

**Paxton Green Time Bank, Creative Conversation Transcript for  
*Reframed: The Woman in the Window*. 11 November 2021**



## **Discussing: Walter Sickert, *Woman Seated at a Window*, c. 1908-09**

Private Collection, promised to Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris, in memory of Delphine Lévy

### **Present:**

Madeleine Whitlock

Bee Dunne

David Knapp

Andrew Hamer

Roma

Marie Bernard

Maude Estwick

Facilitator

### **Discussion:**

(Madeleine)

We were discussing earlier when we were looking at it and I thought that she could be a prostitute. And you've... the client's just left, and she's just sat down and staring out of the window, thinking "There's got to be something better than this". Because that's the feeling I get looking at it - she's looking out of the window lost in her own thoughts, thinking "There's got to be something else besides what I'm doing". You know, that is what I get from that, from looking at that.

(Facilitator)

And what do you see... I will come back to what you said - what do you see that makes you say that you think that she might be a prostitute?

(Madeleine)

I think it's just that she's slightly dishevelled. She's... bosoms exposed. She doesn't look like she's, like, just got up and like having a wash or, you know, getting ready for the day. She looks, as I say, a bit dishevelled - a bit, I don't know, just to me, she looks a bit sad. And, as I said, she's staring out the window. And I just get the feeling that she's thinking. She's lost in thought thinking "There could be something better than what I'm doing". That's just the feeling I get from it.

(Facilitator)

Thanks, Madeleine. So, Madeleine is kind of talking about - questioning, maybe - who this figure is. Feeling this time of day, as the sun is going down - and this is talking about the kind of light that's casting the shadows that are cast across the room. But, coming back to this idea of who this person might be. One of her thoughts was that it might be, this figure might be, a prostitute. That might be her profession. And that she is... that it's kind of... what was the word? Sad?

(Madeleine)

Sad.

(Facilitator)

A sad kind of feeling, looking at this painting. Mainly because of the figure herself - that she looks dishevelled, but mainly, in terms of the emotion that she is bringing in that she seems fed up and lost in thought. Her eye is sort of out - looking away - looking outside of this space. Okay. Anyone else?

(Bee)

I think, just adding on to what Madeline said, I think she's quite forlorn looking possibly. And the curtain is only open a small amount. It's not fully open. So, she's either seeing somebody go away, or maybe waiting for somebody, potentially. But, as she's kind of in a state of undress, shall we say, she only wants the curtain open a small amount.

(Facilitator)

Okay, thank you. Bee is following on, as you say, from what Madeline is saying in terms of this figure, and maybe the mood that this figure is in.

You use the word "forlorn" - you're feeling that that's the kind of feeling that she's having. You noticed and, kind of, drew attention to the window itself, and particularly about the curtains being half open and this sense that maybe she is seeing somebody off or waiting to see somebody arriving. What else did you mention? There was something else you mentioned?

(Bee)

And because of her state of undress - that's why she hasn't got the curtains open properly.

(Facilitator)

Yeah, so, kind of wondering, maybe, you know, linking the window with the figure that, you know, this window, the curtains are not fully open because she is in a state of undress. Okay, thank you.

(David)

Possibly, she is a prostitute and she's just seen a customer who has just walked out without paying.

(Facilitator)

Thank you. So, David is also feeling that this figure might be a prostitute.

(David)

Well, she has no bra on which is slightly unusual for the time of day.

(Facilitator)

Okay. So, thinking about the time of day and the sort of state of undress and thinking that maybe there is a bit of drama going on that, that possibly...

(David)

Some way off, yes. Not here.

(Facilitator)

Okay, so that there is a drama that's happened some way off, linked to maybe a customer that has left without paying. So...

(David)

Could be, yes.

(Facilitator)

So, thinking more broadly, about maybe what's happened, and why she's sitting here.

(David)

Yes, I think that's a reasonable thing to say, yes. I would say so.

(Facilitator)

Thank you, David. And, Roma, you wanted to say something?

