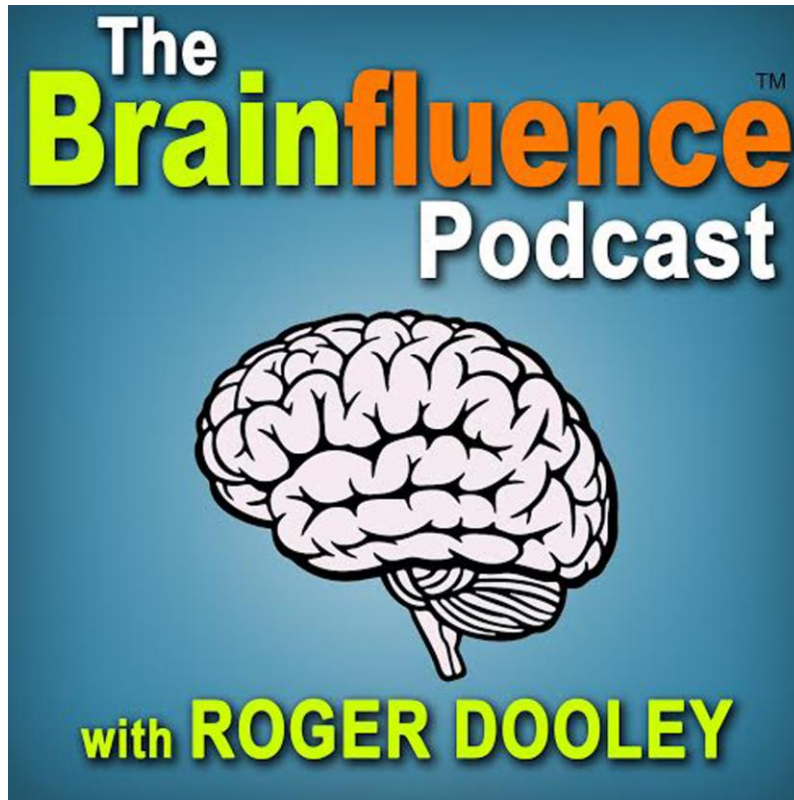


Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman



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**Roger Dooley**

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## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

Welcome to the *Brainfluence Podcast* with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger Dooley: Welcome to the *Brainfluence Podcast*. I'm Roger Dooley. Let me start by asking a few questions of the audience. How can you look at Monet's water lily paintings and save your company lots of money? How can pictures of naked women and sculptures made out of urinals help save lives and foil terrorist attacks?

My guest this week has the answers. She can also teach you how to win an argument, calm your child, catch a thief, and a lot more. She developed and teaches a course called The Art of Perception. She first offered the program for medical students to improve their observation skills. Then she expanded it to other medical schools, law enforcement professionals, including the NYPD, the FBI, the Department of Justice, and the Secret Service.

She has a B.A. in international affairs, a J.D., and an M.A. in Art History. My guest's new book is *Visual Intelligence: Sharpen Your Perception, Change Your Life*. Welcome to the show, Amy Herman.

Amy Herman: Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be here.

Roger Dooley: Great. First let me congratulate you on your book, Amy. It's got really nice production values. There's a lot of full color illustrations and there's a big set of endnotes too for people like me who obsess over tracking down original research.

[The Brainfluence Podcast](#) with Roger Dooley

## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

Amy Herman: Yes. We had to backup everything we said so the endnotes take up quite a bit of room in the book.

Roger Dooley: Right, well believe me, it's well worth it for a lot of people. I'm very frustrated when I read a book and an author makes an assertion and says, "As we know from research..." and you have absolutely no clue as to what that research might be and how to track it down and so on.

Amy Herman: I find that frustrating as well. It actually cuts into the credibility for me.

Roger Dooley: Right, well, for sure. Because you don't really know if—undoubtedly, there is some research related to that, but it's like reading a popular diet magazine or something where they'll come out with these assertions. You know, research about carrots and so on and you absolutely have no idea if it's really a valid conclusion.

Anyway, you start the book with some examples of how observation, one person noticing something that many others would overlook can have a profound impact. One person noticed hotels throwing away his used bar of soap every day and ended up creating a soap recycling operation to ship these recycled soap to people who really needed it. Another prevented a child from carrying out a suicide bombing.

Do you think that technology today is working against observation? It seems like whether we're waiting for somebody or walking down the street, we're looking at our phones. We can barely avoid collisions with lampposts, much less really be observant. Any minute of downtime we're triggered to grab a device. It's really not

## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

very conducive to living in the moment and observation. Do you find this to be a battle in today's society?

