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THE MASTERFUL EXPRESSION OF THE PERCEPTION OF MOTION IN VISUAL ART: A VISUAL ANALYSIS OF REMBRANDT'S "THE NIGHT WATCH"

RESİM SANATINDA HAREKET ALGISININ USTALIK İFADESİ: REMBRANDT'IN GECE DEVRİYESİ ESERİ ÜZERİNE BİR GÖRSEL İNCELEME

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Abstract
This study aims to examine how the perception of movement is constructed on static surfaces within the context of plastic arts, through an analysis of Rembrandt's 1642 masterpiece *The Night Watch*. In visual arts, the sense of movement can be created not only through physical motion but also through the structural organization of the composition, the positioning and orientation of figures, and the integrated use of fundamental visual elements. In this regard, the study adopts a visual analysis-based approach, focusing on rhythm, directional flow, contrast, and the guidance of the viewer's gaze. It reveals that the dynamic and rhythmic arrangement of visual components such as form, line, direction, light, and color produces a sense of continuity, motion, and temporal progression. The work is interpreted within the aesthetic framework of the Baroque period, emphasizing Rembrandt's effective use of chiaroscuro, spatial depth, and sequential figure arrangement to construct a strong perception of movement. Furthermore, it concludes that the viewer's perceptual engagement plays a decisive role in experiencing movement within a visual context. Ultimately, the study provides an interdisciplinary perspective on how movement can be effectively expressed in a static pictorial medium, contributing to the theoretical discourse on visual perception in art.

Keywords: Perception of Movement, Visual Elements, Plastic Arts, *The Night Watch*, Visual Rhythm.

Öz
Bu çalışma, plastik sanatlar bağlamında durağan yüzeylerde hareket algısının nasıl inşa edildiğini, Rembrandt'ın 1642 tarihli başyapıtı *Gece Devriyesi* üzerinden incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Görsel sanatlarda hareket izlenimi, yalnızca fiziksel devinimle değil; aynı zamanda kompozisyonun yapısal örgüsü, figürlerin konumlanışı, yönelimi ve temel görsel elemanların işlevsel birlikteliğiyle de kurulabilmektedir. Bu bağlamda çalışma, görsel ritim, yönlendirme, kontrast kullanımı ve izleyici bakışının yönlendirilmesine odaklanan görsel çözümleme temelli bir yöntemle yapılandırılmıştır. Biçim, çizgi, yön, ışık ve renk gibi temel ögelerin dinamik ve ritmik düzenlenişiyle, izleyicide süreklilik, hareketlilik ve zamansal geçiş duygusu oluşturulduğu ortaya konmuştur. Yapıt, Barok estetik ilkeleri doğrultusunda değerlendirilmiş; özellikle chiaroscuro tekniği, mekânsal derinlik etkisi ve figürlerin ardışık dizilimi gibi ögelerle Rembrandt'ın harekete dair algıyı güçlü biçimde inşa ettiği vurgulanmıştır. Ayrıca izleyiciyle kurulan algısal ilişkinin, görsel deneyimin hareket olarak hissedilmesinde belirleyici rol oynadığı sonucuna varılmıştır. Sonuç olarak bu çalışma, durağan resim yüzeyinde hareketin nasıl etkili biçimde ifade edildiğini disiplinlerarası bir yaklaşımla ele almakta ve sanat kuramına katkı sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hareket Algısı, Görsel Elemanlar, Plastik Sanatlar, *Gece Devriyesi*, Görsel Ritim.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout art history, movement has appeared in works of art not only as a physical phenomenon but also as a structural element that generates emotional and perceptual engagement in the viewer. Especially within the field of plastic arts, the creation of a sense of motion on static surfaces is directly related to the artist's skillful use of basic visual elements such as form, line, light, color, and composition. In this context, movement is not a quality exclusive to kinetic arts, but also a perceptual construct that can be powerfully evoked within technically static mediums such as painting.

This study aims to examine how the fundamental visual components that create a sense of movement function in plastic arts, through an analysis of Rembrandt's 1642 masterpiece, *The Night Watch*. In this work, visual dynamism is achieved through rhythmic structures, directionality, contrasts of light and shadow, spatial distances between figures, and variations in gesture—offering a strong compositional unity that supports the perception of movement. It has been noted that Baroque painters used artificial light in ways that guide the viewer's gaze, thereby reinforcing the illusion of motion (Hasanoğlu, 2022).