(Roma)

There are two chairs here. That one and the one on the right. Yeah. So I think there may be a... maybe I... I don't know. Sorry, I pass that.

5:42 (Facilitator)

Okay. That's fine. So, you have picked out... Roma's thinking about what's in the room, the furniture...

(Roma)

Yeah.

(Facilitator)

...and noticing that there's two chairs. And maybe that's something that you've picked up on because it might mean something - have some meaning?

(Roma)

There is a sign of optimism, if you want to call it like that, in a way - if one sees the bottom, the bottom left, corner. Sorry, when I say "left", I mean, the other one... Yeah. And it seems to be the only positive element if we want to consider that orange and that triangle there...

(Bee)

It's the only colour that isn't drab really, isn't it?

(Roma)

Yeah. And then the corner... the right corner... or the other corner - yeah, that one there. Do I see properly that under the chair there seems to be some urine? Isn't there a pot?

(Facilitator)

You are thinking that this here might be a pot?

(Roma)

Yeah.

(Facilitator)

Okay.

(Roma)

Possibly pee pee? Maybe?

(Facilitator)

Yeah. Okay. Thank you, Roma. So, Roma has is to kind of talking about like, a lot of you have said that this, this painting has a kind of - what was the word you used? Was it "despair"?

(Bee)

Forlorn.

(Facilitator)

Forlorn. Even better. Forlorn. And you talked about kind of a sort of sadness, and Roma sort of bringing that in, but also she's sort of agreeing and drawing our attention to this area here, saying it seems to be the only point of optimism in this work. She's talking specifically about the colours that are used, and you said the, sort of, reds and the oranges in this section. And then you're also wondering about what this might be over here and thinking that it's possibly a bowl or chamber pot?

(Roma)

Chamber pot.

(Facilitator)

Okay, so something that might be used for urine?

(Roma)

Let's call a spade a spade.

(Facilitator)

Okay, thank you. What more can we find? Anything? Please chip in. Like this is... we are just having a conversation about this painting.

(Madeleine)

Or, I've just had another thought. That, if she isn't a prostitute, but she could be a nursing mother that's just fed the baby and that's been put down somewhere else in the room. And she's just taking a time for herself after doing that, so it could mean different things. And then she's just thinking, but she just seems to be just lost in thought all the time, no matter what's happening, or just happened in the room. I still think she's like lost in thought - staring out the window. Yeah.

(Facilitator)

All right. Thank you. So, Madeline is saying that there might be another reason for why this figure is sitting semi undressed, also, kind of deep in thought - mind elsewhere. That she might be taking a moment. That she might be a nursing mother, which would sort of explain and saying that this figure could remain in this same position, but the story behind it could be very different. We don't know.

(Bee)

Maybe that's why the curtain is only open a little bit because the baby's now gone down for a nap. And she wanted... she didn't want to brighten the room.

(Facilitator)

Okay. So again, sort of linking, kind of, what's going on in the painting what's happening at this window - the idea that the curtains are not fully open or not fully closed, maybe needing some light, but not too much light in case there is a sleeping baby.

(Madeleine)

And also in, I'm guessing, the era not like today - women breastfeeding in public and everything - it was a discrete thing or a

private thing. So, you wouldn't have the window... curtains open so that passers-by could see what you was doing.

(Facilitator)

So, Madeleine, thank you. You're placing this, maybe, in a different historical place to now.

(Madeleine)

Only by the dress, you know, could be in like the First World War, or just before because of the length of the skirts and everything.

(Facilitator)

So, looking at the clothing, placing it in the past, and the different ideas about privacy, and that breastfeeding wouldn't have been something done publicly. So again, sort of fitting in with what we were saying about these curtains and them being only partially open for privacy.

(Bee)

But also from the waist down, she's actually respectable, essentially. Because it's like literally covering down to her feet, the skirt.

(Facilitator)

Okay, so coming back to her clothing as well - that this sort of lower part is respectable, possibly for the time when the skirts went all the way down and covered the ankles. Okay. So, what do you think the figure in the artwork is thinking about? We've had a few thoughts about a possible client that's left without paying, taking a moment - so maybe no thoughts?

