implied space** rather than **actual space**. (Sculpture and architecture deal with **actual space**.) *In a 2D artwork, the illusion of space is the result of all the elements and principles working together.* In 2D art then, space is the result of line, tone, shape, texture and color arranged in a certain way. Spatial illusion in painting can be of **deep space** or **shallow space**, or some combination of both.

     There is also such a thing as completely flat paintings that do not attempt to create spatial illusion. This type of painting is sometimes called **decorative** painting.
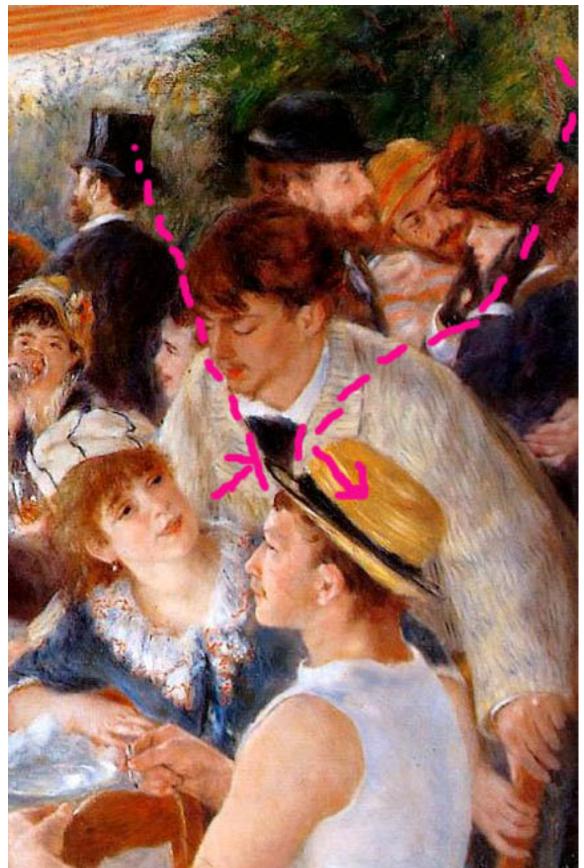
Space in "Luncheon of the Boating Party:"

Is Renoir showing us **deep** or **shallow** space in this painting?

On the one hand, we are given a glimpse into the distant landscape of the river in the upper left of the painting; boats bob along, their **scale** indicating an implied distance of at least 50-60 yards from the foreground of the painting.

Within the group of figures, Renoir uses **scale shifts**, **overlapping**, and **modeling** of light and shadow to create a space that is believably deep, occupied by volumetric figures. Overlap and scale are the most common sense of these devices: we perceive immediately that some figures are in front of others because they **overlap** them. When **scale** shifts, we understand that the smaller figures are farther back in space than the larger figures. Based on scale, we could fairly estimate the distance from the foreground figures to the most distant figures on the terrace to be about 20 feet. Notice also that the figures in the foreground and middle ground are, in general, lighter in **value** than those in the background. The light values of their skin and clothing project forward in the space of the painting, while the darker-clothed figures **recede** spatially.

And yet: Renoir is at the same time *compressing* the space of his painting, pressing foreground and background together. If we look again at the figure group on the terrace, we find many places where Renoir is **pulling** the background figures forward and **pushing** the foreground figures back visually. He accomplishes this flattening of space through a variety of means, perhaps most notably repeated colors and values that, as we said above, "knit" the foreground and background of the painting together.

Pink lines show repeated and linked black shapes that create spatial compression.

Moments of spatial compression include:
- The repeated blacks in the hatband of the foreground man at right and the bowtie of the man leaning over him. **Overlapping** tells us the man leaning is behind, but because the hatband and tie are linked in a single black shape, this tends to *press* the foreground figure back and *pull* the background figure forward. Imagine if the man's tie was a different color: it could have been red, or yellow, or blue, but Renoir made it black, thus linking it with the other man's hatband.
- The above blacks also form an **inverted triangle** or implied "V" shape with the black top hat of the man above and to the left of the foreground men, and with the black gloves and hat of the woman above and to the right of them. (see diagram below) Our eye links these repeated values *across the two-dimensional surface of the painting*, Rather than increasing the illusion of depth, these repeated blacks are compressing the space.

Broader Context: Picture as Window versus Picture as Picture

A dynamic tension thus exists in "Luncheon of the Boating Party" between the 2D nature of the painting and the illusion of depth it displays. Renoir has used the elements – line, tone, color, shape and texture – in such a way as to create spatial illusion in the painting but also to deliberately counter or reduce the illusion of three dimensions. This is not a lack of skill on Renoir's part. Rather, these issues have been integral to painting for centuries.

Painting is by nature a 2-dimensional art, so what is the relationship between its 2-dimensionality and the effort a painter makes to create an illusion of 3D space? As we will see when we get to the art history portion of the course, during the burgeoning **modern era** of which Renoir and the other Impressionists were part, artists became increasingly concerned with declaring *in their work* the nature and constraints of the very medium they were working in. For painting, this meant that a painting should declare *in its form* its own nature as a flat surface with colors applied to it. This was in part a reaction against **academic** values dominant since the Renaissance that held that a picture should be like a "window" onto another world. The simultaneous illusion of depth and compression of depth that we see in "Luncheon of the Boating Party" is to be understood within this context of modern art's reaction against the "picture as window" philosophy of the French Academy. We will learn more about the Academy and its role in European art history in Unit 5.

The French painter Maurice Denis summed up modern painters' preoccupation with the fundamental nature of their medium in his famous statement made in 1890:

"It should be remembered that a picture—before being a warhorse, a nude, or an anecdote of some sort—is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order."[1]

A picture, modern art says, is not a window *but a picture.*

Conclusion – What is it All About?

What, then, does "Luncheon of the Boating Party" *mean*?

When you see "Luncheon of the Boating Party" at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., it is usually prominently displayed, facing you as you enter the gallery. One is struck right away by the painting's size – almost seven feet wide – and by its light, bright colors. The foreground figures are nearly life size, and this draws the viewer immediately into the space of the painting.

The way Renoir knits the figures and their environment together – through implied lines and shapes, and repeated shapes, colors and values – seems to underscore an atmosphere of **harmony** and **unity** in the painting. The people are enjoying each other and the place they are in; they are visually unified and in harmony with each other and their setting.

One thing we have not talked about is the dominance of curved lines and shapes in the painting. Look at the number of curved arms and bent elbows and you will begin to see this abundance of lilting lines. The scalloped edge of the cloth awning above the terrace is also a rhythmic series of curves. Across the painting, curving, swooping lines contrast with straight lines – such as the poles of the awning and the black pant leg of the foreground man – creating an easy yet lively **visual rhythm**. Sometimes faster, sometimes slower and more leisurely, this rhythm of curving and straight lines echoes the rhythms of the flowing, lively conversation we imagine the crowd is engaged in. The painting speaks to us **_through its form_** of the timeless pleasures of friendship, leisure, and celebration.

Renoir's figures are both timeless and very much of their time – we recognize them as citizens of *fin-de-siecle* France, and yet the activity they are engaged in, and the way Renoir delivers the scene in paint, touch universal aspects of human experience. The feeling (content) of the scene

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[1] "Maurice Denis," from The Encyclopedia Britannica online.
http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/157702/Maurice-Denis

is delivered to us **through its form**, and this is what makes the painting great and its content timeless.

It is not just **what** Renoir painted, then, but **HOW** he painted it that makes "Luncheon of the Boating Party" a masterwork of Impressionism.