

National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

Jean-Antoine Watteau

*Ceres (Summer)*

1684 - 1721

55 3/4 x 45 9/16 inches

Oil on canvas

1961.9.50

Placed in a gilded-wooden frame hanging on an eggshell white wall.



The artist put his brush down. Taking a step back, he reveled in his finished piece, tracing his eyes across the surface of the paint. Every decision he had made manifested the intentionality of soft elegance throughout the composition. As an artist, he held his own secrets as to how he managed to achieve such an effect; however, these visual secrets were slyly mapped here within this document, by yours truly. Now travel with me, on this journey through the elements: the visual elements. With me as your guide, we shall unlock the visual secrets that are key to characterizing this work's delicate grandeur.

Our journey across this painting begins, ironically, by stepping away from it. Standing in relation to the painting, one must be several feet away in order to fully grasp its composition. Dominating the center of the canvas is a female figure, nearly life size in scale. She is seated, slightly reposed against the figure of a lion. Her body intentionally mimics the ovular nature of the canvas, with her upper arms close to her chest and her forearms extending slightly outwards in accordance with the convex sides of the canvas. Her legs complete the shape by the wide separation of her thighs beneath her dress, and her relaxed left foot closes it through its placement near her right leg toward the base of the canvas. The artist chose to emphasize the ovoid nature of the canvas through her figure to both enhance the sense of balance, and her significance to the scene.

The artists arranged the figures outside the central woman in relation to the ovular nature of the canvas as well. These figures act as framing devices for her seated form. They are visually organized in a counter-clockwise arrangement. The left-leaning action of the woman promotes us to follow her right arm down to the lion (don't be scared it can't bite), who faces the right of the composition. His eyes meet the form of a crayfish toward the bottom of the canvas. The crayfish faces the left, yet its body curves in relation to the counter-clockwise nature of the composition.

Though the lion's eyes look to the crayfish, the angle of his face takes us to the figure's left foot, which rests at an angle, guiding them upwards towards a secondary woman. This woman mirrors the lion in terms of positioning, yet faces the left. Above her, a child figure is presented. This character nearly breaks the cyclical rhythm established by the previous figures by facing the right, but is instead contained by the framing provided by a sickle held in the central woman's left hand. The sickle faces left, returning the counter-clockwise motion to the scene and inevitably taking our journey back to the central focus: the seated woman. Additionally, wheat protruding above the lion's mane, as well as wheat that is held by the two secondary figures, acts as a unifying element echoing throughout the work. The entirety of the composition is contained within a mass of clouds, covering nearly the full extent of the backdrop for the figures, save a few sections of blue sky that appears in the upper and furthestmost left of the canvas. The artist maintains a delicate balance throughout the composition, relying on this counter-clockwise path of movement to guide travelers such as ourselves around the scene in a rhythmical way. Thus you see, our journey across the painting was mapped for us by the artist's secret element #1: compositional arrangement.

Perspective is immediately sensed through the overlapping of forms, as opposed to atmospheric depth. The artist presents each figure within the foreground, deliberately impacting the overall feeling of grandeur. As the figures enter our space, they command our attention. The only aspect of the work that appears to slightly recede into the background are the clouds rendered above the figures, as they get slightly smaller and less detailed towards the top. Clouds that rest at the foot of the main figure are brought to the foreground, acting as a grounding element for the central woman, lion, and crayfish to rest upon. It is difficult to get lost on this

journey through the elements (even without my guidance), as the artist uses the pictorial space to bring all the figures to you, traveler, without making one wander alone into a background.

The figurative forms represented throughout the composition are rounded and curvilinear; with some appearing light, while others more solid. Acting as the primary figurative form, the seated woman is emphasized to look more weighted than those around her. The artist does this in order to ensure that she captures our attention first and foremost before we engage with the rest of the painting. The mass of her body is contrasted against the lightness of the clouds that seat her. A delicate nature befalls the secondary figurative forms, as the two characters right of the central woman appear to almost materialize out of the sky. The artist does this through dissipating the lowest woman's left arm and torso behind the wheat she embosoms. The child figure above her echoes her airy nature by appearing from the clouds, showing only its upper body.