As part of the visual analysis of the artwork, certain elements such as directional lines, figure placements, and focal points have been visually marked solely for the purposes of analysis and education. These interventions do not alter the structure of the original artwork but serve as an interpretive layer added to support visual reading.

This study constitutes a descriptive analysis focusing on the relationship between visual perception and narrative expression. Descriptive analysis was employed as the research method; visual elements within the work were deconstructed and the construction of movement was evaluated in a layered manner. Rembrandt's figurative arrangements enable visual rhythm to be perceived as a temporal structure. This effect creates the impression that the viewer's gaze is directed through the composition much like camera movement in cinema (Yılmaz, 2021).

Since images often function as a more direct and powerful means of expression than words, visual data plays not only a supportive but also an explanatory and communicative role in the interpretation of artworks. Accordingly, rather than relying solely on written descriptions, this article includes multiple visually marked versions of the same artwork to concretize its different aspects. The painting's width of approximately 4.5 meters transforms the viewer from a passive observer into an almost immersive subject; this suggests that the sense of movement is constructed not only through content but also through the spatial relationship between the viewer and the artwork. These visual structuring strategies have been carefully composed to guide the viewer's perceptual reading and to more clearly articulate the compositional, rhythmic, and narrative elements of the analyzed work. In this way, the study reveals how the sense of perceptual motion is constructed through fundamental visual arrangements.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: PERCEPTION OF MOTION IN PLASTIC ARTS

The perception of movement in the plastic arts is shaped not only by physical motion but also by the visual, psychological, and perceptual connections established with the viewer. Although basic elements such as form, line, color, light, and rhythm remain static on the surface, they can evoke a sense of direction, flow, and continuity in the viewer (Aslıer, Eti, Işıngör, 1986). This indicates that in painting, in particular, movement is a phenomenon that emerges from within the structure itself (Ocvirk et al., 2013). It is emphasized that rhythmic repetitions of linear arrangements reinforce the sense of motion and that these should be considered in conjunction with concepts such as direction, balance, and continuity in visual compositions (Özkartal, 2009).

From this theoretical framework, it becomes clear that the perception of movement in plastic arts is not merely the representation of physical motion; rather, it can be generated through the combination of internal compositional order, linear structure, light-shadow balance, and rhythmic repetition—creating in the viewer a sense of direction and a perception of time. This study aims to evaluate these theoretical approaches by examining how such visual elements are operationalized in a concrete example: Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*, thereby providing a practical analysis of the structural dimension of movement.

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THE ARTIST'S CONTEXT: REMBRANDT AND BAROQUE AESTHETICS

Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606–1669) emerged during the Dutch Golden Age of the 17th century and is regarded as one of the artists who most masterfully conveyed the narrative power of Baroque art. "While creating their works, artists reflect both their personal aesthetic pursuits and the traces of the society they live in" (Asan, 2025). The socio-cultural environment of the time provided a setting in which art evolved from religious themes toward secular subjects, with the rise of the bourgeoisie bringing increased importance to portraiture. Positioned at the heart of this transformation, Rembrandt produced works that foregrounded the individual, emotion, and motion.

Baroque aesthetics is characterized by exaggerated movement, theatrical composition, intense emotional expression, and the stark contrast of light and shadow (chiaroscuro). These features not only enhance figurative narration but also deepen the psychological engagement with the viewer (Ertuğ, 2021; Altıntaş, 2019). Unlike the static and idealized order of the Renaissance, Baroque artists directed the viewer's gaze and amplified dramatic effect through dynamic elements embedded within the composition.

Rembrandt's art relaxes classical compositional rules, emphasizing dramatic intensity and the relationships among figures. Particularly in his group portraits, he successfully balances individual character exploration with collective motion. In his works, light functions not merely as a means of illumination, but also as a narrative guide and emotional accent. Together with the orientation, gestures, and facial expressions of the figures, the strategic use of light evokes a sense of both temporal and spatial flow in the viewer (Ertuğ, 2021).

The *Night Watch* (1642) stands as one of the most striking examples of this expressive approach. The positioning of figures as if in mid-motion, the areas highlighted by light creating focal points across the surface, and the rhythmic orchestration of these elements all integrate the theatricality of the Baroque with Rembrandt's unique personal style. As a result, the work transcends the conventional group portrait to become an immersive, participatory narrative space for the viewer.