(Madeleine)

No.

(Facilitator)

But do we have any ideas or maybe any thoughts about what she might be thinking about?

(Madeleine)

As I say, with the what I said first, if she's like the prostitute figure, as I said, I think she's lost in thought thinking that - looking out of the window, watching people go past, perhaps nicely dressed and everything - thinking there should be something better that she could be doing, or how could she get out of the situation that she's in? So, you know, I think she's just lost in thinking of a better life perhaps, or, you know, just totally lost in - why is she doing what she's doing? If that is the correct perspective of the painting, you know...

(Facilitator)

Alright, thank you. So, Madeleine was kind of thinking that one possibility is this - why she's sort of deep in thought and maybe what she's thinking about is linked to what's going on outside. That maybe what's outside differs so much from her life, and maybe a kind of wish for a different life - a different way of living. Thank you.

(David)

She might be thinking about paying the rent. She might be desperately short of money.

(Bee)

But she might also be - if we go to the theme of her being a mum, possibly a first-time mom - and she's stuck in the house and she could be thinking "Is this my whole purpose in life? Is this my lot that I'm stuck here because I have to nurse this baby and when I really want to be outside?"

(Facilitator)

Alright. Thank you. So, back to just David. David was sort of saying what she might be thinking - about possibly paying her rent. What do you see that makes you say that?

(David)

Well, she is in a melancholy mood. Quite obviously. So, money is...

(Bee)

Tight.

(David)

...money is likely to be a problem for a girl in her position.

(Facilitator)

So, thanks, David. David is giving us another idea of why this figure is in a melancholy mood, and possibly often, you know, stress to do with money.

(David)

Yeah, I've got a query about the picture: has she got long hair or is it short?

(Facilitator)

I don't know. What do you think?

(David)

Has she got it tied up - at the back?

(Facilitator)

Any ideas? I mean, I am closer...

(David)

From here, it looks as if it's tied up and it's hanging down her back.

(Facilitator)

Okay.

(Madeleine)

Because it looks a bit platted so it would be at the back, I think.

(Marie)

I was going to ask. I don't know... I'm just looking from the painter point of view... that he really set the scene and maybe that's what he wanted and he was trying to capture... So, saying more so that, could it be that he's in control of the narrative that's going on and it's not necessarily her lifestyle, whatever. It could just be, as a painter, that's the mood he desired and he wanted to set up so he could capture, and then, you know, reflect that on canvas? I just, I just wondered, you

know, because, I mean... I'm not... I don't paint so, I don't know about these things, but from what I'm seeing, you know - television programs and what have you and classes and that - and I see them, putting models on... putting models out, and telling them what pose - doesn't matter whether it's male or female - this is the pose that I require because this is either the technique, or whatever it is, that I'm trying to achieve. I don't know how to explain it. And I'm thinking that it's not so much her, but the painter in charge of double narrating the whole setup? And yeah, and he's... he'll say to us... this is how I want you, you know, when he's sort of making sure the curtains got the kind of light that he is looking for, you know, that kind of stuff really.

(Facilitator)

Okay, thank you. Can I just have your name?

(Marie)

Marie

(Facilitator)

Marie? Thank you, Marie.

(Marie)

Well, I don't know, because I'm not a...

(Facilitator)

Well, now you're in - you're in the conversation. Thank you, Marie. So, Marie's is another perspective. So, Marie is wondering, rather than this kind of in itself having a story or meaning that possibly it's the narrative, and the feeling and the mood has come from the artist themselves. That they have wanted to create a kind of mood or a feeling and that this, potentially, has been set up and you are sort of linking that to how models are directed by painters to create a particular feeling or story. Okay. Thank you, Marie. Anything else? Any more we can find?

(Roma)

I was thinking that the lady or the woman... Yeah. Give me two seconds. Oh, yes. She could be a washer, a woman that washes

clothes and stuff. Because there she's got both arms free from you know... because... almost as if she didn't want to be... to see... Yeah. She didn't want to be...

