

# Emotion and Perception: A Case Study of Aesthetic Response to Frith's Narrative Painting "The Railway Station"

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**Abstract.** This study intends to exam Clive Bell's theory of significant form. For Bell, a painting could not be a work of art if line and color were used to recount anecdotes, express ideas, and indicate the lifestyle of an age. In his influential book *Art*, Bell claimed that William Powell Frith's famous narrative painting *The Railway Station* was not a work of art. This paper used Frith's painting as the subject to explore whether viewers' aesthetic responses to a narrative painting would be affected by their perceptive awareness of image. Statistical data showed that, contrary to Bell's criticism, the artistic value of the work was confirmed by viewers' responses, demonstrating that he underestimated the attractiveness of representational painting. The results of this study partly supported Bell's argument. Comparing with artist's achievement of realistic representation, the viewers were indeed unmoved by the effects of idea communication and emotional expression in the painting. No significant association was found between viewers' perceptive awareness and their aesthetic judgments, suggesting that visual attraction could be more critical than cognitive information for viewers' aesthetic responses to a work of art.

**Keywords:** Emotion, perception, aesthetics response

## 1 Introduction

Located in London, Paddington Station was built in 1838 and started to operate in 1845, seven years earlier than that of King's Cross Station which featured in J. K. Rowling's famous novel of Harry Potter. Paddington Station was reconstructed as an underground station complex after 1863 and became the terminus of central London railway.

As shown in Figure 1, the painting entitled *The Railway Station* was created by a British genre painter William Powell Frith (1819-1909). The work was completed in 1862, 101 inches long and 46 inches wide. Through a Victorian scene of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paddington Station, the artist depicted a virtual reality of lifestyle in London after the industrial revolution. Most viewers would agree that this painting is a work of art. However, in his influential book *Art*, the famous British aesthician and art critic Clive Bell (1881-1964) proclaimed that Frith's *The Railway Station* is not a work of art [1].



Figure 1. *The Railway Station*, W. P. Frith, 1862, Royal Holloway College, Surrey, UK

One of the most important issues raised by Bell was the difference of artistic significance evoked by emotion and perception. Bell believed that the aesthetic value of a work of art derived from viewers' emotional pleasure derived instinctively when gazing at the abstract elements of its composition. He argued that if forms and the relations of forms are employed to achieve the purpose of suggesting emotion and conveying ideas, they are created for visual perception rather than aesthetic emotion [1].

In this study we intend to examine Bell's theory of significant form. Using the image of Frith's *The Railway Station* as the study object, we attempted to explore whether viewers' aesthetic responses to a narrative painting would be affected by their perceptive awareness of image.

The purpose of this study was to construct an accessible criticism model of art appreciation. An aesthetic paragon connected to mental function was addressed based on viewers' response to different levels of perceptive awareness. The output of the study was expected to enhance aesthetic literacy of the public.

## 2 Literature Review

Before the sixteenth century, the concept that art imitates nature underlay representational theory. Even in the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant still claimed that art can only be called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and yet it looks to us like nature [2]. However, the invention of photography resulted in a revolutionary development. Now

that the machine could easily imitate reality in nature even better than humans could, what was the value of a representational painting? In his theory of significant form, Clive Bell rejected representation as the essence of art. He praised primitive art for its absence of representation and description.

From a psychological point of view, human perception is significantly effected by emotion. In a study on the impact of emotion on perception, Zeelenberg, Wagenmakers, & Rotteveel claimed that emotionally significant stimuli were better identified than neutral stimuli [10]. Weierich and Barrett in their article discussing visual attention also suggested that the affective value would enhance visual sensitivity [9]. The conclusion that emotional content of the pictures effected perceptual encoding of outer stimuli could be drawn from the results of many experiments [8]. However, Bell suggested that aesthetic emotion derived from pure sensational stimuli but not cognitive awareness of a work of art.

According to Bell, human aesthetic experience derives from a particular composition of lines, colors, and forms. He claimed that in each masterpiece, lines and color combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotion. These relations and combinations of lines and colors, these aesthetically moving forms, Bell called "Signification Form" [1]. For Bell, a painting could not be a work of art if line and color are used to recount anecdotes, express ideas, and indicate the lifestyle of an age. Accordingly, Bell claimed that William Powell Frith's painting *The Railway Station* is not a work of art.

