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## Attention to Detail: A Book Review of Amy Herman’s Visual Intelligence

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### Introduction

One year ago, I wrote an article on the importance of paying attention to detail in observing workplaces, organizations, and artifacts during audits, regardless whether they are audits of organizational function, design, expenditure, culture, environmental health, or occupational safety, among other topics. I termed this attention to detail necessity, something I learned in practice during 20 years of military service, as *observational intelligence*, with the premise being about paying close attention to the details in behaviors, documents, and interview responses. Thus, I was pleasantly surprised when I read the synopsis of Herman’s book, a manuscript that sheds light on the way we see the world around us, and shows how to improve those observational skills.

### Book Review

Herman’s book, *Visual Intelligence: Sharpen Your Perception, Change Your Life*, focuses on the discussion of how the bulk percentage of the population, when faced with an image, a crime scene, a scenario, or a piece of art, will not see them identically, and will miss necessary and important details. She brilliantly addresses the Sherlock Holmes summation that “most people see but do not observe.” In her book, this phenomenon is called inattentional, perceptual, or unintentional blindness, suggesting that when we focus exclusively on a specific task, concept, or part of an image, the other details tend to fade into the background regardless of whether they are in plain view. Further, most people do not believe that they experience this because they lack the awareness of it. Essentially, they are unaware of being unaware, and they lack the personal use-of-self-as-instrument skill or practice to recognize this. Amy Herman’s book helps. “The ability to see, to pay attention to what is often readily available right in front of us,” the author writes, “is not only a means to avert disaster but also the precursor and prerequisite to great discovery. In her book, Herman shows that exploring the Sherlock Holmes within us is a useful skill, regardless of profession, and can aid in effective communication, situational awareness, and decision-making.

Herman’s framework convincingly exhibits how analysis of famous works of art can empower individuals to better see the clues in real-life situations, such as crime scenes and intelligence analysis. A lawyer and an art historian, she has uncovered this method to train people in different professions on how to better observe their situations and find and describe fine data. Herman employs works of art, including paintings and photography of renowned artist such as Jane Alexander, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, John Singleton Copley, Anna Schuleit Haber, Edward Hopper, Edouard Manet, Michelangelo, Claude Monet, and numerous others in order to teach her lessons of observation, and deduction from detail.

She pushes her readers, student so to speak, not to try to look beyond what they see, but rather to take a deeper dive into what is right in front of them, and to pull new or more detailed meaning from it. She prompts us to observe, in every picture, the who, what, when, and where, to analyze the scenario from every angle, and to avoid perceptual filtration that leads to confirmation and cognitive biases and tunnel vision. The book reads like a workshop that walks readers through scenarios that provide practice in observing, with a solid differentiation between subjective and objective observation. The exercises have readers investigating what it is that the artists intended them to see, and looking for clues that provide insight into their work. The author displays, rather easily, how these art analysis skills translate into practical occupational application.

Herman has successfully used this framework to coach physicians, FBI agents, business executives, police officers, and others to enhance their abilities to observe their environments and effectively draw useful data from them, data that makes them more effective in their jobs. As an industrial safety expert, and experienced auditor, a health scientist, a military Officer, and a management consultant, I can attest to the usefulness of Herman's method to each of these professional arenas. The only negative aspect of the book is the size, proportion, and color of the artwork displayed on the pages, which at times makes it difficult to carefully analyze them as the reader navigates the author's prompts and instructions.

All in all, Herman shows us how people can be trained to be better observers by cultivating their habits of active enquiry. Novel, original, interesting, and easy to read, this book should change how professionals observe the world and approach their tasks, whether they are detectives investigating a crime scene, intelligence analysts briefing decision makers on threats, physicians diagnosing or treating patients, auditors studying financial records, or safety engineers performing accident root cause investigations. Herman's *Visual Intelligence* is a must read for people from all walks of life.

**Disclaimer Statement**

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**References**

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