**How to Use the Senses to Analyze Art and Architecture**

In *How to Use Your Eyes*, James Elkins, Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago writes “For me, looking is a kind of pure pleasure – it takes me out of myself and lets me think only of what I am seeing...Seeing is, after all, a soundless activity. It isn’t talking, or listening, or smelling, or touching. It happens best in solitude, when there is nothing in the world but you and the object of your attention." (Elkins 2000: xi)

For Elkins looking at art is a visual experience.

Here are some quotations from various sources to encourage you to consider how the senses of sound, touch, taste, bodily movement, equilibrium, hunger, thirst, malaise, pain, and possibly other senses are involved in the perception and analysis of works of art and architecture.

S. Brent Plate, "The Skin of Religion: Aesthetic Mediations of the Sacred" (2012):

We begin with the skin. The liminal, semi-porous boundary between inner and outer worlds, between self and world. Here is the edge of productive space: the ebb and flow of sight, scent, sound, touch, and taste. Herein, I articulate the beginnings of an approach to understanding religion in and through its skin, and through the sensually mediated experiences of religion. By religious “experience,” I don’t mean the stories people tell of so-called immediate, mystical experience of the gods and goddesses, but rather of the sensual sacred experiences of the human in her/his physical spaces. By focusing on the vital role that the sensual body plays in human experiences of the world, we are able to investigate religious traditions in ways that complement and expand traditional approaches to religion. The study of religion has continued to focus heavily on the interpretation of sacred texts and intellectual exploration of philosophical doctrines. In contrast, experiencing religion through its sensual, material, and artistic practices challenges the student of religion to think through the seemingly mundane dimensions of religions: what religious people eat and taste and see in their sacred settings. What seems trivial and easily overlooked, in the end, becomes foundational for religious environments and traditions... The sense organs, situated at various parts of surface of the human body, coexistent with the skin, are the passageways that allow interrelations between people. Religion itself is founded on a relation between embodied beings and the world around them.

Constance Classen, "Foundations for an Anthropology of the Senses," 1997:

Together, these sensory meanings and values form the sensory model espoused by a society, according to which the members of that society ‘make sense’ of the world, or translate sensory perceptions and concepts into a particular ‘worldview.’ There will likely be challenges to this model from within the society – persons and groups who differ on certain sensory values – yet this model will provide the basic perceptual paradigm to be followed or resisted.”

Quotes from articles in the journal *Senses and Society*:

Each culture elaborates its own ways of understanding and using the senses. No one sensory model will fit all.

The senses collaborate, but they may also conflict. The unity of the senses should not be presupposed (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

sense [sens] 1. a faculty by which the conditions or properties of things are perceived. Five major senses were traditionally considered: vision, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. In addition, equilibrium, hunger, thirst, malaise, pain, and other types of senses have been distinguished. The operation of all senses involves the reception of stimuli by sense organs, each of which is sensitive to a particular kind of stimulus. The eyes are sensitive to light; the ears, to sound; the olfactory organs, to odor; and the taste buds, to taste. Various sense organs of the skin and other tissues are sensitive to touch, pain, temperature, and other sensations.

Despite all this sensory input, most individuals receive the bulk of the information about their environment through the sense of sight, while balance or equilibrium (vestibular sense) apparently ranks next in importance

Space is constructed through sensory elements: the water, the textures, the, temperature of the fireplace, the light from a candle, and the smell of the characters’ clothing. All visceral elements are not merely presented to our sight but are simulated perceptions that can be touched and felt through direct contact with the skin.

We are capable of perceiving textures through sound and image, which also replace touch in the haptic recognition of objects (size and form). This is fundamental to providing a salient experience if we consider that the haptic helps us to map space; biases our memory and emotions; provides sensations of temperature, weight, pain, and body position; and is “an active modality in which the perceiver seeks information from the world, by exploratory movements.

On casual consideration, it might be concluded that the perception of space is based exclusively on vision. After closer study, however, this so-called visual space is found to be supplemented perceptually by cues based on auditory (sense of hearing), kinesthetic (sense of bodily movement), olfactory (sense of smell), and gustatory (sense of taste) experience. Spatial cues, such as vestibular stimuli (sense of balance) and other modes for sensing body orientation, also contribute to perception. No single cue is perceived independently of another; in fact, experimental evidence shows these sensations combine to produce unified perceptual experiences.

Sometimes internal imagery can overwhelm the sensory input from external stimuli when sharing neural pathways, or if indistinct stimuli is perceived and manipulated to match one's expectations or beliefs, especially about the environment. This can result in a hallucination,[36] and this effect is sometimes exploited to form an optical illusion... Hallucinatory activity was and remains a component part of the Baudelairean programme of ‘painting of modern life’ adopted by Wall in the late 1970s. This programme cannot restrict itself to the objective, current data of sensory perception; it must integrate received images, found or hallucinated. The twofold nature, realistic and hallucinatory, of the environment described in The Flooded Grave arises out of a pictorial tradition that brought together a descriptive view and visionary apparition. The Surrealist painters adapted the formula to the modern conditions of ecstasy and illumination.

**See also**

David Howes, The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies

http://www.sensorystudies.org/sensorial-investigations/the-expanding-field-of-sensory-studies/

Centre for Sensory Studies, Concordia University http://www.centreforsensorystudies.org/

articles in the journal: *Senses & Society*