

# How to Observe Paintings like Sherlock Holmes

by Hiroyuki Iwane, FSPE

If you like Sudoku puzzles, I would like to suggest another fun leisure activity. This one is performed in a museum and will exercise both your brain and your body, improving your blood circulation as you walk around the museum. You may say, “I do not know anything about art.” No problem at all. You don’t need to have any prerequisite knowledge. The object is to observe paintings like Sherlock Holmes. But instead of observing a crime scene like him, we will observe paintings and photographs in the museum, because, even if we have a scientific background, most of us can agree that we are more comfortable observing paintings than observing dead bodies. The aim of this activity is the same as that of a Sudoku puzzle: to give your brain the training of observation and abductive reasoning skills—or to kill time, not a person.

In the story, *A Scandal in Bohemia*, Holmes and Watson were sitting in their matching armchairs when the famous detective instructed the doctor on the difference between watching and observing. Let me quote their conversation:

Holmes: “You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear. For example, you have frequently seen the steps which lead up from the hall to this room.”

Watson: “Frequently.”

Holmes: “How often?”

Watson: “Well, some hundreds of times.”

Holmes: “Then how many are there?”

Watson: “How many? I don’t know.”

Holmes: “Quite so! You have not observed. And yet you have seen. That is just my point. Now, I know that there are seventeen steps, because I have both seen and observed.”<sup>1</sup>

I experienced a similar phenomenon myself. When I was teaching body languages and facial expressions to a class, I did an experiment. Similar to Holmes, I said to the class, “You have frequently seen traffic lights on the street, haven’t you? How often? Raise your hand if it is more than a million.” They all raised their hands. Then I asked, “Will you tell me which picture is the correct one?” I showed two pictures of traffic lights, but one had the red and green lights in the opposite places. Surprisingly—or, perhaps, as I expected—more than half of them were not sure which one was the right picture. The colors of a traffic light may be important, but the order of the colors does not seem to be essential for us anymore. In our modern society, our observation skills seem to have degenerated. In other words, we are sleeping and moving like automated machines. Maria Konnikova, the author of *Mastermind: How to Think Like Sherlock Holmes*, has defined the sleeping mind as “System Watson” and the waking mind as “System Holmes,”<sup>2</sup>—a naming convention that I assume IBM may not appreciate.

Anyway, I wanted to have a training method to encourage people to be like Holmes. But why have I chosen the arts, then? I would like to introduce you to another phenomenon similar to System Watson. In 1987, the Museum of Modern Art, also known as MoMA, was interested in how many attendees remembered what they heard from the curator during the gallery tour. MoMA did some research. The results surprised them, as almost all attendees remembered nothing. Some couldn’t even recognize paintings which they had just seen in the museum. Because of these results, MoMA developed Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) in 1991 to change the method of educating students about the arts.<sup>3</sup> VTS uses trained moderators to carefully guide student discussions and has been transforming the way students think and learn about the arts, using three questions:

1. What is happening in this picture?
2. What do you see that makes you think so?
3. What more can we find?

I have customized the VTS process to employ self-dialogue, instead of a moderator's guiding, with my training technique using "System Holmes." The method is easy. Go to a museum and choose a painting or a photograph which has people in it. Ask yourself, "What is happening in this picture?" Then observe to find evidence the way Holmes does at a murder scene. When you suspect something is happening involving the people in the image, then ask yourself, "What do I see that makes me think so?" If you find some evidence, then you can ask yourself the third question, "What more can I find?"—and that

returns you to the first question like an endless loop of a computer program.

This method is similar to VTS but is performed silently. I named this method, "Mind-Baritsu," after the famous martial arts of Holmes. It includes a training method for things like memory palace, body-language reasoning, and abductive inference of Holmes. Students are awarded a green belt or black belt according to their skills, like the Six Sigma program of Jack Welch.

On 16 February 2019, I introduced this observation method at the beginning of a lecture by showing the painting of Gustave Courbet, *The Meeting* (1854). I gave the lecture at an event organized by UFRA (Urayasu Foreign Residents'



*The Meeting*  
by Gustave Courbet<sup>4</sup>


Association). There were more than 50 attendees, and I had them observe the painting for only one minute before asking the three questions. At the end of the one-hour lecture, I asked how many of them still remembered the details of the painting. The results were fantastic. Almost all of the attendees remembered even the minor parts of the painting, such as the small coach on the right.


In addition to asking you to try this method, I am also periodically visiting museums myself to improve on the technique. As a byproduct of this

activity, I am gaining knowledge about the arts and improving my health through all the walking in the museums. If you are also interested in trying this method, why don't you take a look at the painting by Courbet and try to deduce what is going on without having any additional information? Of course, I also hope you will enjoy trying this method while visiting museums.

“Education never ends, Watson. It is a series of lessons, with the greatest for the last.”  
—Sherlock Holmes in *His Last Bow*

## NOTES

1. Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Scandal in Bohemia* (<https://sherlock-holm.es/stories/pdf/a4/1-sided/scan.pdf>).
2. Maria Konnikova, *Mastermind: How to Think Like Sherlock Holmes* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2013).
3. Philip Yenawine, *Visual Thinking Strategies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2013).
4. Wikipedia contributors, “Gustave Courbet,” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustave\\_Courbet#/media/File:Gustave\\_Courbet\\_-\\_Bonjour\\_Monsieur\\_Courbet\\_-\\_Mus%C3%A9e\\_Fabre.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustave_Courbet#/media/File:Gustave_Courbet_-_Bonjour_Monsieur_Courbet_-_Mus%C3%A9e_Fabre.jpg). 



“Mediocrity knows nothing  
higher than itself,  
but talent instantly  
recognizes genius.”  
—Sherlock Holmes in *Valley of Fear*