Frith specialized in genre subjects and narrative panorama. The painting represented a lively scene of London Paddington station. Every detail on the canvas was an imitation of the real world. The engine of the locomotive was drawn based on a photograph. The structural elements such as pillars, arches, and girders, which occupying almost the entire upper half of the canvas, still looks the same after one and a half century. The most dramatic effect of the painting is nearly a hundred figures separating on the lower part of the canvas in which the artist set up several scenarios happening in different groups of people. In an age without motion picture this painting represented a marvelous pictorial spectacle. However, according to Bell, this work is merely an interesting and amusing historical document. He argued that line and color in this painting are used to recount anecdotes, suggest ideas, and indicate the manners and customs of an age; they are not used to provoke aesthetic emotion [1].

It is interesting that the same comment of "historical document" was employed by another art critic to argue that Frith's painting became one of the most important contemporary works of art. In a biographical and critical essay written in 1978, Aubrey Noakes used "Extraordinary Victorian Painter" as the title, highly recommended Frith's *The Railway Station*. Noakes claimed that the artist accurately represented the fashion of in the 1860s. He argued that the artistic value of this painting derived from its documentary significance through which social historians were inspired over a century [6].

Bell's notion sustained the theory of several modern art movements, including abstractionism and minimalism. Noël Carroll argued that Bell intended to exclude photography from the art world because he was writing in the shadow of this new technology [3]. Bell foresaw the challenge of photography. His theory of significant form

influenced art creation, and as an influential art critic his theory influence major museum collections in Britain, France, and the United States in the early twentieth century. By the end of the 20th century, the development of computer technology enabled artists to master more powerful media and to create visual images that look real. Once again, Bell's argument about significant form inspires us to reconsider the value of representative paintings

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Instrument

In order to examine whether viewers' aesthetic responses to a narrative painting would be effected by their perceptive awareness of the image, a questionnaire was developed to obtain participants' aesthetic response after completing their appreciation of the work.

Participants were divided into two groups. An interpretation of the work was introduced in detail to the experimental group. In contrast, participants in the control group were not offered any information about the work before answering the questionnaire.

#### 3.2 Framework of the Study

Participants' educational background and their awareness of the creation motifs of the painting were used as independent variables. An aesthetic judgment connecting to mental function was examined based on viewers' response to different levels of perceptive awareness. A framework for the research design is shown in figure 2.

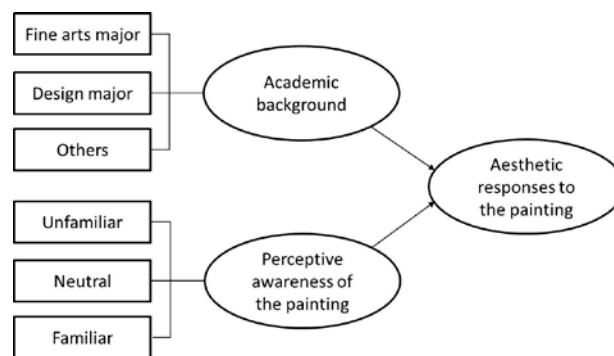


Figure 2. Framework of the research design

Educational background was divided into three categories of 1) Fine arts major, 2) Design major, and 3) Others. Perceptive awareness included three levels of 1) Unfamiliar, 2) Neutral, and 3) Familiar. There are two sets of dependent variables.

The first is a multi-choice question about how the painting attracted the viewer including six categorical items: 1) Integrated and compact composition, 2) Detailed and

fluid contours, 3) Vivid and vigorous colors, 4) Lively figures and scenery, 5) Clear idea communication, and 6) Abundant emotional expression. The second is a group of questions using the format of 5 points Likert scales to examine participants' criticism of the painting:

- 1) This is a work with high artistic value.
- 2) This work is more like a historical document.
- 3) This work demonstrates the zeitgeist of artist's time.
- 4) This work rigidly adheres to the skill of realistic depiction.
- 5) This work seems to narrate an interesting story.
- 6) The visual expression is better than content narration in this work.
- 7) Taken as a whole, I highly appreciate this work.

## 4 Data Analysis

The study completed 119 effective questionnaires, covering three different educational backgrounds (Fine arts major 28, Design major 40, and Others 51) and three diverse levels of perceptive awareness (Unfamiliar 33, Neutral 43, and Familiar 43). The significant outcomes and discoveries are as below.

### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics of mean score and standard deviation were used in this study to demonstrate participants' criticisms evaluated by 5 points Likert scales.

Table 1 shows that the mean scores of questions "This is a work with high artistic value" and "Taken as a whole, I highly appreciate this work" were significantly greater than the assumed mean of 3, suggesting participants' positive attitudes toward this painting. Among all items, the question "This work demonstrates the zeitgeist of artist's time" got the best rates, the question "This work adheres to the skill of realistic depiction" obtained the lowest score.

**Table 1. Mean Scores and Standard Deviation of Participants' Evaluation of the Painting**

Items	Mean	SD
1.This is a work with high artistic value	3.82	.747
2.This work is more like a historical document	3.73	.972
3.This work demonstrates the zeitgeist of artist's time	4.17	.847
4.This work adheres to the skill of realistic depiction	2.86	.945
5.This work seems to narrate an interesting story	3.75	1.043
6.The visual expression is better than content narration	3.46	1.080
7.Taken as a whole, I highly appreciate this work	3.87	.853

## 4.2 Chi-square Test and Correspondence Analysis

Chi-square test was manipulated in this study to examine the association between two independent variables and the categorical dependent variable of aesthetic judgments.

Table 2 shows that two sets of Chi-square score were less than the critical values, suggesting that participants' educational background and perceptive awareness of the painting did not result in significant differences in their aesthetic judgments. Most of the participants selected item 4 "Lively figures and scenery." The second was item 1 "Integrated and compact composition." The final was "Detailed and fluid contours."

**Table 2. Chi-square Tests for Aesthetic Judgments by Educational Background and Perceptive Awareness**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	$\chi^2$ (df)
<b>Fine Art Major</b>	6 21.4%	3 10.7%	2 7.1%	11 39.3%	4 14.3%	2 7.1%	
<b>Design Major</b>	9 22.5%	2 5.0%	4 10.0%	20 50.0%	1 2.5%	4 10.0%	<b>12.57</b> <b>(10)</b>
<b>Other Major</b>	5 9.8%	1 2.0%	11 21.6%	26 51.0%	4 7.8%	4 7.8%	
<b>Unfamiliar</b>	7 21.2%	1 3.0%	6 18.2%	15 45.5%	0 .0%	4 12.1%	
<b>Neutral</b>	8 18.6%	3 7.0%	6 14.0%	18 41.9%	5 11.6%	3 7.0%	<b>7.60</b> <b>(10)</b>
<b>Familiar</b>	5 11.6%	2 4.7%	5 11.6%	24 55.8%	4 9.3%	3 7.0%	
<b>Total</b>	20 16.8%	6 5.0%	17 14.3%	57 47.9%	9 7.6%	10 8.4%	119 100.0%

A technique of correspondence analysis was employed in this study to identify systematic relations between two sets of categorical variables. Through two-dimensional graphics, the data demonstrated how participants' aesthetic responses to the painting were related to their educational backgrounds and their cognitive awareness of the painting.

Figure 3 shows that as regards the attractiveness of the painting, participants of fine arts major distinctly put their focus on detailed and fluid contours and clear idea communication. Participants of design major stressed the significance of integrated and compact composition and abundant emotional expression. Non-art and non-design major participants preferred vivid and vigorous colors and lively figures and scenery.

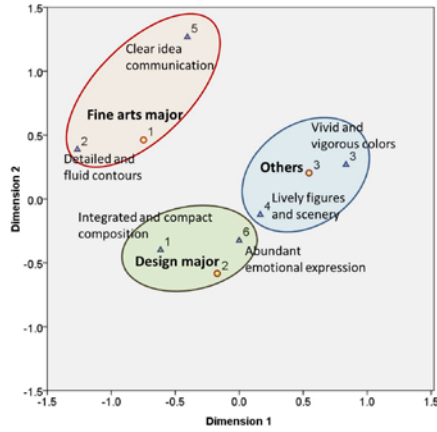


Figure 3. The relation between educational backgrounds and aesthetic responses

Figure 4 suggests that the participants who are unfamiliar with the painting drew their attention to colors and emotional expression. The participants well acquainted with the painting preferred lively figures and scenery. The participants who knew a little about the painting tended to give weight to composition, contours, and idea communication.

