

# TOUCHING THE ART

A Guide To Enjoying Art at a Museum



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# 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.

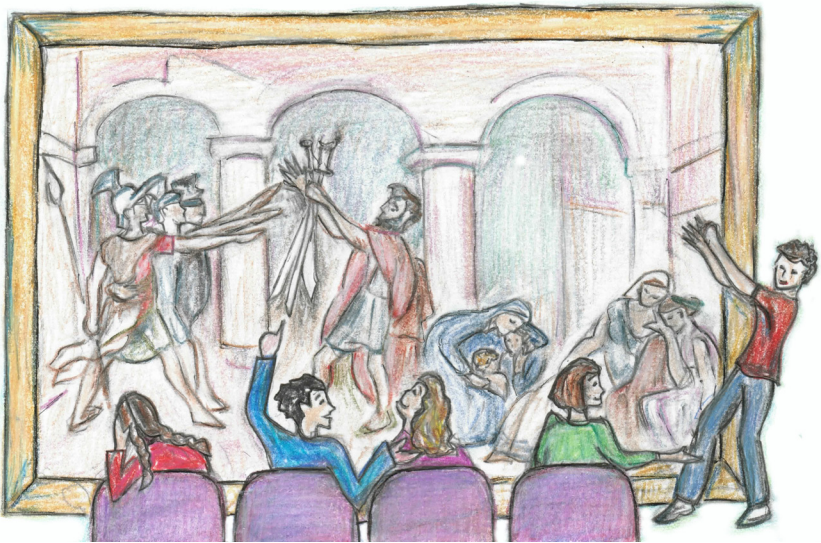
### IV. Connecting

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.

*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!