

TOUCHING THE ART

A Guide To Enjoying Art at a Museum



By **LUC TRAVERS**

Illustrated by Marianne Epstein

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ISBN: 978-0-615-40191-1

Illustrations and layout by Marianne Epstein

Photos by Elizabeth O'Brien (pp. 30 & 40), Jason Head (pp. 11 & 30),
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To Lee, who set me on my path,

And Lisa, who cleared it for me.

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PREFACE

Perhaps you've picked up this booklet because you have an interest in the visual arts, but you are hoping to get more from your experience with them. Or perhaps your interest in the visual arts is limited, but you wonder if that is because you've never been shown an approach to them that works for you. Either way, this is the booklet for you.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOKLET

This is a “how-to” book. I will be guiding you through a process that will enhance your experience with the visual arts in general, not just with particular artworks. If you recall high school, this is your driver's ed class, not your history class—you're learning a process, not a breadth of information. And like a driver's ed class, **all the techniques you will learn add up to a skill you will be able to use for years to come.**

In each chapter, there will be simple “Exercises” for you to implement and practice the principles and techniques described. I recommend having paper and pen (or a laptop) on hand while you read.

You will also find boxes that give you additional “Tips” to help you better grasp the process, as well as “Museum Activities,” fun ways of applying what you are learning to your museum visit.

WHAT NOT TO EXPECT

As you read through the booklet there are several things you should not expect here that you would from a typical

art appreciation book. There is barely any art historical information. There is no description of Impressionism, or mention of Fauvism or the High Renaissance. There are no dates listed next to the artworks or artists. I don't tell you the artist's name or even the title of the artwork when I show it to you.

This is not a survey of art, nor a reference book that provides you information about specific artworks. In fact there are only four works featured in about sixty pages. Rather, **I will be teaching you a process of experiencing art without reference to anything... except the artwork itself.** The goal of this booklet is to eliminate the need for books when engaging with an artwork.

The process I describe will be more similar to enjoying a movie than to going on a museum tour. So, to help familiarize you with this atypical approach to the visual arts, I will repeatedly compare what we're doing with what you do while watching a movie.

HOW THIS BOOKLET WAS CREATED

I've never been much of an artist, and the first art museum I remember visiting was when I was in my teens. My passion for art only began when I was almost twenty years old. My friend Lee Sandstead, an impassioned art historian, introduced me to the world of great art. The way he responded deeply and personally to art was inspiring to me. Under his influence I developed my own passion for art, and after several stimulating trips abroad to see the great museums of the world, I started studying art

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history. However, I developed my approach only after completing my years of formal education, when I began giving my own tours at museums.

After attending one of my tours, Lisa VanDamme, the director of the school at which I was teaching language arts at the time, asked if I could apply what she experienced on the tour to the classroom. So, for the past four years, I've been teaching art appreciation and literature to junior high and elementary students. Over these four years, I continued to refine my approach through creating curricula for the classroom and leading tours at museums across the country.

The idea for this booklet came in the early spring of 2009. I was spending some time at the Art Institute of Chicago with my friends Keith and Pari Schacht, who had never experienced my approach. After a wonderful afternoon enjoying a few works, Pari suggested that I should write a pamphlet to illustrate my method. And thus the idea was planted.

The project started in earnest when Marianne agreed to illustrate the booklet, and for the past year we've been working on this together.

I would like to acknowledge the help of several people whose participation has been important in the creation of this booklet. Throughout the years of developing my approach Fawaz Al-Matrouk and David and Elizabeth O'Brien have provided their insights and moral support. After I completed my

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first draft, Kyle Steele and Alex Epstein assisted me with the editing. I am grateful to everyone who helped me in the creation of this project, and I hope you find the product of our work personally valuable.

INTRODUCTION



Take a quick look at the painting above. Do you like it? How would you proceed to get the most out of it?

WHAT SHOULD YOU EXPECT FROM ART?

Have you ever wept in front of an artwork? Have you laughed out loud at a discovery you've made in a painting? Have you held the person next to you closely as you start to grasp the meaning of a sculpture? Do you have an artwork that inspires you anytime you call it to mind?

Ever since I was nineteen, I wondered how to say “yes” to these questions—how I could generate the same kind of experience in front of an artwork that I felt while watching a movie or reading a novel. I sort of knew what I liked at first glance. The first time I saw William Bouguereau's *Birth of Venus* is still a vivid memory. The immediate impact of the clear light on the beautiful nude figure struck me when I laid eyes on the painting. And in this limited way—through my immediate reaction—I enjoyed art. But then, after that first impression, I felt like I wanted to do more with the artwork. There was no deeply emotional impact in my immediate reaction of the sort I experienced with my favorite movies and novels. However, I didn't know what to do.

WHAT'S OFFERED

I took art appreciation classes in college and found that two main ways to experience art were taught. In one, your subjective response to the artwork is what matters. The content of the artwork is only relevant as a springboard for discovering personal feelings and associations. Looking at, for example, a swath of bright colors, you are advised to turn within yourself and ask how the

colors make you feel or what they remind you of. The artwork is a sort of Rorschach test, and the experience and meaning of it are different for everyone. In the second approach, what matters is the historical context. Rather than look within yourself, you listen to an experienced tour guide describe what makes an artwork Impressionist rather than Post-Impressionist, or that a statue reflects the Ancient Greek view of the world, or that the artist was going through troubled times when he painted the self-portrait. In the first approach the meaningful experience takes place within you; in the second, the meaningful experience takes place in studying the context of the artwork. Neither approach focuses on the artwork itself.

MY DAVID DISAPPOINTMENT

I opted for the second approach and studied art history in college. Though I learned much, I began to realize that there was still something missing for me. Every time I wanted more than the impact from my first glance, I turned away from the work to open an art history text. My favorite artwork was Michelangelo's *David*. I intensely studied its significance in the history of art, and I read accounts of how the young Michelangelo came up with his idea and labored over its creation. I enjoyed learning all about the philosophical and historical meaning of the work.

Then, I had the chance to see it in person. After an initial feeling of awe at the monumentality of this heroic, muscular nude and at standing in the presence of THE *David*, I tried to continue

experiencing it... and I wasn't sure what to do. I knew all there was to know about the art history. But that wasn't the kind of experience I wanted. I wanted the feeling I had had while watching the movie *Braveheart* or reading the play *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The momentary wonder at the grandeur ebbed quickly, and I was left wanting more and wondering if this was all there was to experiencing what was supposed to be my favorite work of art. I departed feeling frustrated and guilty — like I should have felt more in front of this work than I did — like I'd let myself down.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

Through the next several years I continued studying art history, but kept encountering the same problem that I had with the *David*. I yearned for more and tried to figure out how to find it. It was after I stopped studying art history and started putting together museum tours on my own that I began figuring out a new approach. As I gave these tours and began to teach art appreciation to elementary and junior high students, I developed techniques, principles, and, eventually, an overall approach to enjoying art.

My approach is one that doesn't involve leaving the artwork to read about its historical significance, or leaving it to focus on my subjective response. Rather, it's an approach that directs my attention to knowing and becoming interested in the characters, that helps me experience what is happening, that allows me to understand the meaning of the scene, and that moves me as I grasp how that meaning connects to my life.

Introduction

When I go to an art museum now, I expect that I could weep, that I may laugh, that I'll share meaningful looks with my companions, and that I will leave feeling inspired, energized, and ready to face the world. The *David*, today, means much more to me than it ever did before.

The process I will present to you in this booklet is one I wish I had been taught when I was in school. In the following pages, I will show you a few artworks—artworks that have moved me, and moved my students and those who have attended my tours. As I guide you through the process of experiencing these artworks, I will help you learn how to recreate the method for yourself. Even if you are already passionate about art (like I had been in college), **reading through this guide will enable you to go back to your favorite artworks and see them anew.** As for those of you who have found little enjoyment in art, this guide will provide you with the tools that will motivate you to seek out art you will cherish. There is so much great art to be experienced, or re-experienced, and in the following pages you will learn the keys to unlocking the powerful moments they hold in store.

1. A NEW, FAMILIAR APPROACH

MY YOUNG NIECE

To begin my approach to art, I would like to start with a story—a story about my two year-old niece, Quinn. If I had seen her approach to art ten years ago, I would not have had to try so hard to figure one out!

Last spring, while visiting her in Atlanta, I took her to the zoo. After we spent twenty minutes staring at the pink flamingos, I finally coaxed her to come see the lions with me. Walking along, I suddenly noticed that she wasn't beside me anymore. I looked around to find her staring at two bronze statues. She likes climbing, so she climbed on top of the embankment on which the two statues were perched to get closer to a little girl in bronze. The little bronze girl was sitting down, cross-legged, petting a cat lying in her lap and smiling brightly up at a bronze boy holding out a snake to show her. I watched delightedly as Quinn did something I wasn't expecting: she went over to the girl and gave her a hug. Then, she turned to me, tapped the girl on the head and said, "Quinn." Beckoning me over, she pointed to the older-looking boy and said, "Tonton Luc!" ("Uncle Luc").