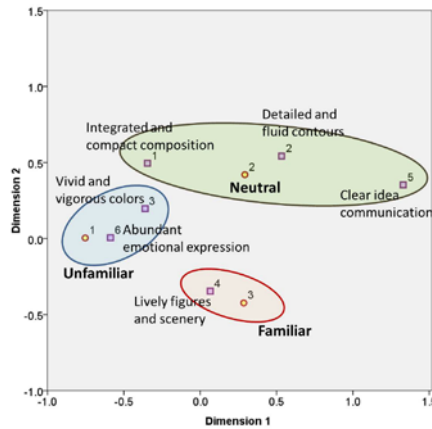


Figure 4. The relation between cognitive awareness and aesthetic responses

### 4.3 Analysis of Variance

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to explore how participants' criticism were effected by independent variables of educational background and conceptive awareness of the work.

Table 3 shows that the mean scores for "This is a work with high artistic value" and "Taken as a whole, I highly appreciate this work" demonstrated significant variance due to educational background differences. Results of Scheffe's post-hoc analysis

suggested that in these two questions, scores of fine arts and design major participants were significantly less than that of other majors.

**Table 3. Analysis of Variance for Criticisms by Educational Background**

Items	F	M			Scheffe's post hoc
		FA	D	O	
1.This is a work with high artistic value	7.13**	3.64	3.58	4.10	O>FA, O>D
2.This work is more like a historical document	1.83	4.04	3.63	3.65	
3.This work demonstrates the zeitgeist of artist's time	.74	4.00	4.20	4.24	
4.This work adheres to the skill of realistic depiction	.45	2.96	2.90	2.76	
5.This work seems to narrate an interesting story	.27	3.82	3.80	3.67	
6.The visual expression is better than content narration	.04	3.43	3.50	3.45	
7.Taken as a whole, I highly appreciate this work	5.61*	3.64	3.65	4.16	O>FA, O>D

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , FA: Fine Arts Major, D: Design Major, O: Others

Table 4 shows that participants' perceptive awareness of the work did not result in significant differences in their criticisms.

**Table 4. Analysis of Variance for Criticisms by Perceptive Awareness**

Works	F	M			Scheffe's post hoc
		U	N	F	
1.This is a work with high artistic value	.29	3.79	3.88	3.77	
2.This work is more like a historical document	.43	3.61	3.81	3.74	
3.This work demonstrates the zeitgeist of artist's time	2.92	3.94	4.40	4.12	
4.This work adheres to the skill of realistic depiction	1.57	2.64	3.02	2.86	
5.This work seems to narrate an interesting story	1.70	3.67	3.58	3.98	
6.The visual expression is better than content narration	1.90	3.58	3.63	3.21	
7.Taken as a whole, I highly appreciate this work	.87	3.82	3.77	4.00	

U: Unfamiliar, N: Neutral, F: Familiar

#### 4.4 Correlation Analysis

Correlation coefficients were calculated in this study to examine the relationship between every pair of items of participants' criticism. Table 5 shows that the score of "this is a work with high artistic value" is significantly correlated with that of "this work demonstrates the zeitgeist of artist's time" and "taken as a whole, I highly appreciate this work." The correlation between the score of "this work is more like a historical document" and "this work rigidly adheres to the skill of realistic depiction" is



significant. Participant's responses to "this work seems to narrate an interesting story" and "taken as a whole, I highly appreciate this work" are also significantly correlated.

**Table 5. Correlation Matrix for Seven Items of Criticism**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	-						
2	-.162	-					
3	.277**	-.027	-				
4	-.110	.245**	-.033				
5	.092	-.151	-.019	-.072	-		
6	-.019	-.018	-.021	.132	-.061	-	
7	.359**	.007	.020	-.077	.247**	-.015	-

\*\*p<.01

## 5 Findings and Discussion

This study attempted to explore whether viewers' aesthetic responses to a narrative painting would be effected by their perceptive awareness of the work. Based on statistical analysis of data, some important findings are discussed below.

### 5.1.1 Regarding the attractiveness of the painting

In responses to the question about the attractiveness of the painting, most of the viewers selected "lively figures and scenery" and "integrated and compact composition." According to Bell, human aesthetic experience derives from a particular composition of lines, colors, and forms. He rejected representation as the essence of art. From this point of view, Bell underestimated the attractiveness of representational painting.

