

Meet the art expert who trains doctors, Navy Seals and the CIA

By Alastair Sooke, CHIEF ART CRITIC
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Detail of Diego Velázquez's Las Meninas, a painting used in Amy Herman's seminars | CREDIT: Getty Images

Twice a year, in February and July, fledgling units of special-operations forces undergoing training at the world's largest naval base in Norfolk, Virginia, head downtown to the city's Chrysler Museum of Art. After assembling in the foyer, they listen to their superior officer as he introduces a friendly brunette from New York City. "You may wonder what the hell you're doing in a museum," he tells his recruits. "But listen to every word this woman says, because you're going to need them, in next week's mission, and the week after that – and the week after that."

No matter how often she finds herself the subject of this short, expletive-peppered speech, each time Amy Herman, an art educator and self-styled "social entrepreneur", can't help smiling. "I mean, you couldn't say anything more to make my heart sing," she tells me, speaking via Skype from Manhattan.

For two decades, Herman, 53, has been delivering a seminar called "The Art of Perception". As well as US Navy Seals, she trains doctors, trauma nurses, FBI officers, CIA intelligence analysts, and the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies. She has taken rookies from Scotland Yard around the Wallace Collection in London, and led sessions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art with cops from the New York City Police Department (NYPD).

To all her pupils, she promises that studying pictures will enhance their powers of observation and communication, and transform the way they approach their jobs. "Visual intelligence", as she describes the skill she seeks to stimulate, can crack a case. Looking closely, she says, can save a life. "It's about effectively communicating what you see," she tells me.

Inspired by research from Yale University, which showed that analysing works of art could improve a doctor's diagnostic skills, Herman conceived her programme for medical students while working as head of education at the Frick Collection on Fifth Avenue in 2000. She invited them to scrutinise the museum's masterpieces, such as Johannes Vermeer's *Mistress and Maid* (1666-67) – but learning about art history was never the point of the exercise: "If you know the story of this painting," she would say, "don't tell me."

