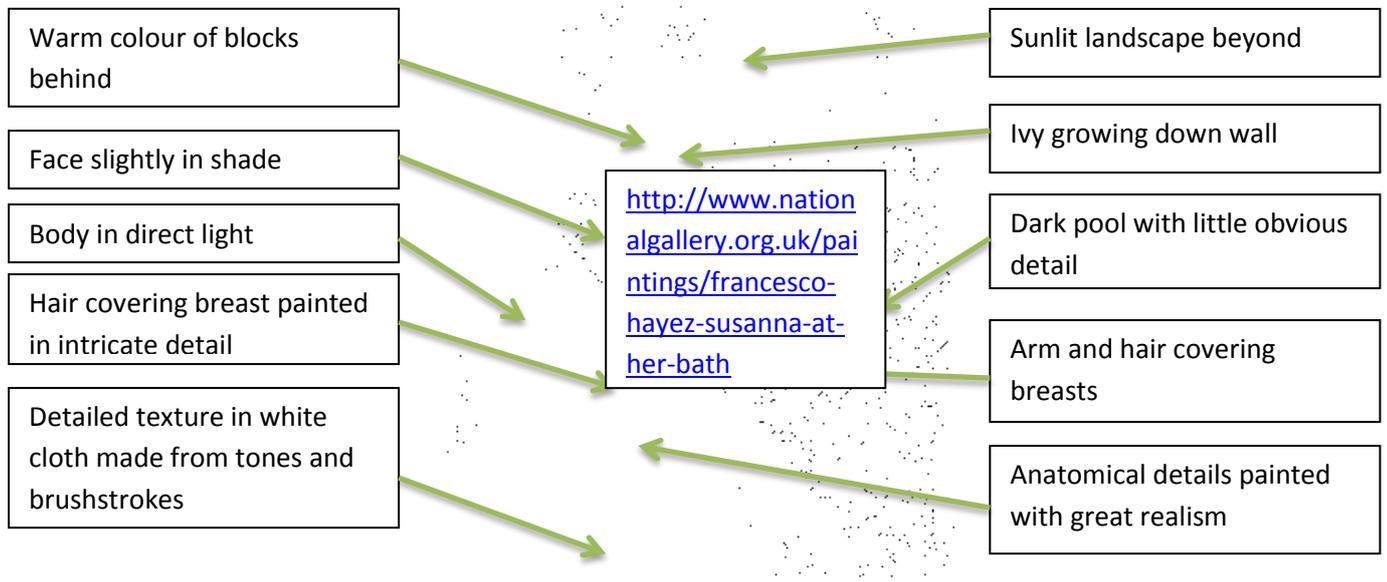


Susanna at her Bath - Francesco Hayez



Oil on Canvas; 138x122cm; painted 1850; National Gallery, London

- Body in bright light, face in shade increases emphasis on body and depersonalises the painting
- Symbolism of ivy on the wall behind
- Susanna's hair very dark and skin very pale gives great contrast
- Facial expression open to interpretation – accusing? Coy?

Description

The painting portrays a beautiful young woman sitting by the edge of a pool. Her naked body is turned away, but she looks back over her shoulder looking at the viewer.

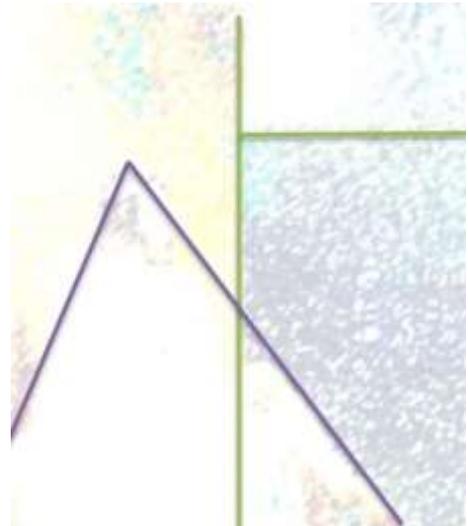
The skin tones are rendered well and the subject has been painted with anatomical accuracy. The pool to the right is very dark and this draws attention to the naked body.

Interpretation

The story comes from the Old Testament of Susanna bathing in her garden. She is interrupted by elders who threaten to accuse her of adultery if she does not do as they wish. She refuses and is put on trial but eventually the truth is revealed and the elders that are punished.

The National Gallery Website states that this painting combines two of Hayez's favourite subjects "an Old Testament story and a voluptuous female nude".

The subject's pose forms a triangle at the bottom left of the painting. The pool in the lower right of the frame is painted very darkly whereas the landscape at the top right is bright and colourful. Perhaps this is a metaphor for Susanna's progress from accusation of adultery to eventual acquittal. The ivy growing down the wall behind may be a symbol, as an evergreen it suggests immortality –in this case it may be symbolic of Susanna surviving her ordeal.



Evaluation

The story has been painted by many artists including Rembrandt, Rubens, Tintoretto and Tiepolo.

What is different about Hayez's treatment of the story is that the elders are not present in the scene, the viewer takes their place. When viewing the painting at first one admires the body, but then the realisation comes that you are replacing the lecherous elders and this causes you to question your own reasons for viewing the nude Susanna.

I think that the look on Susanna's face is open to interpretation, is it scornful, dismissive, coy, or maybe a combination of these.

The treatment of the story is very different from that of Artemisia Gentileschi. She portrays the elders very close to Susanna who looks frightened.

The result of this I think is to provoke the male gaze at the naked Susanna far more in Hayez's painting. This is achieved by the composition with the pose of the subject, the lighting which directly brings attention to the naked body and the facial expression of the subject. Gentileschi's treatment is more concerned with the horror of the scene.



Maria Szanthy's Reclining Nude is more revealing, but the facial expression is very different, the subject has her eyes closed, dismissive of the viewer. In the Hayez painting the subject is directly engaged with the viewer. In the Szanthy painting there are immediately several points of interest whereas in the Hayez the attention is immediately drawn to the naked body.

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Web References

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/francesco-hayez-susanna-at-her-bath>

<http://www.artemis-ia-gentileschi.com/susanna2.html>