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Visual Communication

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### Visual Analysis: “Temptation”



The visual piece that I chose to analyze for this paper is William-Adolphe Bouguereau's

painting “Temptation.” I chose this for a couple reasons. Firstly, I studied this piece in an art history class in highschool, and wanted to come back to it years later with a fresh perspective. The second reason is that I simply love the realism and beauty of this image. I was immediately struck by how realistic the image is; it appears to look more like a photograph than it does a painting. I also had the opportunity to experience this painting for myself up close in the MIA (Minnesota Institute of Art). While it looks good on a screen, it looks even more stunning up close.

While my initial perspective on it was a shallow appreciation of its beauty and visually appealing nature, after studying the painting more as a whole and looking at it from different angles, I began to have a more in-depth understanding of the painting, and all the things that actually make it a complex piece of art.

William Adolphe Bouguereau created “Temptation” in 1880. He was a French painter who lived from 1825-1905, and was largely known for his Neoclassical approach to art. He is renowned for his disagreements with impressionist artists for their “lack of technical precision.” Despite impressionism being a very popular art form at the time, Bouguereau was a “leading figure for a late generation of Neoclassical artists” during this period, and these artists’ works actually gained more recognition and popularity at the time. Bouguereau had a remarkable ability for realistic and precise technique with his work, and his paintings typically contained religious or mythological themes, a rustic life in the countryside, and youthful innocence. He was also well-known for his modern depictions of classical nudes. “Temptation” is a great example of a

modernized realistic depiction of a nude child.

Throughout his life, different genres of art became popular and quickly lost popularity, but Bouguereau rarely strayed from his Neoclassical, more traditional approach to painting. His portrait paintings seemed to gain the most popularity, and he received many honors in the 1860's and 70's as his career progressed; he began to exhibit his art in the Salon in France-which was arguably the greatest annual art event of the Western World between 1748 and 1890. He received a large amount of interest from middle and upper-class patrons, which gave him endless opportunities to paint various churches and other buildings.

While he received a lot of fame and praise for his works, Bouguereau's life was not always characterized by success and happiness. Three of his children died at birth, and his wife Nelly died in 1877, which also inspired some of his more "somber" paintings. He was a mentor and teacher for many people throughout his life, and was celebrated with elaborate processions and monuments in Paris and his hometown of La Rochelle when he died. He was known to have painted 822 different paintings over the course of his life, although the whereabouts of some of these are unknown. "Temptation" will forever live on as a work of art that embodies his traditional and realistic approach to art.

As for the technical details of how the painting was literally made, it has dimensions of 39 x 52 inches, and is an oil on canvas painting. In true fashion, he employed traditional methods of "working up a painting" by first making detailed pencil studies and oil sketches, and then turning this into an accurate depiction of the human form. The process of oil painting is

typically done with 3 important rules. These rules are ‘fat over lean,’ ‘thick over thin’ and ‘slow-drying over fast drying.’ Essentially, each coat of paint that comes after needs to be thicker, more flexible and slower to dry than the layer that preceded it.

At first glance, the viewer might be immediately struck by Bouguereau’s use of light in the image. The light is striking in a sense that it is very natural. The scene that unfolds before our eyes is very much a natural scene in nature that one would encounter when going for a walk outside. It also serves to create a unique contrast between the two figures; the woman and the young child. As we can see, the young child is illuminated by the light and the woman is hidden in shadow, most likely shadow created by the canopy of trees which hang over her head. Not only are the human figures Bouguereau painted incredibly lifelike, but the elements of nature such as the trees, grass, pond, and water lily also resemble very lifelike and real objects.

Overall, the image heavily uses earthy tones of greens, browns, and blues, with the sky as a muted blue color and the grass and trees a dark greenish-brown, most likely indicating that they are in the midst or end of summer. There are a few sparse pops of color which draw the viewer’s eyes toward the center. For example, the apple the woman holds appears to be extraordinarily shiny for a normal apple. It is depicted with the usual gold and red tones of an apple, but more vibrantly, which creates a striking contrast to the muted tones of their clothing and the landscape. Another interesting technical detail is the way both of the figures wear burgundy ribbons in their hair.