ARTWORK ANALYSIS: MOTION THROUGH VISUAL ELEMENTS IN THE *NIGHT WATCH*

Under this heading, *The Night Watch* will be analyzed in terms of the fundamental visual elements that play a role in expressing movement and the ways in which these elements are utilized within the composition. Visual components such as form, line, direction, rhythm, color, and light not only organize the pictorial surface, but also serve as structural foundations that generate a dynamic perception in the viewer. These elements constitute the building blocks of visual formation on both aesthetic and perceptual levels.

Direction and Linearity

In Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*, the notion of direction is constructed not only through the gazes and movements of the figures but also through the overall linear structure of the composition. This line-based organization is reinforced by the figures' gestures, the objects they hold (such as rifles, spears, and flags), architectural details, and background elements. The resulting directional quality on the pictorial surface guides the viewer's gaze along a particular flow, ensuring the continuity of the visual narrative.

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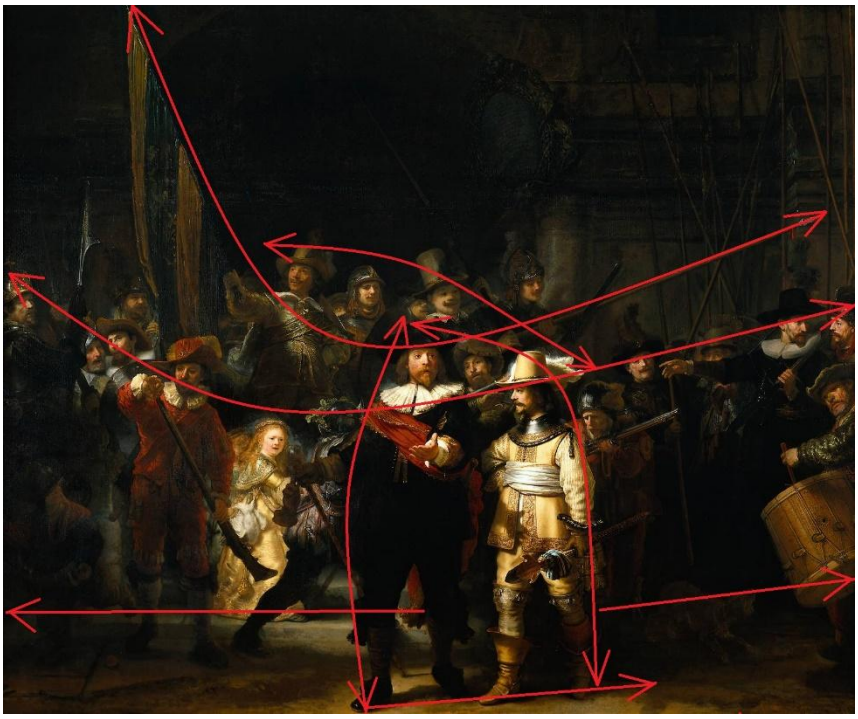


Figure 1. The primary directions formed through the positioning of the figures, used only once on the surface as a directional and motion-expressing element.

The artist creates a sense of multidirectional movement on the scene by assigning each figure a distinct gesture and orientation, rather than establishing a uniform rhythm. Notably, these directional cues do not repeat—each orientation is represented only once across the surface. This indicates a deliberate departure from an expectation of regular rhythm in the composition, opting instead for an irregular yet vivid and dramatic dynamism. Each figure contributes to the composition by generating a unique sense of direction within its own axis.



Figure 2. X-ray image of *The Night Watch* (Rijksmuseum, Operation Night Watch).

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In the article titled "Preparatory Sketch Discovered Beneath *The Night Watch*," published by the Rijksmuseum on December 7, 2021, findings from the research project "Operation Night Watch" were shared. Within this scope, visuals obtained through advanced imaging techniques revealed that in the sketch phase of the painting, fundamental visual elements such as lines indicating direction and motion were heavily employed in the understructure. Even in the final version of the work, it can be observed that the line intensity evident during the design process was partially subdued and visually suppressed by the strong contrasts of light and dark values.

In addition to the movement of the figures, one of the main structural elements contributing to the sense of motion and direction in the composition is the use of linear components. Objects such as rifles, flags, and spears function not only as narrative elements within the scene but also as visual guides that direct the viewer's gaze and maintain the flow of the composition.



Figure 3. Positions of linear objects (rifles, spears, flags, etc.) in terms of their effect on direction and motion within the composition.

