

A Guide for Objective Viewers

I offer you this brief guide as encouragement to see the exhibit without aides of any kind. Spare yourself my frustration. All you need are the tools you have learned, your own eyes and mind, and courage.

I certainly could have described what I found of interest in many more pictures. I could have spent days comparing paintings in this exhibit with similar ones at The Barnes. I could have discussed the other artists' work exhibited to illustrate the adaptation of Renoir's ideas. I had to force myself to stop. My goal was to entice you to make this work live again in your experience, not mine.

If you do so, you just may return to your daily life with your perception informed.

1. *Young Girls at the Piano*, 1892, Oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay: bright, delicate, pastel-like shades of green, blue, pink, yellow, and coral model masses receding in deep space with the repoussoir of chair and music in the lower right corner beginning the pushback. The two figures, rendered with ribbons of soft, vaporous color, intersect, curl up and move further back. This recession is then pushed forward by the projector of curtain and wall, sandwiching the figures between the repoussoir and the projector, an ingenious use of both devices to create a pulsating contrast of light-in-color drama. The left side opens up into a deeper space of gold and pinks, a rhythmic variation of the color themes introduced in the foreground. Spatial rhythms are subtle and intriguing: examine the spaces between the three hands at the piano; the space between the music holder; the spaces between the arm of the standing figure and the green curtain; the space between the blond curls and the pink dress; between the standing figure's right arm (on the left of the painting) and the background room. Notice how the flowers in the vase rhythmically duplicate the horizontality of the music holder; how the lines of the curtains skewer the mid-ground to the foreground.
2. *Young Spanish Woman with a Guitar*, 1898, Oil on canvas, NGA: The immediate clue to this picture is the figure's left hand (on the right): the arched curve of the wrist and the overlapping horizontal push left of the squid-like fingers is similar to the large, left tree in The Barnes Foundation's *Noirmoutier*. This pull back, push forward sinuous pattern is repeated in the yellow strap, the curve in the richly embellished sleeve, and the curves of the guitar. Projected forward by the background's left brown band, the space on the right, with its crisscross of greenish brushwork speckled with gold, recreates the toreador's "suit of lights" while also establishing a pocket of space in which the guitar recedes. The theme: a gentle push/pull in space of gently dramatic gold, pinks, greens, and warm browns, establishing a swing, a caught-in-action turn of the figure in space.
3. *Bathers Playing with a Crab*, c. 1897, Oil on canvas, Cleveland Museum of Art: certainly, the obvious comparison is *Bathers in a Forest*, c. 1897, at The Barnes Foundation. If "arabesque-movement of solid volumes in colored space" (Barnes, *The*

Art of Renoir, p. 113) sums up the Barnes painting, this one has elements that foreshadow The Barnes Foundation's 1916 *Bathing Group*, particularly the two figures on the right playing with the crab. In *Bathers Playing with a Crab*, two foreground units float on individual platforms of cloth as arabesques of glowing color volumes intertwine among rich, luminous blues, reds, and greens. The two mid-ground figures in white draw the eye to the opening of receding blue as the background melts into wisps of greens, gold, and pinks. In fact, that pocket of space gives credence to Violette de Mazia's observation that, at times, Renoir's paintings seem "breathed onto the canvas." Follow the curve of the upper right tree down through the pile of pink and red clothing to the arc of the backbone of the reclining figure to enjoy the skewer. Notice how the puffs of foliage rhythmically recreate the soft, roundness of the figures. All the color volumes curve, bend, lean, swirl, and intersect as they swim and float in their puffy setting. Manet-like, punctuations of dark hair, ribbons on the hat on the right, and patterning on the acidic green of the lower foreground act as coasters moving the eye among all the activity and leading back to deeper space.

4. *Reclining Nude*, 1902, Oil on canvas, Private Collection: This picture begs comparison to The Barnes Foundation painting *Reclining Nude* hanging in the Main Gallery (North Wall, left). The Barnes painting has a "dripping down" or cascading theme: the small white flowers in the mid-ground, the hair, the foliage, all ripple downward. Here, the elongated torso, along with the sinuous curves of arms, body, and legs, conspire to create a horizontal, fluid, color symphony of pinks, lavenders, oranges, and ivory rhythmically repeated in the background foliage. The catalog says Renoir "takes up the Renaissance theme of the nymph at the spring," which he "reissues as an erotic vision of woman as life's elemental source." (p. 226) Aesthetically, the rhythmic repetitions of soft, rounded balls of color (breasts, foliage, right-side bank, knees) along with linear "hairy" color on the body, in the foliage, and in the grass creates light-in-color surface decorativeness as well as extraordinarily subtle space recession. Foliage encircles the thigh, then is repeated and balanced by lavender-blue arc shaped shadow pulsing between luminous swirls of ivory-pink. The foliage behind and to the figure's left reaches forward, curls to create pockets of space around the arms, and joins with the hair to move in and out of this shallow space. Follow the pink lines that define the toes as they move upward and become horizontal green and blue strokes, then become white and darker blue in the small patch of water and then move left to fan out in the mound of foliage, then move left again to become a tent of down-flowing, multi-colorful ribbons suggesting rippling water. This color unit wears a hat created by the brown shadow and its pink, red, and tan "fabric" that rises like a plume from the green leafy foliage on the thigh. The entire diagonal unit of foliage projects the figure forward and establishes the color theme of small, luminous color puffs moving in and out of a shallow space. To the right, a recession of horizontal orange-ochre mounds of color move upward. At the top right, a sliver of horizontal strokes of pink and blue say sky and establishes a plane of deep

space. The wall chart says Renoir painted several reclining nudes in horizontal formats over about 12 years, and this one he may have painted to keep for himself. Easy to see why.

5. *Woman Tying Her Shoe*, c. 1918, Oil on canvas, London, The Courtauld Gallery:
Composed of swirling pillows of such color chording richness the eye becomes inebriated at first glance. No matter where you look, you become bewitched by nuances of rose, yellow, ivory, tan, and blue. Violette de Mazia used to say Renoir painted as a bird sings, and his singing here seduces and enraptures. The figure becomes a central solid but light-in-weight mass of linear light-in-color strokes, glowing skin tones, and golden hair highlights. The hair swirls into at least three concentric circles establishing a donut-like mound, and this circularity is repeated and balanced by the figure's backside, donut rounded again, and planted in the small chair. Similarly, the mass to her right, the mass behind her head, and the cushion on the floor repeat the theme. In the unit to the left, the color units fan out and encircle the head creating internal clover patterns, then subdue on the floor unit and background wall into muted strokes of syrupy pastel tones. Renoir transforms a simple, everyday activity of tying a shoe into a color rondo illustrating his ability to fuse all the plastic means and illustrative details into a blend inseparable from decorative patterns. Each volume floats into colorful space and is an organic part of the delicate, variegated color units.