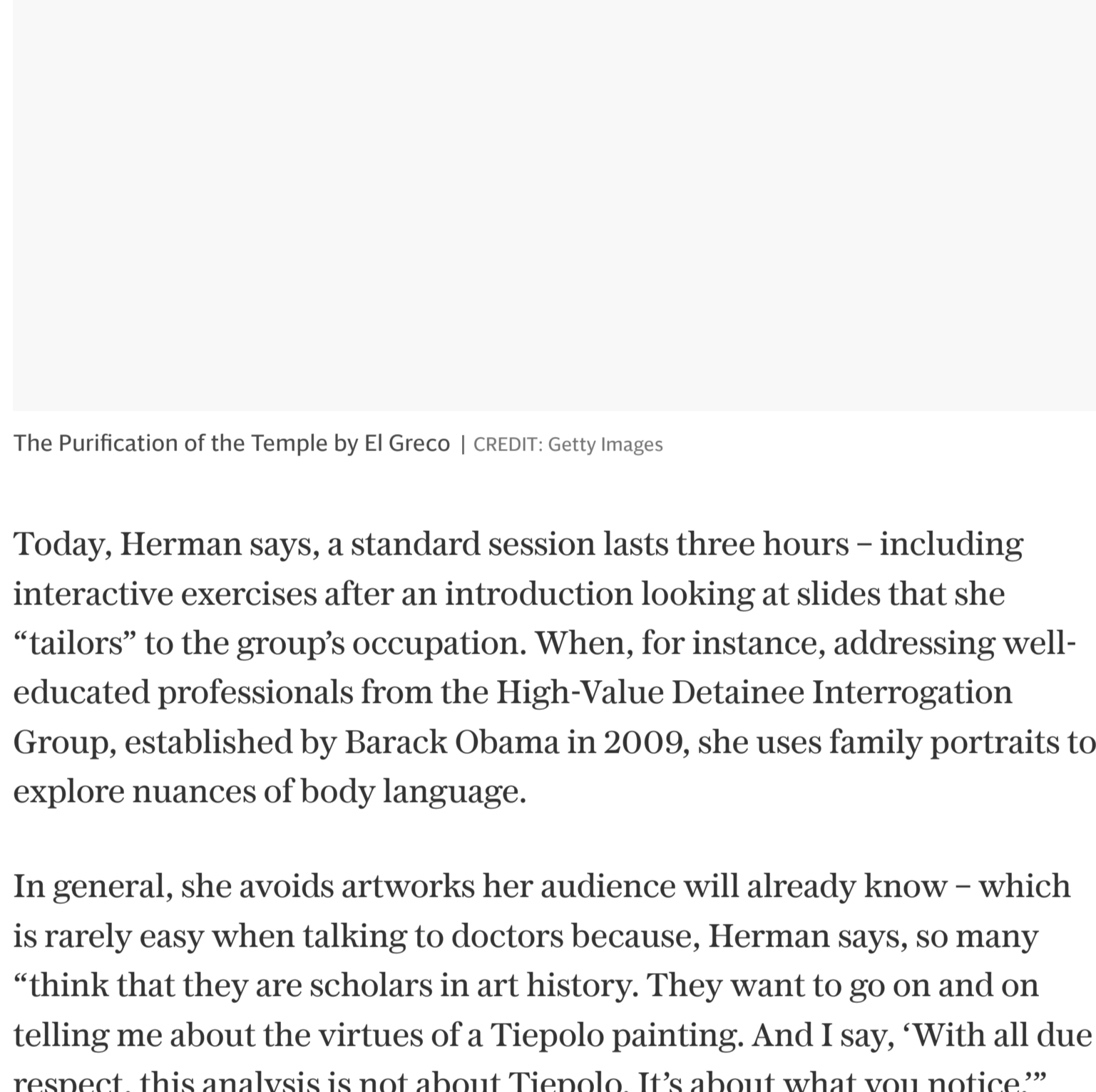


Mistress and Maid by Johannes Vermeer | CREDIT: Getty Images

Rather, the students had to observe a picture for a minute or two and absorb as many details as possible. In her 2016 self-help book, *Visual Intelligence: Sharpen Your Perception, Change Your Life*, Herman illustrates her approach by analysing Vermeer's painting in depth. Often, she'd ask her class: did you notice the white ribbon tying together a string of pearls at the nape of the seated woman's neck? No? What about the shadow across her legs, indicating the direction of light? If not, look again. Who spotted the reflection of windows in the inkwell? Nobody? Then look harder.

The course ticked over for a few years – until one night, over dinner with a friend, Herman confided her frustration with the "myopia" of the medical students for whom, she felt, the task "was all about diagnosis and physiology." The friend suggested she widen the programme to other professions: "How about homicide detectives?" The following Monday, Herman cold-called the NYPD. She was transferred seven times before she finally reached a sympathetic deputy commissioner. Within six months, as she puts it, "every new captain in the NYPD had to take my class." In 2005, *The Wall Street Journal* ran a front-page story by a reporter who had shadowed NYPD officers inside the Frick. "And that," says Herman, "is when my world exploded."

The people who attend Herman's sessions often surprise her. Sometimes, they make her laugh. A favourite stop-off in the Frick is El Greco's *Purification of the Temple* (c 1600) – a "noisy" scene, as she puts it, in which Christ chases through the middle of a crowd, chasing out the traders, with "sinners on one side, believers on the other". Once, she asked a group of cops to respond to the painting. A seasoned detective remarked immediately, "First of all, I'd bring out the riot gear." Then he pointed at Christ, in his rose-coloured robe, and said, "And I'd collar the guy in the memory, because he's causing all the trouble." Herman still smiles at the memory. "Fabulous!" The discussion then moved on: who among the melee would make the most reliable witness?



