

## If You Don't Stop, You Don't See Anything

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*The Metropolitan Museum of Art*

It happened a number of years ago in front of the portrait of Filippo Archinto, Archbishop of Milan, by Titian, in the European Paintings Galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I was with a group of high school students, and like many people who teach high school students in museums, I both feared their boredom and bemoaned their ignorance of civilization. I had just finished instructing them in the works of El Greco, and was moving on to discuss some of the artists who influenced him. I introduced my next remarks by saying, in the manner of art historians, "This is a Titian." With obvious reluctance, a student in the back raised his hand, and apologetically explained that it was his first class in the museum, but could I please tell him "what exactly is a Titian? an electrician? a dietitian? a mortician?" Tempted to laugh, I did not. I realized the student had gently and humorously questioned a time-honored art historical conceit, one of many that veil art in a mysterious language all its own, and at the same time, he was expressing his dismay that his own previous experience in the world had somehow not prepared him for experience in the museum. My dismay was equal to or greater than his, as I realized I could no longer continue teaching as I had been. It was time for me to stop lecturing and begin listening, not only to what the students had to say about art, but what they had to say about the experience of art.

In the eyes of students, coming to the museum for the first time may be fraught with intimidating obstacles. High school students have told me that their confidence to look at art fails even as they approach the museum. There it is, they say, in all its architectural splendor, an imposing presence easily confused with libraries and courts of law. Big banners wave with names they do not recognize ("Annenberg," "Majolica," "Verrocchio," to mention a few from recent times). Up the steps, they meet armed guards who tell them to check their belongings. Information desks suggest visitors need information; acoustic guide desks suggest acoustic guides; bookstores, books; lecture kiosks, lectures. If they are brave enough to continue, they may encounter lecturers in the galleries who, astonishingly, either stand there and tell them what they already see, or stand there and tell them

what they do not see. Labels offer information about patrons and provenance, but none about unusual visual phenomena. For example, a painting by Andrea Mantegna, not far from the paintings by Titian, features some very red cherubs that are unexplained in the label copy. To the uninitiated, it may be difficult to enjoy a work of art if, on the one hand, the museum suggests the necessity of information, but on the other hand disregards our fundamental questions and observations. Students may go so far as to wonder if we are all considering the same painting, and if the person new to the museum can understand or appreciate anything of the museum experience.

As museum instructors, we sometimes parallel this mystifying experience. Teaching students as we have been taught, we provide them with art historical information and analysis. It is an easy and obvious association. Museums have constructed their collections around it, curators are trained in it, publications regale us with it. But art history is what it says it is, the history of works of art: when they were made, in what style, by whom and for whom, where, sometimes why, and always of what. It is not necessarily the information that helps us see what is before us.

In the painting by Titian under question, my students saw a dark and serious man, full of worry and age, enveloped in flesh and heavy clothing. That Titian was a Venetian painter, that this work was probably executed in the mid 1550s, that Filippo Archinto promoted the cause of St. Ignatius Loyola, was of little or no interest to them. Nor did that information have anything to do with what we were perceiving. Yet this is the kind of information we routinely "tell" and "feed" students in museums. Perhaps it is because we think it is important to some kind of understanding, in this case, of the Renaissance, or of the nature of portraiture, or the study of Titian himself. To our students, however, the importance of this information is scarcely apparent. What is apparent is their feelings, the urgent need to bring their own experience to the work of art, and the desire to ask their own questions.

A docent lecturer at the Metropolitan once told me, "I want so much to give them something to take home." What she meant, of course, was telling the students what she knew, the "facts" about the various paintings on her tour, which she had dutifully studied and memorized. She did not see that these gifts of information severely limit the possibility for a perceptual and personal relationship with a work of art. The students realize their participation is irrelevant, that other people have already defined what is important and significant. This not only includes names, styles, and dates, but the idea of correct responses. The experience in the museum begins to remind them of school work and the acquisition of a body of knowledge that should be remembered, and the students "tune out."

The greatest gift we can give our students in the museum is the acceptance of their responses—as a group and as individuals—and an affirmation that whatever experience and reference each brings, it is valuable to our collective understanding of a work of art. The high school students who come to the museum already know a great deal about life, and we as instructors must understand that that experience is tremendous preparation for looking at art. Instead of bemoaning their lack of education, we can encourage and inspire and share an elevated aesthetic experience with that as common ground. And we can learn from these students who have not yet “learned” to see art through the narrow lens of art historical and formal analysis. On the threshold of an adult world, they bring new eyes to art. They have not learned to fear being labeled “corny” or “nerdy” for expressing the thoughts about the human condition, such as life, death, fear, loneliness, love, despair, inclusion, exclusion, the acceptance of ambiguity, that they find expressed in so many of the works of art in the museum. The high school students are remarkable for the honesty and visual acuity they bring to looking at works of art, for their extraordinary ability to consider art on their own terms. They can appreciate with aplomb great masterpieces. They are uplifted by art, by the beauty and by the ideas expressed. As John Melendez, a senior at Seward Park High School, said, “A masterpiece makes your heart pound, your mind think, it fills you up with emotions you never knew you had. It’s not like everyday life. It’s amazing, it’s profound.”