(Facilitator)

To wet her clothes?

(Roma)

Yeah, she didn't want to be seen wet and I think too ... what is the word? To be dishevelled, yeah.

(Facilitator)

Thank you. So, Roma is kind of wondering again, on the question about what kind of... who this figure is and what her role might be. And I think you said possibly a washer woman and you were thinking that to do with the fact that her sleeves of her shirt are pulled up and feeling that not wanting... I think is that to protect the sleeves so they don't get wet. So that she's not... she can be neater? Possibly. That wasn't well said at all! Sorry, Roma, you said it much better. Okay, thank you. And Bee, we were going to go back to you to do with this idea that maybe she a nursing mother and you were... what was it that you were saying? Oh yes. Feeling about, kind of, what she might be thinking and this idea of looking out the window. Maybe a sense of feeling that that's one role that she's doing, and possibly this idea of looking out the window meaning thinking about maybe another way of being.

(Bee)

Perhaps what she did before she had the child. She was able to go out and do whatever she wanted to do. Her time was her own whereas, possibly, if she has had a baby, her time isn't her own now. It's very much dictated to by the baby's needs.

(Facilitator)

Thank you, Bee. So, thinking about maybe how life was before the baby and where there was more freedom, possibly, and, and how different maybe her life is now with a baby dictating the day and meeting that child's needs.

(Bee)

And just going back to what Roma said about the pot under the bed.

(Facilitator)

Yeah.

(Bee)

If, you know, if... because she does have her sleeves rolled up...

(Roma)

Can you see there?

(Bee)

Yeah, and that maybe that's actually got water in it that was used for the baby.

(Facilitator)

Okay. So, we're thinking, looking for evidence and objects and these saying, maybe this pot is for water? And instead that it's a basin of water. So, we're thinking kind of, does that tie in with wondering what her role is? And maybe if she is a mother, that's for her baby?

(Bee)

Because it is a peculiar place to have something like that.

(Facilitator)

What do you... why do you say that?

(Bee)

Because it appears to be under something.

(Facilitator)

Okay. So, questions, you know, what is that object doing there? It seems to be in an odd place. Okay. All right, thank you

(Bee)

But it's obviously important to the actual narrative of the painting.

(Facilitator)

So, you're linking in what's in the room, the objects in the room, and what they're telling us about a potential story. Okay, and how do you... What emotions do you feel when you look at the painting? Any emotions? I mean, some words have been said already about the feeling of the painting, but for yourselves. Are there any emotions that...?

(David)

Melancholy, I think, is the word. Yeah.

(Facilitator)

Okay. What is it about it that makes you feel that way?

(David)

Well, I don't know. Colour - I can see, it's all very, very subdued. Very, very faint lighting. It's late in the afternoon, apparently, which is a melancholy time. So, that's what I think.

(Facilitator)

Thank you, David. So, David, used the word "melancholy" and talking particularly about the colours used in the painting, and the time of day, and that being a particular time of day for melancholy. Talking about the lighting as well, and the effect of that. Thank you. Any other emotions?

(Bee)

Sadness maybe.

(Facilitator)

And what is it for you that makes you feel that way? What is it about the painting?

(Bee)

Because her face doesn't look happy.

(Facilitator)

So for you, it's... go on... sorry...

(Bee)

So, the opposite of happy would be sad, basically.

(Facilitator)

Okay. So, for you, it's not about the sort of formal structure or the colours, it's about her expression.

(Bee)

Yeah.

(Facilitator)

And that makes you feel sadness as a response to the work. Okay, thank you. Gosh, we've literally.... we've covered it all. Lots of questions about and wondering about who this woman is, and what's her story. Definitely a kind of agreement in terms of the feeling of this painting - that it's giving out melancholy and sadness and you linked the formal structures of the painting, so colour, lighting, but also the figure, her posture, her expression. You linked a lot. You made a lot of links between the window and the figure and kind of what this window was representing - a former life, previous life, a bit of drama. Maybe something's happening outside of this window that's affecting this, this figure. So, now that we've talked through a little bit, do you see this painting differently now from when you first saw it when you came in?

