

## *A Visit to the Gallery*

NICHOLAS DELBANCO

---

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM of Art is the biggest cultural attraction in New York City, visited by 4.6 million people each year. Some tourists fly to Bilbao for the single purpose of a trip to Frank Gehry's Guggenheim; others, with a similar intention, travel to Paris or Kyoto or Dubai. Every month in China, seemingly, a museum appears or expands. For the contemporary architect, these buildings are major commissions, for the philanthropist prime sites. There is widespread interest in such structures now, and beyond the commercial aspect of this market phenomenon we bring a leaven of reverence: *museo*, the place of the muse.

All my life I have approached the space of a museum as something special, hallowed. By this I do not mean that no sound is welcome or no school group should visit—but the hush of expectation and attentive searching in the gallery does have in it a component of worship. We make, I think, a pilgrimage within a sacred grove. We enter a museum building in a way that is very different from the way we enter, say, an office building or shop (though a museum may contain those latter spaces as well).

Why, I wonder; what sets it apart? And should it in fact be separate or, as others suggest, folded seamlessly into the fabric of society? Does it best serve its purpose as a kind of sanctum, even sanctuary, or as a part of the whole? My reflections on these questions are a privacy made public—not a bad working definition of the function of museums—and an attempt to answer or at least ask why such a place should matter, and what it represents.

♦ ♦ ♦

My parents were both refugees from Hitler's Germany who knew each other glancingly, then met again and married in London; I was born there during the Second World War and came to this

country when young. As “Delbanco” suggests, my father’s people took their name in Italy, but they left Venice as long ago as 1630 and had been living in Germany for three hundred years. Both his and my mother’s families were prosperous—bankers and businessmen—the sort of *bürgerliche* Jews who couldn’t quite accept that Hitler might actually have them in mind. Albert Speer, his architect, worked on my maternal grandparents’ house in Berlin; the Expressionist painter Karl Schmidt-Rotluff fashioned jewelry for my father’s mother in Hamburg. I don’t mean to overstate the case; they weren’t major players in the world of art, but art was always understood to be of consequence, to count. This was the sort of culture in which oil portraits were commissioned, in-house concerts offered on a Sunday after lunch, and wood furniture polished to a fare-thee-well by the upstairs maid. My parents were supporters of the Bauhaus, collectors of Expressionist paintings and (a little more surprisingly, since this was very early on) tribal objects and African masks; my father had an eye. My first memories of life with him have much to do with museums; he was an inveterate—even an obsessive—visitor.

No sooner did we reach a town than we were off to see the artwork it was famous for, since he always knew a town in terms of what was hanging there, or which square contained the Donatello sculpture it was essential to see. He read few books; he had trouble remembering people’s names; but he had no difficulty whatsoever recalling the Goya on the southwest wall of the upstairs space he had visited in Madrid in 1928. Until he died at ninety-eight, this remained the case. Though he forgot what happened yesterday, he would remember the composition of a Kirchner or Degas he saw eighty years before.

In my early childhood I had small volition, and I simply assumed this preoccupation with art was normal: what people did and how they viewed the world. Later, when the age of anxiety set in—which is to say, when I first learned to be embarrassed by my parents—I can remember protesting, *Do we have to? Can’t we stay in the hotel? Can we eat something first at least?*, while he set off, his sons in tow, to the Duomo or Uffizi or Accademia or Louvre or some

less trafficked building or church whose guardian was just about to shut the doors when this importunate person approached. In those days the lighting was quite often dim, controlled by some custodian or monk who dozed beside the switch; always my father would walk up to him, a fistful of lire or francs outstretched. I would stand as far away as possible, in an agony of discomfiture, but the bribe did work and the lights turned on and, hey presto, Masaccio or Matthias der Mahler appeared.

Other children spent time with their fathers playing baseball or fishing or working on cars. I spent Saturday mornings at his side painting or sitting for portraits, because he was a more-than-Sunday painter and an accomplished one. Several of his portraits are in fact in public places—the National Portrait Gallery, Harvard College, the Museum of the City of New York. He never quite had the daring or drive to make a career of it, and was a collector more than a creator. But he had genuine talent and loved to draw, and even in his great old age declared, “A painting a day keeps the doctor away.” When he came home from a business trip it was always with something acquired en route: a Zuni Bowl or hermaphroditic standing figure with breasts and penis I’d stare at in wonder, an etching by Rembrandt or woodcut by Dürer or poster by his favorite, Henri Toulouse de Lautrec. Lautrec’s Aristide Bruant turned his broad back above my childhood bed; Yvette Guilbert smiled soulfully down; La Goulue lifted her leg. There were oil paintings in the dining room by Lovis Corinth and Chagall. And always, when we traveled, it was the museum or the monastery or the chapel at the edge of town my father took us to first.