The natural forms, such as the lion and the crayfish are characterized with a concentration of mass equal to the central woman; as such they appear more solid than the secondary figurative forms. The crayfish, being the only figure that does not overlap another in the composition, is isolated by the formation of clouds composing the lower portion of the canvas. The lion, despite being rendered to appear naturalistic, has a characteristically short snout and an awkward facial structure. The clouds appear denser towards the bottom, while those that make up the upper half of the canvas are lightened, eliciting a feeling of weightlessness. The artist purposefully matches the density of the lower clouds to the figures that rest upon them to create the illusion that, somehow, those clouds are capable of holding their weight. With this we see the accumulation of artist elemental secret #3: form. Now squint your eyes fellow traveler, we're looking at light next.

The artist utilized light to establish the overall radiance of the composition, and evoke a gentle, soft quality throughout. Notably, the artist's handling of light directly impacts the representation of each form. Detailing the appearance of density through contrasting areas of light and dark, he utilizes chiaroscuro to enhance the depth and naturalism within the bodies of his figure. While this technique is used on the secondary figurative forms, it is less intense in the appearance of shadow, aiding in their visually ethereal presence. In contrast, areas of light and shadow are made more intense on the central woman's pale skin; creating the illusion of solid mass. For instance, her upper torso is softly defined in a slight shadow that encompasses her, defining her more clearly in space. Her dress nearly glows against her, shimmering under the lightest part of the composition. The dispersion of light and dark create the folds in the fabric of her dress. The source of light appears to come from the right; it is both outside of and above the composition. The primary and secondary human figures are illuminated, as is the wheat. The three bundles of wheat have a similar weightless presence and luminosity as the secondary human figures, specifically balancing the area of shadow on the left side of the canvas with the area of light on the right. Here the artist intentionally ensures a unifying luminescence across the painting, despite areas of contrast. The gentleness of the work is suggested through the subdued nature of the overall pale-gold lighting. The central woman's shadow darkens the bottom left of the canvas and shades the lion, the crayfish, and the clouds below. This intensifies the highlights of white on the shell of the crayfish and the muzzle of the lion. This, reader, is the secret to how the artist used light to define his figures in a radiant, and natural way. Evoking a feeling of harmony and serenity. We've made it through the light, traveler, you can un-squint your eyes... I was just being dramatic.

Line defines each form within the composition through the use of soft, strictly rounded contours. This intentionally promotes the graceful convention of each figure, as not a single true linear edge or line is found within the composition. A sense of movement in the central woman's dress is created, predominantly, through the repetition of line. The top of her dress is composed of thin, right leaning vertical lines that create the illusion of a lightweight fabric. The artist composes these lines in a purposefully loose nature in order to elicit a feeling of sensuality as they drape over her sinuous figure. The bottom of her dress appears heavier in comparison to the top, as the lines comprising it are separated further and are noticeably broader. They too lean in accordance with her figure, yet are more pronounced in the seat of her lap and at the bend of her knees. Lines are seen in their most basic construction through the stalks of wheat and the antennae of the crayfish; the artist removes any possible evocation of rigidity by presenting even these as curved and painterly. The sharply defined contour of the sickle emphasizes the material of the metal. The lines that constitute each individual form are painterly and delicate; revealing to us the artist's secret to capturing the essence of grace and elegance.

The artist chose a light-filled color palette that adds a purposeful luminosity and airiness to the overall conception, providing us travelers with a sense of the ethereal. Composed primarily of pastel pink, pale gold, and soft tones of gray and blue, the painting manifests a light global tone. The pink hue in the central woman's dress shifts from a tonal, warm pink to a tinted pearlescent blush pink. The placement of these varying tonalities assists in promoting a sense of motion in the folds of her dress. They also imply a satinlike texture, which we shall explore soon. The central woman is crowned with flowers and stems of wheat that present the strongest concentration of saturated color within the work, alongside the pinks of her face. The flowers are painterly hues of vermillion and powder blue, assisting the central woman by distinguishing the