As for an ethical perspective, I felt that hedonism might be the most accurate philosophy

used. There were rumors going around at the time that Bouguereau only painted for the bourgeois to get rich. The bourgeois were the wealthy middle class of society in France at the time, and they often implored Bouguereau's help for many different projects. However, this is a myth that has never been proven. He painted what he loved and poured so much of his time and energy into his work that it appears quite unlikely that he simply painted for the money. He seemed to have a great love for the aesthetics of the image, as the majority of the pieces he created utilized beautiful light and color, so as to depict only the beauty he saw in humanity instead of the things which would reveal it to be broken and ugly. For example, this quote sums up well Bouguereau's approach to making art: "In painting, I am an idealist. I see only the beautiful in art and, for me, art is the beautiful. Why reproduce what is ugly in nature? I do not see why it should be necessary." Obviously with this quote he places much importance on the aesthetics of an image, and seems to be making a jab at artists that produce less visually pleasing art.

There are a lot of cultural and symbolic elements in this piece. There is also much speculation about what the painting is actually trying to communicate; Bouguereau left it up to interpretation but it seems likely that he was trying to communicate a central idea of temptation since the painting is literally titled "Temptation."

The apple in the painting stands out against the muted tones of the clothing and background, which I think was actually a very intentional choice on Bouguereau's part. Culturally the red apple has been known to symbolize love, passion and temptation, which makes

sense when considering the title. The apple is also a biblical element because of the Fall. As the story goes, Adam and Eve were tempted by the apple in the Garden of Eden because they believed that if they ate it they would become like God and have knowledge of good and evil. So with this knowledge of the bible story in mind, the choice to incorporate an apple into the painting to communicate an idea of temptation or desire makes a lot of sense.

As I said previously, there is a lot of speculation about what the painting is really trying to communicate, but there are a few possible interpretations which seem plausible. One idea is that the woman in the painting is sharing the narrative of the Fall with her young daughter. Another idea is that the woman is actually an older version of the young child. I think the 2nd idea seems the most likely, since both figures are wearing the same burgundy ribbon in their hair and have similar hairstyles. If this 2nd interpretation is accurate, Bouguereau may have been using very intentional light choices to highlight a moral quandary between the younger and older version of the girl. To clarify, the child is exposed to the natural light in the image, but the woman is hidden in shadow and appears less noticeable. The light surrounding the child communicates an idea of innocence and youth, while the shadow helps to communicate “experience.” With the changing of the time humans naturally lose their innocence because they gain more experience and become more accustomed to the ways of the world. They are less naive to the ways in which they will be tempted, and have more opportunity to be tempted as they grow with age and are exposed to everything the world has to offer them.

The waterlily also has quite a bit of symbolic significance, since it can represent things

such as birth, resurrection, purity, innocence, majesty and enlightenment. In this context, it is likely that the waterlily is also tied to the innocence and purity of youth.

Another interesting detail about this image is that the child is naked and the woman is fully clothed. Referring to The Fall again, as soon as Adam and Eve ate of the fruit they instantly became ashamed that they were naked, and sewed garments of fig leaves to cover themselves. They changed from having a childlike, naive innocence to experiencing a deep sense of shame. It is possible that there is an element of shame being portrayed in the image as well because of this interesting dichotomy.

Thinking critically about this piece after studying all of the perspectives, I was given an even deeper appreciation for all that this painting is. It has an ability to immediately catch the eye of the viewer because of its obvious visual appeal. Most people likely look at this painting and find it to be a very beautiful piece-but I think the thing which especially sets it apart from other aesthetically pleasing paintings is that it feels like a reflection on humanity. It is communicating a deeper message about a very real and human experience-temptation. There is not a single person existing today that has not experienced temptation in some form, and so it makes the piece feel timeless and relatable. We live in a material world that pushes material possessions and a consumerism mindset on us, and it can be hard to avoid the “shiny apple” that is presented to us at all times and from all directions. We want to engage with what we see and take part in what the world has to offer, often realizing too late that what it has to offer can be harmful to us. For example, we feel a need to download the newest social media app because

it is what our culture tells us to do, without thinking about the potential harm it might cause. We become addicted quickly and find it difficult to break away from the endless scrolling.

While I could talk about a deeper meaning and how relatable this painting feels for a long time, I also appreciate the amount of work and time that went into its creation after studying the technical details of how it was made. Bouguereau had to undergo a long process of making sketches and then creating multiple layers upon layers of paint to get the desired outcome. I think it is a good encouragement for any aspiring artist to be patient with the process, because a work of art like this doesn't just happen overnight.



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