(Bee)

Yeah, I've gone from thinking she was a loose woman, basically, potentially. Because the skirt was respectable, that maybe it's something other.

(Facilitator)

Okay.

(Bee)

But, it could still be that she's a loose woman.

(Facilitator)

But another idea came in?

(Bee)

Yeah.

(Facilitator)

Okay. Anyone else seeing it any differently from how they first did?

(David)

Well, we know a bit more about her now we've had a think, but she's still a mystery.

(Roma)

She is still?

(Facilitator)

A mystery. So, this sort of act of talking more gave us maybe some more ideas about her story, but there's still a question mark.

(David)

Yes, definitely.

(Marie)

A mystery, but she's still a model.

(Facilitator)

Still a mystery?

(Marie)

She's still a model, I'm saying, because she's so central to the whole picture. A model nevertheless, but, as you say, representing all these things. She's got a nice body. Well, she has. She's got a nice body. For that period, I'm thinking. She's well endowed with... because that was the thing, wasn't it at that time, before placing it in that period? She's got a nice full breast, nice shoulders. It's in proportion - her top to her hips and that.

(Facilitator)

And do you... are you seeing it any differently after listening to each other?

(Marie)

Definitely, the mood thing. I think it's quite... it's quite strong.

(Facilitator)

Okay.

(Marie)

Whether it's that a mood that is emanating from her or whether it's one that's been projected. Nevertheless, what everyone said about the mood is... I think... plays a major part to the picture. Well, what it conveys anyway.

(Facilitator)

Wonderful, great. Well, thank you, everybody. That was really enjoyable. Yeah.

(Roma)

Could I ask one more question of the group?

(Facilitator)

Yes, Roma, please do.

(Roma)

So, the question, if you don't mind, I was wondering if we could go round and see how you relate to this picture? It could be anything, could be absolutely anything - just is there anything in this picture either visually or how it makes you feel that you can relate to something?

(Marie)

I'd say "all woman". No - all woman. She's, you know, she's a woman. That's what I see and I equate that with, with strength, you know, with... what shall I say... with her being... she's comfortable with who she is sort of thing. With her presence - yeah, I see. That's what I see. She's all woman and it's from a position of strength, not a weakness.

(Facilitator)

Wonderful, and your name again? Sorry, just because we all have name tags...

(Marie)

Marie

(Facilitator)

So, Marie is identifying and relating to this figure, and using the term "all woman" as a kind of a figure of strength. Thank you.

(Bee)

I'm going to say the opposite of that because when we first looked at the picture - when we got up and looked at it - I think the first thing I said was, she looks like trapped inside but she wants to be outside.

(Facilitator)

Do you relate to that? Is that something you are...?

(Bee)

Well, I think we could all relate to that going back to last year. Don't go out. We were all being told not to go out.

(Facilitator)

Thank you, Bee. So, Bee is kind of making links to our current or our most recent sort of experiences, linking it to something that you've identified in this painting, the sense of feeling trapped, being trapped in a space and kind of looking outwards, and maybe you know how things could be. Thank you. Anyone else relate to this painting or the figure or the mood?

(Madeleine)

When I first saw it, I was thinking she was thinking like "Is this all there is?" which I can relate to being in positions some time back that I would know the mood.

(David)

She needs to go for a nice walk on the Downs in Sussex.

(Facilitator)

Thank you. So, Madeline sort of saying, you know, talking quite personally about this. She is recognizing that feeling of, you know, "Is there something more?" - wanting something more. Thank you. And David feels that we could all do with now going for a brisk walk on the Downs.

(David)

Definitely.

(Facilitator)

Yes. Sounds good to me. Wonderful. All right. That's great. Thank you so much. I think we've got some really, really good stuff there, so thanks for contributing and sharing. So that was great. Lovely.

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