It was as if she wanted to play make-believe, just as we had earlier that day using a couple of dolls. After contemplating the statues for a few moments, she sat down in the girl's lap and started petting the cat. I then asked her if she would touch the snake, and she cringed. But she soon built up the courage and

touched it with the tips of her fingers. She did not want to leave her new friends.



Quinn, Age 2

Steeped in years of studying works of art as historical relics, I was amazed at how readily she took for granted that she wasn't encountering artifacts made of bronze. Instead, she saw a little girl she liked, a boy who reminded her of her uncle, and a cat she wanted to pet. Having spent the previous ten years of my life trying to figure out how to get the most fulfilling experience out of the visual arts, I realized that there, in a nutshell—an adorable two-year-old nutshell—was the essence of an approach to art I'd never learned in classes, an approach that I'd been long striving to formulate, yet seemed so natural to her.

Imagine if a tour guide were to show you those same bronze statues. What would be his approach? He might talk about the artist, the influences, the style, or the process of casting bronze.

Missing from the presentation would be the enjoyment of getting to know the characters and the excitement of figuring out and experiencing what is happening—elements of an approach we take for granted when we watch a movie or read a novel. So why isn't this an approach we naturally associate with the visual arts?

MUSEUM MALAISE

The day after I witnessed my niece's interaction with the bronze boy and girl, I went to a museum on my own and observed the perfect foil to her approach to art—one, unfortunately, that many people feel they need to take. A father and son were walking through the galleries, but the son was sulking—he did not want to be at the museum. The father seemed to be dragging the unwilling boy through the exhibits. "We've already been through this section," I heard the boy grumble. The father consulted his map, then sharply informed him that they had not in fact visited that section yet. He ushered the child into the next gallery.

For them, as for many visitors to an art museum, going through the galleries becomes an exhausting "To Do" list. Getting through the museum was more important to this family than actually enjoying it, or even noticing the art—the dad had to consult his map to tell one section from another. For most people, this duty-bound approach to visiting museums results in frustration and boredom. Yet, they still strive to do their cultural duty, and in turn suffer the museum malaise that usually comes along with it.

MOVIE EXPECTATIONS

This feeling of duty, which you're less likely to feel sympathy for as a child, but as an adult you might accept, doesn't seem to come into play when you go to a movie theater. You go to the movies to enjoy yourself, not out of a sense of the need to "educate yourself." And consequently, if you find yourself utterly bored or falling asleep halfway through, no sense of cultural duty will prevent you from suggesting to your companions that you choose something more enjoyable to do.

When you see a movie, you expect to laugh, to cry, to be on the edge of your seat—you expect to be engaged and moved. And if a movie isn't delivering, you turn it off or leave the theater.

This is the kind of expectation I want you to have with the visual arts, with going to a museum. My delighted niece stayed with the bronze girl and boy for about ten minutes. I can't imagine dragging her around a museum.

MAKE-BELIEVE VS. ARTIFACTS

So how does one create this kind of enjoyment I'm asking you to expect? You may first have to change your mindset when approaching artworks—to treat each work not as a curio, but as a reality you are experiencing. In a sense you will have to make-believe, or as adults put it, to **suspend disbelief**. This is actually an approach that you are thoroughly familiar with from your experience watching movies. When you watch a well-made movie, you imagine that the characters are real people. You don't expect the actors to forget their lines and break out of

character, and you don't expect the boom mike to appear at the top of the screen. For those two hours, you believe that these characters and the world they inhabit are real. Their struggles and conflicts are moving because you believe they are going through them.

Suspending disbelief in front of an artwork is something most people don't typically do. The approach most people take with artworks is to treat them as historical artifacts—artifacts that represent a stylistic movement, an artist's state of mind, or the ideas of a culture. If not as a piece of history, then an artwork is looked at for its technique (“Imagine how much time it took to carve that!” “This painting looks like a photo.” “My kid could do that.”). Do you watch a movie thinking primarily about its place in history or its style? No, you watch a movie to be swept away by memorable characters, pulsating dramatic moments, and deeply personal meaning. And the reason those expectations are often met is that you imagine what is happening on screen is really occurring. You suspend disbelief—you make-believe. And you can do the same with paintings and sculptures. The first step is to stop treating the art as a history lesson that will fulfill your cultural obligation and start expecting an experience you will want to lose yourself in.

THE PLAN

I. Previewing

We will begin in a small imaginary gallery where you will “preview” a few artworks and learn how to select what you want to “watch.”

II. Reading

Then, we will learn to figure out what is happening in an artwork by learning how to “read” the scene.

III. Immersing

Going beyond our “reading,” we will learn how to *immerse ourselves* more fully in the reality of the artwork.

IV. Connecting

Afterwards, I’ll show you the importance of *personally connecting* to the situation and characters in the artwork.

V. Planning

Finally, knowing what we want from our art museum experience, we will learn how to plan an enjoyable trip to the museum.

2. PREVIEWING THE ART



ENTERING THE PARTY

As we begin our exploration of art, we will enter into our own little art gallery where we'll see a few artworks—only four. However, since I want to get you out of the mindset of walking into an art museum, think back to a party you have been to. Perhaps you didn't know many of the guests, but as you glanced around they looked interesting and were involved in all the fun things one does at a party. Which people did you want to get to know? What kinds of activities were you interested in doing? As you walked around, you glanced at the guests and formed first impressions. Thoughts you might have had about the guests could have included: "She's beautiful!" "He looks contented." "That's a jolly fellow!" Who looked interesting to you? Whom did you want to meet?

As you walked around, you also noticed the kinds of activities the guests were engaged in. The beautiful woman might have been sensuously dancing the salsa. The contented guy might have been sitting back sipping wine with some friends. The jolly fellow might have been recounting wild stories to a rapt audience. What looked like fun to you? What were you in the mood to do that evening?

THE IMAGINARY PARTY

Now transfer this party mindset over to an art gallery. The range of characters in art is wider, and the activities more diverse: there are battles, lovers' intimate moments, saints consoling, kings conquering, peasants brooding, generals scheming, goddesses pining, etc. But you can think of the people that inhabit these artworks in the same way that you thought of the guests at the party. **Don't view the figures on the canvases as a collection of colored pigment, imagine that they are real people whom you have the opportunity to meet.** Suspend disbelief.

On the next pages are four artworks. But rather than thinking of them as four artworks, imagine them as a small gathering of interesting people. Glance through the pages and make note of your first impressions by trying to come up with a quick description of each artwork. This quick description will allow you to focus on what kind of person is depicted and what kind of activity he or she is involved in rather than the colors or style that catch your eye. It might help to imagine that you are walking through the party with a friend, and you want to quickly

draw their attention to something going on—"Look! What a beautiful dancer!"

EXERCISE

One-liners. *As you glance at each of the artworks in the pages that follow, briefly name what you see—just a simple, descriptive phrase, a one-liner, like "She looks sad." And, like at the party, ask yourself which people you want to get to know better, and which activities you would like to be a spectator to.*

MUSEUM ACTIVITY

The "Newlywed Game." *If I'm with company, I like to play a game—a guessing game for art selections. Try to figure out which artwork your companion found most intriguing. This is a fun way to start to enjoy the art and each other's company. Out of the four in our gallery, which did you enjoy the most? Which one do you think your family or friends would enjoy? (Show them the four artworks here and see if you guessed correctly!)*



Previewing the Art



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Previewing the Art



What are your one-liners?

Which artworks did you find most intriguing?

Here are some one-liners that a few friends came up with:

- i. Alone and Sad
- ii. Strong Man!
- iii. Passionate Kiss
- iv. Arrow Shot

Before developing my approach, at this point I would have looked at the plaque on the wall and moved on, as do many people. But I suggest you don't even look at the title. Often the titles give away too much information and kill the suspense of experiencing the drama first-hand. (Later I'll discuss at what point it's best to check out the title.) For now, we'll use the one-liners above as our "titles." The question we'll answer in the next chapter is the one that I struggled for so many years to figure out. Now that I've had an initial response to the artwork, and I like it, what do I do next? Now that I've been hooked by the preview, how do I start watching the movie?

TIP

Taking a Second Look. *Just as your first impression of someone may change when you get to know him better, so sometimes an artwork that doesn't intrigue you initially may, after you've more fully experienced it, enthrall you.*

3. A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND OF YOUR WORDS

THE NEED FOR WORDS

Now that you are in front of your chosen work of art, what do you do? The natural reaction that most people have after they see an artwork that interests them is to go immediately to the plaque on the wall. They want to know what is going on and what the meaning is of what they're looking at. They want to put words to what they are seeing. And they are right to do so. But **the words have to be yours.**

So far we've used our familiarity with movies to better grasp our approach to art, but at this point it will be helpful to draw a comparison to literature. When you read a novel, you have the words there, in front of you. The words describe the characters and events of the story. Words fill the pages, but there are no images—it is up to you to provide the illustrations yourself. Adding the images in your mind's eye completes the experience of reading the novel. On the other hand, in a work of art, you are provided with the images, but not the words. So, in order to complete the experience of really seeing the images, you need to add the words. **You need to “read” the painting, just as you “see” the description in the novel.**

READING AN ARTWORK

When I introduce a new work of art to my students, the first thing I have them do is pull out a piece of paper and start writing down everything they see in the image. Their pencils are imme-

diately responsive in writing the words to describe what their eyes see. They write down every detail they notice, from a man's furrowed brow to the red of a sunset. All details are relevant. Just as an author has selected all the words in his novel, so an artist has selected all the details in his artwork. All the students' "readings" are, of course, different—just as your mental images of a novel are different from everyone else's.