To Bell, line and color in Frith's *The Railway Station* were used to recount anecdotes, suggest ideas, and indicate the manners and customs of an age; they are not used to provoke aesthetic emotion. The results of this study partly supported Bell's argument. Compared with the artist's achievement of realistic representation, the viewers were indeed cared less about the effects of idea communication and emotional expression in the painting.

### 5.1.2 Regarding viewers' criticisms on the painting

Seven questions were conceived by using 5 points Likert scales to explore participants' aesthetic judgments on the painting. Statistical data showed that, contrary to Bell's criticism, the artistic value of the work was highly confirmed. Participants also express their appreciation to this painting. Among all questions, the comment "This work demonstrates the zeitgeist of artist's time" got the best rates and this judgment was significantly correlated with the artistic value of the work. The feature of story narration was also significantly correlated with participants' appreciation of the work.

In summary, the viewers accepted Frith's work as a historical document and narrating an interesting story. Though the visual expression could be better than content narration in this work, they opposed the idea that this work rigidly adhered to the skill of realistic depiction. Bell's theory was not sustained by participants' criticisms of the painting.

### **5.1.3 Regarding the influence of viewers' perceptive awareness of the painting**

The results of both Chi-square or ANOVA showed that there was no significant association between viewers' perceptive awareness and aesthetic judgments, suggesting that visual attraction could be more critical than cognitive information for viewers' aesthetic responses to a work of art.

The outcome of further correspondence analysis suggested that the participants who are unfamiliar with the painting drew their attention to colors and emotional expression. The participants well acquainted with the painting preferred lively figures and scenery. To provide the viewers with prior knowledge of the work would influence their attitude toward the arts.

### **5.1.4 Regarding the influence of viewers' educational background**

When rating artistic value of the painting and participants' appreciation of the work, educational background was a critical factor resulting in significant differences. It is understandable that participants of fine arts major and design major had higher standard of than participants of other majors. However, there were no significant differences within three groups of participants in response to the other five questions about qualitative descriptions of the painting.

## **6 Conclusions**

This study intended to examine Bell's theory of significant form. He rejected representation as the essence of art. According to Bell, all systems of aesthetics must be based on personal experience of a peculiar emotion. Thus, aesthetic experience is not cognitive and not a judgment involving objective concepts. Bell proposed that there must be some qualities which are the essence of art. He believed that significant form is exactly that essence to evoke viewers' aesthetic emotion and without which an object cannot really be regarded as a work of art.

When Bell explicitly pointed out that Frith's *The Railway Station* is not a work of art, he attempted to convince us the skills applied in this painting were used to recite anecdotes, suggest ideas, and indicate the lifestyle of an age, they were not used to provoke aesthetic emotion. However, the result of this study showed that the viewers appreciated artist's representational style of painting. We may conclude from this study that people did get aesthetic emotion from the significant form of this painting, but they also enjoyed the pleasure derived from perceptive awareness of the work.

Did we amplify an artist's achievement? After all, the original motive for Frith was commercial appeal. Andy Warhol, the hottest American Pop artist, claimed that "Why do people think artists are special? It's just another job." [7] In fact, Frith had been

enjoying considerable popularity as a narrative painter in the Victorian age. *The Railway Station* was commissioned by Louis Victor Flatow, an art dealer and financier, who invested £4,500 in this deal. It took Frith two years to complete the work. The commission was described as an entirely new departure according to the press at that time. Flatow's accurate judgment on art market was manifested by the grand total of £30,000 income after the exhibition [6].

The artistic value of Frith's painting was not recognized by Bell. Ironically, the public love this painting no matter whether in Victorian times or nowadays. The audiences were deeply attracted by artist's way of narration and his delicate representation of the manners and customs of an age. Today, this skill can be easily replaced by the functions of a camera. Carroll was right when he argued that Bell intended to exclude photography from the realm of the arts. Bell never denied his intention of fighting against narrative paintings. He believed that this sort of works would be spared because of the development of photography and motion picture [2].

Though Bell confessed that "the representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant," nevertheless, he insisted that "to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs." [2] The result of this study shows that many people were profoundly moved by this painting because it demonstrates the zeitgeist of artist's time. This is a perceptive interest to the work. We would like to argue that whether or not a painting is a work of art is no more the critical issue. In his *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche quoted from Stendhal, claimed that Beautiful is a promise of happiness [5]. People lined up and paid to see Frith's exhibition. They involved themselves in an art event and got enjoyment from a narrative painting, and that might be the answer.

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