The Personal Importance of Art History

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The importance of art history is entirely relative to individual perspective. Objectively speaking, it is questionable whether the field has much significance. It certainly has no claim of intellectual priority over other disciplines. Compared to most of them, it is still a small field, although the ranks of art historians in this country have grown considerably, from a few hundred in the early 1940s to several thousand today. And despite the fact that culture is big business these days, the audience for art history is still limited. Sales for even the most successful art books are a fraction of popular novels. If art historians were suddenly to disappear like dinosaurs from the face of the earth, they would hardly be missed, and the world would probably be no worse off either.

In their self-absorption, which they share with other intellectuals, art historians tend to lose sight of these simple facts. This is not to say that art history has no intrinsic value. But in the final analysis, art history is, like the other liberal arts, a largely private affair. This comes about not simply because scholarly writing is done in the scholar's study. It is intrinsic to art itself and how it is most appropriately viewed. The creation of the vast majority of artworks is done by individual artists in the seclusion of their studios. It remains an intensely personal act that only rarely admits audience or other group participation. Looking at works of art is equally personal, even though it usually takes place in museum galleries that are often crowded with tourists. (Has anyone been able to get close to the Mona Lisa lately?) The greatest art experiences usually happen with nobody around. I only came to appreciate Rembrandt's Aristotle one summer when I was doing a graduate internship and had the unique opportunity of contemplating it at leisure in a dimly lit, unused gallery at the Metropolitan Museum, instead of the glare of spotlights with crowds of admirers. Likewise, the greatness of Watteau's Gilles (Pierrot) was fully brought home to me when I

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had the Watteau exhibition at the National Gallery all to myself. For forty-five minutes I "owned" this incredible work, and it provided one of the most moving experiences of my life.

It happens time and again that one is ambushed, so to speak, by a masterpiece when one least expects it, even when one is "doing" a museum as quickly as possible. Some years ago I was rushing through the Alte Pinakothek in Munich in search of a particular painting, when I happened across Rubens's late portrait of himself with his young wife Hélène Fourment in front of Castle Steen. It stopped me dead in my tracks: here was an utterly personal revelation that tells us everything about the artist's self-conception at the end of his life.

Such extraordinary moments are capable of having a lasting impact. Over time, one becomes a junkie addicted to these highs, which one seeks over and over, even though they do not happen that often. How does this addiction begin? In my case, as the son of two art historians, it came simply from being dragged, often unwillingly, to museums. As a boy, my first love was baseball, and I did not relish taking time off from play to spend an afternoon at the Metropolitan Museum. Hence, I am well aware that the love of art does not come readily; yet it must somehow come naturally. I already looked at art with the skeptical eye of a connoisseur. One of my first memories of the Met was being told that Pilate Washing His Hands was a masterpiece by Rembrandt, to which I replied that it was a bad painting (we now know it is by an imitator, thank goodness). In the end, looking at art took, but I confess that I was thrown out of the museum at Colmar by my parents for cutting up. Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece, I realize in retrospect, was too great an achievement for a boy of eleven to take in on the spot. I nevertheless look back on it as perhaps the most important artistic experience of my life. The embarrassing memory of my childish behavior serves to remind me how difficult it can be to gain access to towering masterpieces, which overwhelm us and threaten our cozy understanding of the world.

It often happens that the impact of looking at art is realized only many years later. I was taken by my parents through the great Poussin retrospective at the Louvre in 1960. I didn't think much of those dirty old pictures at the time, but a strange thing happened while we were waiting for Walter Friedlaender, the great Poussin scholar, to catch up with us at the end of the exhibition. I suddenly had the eerie feeling that something was literally trying to reach out to me. When I turned around, I saw the Metropolitan's Blind Orion Searching for the Sun. Although I had viewed the painting before, this was the first time I realized that there is something remarkable about Poussin's late works. I have often returned to this painting and other mythological landscapes by the artist, and I now understand that he was a painter of archetypal images conveying the profoundest insights. At other times, one may have the sense that someone is trying to get one's attention.
This happened to me in the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem, where one of his late portraits of an old woman radiated such a ghostly presence that I felt it from behind my back before I actually saw the picture.

As this litany will suggest, I am fascinated by what artists tell us about their deepest understanding of themselves and of life, especially in old age, for they can act as signposts that increase our own awareness as well. It is this ability to contribute to our vision that makes art so meaningful. The role of the art historian, I believe, is to plumb those depths and to share this understanding with other scholars and, when possible, a lay audience. For me at least, the process nearly always begins with looking at the work itself. During my internship at the Metropolitan Museum, I wandered into the French galleries on a slow day to see what they might have to offer. I was drawn from across the room to Corot’s Sibylle by its sense of mystery. It has taken me on a long scholarly journey into the meaning of Corot’s “muse” paintings; only recently have I at least succeeded in unraveling the painting’s full meaning. In the process, I have been led to contemplate the human psyche in ways I would never have imagined. The impact on my understanding of life, and especially my appreciation of creativity in all its guises, has been profound.