So, let's do a reading of one of the artworks we looked at in our gallery. Let's look more closely at the one of the Strong Man. Here's my shot at a reading. As you look over what I've written, glance at the artwork to see what I describe.

EXERCISE

Before proceeding, try doing your own reading: take three minutes to write down everything you see in the artwork (page 11).

TIP

Reading with Reckless Abandon. *As you read an artwork, don't look over what you've written—keep the flow of your description going!*

1. No detail is too small. *They're all intended to be there by the artist. He started with a blank canvas and hand-selected everything you see.*

2. Ignore mistakes. *Don't worry about inaccurate observations. That's part of the process of putting the puzzle together. And don't worry about grammar and spelling—the process is important, not the final product. I will not be grading you on your readings!*

TIP

Online Images. For high quality online versions of the images discussed in this book, visit <http://www.luctravers.com> and click on the sidebar link, Touching The Art: Art. When prompted, enter the password “art.” Because these artworks will be discussed throughout the booklet, you may find it helpful to access the images to view side by side with the text as you read.

A long, strong bicep and a firm step forward. He carries a child in rags like a bag of groceries, but he has gray hair—he’s old... but he’s strong! His cloak, which contrasts to the child’s disheveled robes, flows behind him like Superman’s cape, and his green tunic’s folds are crisp. What a leg! It makes that walking stick look puny. Is it a walking stick? His eyes are closed... is he blind? He looks straight ahead. He strides straight ahead... out in the middle of nowhere, and it’s about to get dark. He looks very serious... like nothing bothers him. Why is the child collapsing on the strong man’s shoulder? Is that a girl or boy? Maybe a boy... his son? The boy looks pale, his mouth parted helplessly. He’s unconscious... maybe dead! What’s that around the boy’s leg? Rope? A snake! He’s been bitten? So, the boy was bitten by the snake. The man, the blind, strong man, carries him, unaware of the snake.



After you've finished your reading, summarize what you've discovered about the characters and moment depicted:

- i. **Who are the characters?** *A strong, blind, old man who strides forward with determination. An incapacitated young boy.*
- ii. **What's happening?** *The blind man carries the boy after he was bitten by a snake.*

TIP

“Shuttling”: The Key to Starting and Continuing a Reading.

Often, it can be difficult to start describing an image. It's so much easier to go to the plaque and read the description. So, here are a couple of ways to get you started and to keep the reading going (we'll keep using the Strong Man as our example).

From details to generalizations. *Start by describing the simplest details you see. For example: curly white hair; large bicep. And to continue from there, ask yourself what you can infer about the details. Curly white hair... he's old. Large bicep... he's rather strong for an old man. Or ask yourself a question raised by the detail: closed eyes... is he blind? The details should lead to generalizations.*

From generalizations to details. *Another way to start is simply to blurt out your general impressions about the scene and characters. For example: He's determined. And to keep going with the reading, ask yourself what details give rise to that impression. His mouth is closed tight without a smile. His chin is lifted. He strides forward. Your general impressions should be seen in the details.*

*To summarize both approaches: you are **shuttling** back and forth between details and generalizations.*

PUTTING TOGETHER THE STORY

A “reading” is your process of describing an artwork in order to fit together the details you see into a “story.”

When you start a novel, you are not familiar with any of the characters, and you don’t know what will happen to them. Over the course of the story, you get to know them—you learn more and more about their personalities, their values, and their lives. And you see them act in dramatic conflicts. Over the course of the novel you follow the author’s description of characters and events in a sequence he has chosen, in a plot.

In a work of art, you also learn about the characters and see what is happening to them. One main difference in the process is that you are the “author” of the story. All the details of the artwork are contained in this one frozen image, and you have to notice them to fit them into a coherent story. You discover the characters’ traits and secrets, you figure out who the protagonists and antagonists are, you experience suspense as you try to grasp what’s going on, you come across twists and surprises, and you come to a conclusion about what is happening. Or, to introduce another analogy, **think of reading an artwork as putting together a puzzle.** The pieces of the puzzle you begin with and the order in which you put them together is up to you, but the outcome is a clear story.

Rather than reading the artwork on your own, wouldn’t it be easier simply to read a description of an artwork by someone else, especially if that person’s writing is more eloquent? The

answer is that there is no substitute for discovering the story on your own. Would you rather watch the movie yourself or have someone tell you a synopsis? No matter how good of a storyteller that writer is, the first-hand experience of figuring out who the characters are and what moment is being depicted is essential to a personal enjoyment of the artwork.

Let's read another artwork. This time, as you read, keep the following points in mind:

- i. Who are the characters?
- ii. What's happening?
- iii. Keep the flow going by shuttling.
- iv. Read with reckless abandon!

MUSEUM ACTIVITY

Group Readings. *Reading an artwork aloud with others can be a lot of fun! As you describe what you see, you build on each other's observations and piece together the story. Or, you can each write down a description of the artwork and read it to each other. Listen for observations you didn't notice or descriptions that were eloquently phrased.*

EXERCISE

*Try another reading: this time of the painting of the *Passionate Kiss* (page 12).*



A young man reaches up to kiss a very pale young woman standing on a pedestal. He looks strong and handsome, but I can't see his face—he's enveloped in the kiss. She twists her torso towards him, grasps his hand and brings his neck closer to her. He reaches around her waist raising himself on tiptoes—he's into it... just as she is. His body arches up towards her, and the drapery of his tunic flows behind as if he's just made a sudden movement. Her legs are whiter than her torso and her feet sink into a round marble pedestal. She looks like she is a statue, or half of her is still a statue. Is she coming to life? On the ground is a discarded hammer with marble chips littering the floor, as if he'd just been working... on her. In the background is Cupid firing an arrow. He seems to be a little late—they're already in love.

Did you notice that the statue was coming to life? Did you see that he'd been working on her and that his reaction in kissing her was sudden? How would you summarize what's happening?

Putting words to what you are seeing is fundamental to experiencing an artwork—to figuring out the story. However, reading a work of art is only the first step to fully experiencing the world within it—there is more in an artwork than what you simply see. The next step we'll take is to learn to immerse ourselves into that world.

4. STEPPING INTO THE PICTURE FRAME



BEYOND DESCRIPTION

Having just read the artwork, we begin to understand what is happening within it. However, really experiencing what is going on involves more than just description. Imagine describing to your friend on the phone the fun you're having at the beach. No matter how vivid your word picture is, you are the one with the sun's warmth on your skin, the soft sand beneath your feet, the laughter of children playing in your ear, and the relaxation in your body as you lie on your towel.

To really get into a work of art, you put the phone down, go beyond the description, and start experiencing what's happening in front of you—the setting, the characters, and the action. Even

if you sent your friend a photo on your smart-phone, what he gets to see is only one element of the total sensory experience.

Let's again compare art to literature. When you read a novel, not only do you visualize for yourself the characters and their actions, but you also imagine other sensory details. If the rattle of gunfire is described during a battle scene, you might "hear" it. If a storm is blowing rain and wind into a character's face, you might "feel" it yourself. Or, if a character's emotions of romantic love are described, they may evoke similar feelings from your own experience. This kind of immersing yourself into the description of the characters and scenes can and ought to be done with art. When my niece was petting the cat, she was imagining the soft fur. When she saw the snake, she hesitated to touch it. The associations she made to real animals were so powerful that the pieces of bronze came to life for her. This capacity to experience the reality in an artwork is something we can cultivate for ourselves, and it will enhance our enjoyment of what we were simply seeing and describing. In the previous chapter, we learned how to read the art. In this chapter, we'll go over how to experience the reality the artwork suggests—how to experience an artwork as more than a "photo" of reality.

THE OTHER FOUR SENSES

"I can feel the breeze!" "I can smell the perfume of the roses." When I used to hear people describe the realism of an artwork in terms of actual sensations, I was skeptical. "I don't smell the roses," I would think to myself. But now I realize it isn't from the artwork that you feel the breeze or hear the rustling of the

trees. It's from your own experience... applied to what you are reading in the artwork.

Let's take a look at the painting of the sad young woman on the rocks (page 10). I'll first do a reading. As you read along, look for ways in which I try to make the experience more realistic.

EXERCISE

Read Alone and Sad yourself before reading my example. Applying your words first will make reading the words of others much more impactful.



A beautiful young woman sits amid a dark, rocky landscape, surrounded by the sea. A dim orange light is fading over crags in the distance. A hint of lighter clouds is being consumed by scraps of dark, menacing ones. The daylight is dimming—it's hard to see anything on the gloomy horizon. It doesn't look like a nice night to be at the beach. Why is she there? The sea is agitated. It isn't tempestuous, but it's not calm. I can hear the waves splashing on the rocks and churning in little white crests farther out. I can feel the wind blowing—her hair is being tousled by a gust, and her shawl is too. The humming of the wind, the sloshing of the waves,

and no other sounds—no seabirds, no ships, no distant towns. She is at the very tip of the island among barren rocks... alone. And mingled with the sound of the wind and waves is the sound of her weeping.