If we listen to our students, they teach us that the museum is a place where significant and extraordinary understandings of works of art can occur—for all of us. It is a profoundly democratic notion that aesthetic experience is not the preserve of the art historian alone, but one that is available to all of us if we allow ourselves to see and feel and think in response to art. We find that the experience of art comes from within. It does not get told or given or fed or memorized. The meaning is essential, but only if it is one’s own. A student, Siddarth Shah, discussing a painting by Vittore Carpaccio in the Metropolitan, said,

This painting proves that everyone has a different perception of art. You’ll never find a true answer. Everyone has their own feeling, their own meaning, and that’s good because it stays in your mind. You keep asking, “Where am I where am I in this situation?” Everything is surrounding you and you have to pick the right path, but any path you pick will be right.

To sit with a work of art for an hour or more is not our usual experience in a museum. We live in a time of fast-changing images and rapid-paced songs, of action movies and computer information networks. When we do

go to museums, we seldom look at a single work of art. But to look longer, and to slow down, is essential.

I have learned to ask students to sit in front of works of art for long periods of time. I invite them to respond and to listen to each other. Ideas will start to come slowly forward, to fill the perceptual space. They may be generated by any aspect of the work of art: the narrative, the colors, the way the paint is applied, the atmosphere, the emotion. All points of entry are good, all aesthetic experience is valuable. Some students find it easier to discuss feeling, others form. All observations contribute to a collective truth. The experience places enormous value on the here and now, what we see and what the significance of that seeing is. I ask questions to collect thoughts, thoughts that can be moved along and prodded into an evolving experience, one of increased revelation and awareness. The questions are not an inventory, but part of the flow of discussion and observation. A junior at Stuyvesant High School, Amy Chen, described her experience in the process:

I just sit there and try not to think of anything around me. I just sit there and forget about everything else around it and then I look at it and look at it. Soon it will come to me. Somehow, the painting flows and eventually comes together inside my mind.

Everyone contributes to the experience and to the exploration of a work of art. Karen Zaidberg, a classmate of Amy Chen’s at Stuyvesant High School, described how important it was to have the experience of art as part of a group:

It doesn’t really work to try to look at paintings by yourself. I’ve come to the museum and stood there and asked myself the how do you feel thing and I look at it and I come up with a thought or two. But when I’m by myself, it doesn’t seem as great as it does when there are people around you raising their hands and having thoughts. By yourself, once you have exhausted those two thoughts, you’re standing there looking at this painting and this painting is standing there looking at you, and there’s nothing interactive about it. You’re not with other people who can bring out things you didn’t see, or explain things you couldn’t figure out, or describe feelings you couldn’t put into words.

The objective of the aesthetic experience, then, is not the time-efficient transfer of information but the realignment of values wherein an evolving visual experience is of paramount importance. The student’s response and experience come first, before one’s own, before the museum’s, before the history of art. To encourage this free and interactive response means that teachers need to create an arena in which students can question, search,

challenge, be moved by, and ultimately bring the work into the context of their own lives without being intimidated or made to feel inadequate. Information should be added only when it is not injurious to the free flow of ideas and when it can validate and broaden understanding. Knowing why the cherubs are red, for example, is only one small part of the understanding of that painting. Given too early, it discourages observation and interaction, but given gently and sensitively at the right moment, it increases understanding and allows the discussion to move forward. At the highest level of the experience is the confidence to make a substantial judgment about a work of art, to engage in the quest for what Judith Burton of Teachers College calls "meaning-making."<sup>1</sup>

Recently, I was with some students in front of one of Ad Reinhardt's black paintings. One of the students who had been coming to the museum classes for several years said suddenly, "I get it, I finally get it! If you don't stop, you don't see anything!" And we admired in silence how out of the blackness come the slow risings of dark reds and brooding greens and impossible yellows. And then we laughed, because in that moment we realized it was always true. Of course you have to stop to see a work of art, but you have to *really* stop. You have to stop in the deepest sense: out of your life, out of your own time and space, out of conventions of information, and even out of your expectations. Otherwise you do not see anything. The high school students, more than we, understand that this is when the experience really happens. It is described below by Stefne Lynch, a student at the Academy of St. Joseph:

I ask myself, would I have stopped to look at this painting? Coming to the museum and being in a class like this, you focus. You see so much more and you realize its not just a piece of canvas with paint on it hanging on a wall. It has a purpose and a message, and its so strong you say how could there be people walking around and ignoring it? Going by and not having this amazing experience?

What we are encouraging is the value of discovery, the interest in things beneath the surface, the joy of looking and thinking. It is here that meanings are made, that one's own life illuminates a work of art and a work of art in turn illuminates who we are and what we do. It is an experience that is powerful and personal, and it makes the viewer alive in a way that no amount of information can. But if you don't stop, you won't see anything. And then you may never know what a Titian really is.

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#### *Note*

1 For a philosophical and developmental discussion of the concept of meaning and aesthetic understanding, please see Judith M. Burton, "Aesthetics in Art Education: Meaning and Value in Practice," in *Beyond DBAE: The Case for Multiple Visions of Art Education*, ed. Judith M. Burton, Peter London, and Arlene Lederman, private publication, 1988; and idem, *National Assessment of Education Progress* (Princeton: Educational Testing Service, 1993), p. 5.