Amy Herman: Well I'm trying not to make it a battle. I've come to the conclusion that nobody is going to dispense with their technology. That's a given. I just finished a book by Sherry Turkle called *Reclaiming the Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*.

My takeaway from that book is very much one that I incorporate into my own work and the book and my classes in reminding people that while we can use our technology creatively and for maximum efficiency, we can't overlook the fact that the best set of technology that we have, the best piece of technology we have is a pair of human eyes. The eye's attach to the brain is really so incredibly powerful.

I need people to understand that I don't want them to get rid of their technology but it is a distraction and we need to put it down and not forget how important human interaction and human observation is and how much information is available to us just by looking and listening and using our five senses to inform our perceptions.

In an overarching way, I don't want to do battle with technology. I want people to understand that they need to step back and think about what do my inherent observation skills tell me before I rely on technology?

Roger Dooley: Actually, I can name one person who has given up his technology. A few weeks ago we had Martin Lindstrom whose new book is *Small Data*, which is heavily observation based. He goes into people's homes all

## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

over the world and makes observations and then tries to draw conclusions that will help marketers develop new brands, new products, and so on. He actually ditched his smartphone, or so he said. So there's one person who did that.

You have mass transit in New York, I was just in Europe where there's a lot of mass transit. When you're sitting in train car, literally everybody is staring down at their phone. I mean, you talk about the famous invisible gorilla test in the book. I think that you could probably have somebody in a gorilla suit walk down the aisle and nobody would notice in many situations.

Amy Herman: Yeah. It's even scarier than that because there was a shooting here—I'm on the west coast now, I'm in Seattle. There was a shooting in San Francisco, I believe it was about a year and a half ago where someone was on the BART and he pulled out a gun and he shot someone. There wasn't a single witness in the car because everyone was looking down at their technology.

So it becomes not just a matter of what we're missing but a matter of personal safety. A huge part of situational awareness that I talk about in the book, both short term and long term, is about being aware of where you are, of what's happening, who's there. Am I comfortable and am I safe?

Then long-term situational awareness in a professional context is: What problems are lurking? What do I need to be addressing and what do I need to be seeing for my company to operate at maximum efficiency?

## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

Roger Dooley: Since I teased the audience with naked pictures and urinal sculptures, we'll have to get to those eventually. But I think maybe a good place to start would be why you think it's a good idea for doctors, FBI agents, and business people to study art, particularly old art.

Amy Herman: I use art as a set of data. I just want to get it out there initially that I'm not using it substantively. I'm not teaching about Picasso versus Pollock. I'm using art as a new set of data to ask these professionals to step away from what they do for my two or three-hour course. Look at a set of data and use analytical skills and critical inquiry skills that they have to use everyday in their professional context, but to shift their perspective to use it in a different context.

So that by stepping away and then stepping back into what they do, they'll have a fresher perspective and cleaner lenses on the glasses through which they see their work. Art is highly charged and extremely evocative. I spend a lot of time selecting the images that I think will not only be conducive to good dialog but will also illustrate that there are multiple perspectives to seeing the same thing. By soliciting multiple perspectives, you're going to make more informed decisions.

Roger Dooley: So how does looking at an Old Master invoke a different kind of thinking in our brains?

Amy Herman: Old Master paintings are replete with tiny little details, both in clothing and in the background and the expression. I think that they give us an opportunity to look at something that we're not familiar looking with because we don't look at Old Master paintings every day

## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

or 99 percent of the people that I work with are not looking at Old Master paintings every day. By cleaning the slate and back to your other point, you need no digital technology to look at art with me. You don't need to go on your smartphone. You don't need to look up the artist. That's not what I'm interested in.

I need to hear what it is that you observe with your own two eyes. Art gives us sort of the complete opportunity to do this. I don't need supplemental information that you can do a Google search from. When anybody is tempted to pick up a phone during my class and I ask them, "What do you need that for?"

They say, "Oh, I want to take notes or I want to look that up." I say, "That's not warranted here. In fact, I'm discouraging it. Put the phone down and tell me what you see." People find that very challenging and they find it extremely disarming.

Roger Dooley: So somebody who's used to studying crime scene photos rather than showing them different crime scenes photos and pointing out what they missed, using art sort of shifts them out of that mode of thinking completely. But hopefully when they go back to those crime scene photos, they'll be carrying those new skills with them.