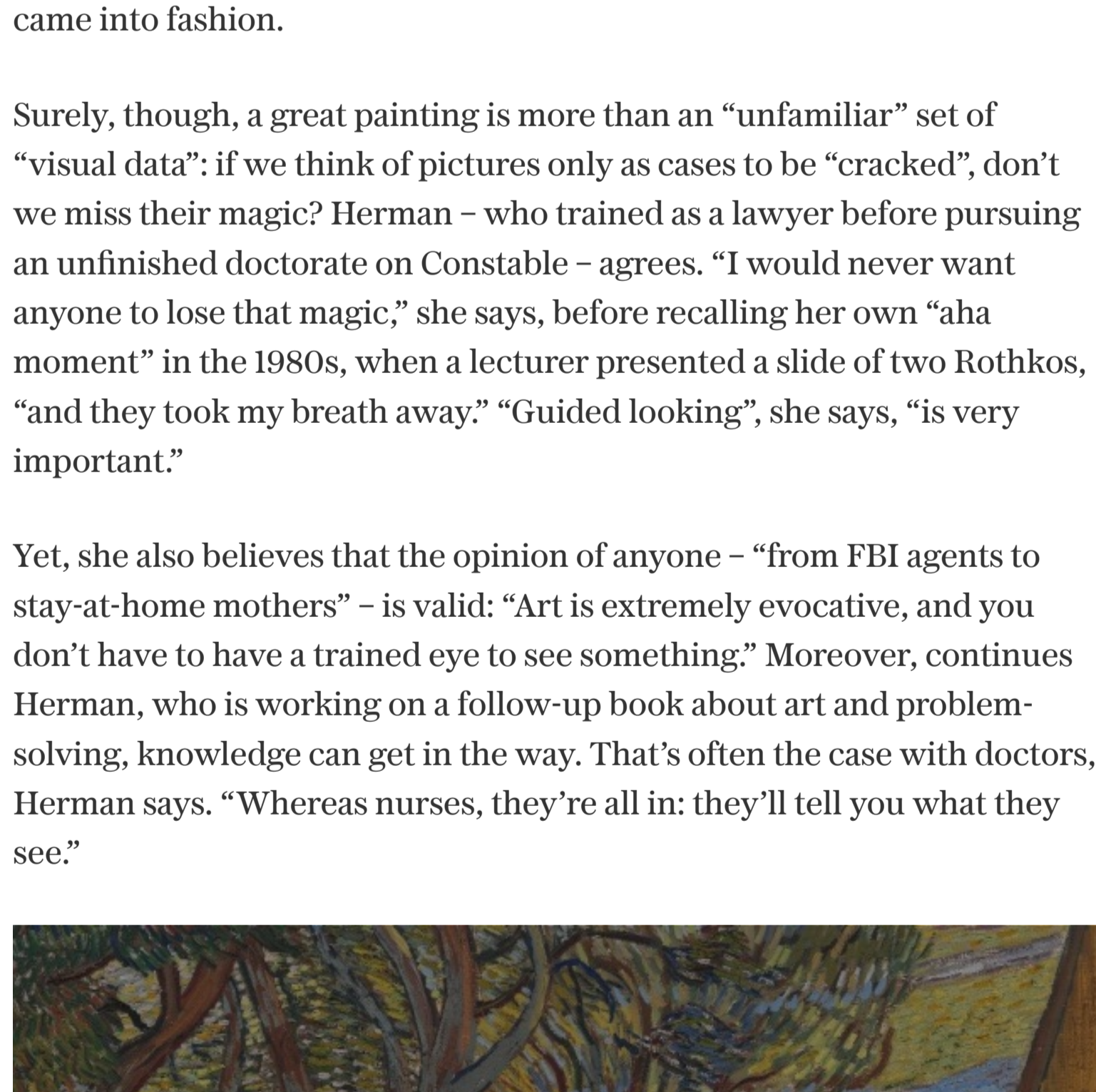
The Purification of the Temple by El Greco | CREDIT: Getty Images

Today, Herman says, a standard session lasts three hours – including interactive exercises after an introduction looking at slides that she "tailors" to the group's occupation. When, for instance, addressing well-educated professionals from the High-Value Detainee Interrogation Group, established by Barack Obama in 2009, she uses family portraits to explore nuances of body language.