light blonde of her hair from the pale gold, pink, and gray clouds behind her in an eye-catching way. The rose pink of her cheeks and mouth also define her face more substantially than what is found in the secondary figures beneath her, giving her a stronger sense of vitality. The light-golden and beige color palette that the two secondary figures adhere to through their hair and skin assists in communicating the weightlessness of their forms. The wheat matches these figures in color, giving it an airy effect as well. However, there is a point of great contrast created in the auburn color of the lion and the deep gray and black of the crayfish. This adds an element of intrigue and energy to the otherwise bright, serene color palette. The blue color of the sky darkens in tone towards the edges of the canvas where it appears, and lightens as it reaches the central composition, acting as a framing device. This, traveler, is how the artist's use of the visual element of color affects us on our journey, giving our voyage a bright atmosphere.

As we move across the scene, we find texture is often reliant on the artist's smooth, painterly brushwork. The surface seen in the fabric of the central woman's dress is, as aforementioned, structured to appear satinlike and lightweight. This is accomplished through the placement of color and line. The veracity of the figurative forms is created through the smooth, supple rendering of skin and fine, individual strokes of hair. The figures are contrasted against the fluffy texture presented in the clouds that surround them. Texture on the figure of the lion is made prominent through the shortened brushstrokes across his body. Compared to the longer, more loosely applied lines of paint that comprise his mane, they indicated the fur of the beast with short, more uniform brushstrokes. In this way, the figure appears more natural and realistic despite the painterly brushwork. The body of the crayfish is smooth, and appears jointed through the repetition of segments in its abdomen. The feathery texture of the wheat defines the grains in an organic way as they appear light against the other figures. In essence we see illusions of

texture presented across the canvas, as the artist rendered each form veraciously and with an overall smoothness that presents a calming aspect to the work. Our final stop, traveler, plays an unsuspecting role within the work, in that it barely plays any role at all, come with me through the element of pattern.

The artist's notable lack of applying ornamental patterning to the figures promotes a natural regality in their favor, allowing them to awe viewers without relying on decorative designs. However, organic patterns do appear throughout the composition with the echoing of forms and lines. For instance, the wheat appears in much the same way across the canvas, unifying the figures through its strategic framework. The lines that segment the crayfish's body also present an organic pattern that indicate the naturalistic illusion that, if it wished to, it would be able to bend and move. The flower crown also presents this repetition of color and form that draws the eye to its arrangement. Overall the artist made use of pattern in, arguably, the most secret of ways. Hiding it in plain sight and using it not to adorn his figures with lavish designs, but to create a flow and repetition that balanced his composition and produced a level of natural elegance that otherwise would not manifest.

This officially concludes our journey, traveler. I am certain that, having me as your guide, we were able to unlock these visual secrets together. Now fully aware of how the artist accomplished the effects presented within the work, we must go forward and share our newfound discoveries with the world.



Reflection: While this assignment provided quite a few challenging elements (no pun intended), I am overall proud of how it turned out. I feel I structured it more neatly than my description, and followed a clean outline. The area I feel I possibly fell short of was the creative aspect, but I really tried to make the visual descriptions as engaging as possible- just worried it isn't as clever as I hoped it'd be. I struggled determining what I wanted to discuss in terms of intentionality for the artist. I attempted to explain each element and follow it with why the artist utilized it in the way he had (his "secrets"). Then using the "journey" of the reader and guide to demonstrate the effect these decisions have on the viewer. I also made a point to mention how specific elements evoked specific responses, both on their own and in connection to the others (Ex: light/form). Covering color was certainly one of the hardest to get through, as I wanted to be sure I was using the correct terminology and considering the artist's implied affect through the palette he chose. Texture also presented a challenge because I felt I had incidentally described texture when focusing on the other elements, thus I ran out of new focuses when I got to the paragraph. Pattern was tricky too in that there was not so much to go off of, so I interpreted a bit in a way I hope was intentional of the artist. Still though, I am pleased that I was able to separate my ideas of descriptive analysis and visual, and understand my work at a stronger level.

I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I did not give nor receive any unauthorized help on this work. -Kelsey Keith