Amy Herman: That's exactly right. In fact, I had a detective, crime scene investigator, for many years come up to me, he took my class three times. Finally I said to him, "Detective, why do you keep taking the class?" He said, "For two reasons. Number one, I'm really terrible at this, at describing and communicating."



## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

He said, “But I also realized after taking your class that when I would get a call to go to a crime scene, in my head I already figured out what the crime scene was going to look like before I even got there. I realize that’s not the way to do my job. Your course gave me this renewed perspective to refresh my sense of critical inquiry and to treat each crime scene as a new and different crime scene instead of trying to arrive at premature conclusions about what I was going to find.”

Roger Dooley: Right. I think that humans are pattern recognizers. We look for those patterns. We even learn to expect those patterns which is handy a lot of the time but when you are say investigating a crime or looking at a novel business problem or something, that may not always be helpful.

Amy Herman: Yes. It’s a point I take up specifically in the book and in the class. I do talk about pattern recognition. I certainly want people to draw on their skills of their past experiences and say, “I’ve dealt with an issue similar to this in the past. I’m well equipped to deal with it.”

But to remember that no two situations are ever identical and how we learn to distinguish between and among patterns and notice the details and nuances to arm ourselves to deal with these situations but to have an edge to recognize that they’re all different. Each one is different.

Roger Dooley: One example of the many in the book that I like is Copley’s *Mrs. John Winthrop*. It’s a portrait of a—for our audience who may not have that information at their fingertips. I certainly didn’t. It’s a portrait of a seated, well-dressed woman. When you ask people to study the



## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

painting and then describe what they see and remember as much as they can about it, they tend to talk about the woman. How's she dressed. What she's holding, and so on.

But you say that almost nobody mentions the mahogany table where she's seated. That table takes up a third of the painting. In addition, it even has a cleverly painted reflection of the woman in it. Why do people not notice the table? I mean, after you point it out, it's pretty obvious and particularly the reflection is skillfully done. Why do people miss that?

Amy Herman: I highlight that painting as probably the most important painting in my presentation. That if my participants just remember one image from my session, it's the lovely Mrs. Hannah Winthrop. I point out to them exactly what you described. I compliment you for giving your listeners such a wonderful visual description of this painting.

Here we have this very stately-looking woman. She's sitting up and she fills the canvas. She's wearing a bonnet with a bow. She has a loose silk dress on with a big blue and white bow. She's sitting in an upholstered chair. She's holding nectarines in each of her hands. As you point out, in the bottom one third of the painting is this mahogany table. In art history, we call it a tour de force. It's really exquisitely detailed with the reflection that you articulated.

The problem for the participants is when I ask a group to describe the portrait, over 50 percent of them omit the table from the description. They say, "So what? This is portrait about a person. Why do I have to worry about a mahogany table?" I said, "Well here's the problem that it

## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

presents. That table is hiding in plain sight. It's right in front of your eyes and you're failing to address it in any way, even as a tertiary consideration."

I said, "What happens in the real world when you are looking at a multifaceted problem or a strategy or you're talking to a witness or a new patient and you just omit to talk about one attribute? It's a real problem." I ask, "How many of you have ever said to a colleague or a friend or a family member, 'How did I miss that? It was right in front of my eyes.'" I worry about that. I don't worry so much about the mahogany table. I worry about its applications in real life.

So to try to ameliorate the problem, I ask people to step back from particularly complex transactions or difficult problems. I say, "Collaborate with each other. Ask a colleague. Here's the problem. Here are my proposed solutions. Is there anything here I might be missing?"

Roger Dooley: One thing I was thinking about as I read the book, movies and TV shows often have a lot of continuity errors. An object that moves part way through the scene. The actor is wearing a different clothing or perhaps some part of the clothing has changed and most people don't notice these because they're focused on the action and perhaps the actor's face and the words and so on. With your observational skills, do these things pop out at you and is it really annoying?

Amy Herman: It is annoying because, unfortunately, I've been asked the question so many times, can I ever turn it off? And unfortunately, I can't. Those inconsistencies strike me but I've learned to filter out the important inconsistencies from what we used to call in law school "harmless error."

## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

Any inconsistency that really isn't going to change my perception of something.

I have a bigger problem with anachronisms, you know. People will come up with these impossible time narratives that just can't exist. I say, "Does anybody notice that this just can't be?"

