

10.2 Anatomy of a masterpiece: contrast and balance in Japanese painting

Objective

This exercise shows how to recognize perceptual tensions existing between the elements of an image. In particular, the exercise invites you to reflect on the importance of empty spaces in connecting the various parts of an image through a network of invisible tensional relationships.

Background

The three images reproduced below were created in the second half of the 19th century by three artists belonging to very different cultures and artistic movements.

The first artist is Seitei Watanabe, a master in the style known as 'lyrical naturalism' for its ability to represent elements of nature such as animals and plants immersed in an atmosphere of intense spirituality. In fig. 10.2a we can see three birds resting on a slender branch and camouflaged among the leaves.



Fig. 10.2a – 'Birds on a Branch', Seitei Watanabe, 1887 (MET Museum, New York).

The second artist is Giovanni Fattori, who belongs to the group of artists called 'Macchiaioli'. The painting depicts three soldiers waiting on a torrid summer's day next to a white wall that is in sharp contrast with an intensely blue sky (fig. 10.2b).



Fig. 10.2b – ‘In vedetta’, Giovanni Fattori (1872).

The third painting is by the impressionist painter Edgar Degas. He depicts young dancers doing warm-up exercises before the performance (fig. 10.2c). Here, too, it is the colour, with its contrasts and nuances, that builds the scene.



Fig. 10.2c – ‘Before the Ballet’, Edgar Degas, (1890/1892).

Even in the diversity of the styles and subjects, there is a graphic element that is common: the empty space. Whoever looks at these paintings cannot help noticing that so much of the image is occupied by an empty surface (Fig. 10.2d).

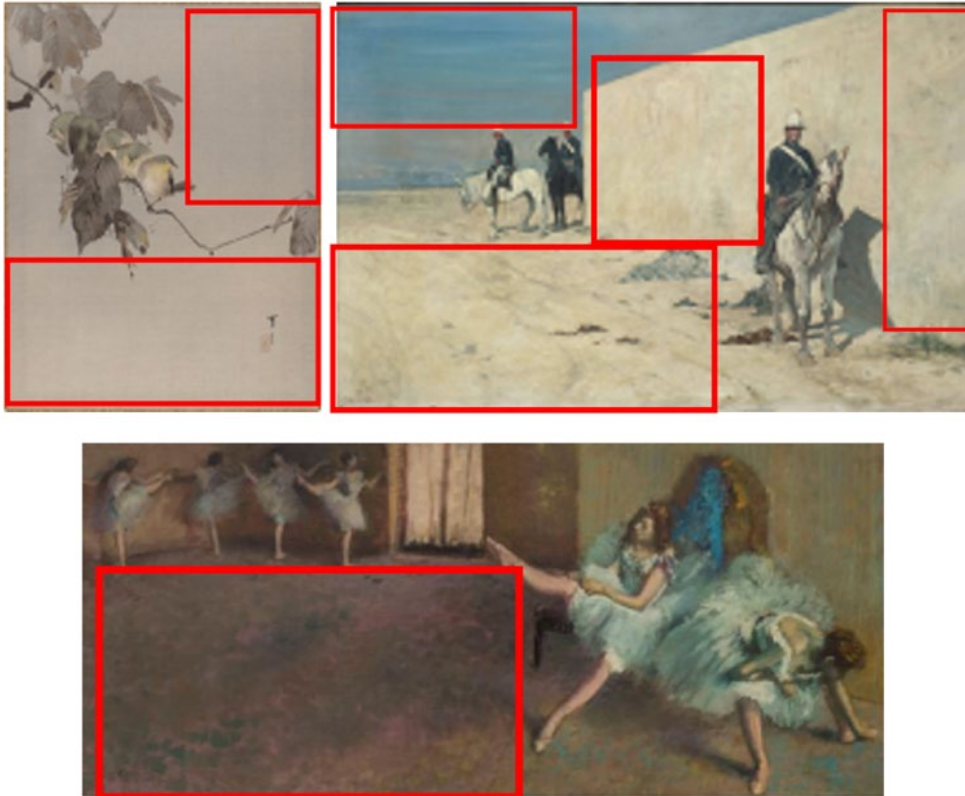


Fig. 10.2d - The empty space in paintings.

Why would an artist ‘waste’ so much of the valuable and limited space available on the canvas? To refer to how valuable this space is, interface designers refer to it in their jargon with the expression ‘Real Estate’.

Indeed, vacuum plays an essential function in the emotional understanding of an image. From a perceptual viewpoint, the void is a place where we get lost and our mind can rest or wander. We can experience this feeling when we contemplate the sea’s distant horizon or watch the sky while lying in a meadow or enjoy the feeling of calm and peace transmitted by the slow movement of waves and clouds. Almost paradoxically, the empty space attracts our gaze. Empty space is a space for waiting, rich in possibilities. It is a place full of potential energy waiting to unfold.

In all three paintings included in this exercise, the empty space communicates the feeling of suspended time. You can feel the precariousness of a life moment that any action will permanently erase. Everything seems suspended: the observer, life, time. So are Watanabe’s birds fragile like leaves, Fattori’s soldiers, patient but restless, and Degas’ dancers, liberating their tension in routine exercises. The absence of any visual relevant element helps us focus, appreciate the joy of the present moment, and connect with the world.

The creation of tension is the result of a wise balance between the empty spaces and the coloured masses (fig. 10.2e) in the painting. The colour masses are arranged along diagonals acting as a lever and on which they balance and contrast. The fulcrum of the lever is also easily recognizable.