The sounds and sensations of the setting are, of course, not directly accessible to us, the viewers, but they are implied by the images. **To get the most out of experiencing the reality depicted, we need not simply to look and describe, but also to follow through on the details' implications for our other senses.** Flowing hair means the sensation of wind on our faces. The sea's waves aren't just an image of a turbulent seascape, but an "image" of the sound of sloshing and the smell of salt spray. The rocks don't just look hard and uncomfortable, they feel hard and uncomfortable to sit on. The description implies the sensation.

EXERCISE

What do you "hear" and "sense" in the painting of the Strong Man? (See page 11.)





GETTING TO KNOW THE CHARACTERS

Characters in movies are dynamic entities you get to know from more than just their appearance. You see their actions and their gestures; you hear how they talk; you sometimes hear them think. But in a sculpture or painting, characters appear stiff, silent, and unthinking.

They don't have to be. Just as you draw from your reading to recreate the setting, so too you draw from your description of the characters to see them, hear them, and sense what they feel.

I. "Strike a pose!"

When we see a character in an artwork looking sad, content, or thoughtful, we can identify those expressions because we know what they look like. We know that someone looks thoughtful because his brow is furrowed, his chin is resting on the hand and he looks down. Furthermore, we can identify with his state of mind because we know how we would feel if we were in

that pose. So, to “feel” more fully for yourself what a character’s state of mind is, recreate the pose you see. If you put yourself in *The Thinker’s* pose, you’ll feel that you are “ready” to ponder.

Let’s take a closer look at the statue of the Arrow Shot (page 13). I’ll start with a brief reading, and then we’ll consider other ways we can understand the characters more fully.

EXERCISE

Read the sculpture yourself, focusing on the characters’ poses and expressions.

A young boy is shooting an arrow while an old man looks on. The boy leans back, staring up at the sky. His mouth is parted and his eyes are wide in anticipation. The old man sits, craning his neck and squinting in the distance. He’s looking very carefully, eyes tight and scrutinizing. It looks as if they are both following the arrow’s flight into the sky. The boy has stretched his arm upwards, holding the pose of his shooting, while his torso is bent back, and his fingers have just released the bow’s string. He is keeping the pose after having shot the arrow—much like a basketball player holds his shooting hand out while staring at the ball he’s just shot flying towards the basket. The boy looks excitedly expectant!



As I describe what this boy may be experiencing, **I can experience more of what he's feeling by mimicking his pose.** Try stretching your arm upward, and arching your torso back. Widen your eyes, part your mouth. Your body's positioning will elicit in you some of the emotion you would feel if your body was automatically responding to the actual emotion. Anticipation? Yes—widen your eyes and part your mouth with a slight smile. Hold your stretched body still, poised with expectation, unable to move until you see your accomplishment through.

Now take the role of the old man. Sit casually, but lean forward, stretch your neck upward, tighten your mouth and squint your eyes. You should start feeling some of the questioning, curiosity, and scrutiny that corresponds to that facial expression and pose of the body.



MUSEUM ACTIVITY

Puppet Master. *Have one of your bold friends attempt to take the pose of the character themselves. Help them out by describing what they need to do to imitate the sculpture more accurately. Avoid saying “Do it like this,” and showing them—describe what they should do!*

II. “What is he saying?”

Unlike characters in movies, characters in artworks obviously don't speak. However, the characters you observe don't have to be silent. Rather, to get to know them better, provide them with dialogue. Think of the paintings on the walls of Hogwarts, Harry Potter's school of magic. The characters of the paintings come to life and interact with the passing students, their personalities fitting with their appearance in the frame. As you start describing to yourself the characters in a work—their physical appearance, their clothing, their expressions—pay attention to the implications the traits you describe have for animating the characters: imagine what they could be thinking at the moment shown, or what they might say if they could speak.

Let's go back to the Arrow Shot. The boy, with his look of eager anticipation, might be thinking something like, “It looks like it's going to get there!” The old man, with his benign scrutiny, might be thinking: “Nice shot... will it be good enough...? Let's make sure.”

My niece's reaction to the smiling girl was to think of her as a friend, so she went up to hug her. She was imagining the friendly personality that resonated from the girl and responded to it. Having the characters “speak” is one way of having their personalities resonate with us.

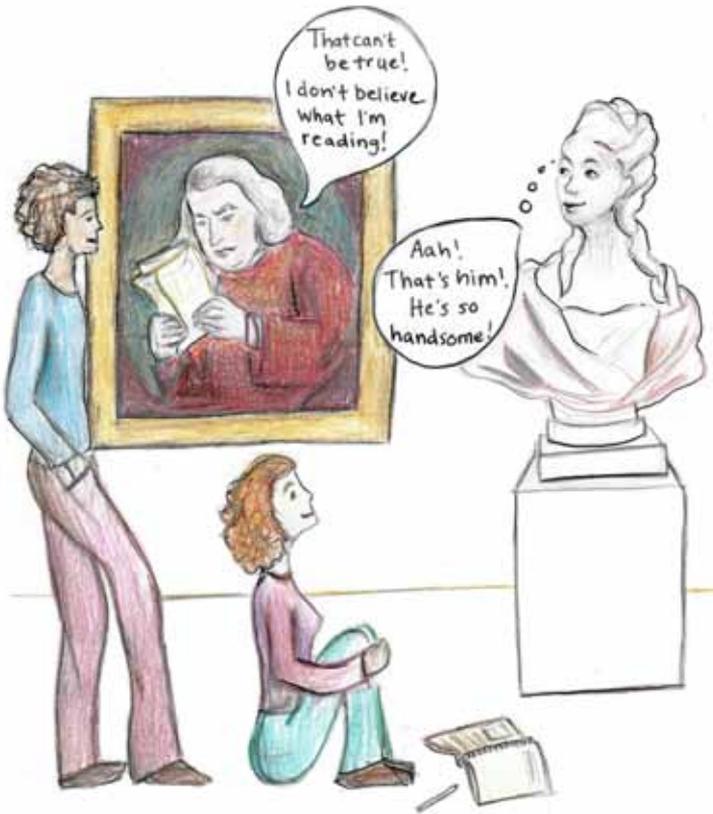


EXERCISE

Go back to the other works of art and describe what each character might be thinking or saying.

MUSEUM ACTIVITY

As you walk by various characters, imagine what the “people” you pass might be thinking or saying—a fun way to exercise your observational skills and wit. This is also a fun way to preview artworks.





REWIND AND PLAY– IMAGINING THE ACTION

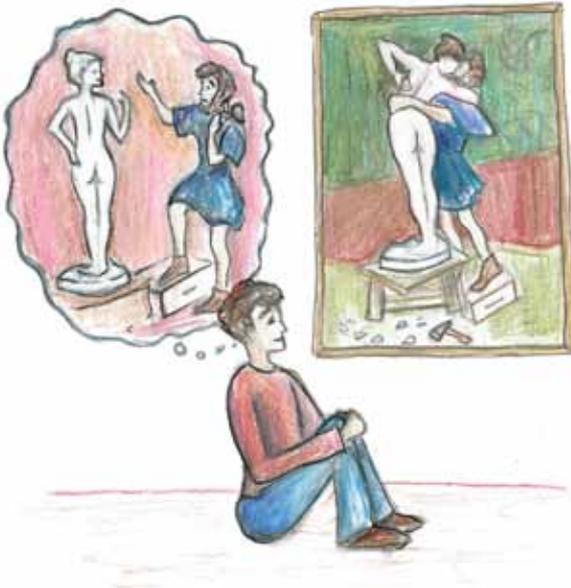
Do you recognize the scene above? If you've seen *The Sound of Music*, you'll recognize Maria, the would-be nun, dancing and singing in the Austrian Alps. What we have here is our version of a scene from a movie. If we were to push "play" on our remote, Maria would come to life, twirling and singing in the hills.

Think of an artwork as a paused movie. Right before and right after the frozen moment in an artwork, there is implied action. What was happening right before? What's going to happen next? **The particular moment is not frozen in a vacuum, and part of experiencing the artwork is imagining what has happened and what will happen.**

When you come before a work of art, imagine you have a remote control. With this power, you can take what may seem to

be a static image and “see” the movement and energy implied in the scene. Let’s look more closely at the painting of the Passionate Kiss (page 12). You may want to look over your reading.

To enliven the action, let’s take our remote control and push the “rewind” button. What was happening a few minutes before the moment captured here? He was sculpting her. That discarded chisel was in his hands. And she would have been completely made of marble. Her body would have been more erect, facing away from him. Suddenly she comes to life. Her marble body becomes rosy, soft flesh, and her hair starts to turn to dark brown. As it dawns on the sculptor that she’s alive, he suddenly flings himself into an embrace with her. In one swift motion he drops his hammer, reaches up his arms to hold her close, and kisses her.



We can also imagine what comes afterwards. She progressively becomes fully human and turns her whole body towards him as their embrace becomes more passionate.

