

## 6.2 Anatomy of a masterpiece: splitting in Titian

### Objective

This exercise shows you how to split information on different levels in a complex representation (e.g. a complex picture or a visual interface). This ability helps designers to understand how to reduce users' information overload by confining attention to parts of the design that can be analyzed independently before being understood in the wider context of the representation.

Let's consider an example. Let's say Lucy wants to eat one piece of fruit and can choose from four apples and four pears. Lucy could pick up one fruit and compare it with all the other pieces to identify the best choice. If Lucy were to perform a pairwise comparison of all the available pieces to make a final decision, she would end up making  $(8 \times 7) / 2 = 28$  comparisons. Suppose Lucy can classify fruits such as pears and apples and prefers one over another. In that case, she will proverbially compare apples to apples (or pears to pears) and reduce the necessary comparisons to  $(4 \times 3) / 2 = 6$ . Through this strategy, Lucy would significantly reduce her cognitive load.

Similarly, in a public speech we use different strategies to split concepts into smaller units (such as subordinate sentences) to deliver a rich message. Writers implement splitting using textual composition through chapters, paragraphs or notes. In a hypertextual web page, we split content by allocating the most important concept or an introduction to the the main page and relating more specific content to links to other pages.

### Background

The painting we have chosen to illustrate how artists can use splitting is Titian's 'Venus'.



Fig. 6.2a – ‘Urbino Venus’, Titian (1538)

The painting depicts a naked woman lying on a bed inside a room. In the background, two housemaids are rummaging through a chest. Guidobaldo II Della Rovere commissioned the painting in 1538, probably to decorate the bedroom, following the Venetian tradition of wedding paintings, which began with Giorgione in 1510 and his ‘Sleeping Venus’. According to the beliefs of the time, the sight of a beautiful naked woman would favour the procreation of beautiful offspring. Titian represents a young naked woman who offers herself without reticence to the observer's gaze. The Venus lies among two sumptuous mattresses inside a rich palace.

Titian organizes the painting on two layers, to which he added a third one through the landscape visible across the window in the background of the room. The woman figure occupies most of the foreground and more or less half of the painting.

To focus the observers’ attention on the woman, Titian paints a dark panel behind the left side of the nude. The panel ends in correspondence of the Venus hand, dividing the scene in two vertical halves. The dark and empty space contrasts with the other half full of colours and details, and this emptiness helps us focus our attention on the Venus. The left half contains two housemaids looking for something in the chest, probably clothes, a mundane task in housekeeping routine. This trivial scene juxtaposes the exceptional beauty of the Venus. The minor relevance of this second scene is also underlined by the small size of the housemaids and the floor's perspective, which runs away to a vanishing point placed in the centre of the painting, on the vertical line crossing the Venus body in correspondence with her hand.

The two spaces are juxtaposed. The space of the naked young woman comes towards the observer, involving him or her emotionally, while the obvious routines of daily life are relegated to the background. Titian wants to show that beauty is an exception that stands out from the dullness of everyday life and that it deserves our appreciation and admiration.

The clear separation of spaces; the distinguishable layers, the presence of bright white, red and black colours along with the softer tone of the naked body, all conspire to guide our gaze across the layers for the visual exploration of the painting, almost imposing a rhythm on our eyes' movements. Our gaze accelerates, pauses, relaxes slowly, caresses, pushes far, pauses again, then returns. And that's how the artist, splitting our attention between the details and the whole scene in the painting, can modulate viewers' emotions.

### **Instructions**

Closely observe the painting of Edouard Manet, 'A bar aux Folies Bergère', made in 1881–1882, then perform an analysis of the image guided by the following questions:

1. What elements in the painting catch your immediate attention?
2. How many information layers can you identify in the painting? (Hint: scan the painting visually from the outside in.)
3. Can you describe what happens in each layer?
4. Are the various layers connected? If yes, how?
5. What is the artist trying to communicate or do by organizing the image through these layers?



Fig. 6.2b – ‘Un bar aux Folies Bergère’, E. Manet (1881–1882).