In general, she avoids artworks her audience will already know – which is rarely easy when talking to doctors because, Herman says, so many "think that they are scholars in art history. They want to go on and on telling me about the virtues of a Tiepolo painting. And I say, 'With all due respect, this analysis is not about Tiepolo. It's about what you notice.'"

Dealing with the military is more straightforward. When training Navy Seals, Herman breaks her own rule by focusing on one of the most famous paintings in the world: *Las Meninas* (1656). "Ninety-five per cent of my participants have never seen a Velázquez, so it doesn't mean anything to them."

First, she shows a photograph of the 2013 al-Shabaab attack on the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi. "The people who survived the attack mobilised their situational awareness," she explains. Then she turns to the painting. "How can we bring situational awareness to a work of art?" Herman asks her students to inspect Velázquez's complex cast of characters. "Who's the guy about to leave through the door in the back? What's a nun doing in the picture?" Finally, she asks the Seals to situate themselves in relation to the painting. "And I show them that they are the king and queen reflected in the mirror."

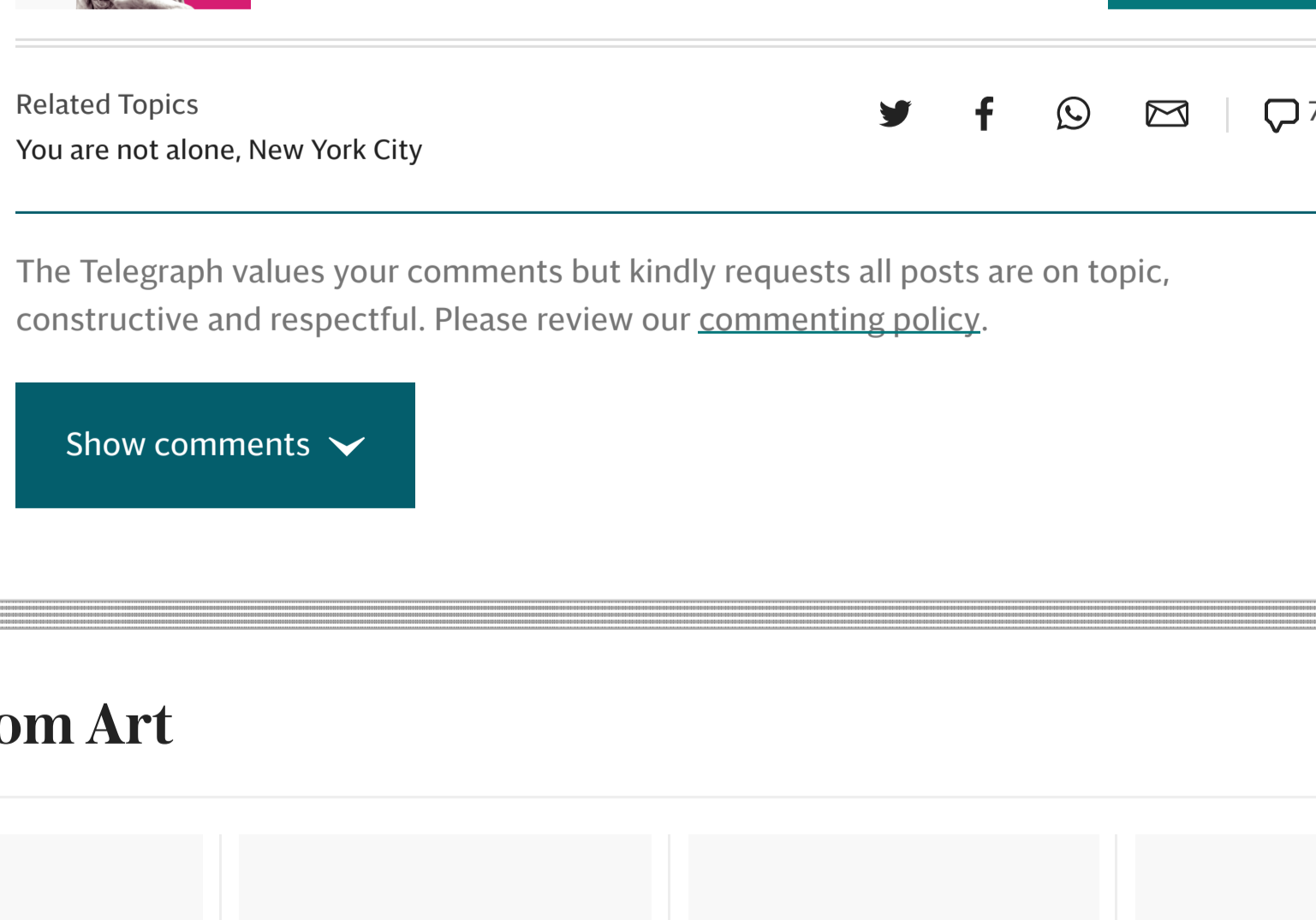


Amy Herman (right) leading a seminar at the Smith College Museum of Art, Massachusetts | CREDIT: Jim Gipe

In her book, Herman talks about the 19th-century Scottish surgeon Joseph Bell, whose mantra was: "Use your eyes, use your eyes." Bell was the real-life inspiration for Sherlock Holmes, and Herman instructs her students to treat paintings "like a crime scene". Like a private detective, she hunts for clues in pictures and follows up leads to establish facts. By a process of elimination, for instance, the white tabletop in Edward Hopper's *Automat* (1927) must be... Carrara glass! Meanwhile, the woman's distinctive hat, with its downturned brim, was probably produced before 1928, because that's when clothes with upturned brims came into fashion.