The other example and I hate to bring it up because it's just anathema to so many people but to talk about the political campaigns right now. Each, I dare say, I'm usually very humble and modest about my program, but I believe that the political campaigns could benefit from taking *The Art of Perception*. I really do.

I think that they have not considered the magnitude or the importance of their word choices. Because every word counts. Look how their words are being scrutinized and manipulated because they're not making good word choices to communicate what it is that they want to say.

Roger Dooley: Good point. Or perhaps they don't care in some cases.

Amy Herman: Yeah, I think that's the bottom line too.

Roger Dooley: There was a news report not that long ago about TSA screeners at airports, the folks who look at x-rays of every carry-on bag that goes by. These screeners who are supposedly trained to do this extensively missed almost all the weapons testers hid in suitcases. Is this inattentional blindness? How would this fit into your system of thinking?

Amy Herman: It's a tough call. I worked with TSA screeners years ago but training, as you can imagine, they're so busy and

## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

they're so overworked. I think there is a certain amount inattentional blindness that happens in every single profession. But as you I'm sure have seen the headlines as of late, our nation's airports are beyond overburdened. The number of passengers that have to go through the regular line is staggering.

Any human being who has to look at screeners all day, every day. I do a lot of work in the intelligence community and with security officers. People often say, they make this remark to me, "Why don't we have our security system like the State of Israel? A weapon never gets through their security system. They never have hijackers. They never have threats to the security."

It's very simple. The State of Israel is the size of New Jersey. We're dealing with volume that is incomprehensible to the State of Israel. We have hundreds of airports in our country, millions of travelers every single day, and thousands upon thousands of flights.

So I think it's a manpower issue combined with an inattentional blindness issue that can only be combatted by frequent changes in shifts and really high level observational training. I'm not sure that that's something that our infrastructure can support right now given the heavy burden on the travel system in our country.

Roger Dooley: I know there's definitely some real logistics issues with employee turnover and just speed of recruiting and replacement and so on.

Amy Herman: Absolutely.

## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

Roger Dooley: So we can't blame it all on psychology and neuroscience. Just to shift gears, you talk about walking around as a way of sort of waking up your brain. Explain a little bit about that and why it's good for you to do.

Amy Herman: We all function according to a set of perceptual filters that have been in place since we were kids. I discovered this exercise when I had a class a couple years ago where they took part one of my class on a Thursday morning and took part two on a Friday morning. The assignment for the interim overnight period was to take a walk between the museum and their hotel and come back and report on something that they don't think they would have noticed beforehand.

I had a class of about 25 people. The things that they noticed were just incredible. They ranged from the small, inane details to really something very major. Without making a terrible pun, I think it was eye opening because as cops like to say to me, we're all so busy trying to get from point A to point B, both literally and figuratively, that we tune out the world. We're so focused on point A to point B that we just put blinders on.

When you add technology and you put earbuds in your ear and you're listening to music or you're watching YouTube videos or texting while you're walking, you diminish even further the information that you're allowing to come in. That information, that way of engaging the world, can really be quite beneficial. People don't do it.

So I really encourage you, one step at a time, take the earbuds out one morning. See what you hear. See what you smell. Take a walk on your familiar route and try to

## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

notice one thing that you would not have seen otherwise.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, I think the one exception would be listening to podcasts, which is...

Amy Herman: I was going to say that.

[Laughter]

Roger Dooley: Don't take your earbuds out then. But no, I know exactly what you're saying, Amy, because I walk my dog moderately frequently and I'll often be listening to podcasts but sometimes I will intentionally leave the earbuds out. It is a different experience. You do see a lot more.

Amy Herman: I have the opposite experience, Roger, because I don't usually listen to earbuds for all the reasons, you know, have my earbuds in except when I'm on an airplane. The few times that I've done it on the streets of New York, I live in New York. The few times that I've lost myself in music, it's a very pleasurable experience, I understand why people do it.

But I am cognizant of how it just cuts out the whole world. It's very unsettling for me. I can't listen to music for very long periods of time when I'm on the street because I feel that my senses are not as heightened as they need to be.

Roger Dooley: In the book, you talk about a firearms training exercise that you went through where you were given a gun, not actually loaded with bullets. Then put in simulated

## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

shooting situations. You pretty much managed to shoot the wrong people and not shoot the right ones.

Amy Herman: Every single time I shot the wrong person.

Roger Dooley: I don't know what your police students thought about that but how did that happen? Why do you think that despite your knowing what you were supposed to do and being maybe more attuned than a lot of people that still in these situations it was challenging for you?