As you read an artwork, pick up on the details that suggest action, and use those to **imagine for yourself a “movie-clip” of the scene. The artwork won’t seem so static.**

In Chapter Two we read the artwork and observed it from the outside, and now we’ve opened the window and stepped into the world within the frame. We’ve felt the breeze and smelled the salty air. We’ve heard characters speak, and felt for ourselves the expressiveness of their bodies. We’ve brought a scene to life to see what happened just before and what will happen next. And all of this was implicit in the artwork. We drew on the details of the art and our own imaginations to immerse ourselves within its world and relish that alternate reality.

EXERCISE

Go back to the Arrow Shot (page 13) and re-imagine the moments just prior to and just after the moment depicted there. Be sure to base your movie-clip on the details from your description.

REVIEW

We started by learning to treat artworks as if we were seeing real human beings and activities, not historical artifacts. Then, we saw that the fundamental way of grasping what is happening is not simply to look, but to combine looking with describing—

Stepping into the Picture Frame

to read. And, as we began to understand what we were seeing, we began to understand what else that reality had in store for us: the stimulation of our other senses and the animation of the characters and events. But, we have not yet gotten to the crucial part of enjoying an artwork, the part where you will immerse yourself even more deeply, where you will grasp the meaning of what you are reading and experiencing for yourself, where you will root for characters, identify with their circumstances, and feel for them as if they were you yourself. It's time to connect personally to the artworks.

5. A PERSONAL TOUCH

YOUR FAVORITE MOVIES

The best artworks, like the best movies, will make you feel like you're experiencing the reality in which they involve you. However, for any art form (movies, literature, music, paintings) to be truly moving, you must find the meaning it has to you. You may be amazed by the special effects of the latest blockbuster movie, but it might be a much less dazzling spectacle that you watch over and over again at home. **A movie you love is one you feel a personal bond with, one that speaks to you. That kind of personal connection is essential to fully enjoying any art form, including the visual arts.** Sometimes, the connection an artwork has to you is clear, but often—especially when you are dealing with subject matter that seems historically remote or too grand for “normal” life—it seems pointless to try to identify with the artwork. And even if you try, what do you have in common with a blind man carrying a snake-bitten boy, Indians shooting arrows, a naked girl crying by the sea, or a statue coming to life? If you want to be deeply moved by an artwork, you must know how to find that commonality.

A CHARACTER'S SITUATION: LEARNING TO EMPATHIZE

The best way to experience more deeply what is happening to the characters is to empathize with them—to identify with them by calling to mind a similar kind of situation from your own life.

If a good friend of yours is describing to you some personal struggles, you can listen to what she says and be able to comment on it. And, you may be able to describe to someone else what you've been told. However, it is only when you empathize that you can "feel for her" and tell her, "I know what you are going through." Through the effort of empathizing, the emotions, thoughts, and events you experienced in a similar circumstance will come back to you. And not only will you more clearly understand your friend's story, but you will also care more deeply.

The same can be done with characters in works of art. When you are able not simply to describe what the character is going through, but to think of a specific similar situation from your past, you will then have an explicit stake in the circumstances the character is experiencing. You will care more deeply for how he responds to his situation because he is responding to the same kind of situation you were in.

Let's turn to the painting of the Strong Man to see if we can empathize with his situation. He's alone, in the middle of a darkening countryside, blind, and his guide has just suffered an accident. This specific scenario has never happened to me, and it most likely isn't something that has happened to you. However, we're looking for a similar *kind* of moment. Look at what's happening to the blind man, and start describing his situation more generally. He's alone, handicapped, and his only potential help isn't available. What would be an analogous situation in your own life?

If nothing comes immediately to mind, it helps to imagine other kinds of moments that would fit with your generalized description of the situation. Maybe your car's broken down on a deserted country road. You've just heard from your boss that you've lost your job, and you fear you won't be able to provide for your family. Or, you've just heard from your doctor the diagnosis for a severe illness, and he doesn't think he can help. In all these situations, or similar ones, the event that brought about the difficulty has already occurred, and no help is at hand. The situation depicted in the painting is the aftermath of a harmful incident in which you're alone to act. The more precisely you can relate to the kind of moment embodied in the artwork, and empathize with the character, the more you will care about the "outcome" of the story—about that character's reaction to his situation—and the more you will respond to the artwork personally.

EXERCISE

Empathizing. *Now that you know what kind of situation the Strong Man finds himself in, try to think of a similar kind of situation from your own life.*

To illustrate my point, let me provide a situation from my life that I connect to the Strong Man. See if you can pick up on how they are similar. Last summer, I took a group of students to Paris. On a Sunday morning we ventured to the outskirts of the city to find the one open car rental agency at which I was able to reserve a mini-van to drive to Normandy. We exited the

subway and walked a good distance to the address. When we arrived, we found that there was in fact no car rental agency, only barren streets of closed businesses. Besides a note on a door saying that the office had recently been moved to another location, all that was left were a couple of garbage bins with “Europcar” labels. I called the phone number on the note, but there was no answer. We were stranded. There was seemingly nowhere to turn for help, and I was with a group of students who were becoming tired and agitated. It didn’t look like we’d be going to Normandy.



Our photo of the bleak situation

I recalled this moment while reflecting on the situation in the painting of the Strong Man, and the feelings of helplessness and frustration I experienced on that Sunday morning in Paris swept back over me. And though I’ve known this painting for several years, I started reacting to it more powerfully. I know now how I would feel if I was blind, and my guide was bitten by a snake, and there was no one around to help. My experience melded

with the situation in the painting, and I suddenly felt the urge to rediscover how the blind man was responding to his situation and how he'd respond to mine.

We took three steps to connect to the characters' situations:

- i. Specific:** Name the specific situation the main character is in.
- ii. General:** Describe that situation in general terms.
- iii. Personal:** Recollect a similar kind of situation from your life.

Sometimes these steps can be interchangeable. You may recall a personal connection that fits before you formulate the general situation.

WHEN BACKGROUND BECOMES HELPFUL

Let's practice figuring out the situation of another one of our works of art. Take a look at the Arrow Shot again (page 13). Let's start by continuing our reading to figure out the situation.

The old man and the boy are engaged in an activity together, but it looks more like the boy is the active one, while the man sits cross-legged and is an avid spectator. So, this isn't so much a grandfather and a son off fishing together, but maybe the grandpa teaching the son to fish, and there's something now on the boy's line. The severity of the old man's expression and his intense scrutiny of the arrow's flight suggest that he is not simply enjoying the spectacle—he's not excitedly encouraging the boy—perhaps he's evaluating him. Is this some kind of a lesson? Is this a test? A test in shooting an arrow?

When the situation isn't quite clear from the artwork, and it seems some background information might be helpful, then, yes, go to the plaque.

TIP

Google it! *Often a plaque will present mostly art historical information and little or nothing about the content of the scene itself. Bring your smart-phone to the museum, and Google the title of the artwork. You are much more likely to find helpful information on the web.*

The title of this sculpture is *The Sun Vow*. The characters are not named to any story-source, but the situation is still one that is difficult to understand without some additional context. They are engaged in a Sioux Indian rite of passage. Sioux boys were trained from a young age to become warriors—to become men. The final test of their coming of age involved shooting an arrow. They had to show the chief that they could fire an arrow into the sun so far that the chief would lose sight of it in the sun's light. Once that was accomplished, the young boy was considered a warrior and a man.

Because there isn't one clear main character in this situation, you could put yourself in either the boy's or the chief's shoes (or moccasins). Try to recall similar moments from your life. Taking the boy's perspective, did your dad ever show you how to swing a baseball bat and then look on as you swung for the fences? Maybe your parents taught you to drive, and you practiced and practiced your parallel parking. On the day of the driver's test,

you did what you'd worked on for so long while your parents looked on. Or, take chief's perspective. Have you ever tutored a child and noticed her start to figure out how to complete a challenging math assignment as you looked on to make sure she was doing it right?

The situation in the sculpture involves a mentor and a pupil. However, they aren't in the middle of teaching. The pupil is showing off what he's learned while the mentor scrutinizes. Whichever role you connect to, pupil or mentor, the situation—a pupil being tested by his mentor—is one you can recall from your life.