In Watanabe's, the fulcrum is at the crossing of the two diagonals. The unbalanced lever to the right conveys a sense of precariousness to the image. In Fattori's painting, the two converging diagonals identify an escape point and accentuate the distance between the two knights. The rider on the right is pushed forward from the diagonal and blocked by the shadow that is carved on the wall. Finally, in Degas' painting the lever breaks at the height of the fulcrum. The legs of the two dancers on the right draw a rotational movement like the hands of a clock and direct the gaze towards the four dancers in the background. The horizontal alignment and rhythm of the four vertical legs give stability and compactness to the group. The observer is an intruder, a voyeur who is violating the girls' concentration. Empty spaces, diagonals, contrasts and balances set the whole image in motion, generating a continuous dialogue between the observer and the image.

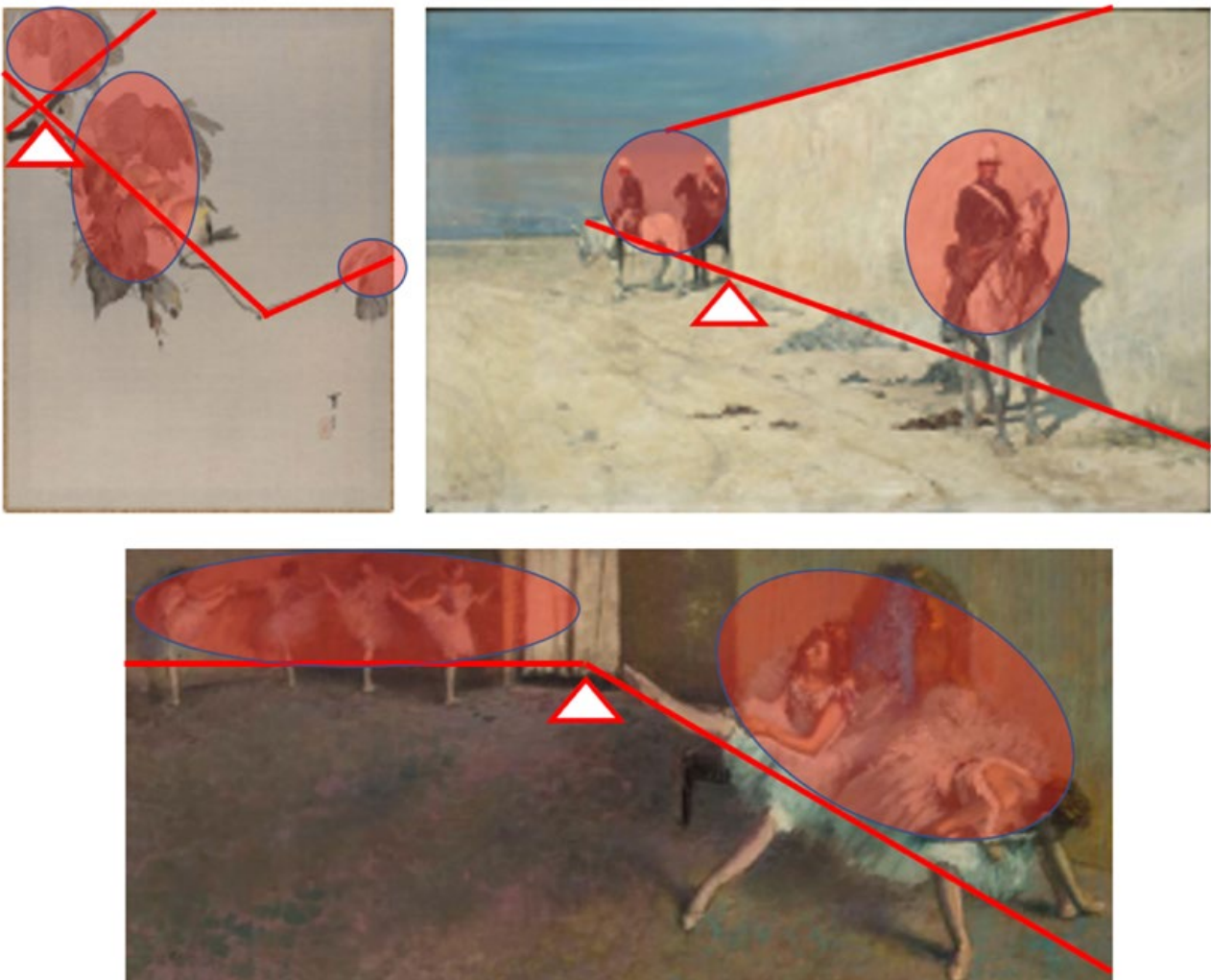


Fig. 10.2e - Diagonals, weights and fulcrum.

Instructions

Observe Degas' painting in fig. 10.2f. Then analyze the painting through the following steps:

1. Circle the white spaces.
2. Identify the main nuclei of the image (hint: there are three main areas).

3. Locate the diagonal and fulcrum (hint: to find out the role that different areas of colour play in the composition, try to cover them with your hand and check how perception changes).
4. Identify the elements of tension and contrast.
5. How do the elements of the composition produce a feeling of suspension and push forward the girl who climbs the stairs?



Fig. 10.2f - Edgar Degas, 'Danseuses montant un escalier', Musée d'Orsay, Paris.