These linear elements are arranged in diagonal and crosswise directions within the scene, enhancing the sense of depth while also guiding the viewer's eye across the surface. These lines, which create an irregular yet melodic visual narrative, reinforce the dynamic quality of the scene on a visual level.

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Figure 4. Positions of the portraits within the composition.

Human faces are among the most rapidly perceived visual elements by viewers. Rembrandt masterfully utilized this fact by highlighting faces with strategic lighting, turning them into focal points within the composition. The distribution of these faces across the surface without regular repetition not only guides the viewer's gaze but also initiates a rhythmic viewing process. In Figure 4, these faces have been marked with white circles, visually demonstrating their directional placement within the composition.

As is well known, visual communication with the "other" is a fundamental impulse directly linked to our effort to understand, and it primarily occurs through the face and facial expressions. This is an extremely rapid process of perception. The facial expressions we capture in milliseconds gain meaning by being associated with expressions and related memories stored in our minds. For this reason, when we engage in communication with another person, we first look at their face and the expression it conveys. Facial expressions directly reflect the emotional state of the person before us.

This phenomenon is also valid when we encounter works of art. Especially in compositions composed of human figures, like this one, our effort to understand first directs us toward the faces, gazes, and expressions. Our analytical mind is driven to construct an overall meaning from the expressions perceived in each figure.

When we approach Rembrandt's work from this perspective as viewers, our attempt to make sense of the scene through facial expressions causes us to shift from one figure to another across the surface. As can be seen in Figure 5, each figure displays a different direction of gaze and a unique expression. Except for the figure standing at the back to the right of the center, none of the 22 figures are looking directly at the viewer.

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Figure 5. Viewing directions of the figures in the composition.

Therefore, on the surface, not only the forms, the direction of the lines, the dynamic postures of the figures, and the asymmetrical distribution of the faces, but also the directions of their gazes and facial expressions guide us, as viewers, into a constantly shifting process of perception. This, in turn, leads to the formation of a sense of movement.

Rhythm and Repetition

In art, rhythm is not merely a formal repetition but an emotional organization of perceptual continuity, direction, and motion. Just as the recurring beats in a musical melody create a sense of tempo and anticipation in the listener, rhythm in visual arts emerges through the organized flow of forms, lines, colors, or light-shadow contrasts across the surface. Such a structure guides the viewer's gaze, draws attention to specific areas, and generates a sense of unity.

"Rhythm is not only the repetition of forms, but also the regular flow of emotions and inner experiences."
— (Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*)

This multilayered approach suggests that rhythm functions not only on a mathematical level but also on an intuitive—and even spiritual—dimension. Within this framework, rhythm in Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* is constructed through the layered use of visual elements such as the placement of figures, their gestures, the objects they carry, and the distribution of light across the surface. Rather than forming a rhythm based on regularly spaced repetition in the traditional sense, the painting conveys an irregular yet powerful sense of movement through momentary postures, gestures, and light accents. The figures' varying directions of gaze, gestures, and differences in scale do not suggest a strictly ordered rhythmic structure but rather introduce a visual diversity that enlivens the scene. This

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diversity transforms the viewer's visual scanning process, steering their attention across different points and preventing a sense of monotony.



Figure 6. Isolated view of the cylindrical drum on the right side of the composition; its removal demonstrates its role in the visual rhythm.

One of the key elements in establishing rhythmic structure is the use of objects that function as visual accents on the surface. Items such as the cylindrical drum located on the right side of the composition serve not only as figurative elements but also as visual rhythm points. Removing such components from the surface would disrupt the viewer's sense of unity, weaken the melodic structure of the rhythm, and interrupt the perception of movement. Thus, these objects act like percussion instruments in a symphony, contributing structurally to the rhythmic dynamism of the narrative.

"Every work of art consists of formally arranged relationships within a whole. These arrangements create a rhythmic structure, much like in music. Rhythm arises from a harmonious balance of repetition and variation."-Johannes Itten, *Design and Form: The Basic Course at the Bauhaus*, 1963

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Figure 7. The original composition.



Figure 8. Two key elements responsible for conveying motion — the drum on the right and the flag in the upper left — have been removed.

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Figure 9. Linear directional elements (spear, rifle, flag, etc.) have been removed from the composition.



Figure 10. The "empty stage" appearance after the figures have been removed from the composition.

Through this sequential reduction method, the gradual silencing of the visual integrity becomes

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observable. This approach not only makes visible what is present, but also reveals the void created by what is removed, thereby concretizing the structural role of rhythm.