Surely, though, a great painting is more than an "unfamiliar" set of "visual data": if we think of pictures only as cases to be "cracked", don't we miss their magic? Herman – who trained as a lawyer before pursuing an unfinished doctorate on Constable – agrees. "I would never want anyone to lose that magic," she says, before recalling her own "aha moment" in the 1980s, when a lecturer presented a slide of two Rothkos, "and they took my breath away." "Guided looking", she says, "is very important."

Yet, she also believes that the opinion of anyone – "from FBI agents to stay-at-home mothers" – is valid: "Art is extremely evocative, and you don't have to have a trained eye to see something." Moreover, continues Herman, who is working on a follow-up book about art and problem-solving, knowledge can get in the way. That's often the case with doctors, Herman says. "Whereas nurses, they're all in: they'll tell you what they see."



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Going "stir-crazy" during lockdown in Manhattan ("I run 21 flights in my building a day"), she takes heart from thinking about all the rapid-response teams she has trained: "For those on the front line in hospitals, astute observation has taken on a whole different meaning."

Ultimately, while Herman's "primary objective" is "to improve observation, perception, and communication skills", her "secondary agenda", as an educator, is to widen access to museums. She describes her old employer, the Frick, as "not a particularly warm, welcoming place, especially for the uninitiated". Likewise, she says, "just ascending the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art" can be daunting.

Indeed, Herman believes that there is no prescribed way of looking at art – or shouldn't be. That's why she tells her classes not to bother with the labels on museum walls before looking at the pictures with their own eyes. "I give them a way to look at art where they involve their own observations first, instead of saying, 'Oh, this is a Renoir from blah, blah'"

She pauses. "I want to dismantle inhibitions. Because everybody sees something. Everybody."

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