MUSEUM ACTIVITY

Coffee and Brownies. *Often it is difficult to come up with real life connections on the spot. I often discover personal relevance while sipping coffee and munching on a brownie in the museum café. Talking about the artworks with a friend allows you not only to explore the artworks' meaning to you, but also to bond with your companion. Discussing the artworks doesn't have to be academically dry. It can be an opportunity to become closer with the people in your life.*



EXERCISE

Figure Out the Situation. *Now, on your own, try to figure out the situation of Alone and Sad (page 10). What's just happened to her? Why is she staring out to sea?*

*The title of the painting is Calypso. Google her name and read about this goddess. What part of her story could this be? Try to be as precise as possible. Then ask yourself what the general situation is that she's in.** Can you relate to it?*

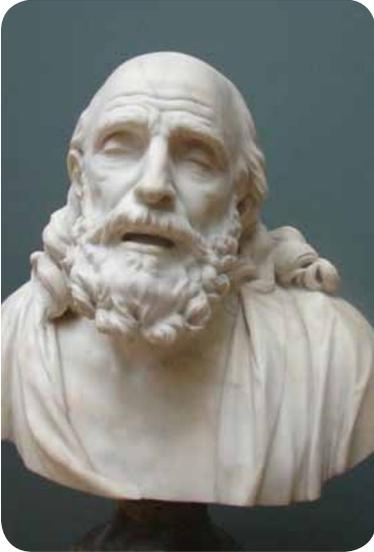
*(**Recent departure of a loved one.)*

Though background information is helpful in some cases for understanding the situation, always begin by drawing on your own life experience to understand what is happening. When my niece saw the sculpture of the girl and boy, she thought of herself and of me. Earlier that day, we'd been playing a game together. I would hand her a doll and say, "Here you go," and she would say "Thank you." Then we'd reverse roles. We played like this for a while, and she never tired of it. The girl in the statue looked older than she, and the boy, well, much younger than I. But the boy was extending the snake to the girl, as if he were saying, "Here you go." When my niece pointed to the girl and called her "Quinn," and then pointed to the boy and called him, "Tonton Luc," I realized that she could be thinking of what we were doing that morning. In our terms, she was connecting the situation in the sculpture with her own life.

CHARACTER REACTIONS

In any situation, there are several ways one can react. So far, we've experienced most of the "story": the setting, the characters, the situation. But we haven't yet integrated how the character reacts to his situation. There is a wide range of possible responses a person can have to any given circumstance. Identifying the specific reaction the main character has to his situation completes the story of the artwork. Though we've already seen the expressions of the characters in our readings, we're going to look back at them with new understanding—your deeply personal understanding. Let's go back to the Strong Man. What are the possible reactions you can imagine

to his situation? Frustration? Anger? Despair? It's clear from the painting that in the aftermath of the difficulties the strong man is undergoing, he strides forward, head unbowed—determined. To understand a character's reactions more clearly, it can be helpful to see a contrasting reaction to a similar situation.



EXERCISE

Take a look at the character in the statue and do a reading.

His forehead is bald with prominent wrinkles lining his brow. His deep-set eyes with closed lids suggest that he is blind. His head looks as if it might topple forward and his lower jaw drops lifelessly. He is dressed in haphazardly falling drapes that cover a sunken chest. He looks as if he might be saying, “Aaaah...I’ve

suffered so much, I don't care—let me expire here and now.” He looks as though he'd collapse if he were to step forward.

If you study this Despairing Man (as we'll now call this sculpture), the reaction of the Strong Man becomes clear. In fact, the Despairing Man is in the same kind of situation. The title of both the sculpture and the painting is *Belisarius*. If you Googled his name, you would discover the fascinating story of this Byzantine general— a supremely successful general who helped the Emperor Justinian II conquer most of the Mediterranean. However, his success spawned jealousy, and his enemies falsely accused him of treason. Found guilty, he was stripped of his post and wealth, and was blinded. All he was granted was a young guide to help him beg his bread. In the scene depicted in the painting, we see that he is blind and alone, and his guide has been incapacitated. Yet, despite all this, we can see also his strength and will. He is not broken.

Though both works are derived from the same literary source, and the characters find themselves in similar situations, the meaning of the sculpture is the complete opposite as that of the painting. Both characters have suffered greatly. But, while the sculpture expresses surrender in the face of difficulties, the painting shows perseverance. Though both characters are named *Belisarius*, their attitudes toward life's struggles are completely different.

How have you reacted in similar situations? Which *Belisarius* have you been? Which would you want to be? In the barren

streets of the outskirts of Paris, I felt like the sculpture. But, I remembered the painting. I could not have asked for a more powerful jolt of inspiration.



EXERCISE

Pygmalion and Galatea. Now, on your own, try to figure out the situation in the painting of the *Passionate Kiss*. The sculptor's beautiful statue, his labor of love, has just come to life. Google the title, Pygmalion and Galatea. What moment of the story is this? What's the situation? ** Can you recall those similar moments in your life?

Now, take a look at this other painting of the same situation. How do the sculptors react differently? Which reaction did you take? Which would you want to take?

(**The unexpected achievement of a goal you've worked hard for.)



A TALISMAN TO TAKE WITH YOU

Let's look for the main characters' reactions in the other artworks. The sculptor's response to seeing his ideal actualized is immediate consummation of his deeply held desire. The woman's state of mind after seeing her lover leave her is a lasting sadness that roots her to the spot she saw him leave from. The boy's attitude as he awaits the result of his examination is excited, optimistic anticipation. **The character's reaction in a particular situation is the essence of what the visual arts depict.** This is what makes up the deeper meaning and what you can take away as the theme.

After this point in the process, the work of art can become a sort of talisman for you—an image upon whose recollection you will call back to mind all the meaning and power you've spiritually invested in it. When I remembered the painting of Belisarius in Paris, I suddenly felt a surge of determination to push forward. I was going to act like him, not like that other of the same name in the sculpture. Later that day we visited Normandy's D-Day beaches, ate mussels in a village café, and spent the night in an 18th century farmhouse.

PERSONAL CONNECTION

We have looked at two ways to connect an artwork to ourselves. The first is by empathizing with the situation. Doing so forges a stronger bond between you and the character, and gets you excited to complete the story by seeing the character's reaction anew. The second is by grasping and evaluating the char-

acter's reaction to his situation. After understanding the theme of the artwork, it then has the power to become a metaphor for important moments in your life—both those that you have experienced and those that you will experience. Furthermore, the work of art becomes a special talisman that harnesses the emotional power you've attached to it, and brings it all back with just a glance from you.

The characters and situations that you experience in artworks should be seen as reflections of yourself and moments in your life. When you connect the artwork to your memories, your aspirations, your self, then you will laugh, you will weep, you will feel inspired by art. Your new friends will be there with you whenever you need them.

6. PLANNING YOUR MUSEUM VISIT

Recall the boy being dragged through the museum by his father who wanted to see all possible sections on the museum map in order to complete the “To Do” list. Now that we have a clearer idea of what we want to experience in front of a work of art, we can derive an approach for visiting an art museum that will help maximize that experience and not leave us tired, frustrated, and suffering from museum malaise.

ENTERING A MUSEUM THROUGH THE BACK DOOR

To begin our understanding of how to approach art, I asked you to imagine yourself inside a gallery with only four artworks. But a museum is vast and filled with hundreds, and usually thousands, of pieces. Museum curators are proud of their vast collections from all periods and all cultures. A museum is organized in such a way that steers you in a certain direction, ensuring that you get the full history of art, from Ancient Egyptian to Modern American. You are encouraged to visit the whole of the museum at once. Add to that the fact that comfortable walking shoes are needed to hike through a medium-sized museum, and it’s no wonder museums can seem intimidating and tiring. So, how do you take on a museum? The task seems quite daunting!

First, let’s clarify our primary purpose in going to an art museum by describing what we’re not there for. We’re not there for a lesson in art history, even if the museum layout suggests that

we should be. Taking an art historical tour before engaging the works on a personal level would be analogous to having a tour guide with you at the movie theater filling you in on the style of the director or the film's reflection of cultural trends... all while you're watching the movie! **You watch the DVD extras after you experience the movie.** We're interested in watching the movie first, so we ignore the museum-suggested history lesson layout.

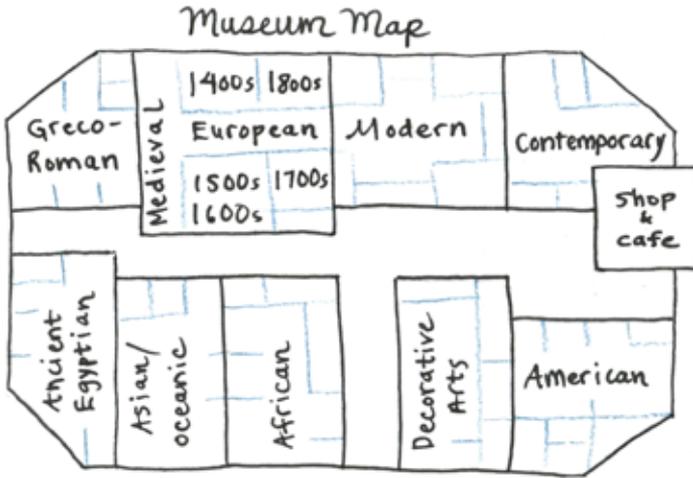
Nor are we visiting the museum, per se. Tourists treat the Louvre, the Met, the Uffizi, the Prado, as destinations in themselves. However, we're not going to the movies to visit the movie theater complex. You don't feel guilty if you don't go into all 20 theaters at the movie multiplex, nor should you feel guilty if you see one twentieth of an art museum.

A VIDEO-STORE APPROACH

Our goal is to come away with a couple of powerful and personal esthetic experiences. So what's the approach to take? **You want to treat the museum like a video store.** You certainly don't watch every movie in the video store, nor do you read all the cover boxes, and you don't plan a weekend holiday to visit Blockbuster Video. You go in with a mindset to be selective. You're there to find and pick up a movie or two to take home with you and enjoy there. (Note: I don't literally suggest you "take home" the artworks. The difficulties you would encounter would not be conducive to an enjoyable esthetic experience!) However, even with the mindset of being selective, a museum is still a rather big video store.