Color, Light, and Visual Guidance

In Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*, the use of light-shadow contrast and color plays a fundamental role in constructing the perception of motion. The chiaroscuro technique—characterized by dramatic light and shadow contrasts and emblematic of the Baroque period—enhances both the spatial depth and the impression of movement across the surface. The striking illumination of central figures not only establishes focal points but also guides the viewer's gaze, creating a dynamic visual flow throughout the composition (Ertuğ, 2021).

It is evident that Rembrandt employs light in this work not merely as a source of illumination, but as a structural element within the composition. While light draws certain figures into prominence, the shadowed areas recede, generating a compelling sense of spatial depth. These light-shadow interactions guide the viewer's eye across the canvas, resulting in a temporally unfolding viewing experience (Loran, 2000). In this way, the visual tension and directional flow shaped by light on a static surface produce a strong perceptual impression of motion.

The painting's color scheme is primarily structured through tonal variations and values of light. While warm and neutral tones dominate the overall composition, accents of yellow, red, and gold appear rhythmically on the garments of figures, strategically placed at visual focal points. These color highlights serve more than just an aesthetic function—they operate as guiding, balancing, and rhythmic elements that reinforce the perception of motion across the surface.

Rembrandt's mastery in the use of light and color facilitates not only the visual organization of the composition but also the formation of a perceptual sense of movement. However, this effect arises not only from how light is painted, but also from how it refracts, reflects, and physically interacts with the surface. At this point, the material layers employed by the artist—the paint thickness, texture, and layering—become critical in understanding how the perception of motion is materially realized. Thus, a significant aspect of the viewer's perceived visual movement lies embedded within the physical structure of the painting itself.

Surface Texture and Layered Light Effect

Bas-relief is a type of relief in which figures or forms slightly protrude from the surface, creating limited depth with perspective kept parallel to the plane. The projection of the figures is minimal—usually only a few millimeters—and a subtle three-dimensional effect is achieved through light and shadow (Encyclopædia Britannica).

In this sense, Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* can also be viewed as a kind of bas-relief. Through his use of thick paint techniques, the painting assumes a relief-like structure. The viewer does not merely observe a symphony of depth created by color, but also experiences an atmosphere shaped by a surface that wears color like a physical garment.

The artwork offers not only a chiaroscuro-based composition of light and dark but also a technically complex structure with actual depth. Scientific analyses have shown that Rembrandt used paint not merely as a coloring medium but as a physical material that directs light and form on the surface. Notably, his use of impasto—the application of thick paint—serves as a powerful tool in manipulating how light is refracted and reflected, thereby guiding viewer perception.

X-ray and spectral analyses conducted as part of the *Operation Night Watch* project by the Rijksmuseum have revealed Rembrandt's distinctive combination of materials. The paint layers incorporate lead white, litharge oil, and plumbonacrite, which are not only volumetric in nature but also quick-drying and highly reflective. More recent findings have identified *lead formates*, an organo-metallic compound, suggesting that Rembrandt deliberately planned the surface's texture and its interaction with light (Rijksmuseum, 2023).

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Thick paint applications are especially concentrated on faces, hands, weapons, flags, and costume details. These raised areas create a physical shimmer and a dramatic depth effect when struck by direct light. With this method, Rembrandt treats light not only as a tonal element but also as a physical construct. In this way, the impasto technique becomes an integral part of his dramatic visual language.



Figure 11. X-ray image of The Night Watch (Rijksmuseum, Operation Night Watch).

This image shows how underlying figures and illuminated areas were repositioned and how paint layers are distributed across the surface. The intensely white areas around the central figures clearly reveal the physical presence of thick paint applications and their relationship with light.

Viewer Perception and Visual Direction

The perception of motion in *The Night Watch* is shaped not only through surface elements such as the distribution of light and color, but also through the integrated use of core visual elements like linearity, formal organization, rhythmic repetition, and figurative orientation. Rembrandt carefully arranges the direction of gazes, body postures, gestures, and the spatial relationships between figures to guide the viewer's eye across the surface step by step. This guidance does not establish a fixed focal point but creates a multidirectional flow of vision that traverses the entire surface. Thus, the viewer is transformed from a passive observer into an active visual traveler, navigating the painting through directional lines, light-shadow contrasts, and formal diversity**.**

The structural distribution of the composition and the strategic use of light are key elements that steer visual perception. The concentrated lighting in the foreground draws the viewer's initial attention, while figure groups in the middle and background planes function as sequential visual stops that facilitate eye movement across the surface. In this way, the painting offers the viewer not only aesthetic unity but also a perceptual journey that unfolds over time (Arnheim, 1974).