Amy Herman: After my performance in the firearms training simulation, my cop friends basically said to me, "Stick to your day job." But the important takeaway for me on a number of levels, it was really a profound experience for me because the instruction that I was given when I was handed this gun was to shoot when appropriate. I said to the instructors, "Well what does that mean?" They said, "That will become clear to you from the situation that you're in."

Not only did it not become clear, I shot when it was not appropriate. I shot when someone was retreating from me. But because I thought they were carrying my child, an infant child, I shot out at them out of pure maternal instinct. I said to them in justification and to myself, "If you hurt my child, I'll kill you."

It made me realize we live in a very, very difficult culture for law enforcement now. You know, it's in the news every day about mistaken shootings and biased shootings and unrecorded shootings. What I learned from that experience was you can't judge someone else until you're in their shoes. I will never judge someone who fired a gun because I saw firsthand how difficult



## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

firing a gun is. You don't just pull the trigger. You realize what the ramifications are when you pull the trigger. It's not easy.

I'm fairly tall. I'm a substantial-sized person and there was a lot of kickback when I fired a gun. They measured my sweat and my pulse and it was really not this simple experience, everyone thinks you just fire a gun. As a result of my training for law enforcement agents, I say to them, and they agree, "Before you pull that trigger, you better be able to account to yourself in a matter of seconds your justification for doing this because you're accountable to other people."

It was really a profoundly educational experience to learn how wrong I was in my preconceived notions about firing a gun. I think it's naturally analogous to decisions that we make under duress and in exigent circumstances. We are no less accountable for those decisions than for the ones where we have the luxury of time to think them through.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, I have a lot of respect for people like the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team or Navy Seals who have to drop into a room instantly that might be filled with good people who are hostages and bad guys who aren't necessarily in uniform, may look a lot like the hostages, and decide who's who and take out the bad ones. That, to me, has got to be an incredibly difficult task but they seem to do it pretty well.

Amy Herman: It's very interesting that both of those groups have embraced my training wholeheartedly. I'm really honored by that. When I've asked them, when I've pressed them a little bit, why museum training? Why are

## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

we looking at art? And they articulated just the point you made.

They said that when our agents, when our special operations forces, are thrust into a situation that is completely foreign to them and they have to make decisions quickly, we need them to be as articulate and accountable as possible. When I take them into the art museum, they equate that with an equally foreign situation because they're not using art in any other aspect of their training.

It reminds me of one situation. I had a group from the army that goes in on the ground to towns and cities in Afghanistan. I assigned these two officers an abstract sculpture in a museum. They didn't know what to do with it. They didn't know if they could walk around it. They didn't know if alarms would go off.

So when they finally did their presentation, I said, "How did you decided how to approach this sculpture?" They said, "We did what we do in Afghanistan where we don't know where the landmines are, we watch where all the locals walk and we know where it's safe to walk. We did the same thing in the museum. We watched where other visitors went. We knew the alarms wouldn't go off. So we knew it was safe to go behind the sculpture."

Roger Dooley: Interesting. You have a whole section on communication which is kind of surprising because I really anticipated this was going to be all about observation but you say that artists are often better communicators. Why is that?

Amy Herman: I believe communication is actually paramount to observation because in my experience working across

## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

the professional spectrum, I have found that the people that I'm working with and hopefully most of the readers of my book already have good skills in observation and perception. That's not the problem.

The problem is the consistent breakdown of the communication of what it is that we see. Something gets lost from what we see to what we communicate both in writing and in speaking. So I have made effective communication and word choice one of the paramount objectives of my program because I can't emphasize enough that every word counts.

I implore my participants, don't make poor word choices. Don't use ambiguous language. Don't use nebulous language. Speak with clarity, precision, and objectivity, both in writing and in speaking whenever possible.

Roger Dooley: I guess as artists when they're communicating in a visual medium they usually do that with a lot of precision and even if it is not necessarily a totally realistic work of art, there's often a lot of attention to detail.

Amy Herman: Yes. And works of art, I believe that they're the greatest chronicler of our time. So we can look at art at two levels. We have the observational level: What is that you see? What do you perceive? What is missing? I ask my analysts especially to pose three questions that are not answered by their visual analysis.

Then most works of art are charged with underlying meaning. The artist has infused the painting with meaning or intent or a special interpretation. So sometimes we get there with the participants but more often than not, we don't.

## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

I find that works of art, artists are communicating their data in such a rich, evocative way, in color and form and brushstroke and the big picture and the small details that it gives us a really, really, rich source of data, new and fresh data, to use with these participants who haven't looked at art in that context in any other way.

Roger Dooley: So how does looking at paintings of water lilies by Monet save me money?

Amy Herman: I think it saves you money because one of the examples that I give in the book is about someone who's trying to get a client out of a contract. On the face of the contract, the client was bound by the contract. This new vendor couldn't find a way in.

But when the new vendor stepped back and read the contract, not just the fine print, saying, "How can I get this potential client out of his existing contract to contract with me?" He had to look at it from a different perspective and say, "How can I keep that client in that contract and still have them come work with me?"

So when you're looking at Monet's water lilies, the example that I give in my program and in the book is I ask one person to describe a Monet painting to another who can't see it. I ask one person to close their eyes and ask the viewer who is looking at the slide to describe it to their partners. They describe, you know, the Japanese bridge and the foliage and the water and the lily pads and all the things that you see in the painting.

But what 99.9 percent of the participants fail to describe is I have this weird white matting. It's like a white border

## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

on two sides of the slide. And no one ever describes it. In twelve years of using this exercise, six pairs of people have included this white border in their description to their partner. It turns out to be the most telling detail.

Three of the six people have turned out to be United States Special Operations. When I ask them why they included the white border in their description, they said, “Because we’re trained to use all the information that we have.”

So when we’re talking to CEOs and entrepreneurs, I think that learning to look at Monet’s water lilies or a painting like that and including all the details and looking at it from a different perspective can give you another way to reach clients that might not be obvious a) to others and b) from your initial viewing of the situation. Learning to look at paintings from other perspectives I think is readily transferable to financial services and to many different practices.

Roger Dooley: Right. I’m sure that 99 percent of the people viewed those white areas as not relevant or actually as nothing. That there’s nothing there. They have nothing to do with the painting that I’m observing. Before we run out of time, let’s get to pictures of naked women and urinal sculptures.

Amy Herman: Sure. The pictures of naked women that I use at a pivotal point in the presentation, I juxtapose two women. One is Goya’s *Naked Maja* from 1798. A very thin, engaging naked woman on this fancy black chair with satin sheets and pillowcases juxtaposed to a portrait by Lucian Freud of a morbidly obese woman who is asleep on a couch. They are a contrast in form and color.

## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

While they're both naked, white women, with brown hair reclining in opposite directions, one is very thin and one isn't. But getting someone to articulate the difference in their girth is not even the main reason I juxtapose the two images but I tell my participants that someone once observed about these two paintings. They said, "In the bottom picture, the woman is morbidly obese. In the top picture, she's perfectly healthy."

I challenged the observer and I said, "How can you look at a picture of someone and tell me they're perfectly healthy? How do you know they're not schizophrenic? How do you know they don't have a blood disorder? How do you know they're not deaf?" This person apologized and said, "Oh, I can't believe how wrong I was." I make the point that they weren't wrong but that their choice of words was poor.

Again, that there are very few things that are 100 percent in our control, choice of words is one of them. So the portraits of the naked women are really illustrative of the compelling need for us to make good word choices.

Finally, looking at a urinal, something that we've seen over and over again stands for the concept that art is everywhere around us. If we engage the world with sort of a renewed vision and critical inquiry, I think that those are skills that are readily transferable to a host of professional scenarios.

Roger Dooley: Let me remind our listeners that we are speaking with Amy Herman, author of *Visual Intelligence: Sharpen Your Perception, Change Your Life*. Amy, how can our listeners find you and your content online?

[The Brainfluence Podcast](#) with Roger Dooley

## Ep #115: How To Increase Your Visual IQ with Amy Herman

Amy Herman: If they're interested in reading more about the training or finding out more about the book, I can be reached at [www.artfulperception.com](http://www.artfulperception.com). I hope they enjoy reading the book.

Roger Dooley: Great, we'll link to that, the book itself, and any other resources we mentioned in the course of the podcast on the show notes page at [rogerdooley.com/podcast](http://rogerdooley.com/podcast). There will be a text version of our conversation there too. Amy, thanks for being on the show and best of luck with the book, really enjoyed it.

Amy Herman: Thanks so much, Roger. Have a good day.

Thank you for joining me for this episode of the *Brainfluence Podcast*. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to brainy success, please visit us at [RogerDooley.com](http://RogerDooley.com).