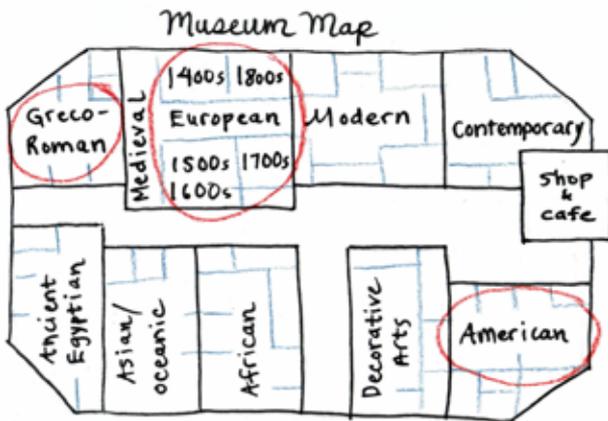
THE MUSEUM MAP: YOUR TOOL FOR RE-CURATING

Before setting out to find art you will personally respond to, you need to know where to look and where not to look. The first criterion of selection is to find art in front of which you'll be able to suspend disbelief. That means art that portrays reality accurately—accurately enough for you to imagine it as real. On this basis alone, much of the collection of the museum will be eliminated from consideration.



The map above is not of any particular museum but represents a typical layout for most art museums. You should be able to find most of these sections in any art museum. Start by “x”-ing out the “decorative arts.” Furniture, silverware, and interior designs have their own merits, but these creations are primarily objects you use every day—they do not embody another reality for you to contemplate. Primitive art, art that imitates reality through simplified and geometric forms, such as African masks, Bud-

dhist figurines, Egyptian wall paintings, etc., doesn't make the cut. They are fascinating to study art historically, but for our purposes, the more detailed the reality is we're looking at, the easier it is to suspend disbelief. Modern abstract art, which can take various forms ranging from solid blocks of color to rows of soup cans, can be saved for another type of museum visit. There are many other works to engage with that offer the kind of personally meaningful experience we've discussed here, and we should seek those out first. If you know that on a given night you don't want to rent a documentary or horror movie, you don't linger in those sections of the video store.



So, looking at the museum map, I cross out those sections, and, with a sense of relief, notice that the museum has shrunk substantially. What's left is Ancient Greek and Roman art, Renaissance through the 19th century in Europe, and 18th and 19th century American. These are the periods of art history in which the viewer was intended to suspend disbelief and imagine that

what he was witnessing was truly happening. These works of art were the movies of their time.

TIP

Portraits and Landscapes.

A **portrait** is the depiction of a character as he typically is. You are not seeing him react to any situation, you are seeing the qualities and traits that are characteristic of the person himself. Along with reading, use the techniques of “Striking a Pose,” and having him “speak,” to enjoy portraits. And of course, connect to them personally. Do you like this person? Does he remind you of anyone you know?



A **landscape** is a scene in which the setting dominates the characters. Often, there are no characters at all. The emotional sum of a landscape is its mood. Immerse yourself into the scene by “hearing” and “sensing” what you describe. Connect to it personally by thinking of experiences you’ve had in similar settings. It’s also enjoyable to think of what you would want to do if you were in the scene.



WHAT ARE YOU IN THE MOOD FOR?

Even after you’ve reduced the area that you might cover, you have so much of the museum left! How do you decide what to go see first? Think of how you decide what movie you want to see. You might ask yourself what you’re in the mood for: Romantic comedy? Action? Drama?

In my ideal art museum, sections would be divided in this way, like a video store, rather than art historically. However, the art historical layout does lend itself to a certain amount of categorization by “genre.” **Different art historical periods often encompass a particular “mood” of art.** For example, if you’re looking for romantic-comedy, go to the Rococo section of the museum (18th century European). Or if you want intense action and melodrama, find the Baroque section (16th & 17th centuries). In a way, you can view the art historical groupings as the different sections of a video store. Take a look at the Tip box on the next page for more re-categorizing.

The section I go to first, above any other, is the early 19th century. 19th century artists were at the pinnacle of creating art conducive to our approach. Not only do they have the best “special effects” (e.g. the greatest skill at depicting the human form and reproducing textures and lighting effects), but their subtlety and emotional power are the product of centuries of development since the Renaissance (15th century). Most of the artworks I’ve used as examples are from the 19th century.

TIP

Art History periods to fit every “mood.”

1. *Rococo/18th Century: Romantic Comedy*
2. *Neo-Classical/Late 18th Century: Historical Drama*
3. *Baroque/17th Century: Action/Adventure, Film Noir*
4. *Romanticism/19th Century: Melodrama, Horror, Fantasy*
5. *Victorian and Academic/19th Century:*
“New Release”— a variety of the best
6. *Renaissance/15th Century: Family Drama*

MUSEUM ACTIVITY

Car Talk. *On your way to the museum, think not only about what you're in the mood for, but also think over what significant moments you've recently experienced in your life—reunions, goodbyes, triumphs, difficulties, enjoyment, etc. What kinds of experiences are resonating with you now? What would you want to experience and contemplate in art? This will prepare you to notice artworks that have the potential to speak to you more deeply.*



JUDGING AN ARTWORK BY ITS COVER

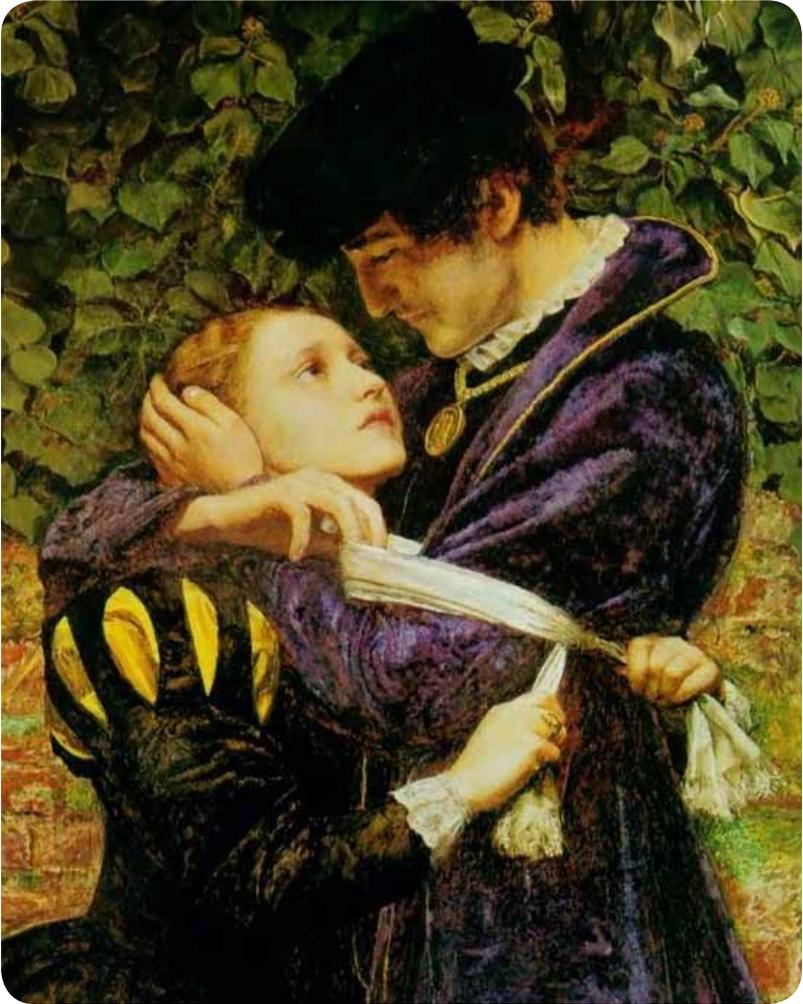
So, now you find yourself in a certain section of the museum you are in the mood for, and you're back to where we were in chapter two—right outside the party and about to enter. But there will be many more than just four works of art. You can't possibly

read all of them in the section—even in a single gallery (there’s a reason a movie usually doesn’t last more than two hours). How do you select? Well, when you’re browsing through the Romantic Comedy section at your local video store, you’ll look at the titles and cover-art. You might react to seeing the name of an actor you like (“Ooh, a Meg Ryan movie I haven’t seen!”). Or, the images on the covers might look interesting. If you really want to decide, you read the back of the cover-box to find out what the movie is about. With art, you do the same thing. You glance at the image, and you “read” what it’s about. Your one-liner functions as your back-cover description.

When I enter a gallery filled with art I’ll be interested in, I don’t take more than a minute or two to glance around and name what I’m seeing. Many of the artworks won’t make a blip on my emotional radar, but I notice when I have a positive first impression—when there’s someone I want to talk to at the party, when there’s a movie preview that has hooked me—and when I do, I make myself comfortable. In my ideal museum, there would be cushiony movie-theater seats. In actual museums, sometimes I find a bench. Some museums offer stools. Or, usually, I just sit on the floor. And I begin to read.

CONCLUSION

Let's return to the artwork I showed you in the introduction. How would you now proceed to get the most out of it? (See page v.)