In this perceptual process, the sense of spatial depth and dramatic light distribution channel the eye's movement in specific directions, establishing a rhythmic pattern of viewing. The eye is led from the illuminated central figures toward shadowed figure clusters, then redirected back to the light sources. This visual loop builds a dynamic structure that continuously sustains both attention distribution and the sense of movement for the viewer.

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In conclusion, *The Night Watch* is not merely a depiction of a scene; it is a narrative plane that deepens the perception of time and motion on a static surface through an intricate network of relationships constructed via the viewer's eye movements.

DISCUSSION: BUILDING DYNAMIC PERCEPTION ON THE PICTORIAL SURFACE

As a visual narrative, *The Night Watch* presents not only a representational scene but also a perceptual plane that unfolds over time for the viewer. The directions of the figures' gazes, body postures, and transitions between gestures guide the viewer's eye across the surface, creating a visual journey. This suggests that the elements in the painting are not merely components of spatial arrangement, but also parts of a mental flow structure (Arnheim, 1974).

Such perceptual flows are also rooted in Denis Diderot's thoughts on art. Diderot argued that a scene's composition should be organized in a way that generates natural movement in the viewer's eye: "Painting must compel the viewer's gaze to follow a coherent direction across the surface. This direction should become a mental walk, gradually revealing the meaning of the composition." (Diderot, as cited in Fried, 1980, p. 93)

The balance between visual weight distribution, use of light, and relationships among figures forms a dynamic structure on an otherwise static surface. Especially notable is Rembrandt's use of light as a guiding element, where the interplay between figures and voids generates dramatic tension across the canvas (Loran, 2000). Through this mechanism, the viewer transforms from a passive observer into an active perceptual subject who navigates the structure over time.

Similarly, the idea that time and motion in visual arts must be "read" by the viewer aligns with cultural theorist Michael Betancourt's assertion that static images hold the potential to transform into temporal flows:

"Even a still image creates a sense of time and space through the viewer's eye movement; this motion is synchronized with the narrative structure within the visual form." (Betancourt, 2013, p. 22)
In light of this analysis, it becomes evident that motion is not merely a represented action; rather, it is a perceptual process constructed through a visual, rhythmic, and directional relationship with the viewer. Line, direction, light, and rhythm serve as fundamental building blocks in establishing this relationship.

CONCLUSION

In the presence of such a Baroque masterpiece, one of the ways to understand the artist's inner world and creative process is to look up at the sky or recall the deserted streets silhouetted by streetlights at night. For a work of art serves as a communicative bridge that links its creator and its viewer within the delicate fabric of time and life. Although it belongs to the past historically, an artwork is reborn in the present through emotion, establishing a silent dialogue with its audience.

This study aimed to demonstrate that the perception of motion in plastic arts is not limited to kinetic or digital media, but can also be effectively constructed on static surfaces—particularly in painting. The analysis of Rembrandt's masterpiece *The Night Watch* illustrates how basic visual elements such as direction, form, light-shadow contrast, and figure arrangement guide the viewer's gaze and influence the perception of time, thus creating a dynamic visual experience.

The orientation of the figures, the distances between them, their gestures, and action-based poses contribute to the creation of a rhythmic and fluid internal unity within the composition. This unity is perceived by the viewer not as a fixed image, but as a visual network that evolves and transforms over time. Especially through strategically placed focal points generated by light, the eye is encouraged to wander across the surface, enhancing the sensation of movement.

The Night Watch stands out as an exemplary work demonstrating how the sense of motion, constructed

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through complementary visual elements such as line, direction, light, and form, can be layered on a static surface. In this sense, Rembrandt can be seen as a pioneer who transcended the aesthetic codes of the Baroque period and anticipated contemporary perceptual approaches.

As Martin Kemp aptly states, "Works of art do not merely describe our perceptual systems; they also guide and shape them" (Kemp, 2000, p. 10). In this context, *The Night Watch* becomes a narrative space that moves through time, facilitated by the visual relationship it establishes with the viewer.

In conclusion, this analysis reveals that motion in plastic arts is not solely a matter of physical movement, but rather a perceptual phenomenon constructed through visual, directional, rhythmic, and psychological relationships with the viewer. It offers an explanatory and visually supported model of how fundamental visual elements shape this process.

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