Anna
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John Berger made two statements in his book *Ways of Seeing*. After I chose my art piece for this assignment, I remembered those statements. He said, “The way we see things is affected by what we know and what we believe” (8). He also stated “The reciprocal nature of vision is more fundamental than that of spoken dialogue” (9).

At first glance, the unnamed painting of “Anna” by L. Weaver, could be a relative of any one of my friends, as well as of me. She just looks like someone’s great-aunt or great-grandmother. The woman portrayed in this art piece is of African descent, but it’s not just her appearance. It’s more than that. Anna feels like my ancestor.

The artist’s coloring of Anna’s skin really impressed me because it’s not just black skin. I can almost touch the texture of her skin. It looks tough and worn and very tired. The color is very close to the color of cinnamon sticks with highlights of orange mixed with gold. It reminds me of the colors I’ve seen when an island sun slowly sinks into the ocean’s rippled surface with the moonlight softly kissing the creases. Her hands tell a story of very hard work and much pain. The knuckles are swollen with arthritis. Anna’s fingers are a deeper shade than her arms and face. They’re more the color of cinnamon toast, a little burned around the edges.

As interesting as this entire piece is to me, the most striking thing is Anna’s face. She has a thin, haggard face with high cheekbones that seem out of place on such a thin face. Her eyes are large with one eye a little lower than the other, suggesting a previous injury to that eye. I wonder how it happened? Did she get in the way of a runaway horse and wagon, or did she catch the wrath of the mistress of the house? Her nose is large, as most African noses are. Anna’s lips are full and stiff. There is no smile on her lips or in her eyes. I see years of pain, loss and suffering on this face. Even though the pain is most evident on her face, it’s all over her, from the top of her neatly braided hair down to her rigidly folded arms.

I am not sure of the timeframe of this piece, though her clothes suggest post-slavery days. On her finger is a small thin gold band. I wonder if she’s married, or has she been widowed. She looks just the way my grandmother has described her own great-grandmother, who was a slave. However, the ring she wears tells me she was probably not a slave at the time of her painting because I don’t think slaves were permitted to openly wear jewelry. Her dress is a simple beige with soft shades of greenish-blue stripes crisscrossed with a deeper shade of brown. The collar of the dress is white cotton, shaped like an old kerchief, with gentle ruffles around the edges. The sleeves are long and finished with deep broad cuffs. Anna seems to me to be a house slave. These slaves were dressed better than the other slaves who did all of the dirty, hard work around the plantation. Then again, most of the slaves kept in the house tending to the family’s needs were much lighter skinned than Anna appears to be.

When I first looked at this painting, I assumed that Anna was someone’s property, a house slave. Was it because she was an African woman from a time that denied all people of color? Or was it because she was an African looking woman portrayed with no posed smile on her face? What about the simple gold band on her finger…should I assume that she’s a lowly slave woman because there was no diamond setting in that ring? Maybe this is the silence and mystification of which Berger speaks. For all I know, Anna could
have been an African queen still regal in her captivity. Or she could have been a Black female entrepreneur. There were a few during this period. Maybe she was posed in this manner because this was the only acceptable way an African American woman could be portrayed during this period. If I have chosen to look at Anna and view her as an African American woman, dark, rigid and filled with pain and suffering, then Berger’s statement about the reciprocal nature of vision makes me wonder: what does Anna see when she looks back at me looking at her?

Viewing this art piece “Anna” was like going way back home and being able to talk to and feel some of the suffering that my great great grandmother Joanie must have felt “in her day.” I’m sure that if fifty people viewed this same piece of art, there would be fifty very different impressions of it. John Berger is right. People should be allowed to view art in their own way and feel free to interpret it without interference. John Berger’s statement regarding what we know and believe affecting what we see is very true to me. I know from family discussions that my ancestors were degraded and made to feel less than human, but why have I chosen to believe that there was no joy in their existence and no lightness in their souls? I’m sure my impressions are colored and influenced by what I know. My experience as an African American woman living in a world that still isn’t ready for me simply reinforces Berger’s statements.

As a viewer who chooses to really look at art, I applaud Mr. Berger’s ability to show me that I am not engaged in a passive exercise when viewing art, but in an active interchange of past and future emotions unearthed and brought to the surface of my knowing and my seeing.

Works Cited