I still get a thrill looking at art. This cannot happen looking at reproductions, even the best of them. That no doubt is why I ended up as a curator after teaching for several years. The objects constantly challenge me and have kept me fresh. I find that they often reveal their secrets only over time. In my present research on the Dutch and Flemish pictures at the North Carolina Museum of Art, I have already discovered things that have passed others by only because I have time to live with these paintings. As a case in point, by tracing his changing treatment of the subject over time and analyzing the handling of the pictorial surface itself, I can show that our Rubens Holy Family is a highly personal work in which the musing figure of Joseph conveys the artist’s sense of wonderment at the birth of his own sons late in life.

One lives for moments of insight like this; whether they come from art, music, or personal experience, they make all the difference in the world in our appreciation of life and its possibilities. I also believe that they help us get in touch with our underlying humanity. Not everyone is sensitive to art and its unique qualities, but I persist in believing that many, if not most, people can have the door opened for them by the right “guide,” so to speak, one who can address that very human level of understanding. It makes a great difference, for example, whether one discusses Abstract Expressionism in purely formal aesthetic terms or as an analogy to the decision-making process that we all must exercise in life, with its inherent risks and failures. The former is greeted with incomprehension by most people, while
the latter rarely fails to gain a sympathetic hearing from even the most begrudging audience.

There is no single road, no one right path to understanding in art or life. Art history has a wonderful diversity which, if anything, has increased in recent years. We now have not only traditional connoisseurship and iconography (the study of the meaning of images), but also Marxism, feminism, and deconstructivism among the newer approaches. What has not grown commensurately is our willingness to allow these various tendencies to coexist, especially when they contradict ours. One may safely take it for granted that tolerance is always in short supply. Scholars are no more open-minded than anyone else. Our egos get in the way, and we assume an inflated self-importance. At conferences we parade our vanity with an arrogance that makes it all too clear why there is such an abiding distrust of intellectuals.

What is most alarming, however, is that matters seem to have worsened materially in recent times. Everything has become politicized. The field has become a vehicle for grinding axes that have nothing to do with art history. Now everyone can use the rostrum as a means for venting anger over every personal or social wrong, real or imagined, that has ever been committed. Conventions often take on the guise of psychodrama, so that scholarly discourse is at a low ebb these days. Especially offensive is the moral browbeating that goes on, often in the name of minority groups. This will sound familiar to our colleagues in other disciplines as well. As our civilization unravels at the fin de siècle, all fields are afflicted with the same malaise.

Underneath it all, what are the stakes? A good bit of the debate that rages at present between the deconstructivists and the iconologists represents an intergenerational conflict. The dispute is couched in intellectual terms that pit a more recent French approach against the German one that has dominated the field for so long. Now, each generation seeks to find its place in the sun by developing a new approach that reflects its particular concerns. This is legitimate and, in the main, to the good, but not when new ideas are promoted by denigrating the work of our predecessors. Father-bashing is, of course, a time-honored tradition; no one is immune to it. Among art historians it reached its all-time low a few years ago in the disgraceful attacks on Erwin Panofsky, one of the seminal minds and great teachers (and truly fine gentlemen) the field has known, who fortunately did not live to suffer this unconscionable affront. To paraphrase Seymour Slive, one should not dump on the shoulders of the giant one is standing on.

This rule ought to hold true no matter how intense the scholarly debate. After all, part of growing up is learning how to agree to disagree. What we see instead is one attempt after another to impose a new orthodoxy in place of the old one, as if one approach has a monopoly on wisdom. Intellectuals are often given to impenetrable language. Following a time-honored tradi-
tion, the terminology has become more obscure in order to shut out the uninitiated by enforcing their ignorance if they are not willing to conform. The net result is a new scholasticism no more appealing than the one it seeks to replace.

Naked self-interest is at stake as well. Foremost is tenure and promotion within academic departments, which are split into generational, intellectual, and ideological camps battling for control of the curricula and budgets. Also on the line is prestige in the form of control over arts organizations and committees, from the College Art Association on down. I confess that I look back with dismay at my belief that my generation would run things better when, in fact, it has done a worse job of it. As a wise friend of mine put it, we pay for our parents' mistakes by repeating them.

There is probably not very much one can do about this situation, except to preach a little tolerance, if such a thing is still possible. Let there be variety. It is the spice of life. Let all ideas meet the test of the market place of ideas, where they can be discussed openly and fairly. Let us also allow everyone to tend his own garden in peace. Some of us have a larger plot than others, but even the biggest of them is pretty small in the scheme of things, as my father, among the most famous art historians, came to understand.

Fortunately, the study of art remains an endearing pastime. In times of trouble, one can still retreat, like the Chinese literati, to the study. And even in this age of iconoclasm, in which postmodernism has relegated artists and their creations to secondary consideration to the written word, one may also find refreshment in the art of the museums. One can only be grateful, as Walter Friedlaender remarked, to be paid to do the thing one loves most. It is also wonderful to have an opportunity to share that pleasure with a few like-minded souls.

In my case, I have reached that stage of mid-life described so eloquently by Anthony Storr in "Solitude, A Return to the Self," where one turns away from the world, with all its snares, in favor of the inner life. Although much of my work is now oriented toward the public, both in terms of textbooks and museum catalogues, I admit that I really write for myself. Each passage becomes an attempt to crystallize part of a larger understanding. For me, the creative act has its own imperative that must be followed, just as it does for the artist; in the end, artist and art historian drink of the same creative stream, but they do so in different ways appropriate to each of them. Once one has chosen that path, the specific forum matters little, and the controversies surrounding the field, though disturbing, become of equally little consequence.