On the next page is a recap of the process we've learned. Go ahead and give it a shot!

EXERCISE

Your turn! Use this recap as your guide. When you finish, continue reading for my example.

I. One-liner

II. “Read”

- Who are these characters?
- What is happening? (Remember to shuttle between details and generalizations.)

III. Step into the frame

- Sounds and sensations from the setting
- Characters
 - Strike a pose.
 - Have them speak.
- “Rewind” and “Play”

What was happening right before? What will happen right after?

IV. Personal Connection

- What kind of situation is this? (Pick one character as the main one.)
- Can you recollect any similar situations you’ve been in?
(Google the title to help:
A Huguenot Lover on St.
Bartholomew’s Day)
- What are the characters’ reactions in this situation?

TIP

As with learning any new skill, the more you practice this approach, the more automated it will become!

Here's what I came up with.

I. One-liner: Saying goodbye

II. Reading: *Her eyes look up to his... imploring. He looks down at her. He looks as if he's trying to reassure her. Why? What is she worried about? He's caressing her with one hand, and it looks like he's grabbing a white scarf around his arm. She is wrapping it around his arm, or trying to. Her fists are squeezing tightly, but his hand is holding it back. Why does she want to put this scarf on him? Why does he prevent it? She looks upset that they are saying goodbye. Will putting this scarf on him reassure her? They are in the middle of a secluded garden—an old brick wall, ivy growing, an unkempt garden with weeds and a few flowers. They look like they are alone. Their parting is covert. Is she afraid of his leaving their hiding? It looks as if he has just kissed her goodbye and must now leave. His head, only, still leans in towards her. Why does he leave? He does not wear military dress, but he does look like he wears some kind of uniform: a trim jacket, black cap, ruffled collar, and gold medallion. She wears a long black dress with yellow stripes on her shoulders. She is young, beautiful, elegant. They look like they are dressed to be in the interior of a parlor, but instead are outside an overgrown garden. She does not want him to leave, at least not without the white scarf attached—her tiny fists strain to tighten it against his casually firm fingers, but he looks resolved to leave.*

III. Stepping into the Frame

- Sounds and Sensations: It's quiet and cool. There are the fragrances of a garden. Perhaps a bird sings.

- Characters:

- Strike a pose

- Man: His posture is upright, his back arched. His head looking down. His right hand calm but firm. His left, cupped and caressing. Woman: Her body leaning in, her head tilted upwards. Her hands tightly squeezing.

- What are they saying?

- “I will not let you go, I’m worried for you, you must wear this.” “I understand your concern, my love, but I must leave, without your help.”

- “Rewind” and “Play”

- Before: They embraced and kissed, and she started tying the scarf to him. After: He will gently pull the scarf off, kiss her again, and back away.

IV. Personal Connection

- Background: The young woman is a Catholic. Her lover is a Protestant. On this day, St. Bartholomew’s Day, 1572, Catholics massacred anyone who appeared to be Protestant. Catholics were identified by a white scarf they wore on their sleeve.

- Specific Situation: A young couple whose respective religious sects are at war with each other must choose between their romantic relationship and their convictions.

- General Situation: A reluctant goodbye.

- Woman: Goodbye to someone dear one does not want to see leave.

Conclusion

Man: A necessary goodbye to someone dear for the sake of another important personal value.

- Reactions: Woman: Resistant and pleading to save her lover.

Man: Tenderness towards his beloved, but resolve in dedication to his deepest value.

- Personal Connection:

Perhaps you have actually had to say goodbye to someone leaving for war, but your personal connection to the situation can come in many other forms. From the woman's perspective, have you ever had to say goodbye to your children as they leave for summer camp? For college? From the man's perspective, have you ever had to leave your spouse at the airport to go on an extended business trip? Or, maybe, moving to another part of the world, you've said goodbye to friends you love in order to pursue your dreams.

The following lines from one of my favorite poems capture the meaning of this image to me:

I could not love thee, Dear, so much

Loved I not honour more.

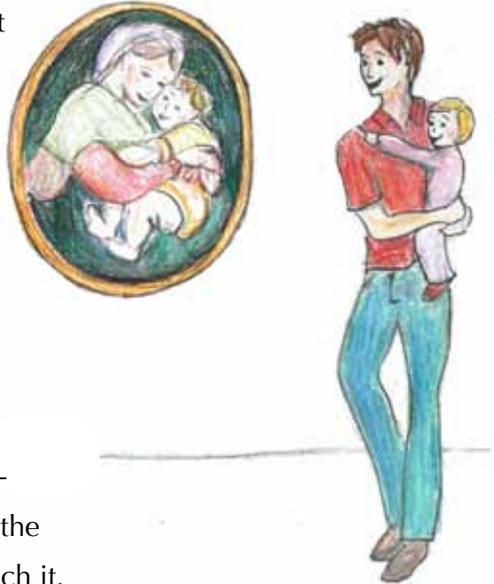
-from "To Lucasta, Going to the Wars"

By Richard Lovelace

TOUCHING THE ART

Entering into an art museum, the first rule, and one we take for granted, is not to touch the art. We are, of course, told this because an artwork in a museum is often worth several thousands or even millions of dollars. However, there is also a general sense that art is distant from us, that a work of art should be revered as a precious object to be passed down through the generations and meticulously taken care of—it is a priceless heirloom that your grandparents wouldn't let you get close to when you were a child. What is disregarded is the artworks value, not as an artifact, but as art. Art is not merely a painted canvas in a frame, not merely pristinely carved marble, but rather in it dwells a person you can get to know, a world you can immerse yourself in, a story you

can connect to, and a meaning that can strike your most personal chords. So, when you are in an art museum, admire the historical significance of the artifact, respect its status as a cultural heirloom, but also remember the personal preciousness it can have to you: experience the reality it has preserved through the centuries; reach out and touch it.



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2. From a sculpture group of the Birdsong Children, Brian and Laura, 1998.
Susan Grant Raymond. Atlanta Zoo. Page 2.
Photo printed with permission of the artist.
Google "Brian and Laura Birdsong" to find out about their story.
3. *Calypso*, 1869.
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4. *Belisarius*, 1797.
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5. *Pygmalion and Galatea*, ca. 1890.
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6. *The Sun Vow*, 1901.
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7. *The Thinker*, 1902.
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8. *Samuel Johnson*, 1775
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15. *The Oath of The Horatii*, 1784.
Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825). Louvre, Paris. Illustration on the back cover.

TIP

Finding More Art. *If there were any artworks above that you particularly liked, Google the artist's name and search for more of his works!*

A few more artists I recommend: Norman Rockwell, William Bouguereau, Frederick Leighton, Michelangelo, Antonio Canova.

ABOUT THE CREATORS

LUC TRAVERS

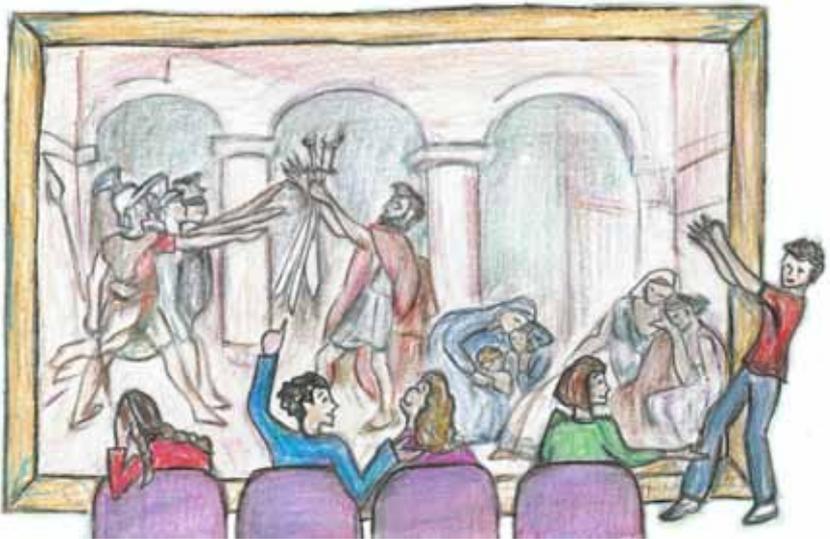
Luc is a teacher, tour guide, and uncle. He teaches elementary and junior high school students at VanDamme Academy to relish in novels, plays, paintings, poems, music, and sculpture. During the summers, he travels the world with his students or on his own seeking great art and great experiences. When he finds the time, he enjoys soccer, Star Trek, and Disneyland with his niece. His website is www.LucTravers.com.



MARIANNE EPSTEIN

Marianne has been illustrating teaching aids in collaboration with Luc since 2006. She graduated from Dartmouth College with a BA in psychology, and is pursuing a career in teaching and graphic design. In her spare time, she enjoys cooking, reading, and singing. Her website is www.cartoonalacarte.com.

*Memorable characters, pulsating drama, deeply personal meaning—
to be experienced at an art museum near you!*



A visit to an art museum does not have to be a history lesson. Appreciating a painting is not reserved for a cultured few. Get ready to experience an innovative yet familiar-feeling approach to enjoying art!