My mother went along with it; she didn’t have much choice. She drew the line, however, at his absentminded tardiness; he was habitually late and she (no doubt in compensation) was a close clock-watcher, always prompt. “Punctuality,” she used to say, “is the politeness of Kings.” “Just a minute, just a minute,” was his mantra, and he’d peer all the more fixedly at the mask or cabinet of curiosities or jade blade that had arrested his gaze. Once, I remember, when we first traveled in America and took a train called *The Twentieth*

*Century Limited* passing through Chicago, there was time enough to visit the Art Institute, and so we left the station and took a taxi to the great museum in order, as he told us, to pay our respects to Seurat. Pointillism is a painstaking technique, and everything about those Sunday morning strollers on *La Grande Jatte* argues leisure, so I suppose it was inevitable that we got back to the station as the train was pulling out. We made it, in fact; we did board. But all these decades later, when I walk up the steps to what the locals call the “toot,” I hear that train whistle blowing and break out into a sweat.

♦ ♦ ♦

My uncle too took me along, though he was a genuine expert and—that daunting word—connoisseur. As a student of art history my father’s elder brother had earned a doctorate for writing on Abraham Bloemart; in prewar London he established, along with two equally knowledgeable partners, a gallery in Old Master paintings and prints. Later, the partners went “modern”—or, anyway, as far as Walter Sickert and Rodin. An early memory for me, and a source of unending if childish delight, was the game we’d play together. We’d enter a room of a museum—and sometimes, to my certain knowledge, one he hadn’t visited before. Then I’d run up to a canvas or a piece of statuary and, having read the attribution and blocked it with my reaching fist, would ask my uncle who had produced it when. He always got it right. He knew, it seemed to me, everything, every single artist’s name, and if the attribution was to that greatest of all creators, Mr. or Ms. Anon, he’d know the country and the century instead. When I asked him how he did it he said *Handwriting*. He could read an artist’s pen- or brush-stroke as if the name were signed.

His gallery was a brick four-story Queen Anne townhouse just off Bond Street and the Burlington Arcade. After college I spent time there, with the not-so-hidden expectation that art-dealing might become a way of life and my profession. I was at loose ends a little, trying to decide if England might be home again and—since I loved my uncle—happy to work at his side. It was an education. I followed

him to Christie's and to Sotheby's, to country homes and The Royal Academy, to the studios of painters, sculptors, frame makers, restorers. I watched him while he authenticated, or refused to, the name on a canvas or named it if unsigned. I learned much. But soon enough I also learned that selling other people's art was not my chosen path.

If someone appeared near the desk where I sat, I'd say, "Good morning, sir." Then one of my uncle's partners (the one concerned with social niceties) informed me that what I thought common politeness was inappropriate and might be construed as, in fact, *common* politeness. The chap who brought my tea would say, "Good morning, sir," but I shouldn't do so to a customer, since it suggested I was of an inferior social position. Unless of course he actually was a sir, in which case I should say, "Good morning, Sir Richard, Sir John. . ."

I learned the proper way to address a lady born to a title or a lady married to it—the distinction between Lady Jane and Lady Addison—and that the ill-shaved threadbare fellow skulking by the stairwell was either a thief or an Earl. And after a few months I found that I could no longer be happy in London; its world was not my world. One day my uncle took me aside and said, "This isn't working, is it; you're arriving in the gallery later and later each morning; you leave as soon as you can. Why don't we admit it; this isn't for you; get out of here and write."

That is the self-congratulatory version of the story, the one where our young hero espouses democratic principles and renounces the world of privilege and private dealing in favor of his own and sullen art. The other version—truer—is that I never knew enough about the field to make a go of it, and wasn't willing to study. Week after month my uncle and I would walk into a room together, and while he'd know every painting there, I'd know only that my feet were wet or that the girl in the corner wasn't wearing a brassiere or that in twenty minutes I could propose we have lunch. Sometimes, still, I think of it—the road not taken, the life unlived—and wonder what would have happened if my uncle and his partners had been a

little more invested in, as it were, the succession. I might have stayed in London or opened a dealership branch in New York. Then, instead of John Q. Public and an interested amateur, I might have been professional, full of earned learned opinion, and, like my uncle, a crank.

The last time he came to America he visited my family. He was in his nineties and would soon die. As was the case with my father, when my uncle came to Ann Arbor he always included a trip to the Detroit Institute of Arts and the museum in Toledo. He had sold them both some paintings, and liked to visit, as he put it, his “old friends.” On the final day I brought him to the University of Michigan’s Museum of Art, which was displaying, with a certain amount of fanfare, a terra-cotta warrior and horse from the Han dynasty. These had arrived from Toronto and were being readied for an exhibition that the sponsors claimed (with justification, I suppose) would be the first showing of these newly discovered artifacts in the fifty states. My uncle approached, was recognized, and was asked if he might offer an opinion for the press. I remember his response: “One of the advantages of old age,” he said, “is that we need not be respectful of the merely ancient. From an anthropological point of view these objects have some value. But from an *artistic* standpoint, they are of course only rubbish.” Then, leaning on his cane, he limped away to view the Max Beckman painting—*Begin the Beguine*—that he loved.

Beckman’s work is highly referential, it seems to me, full of signs and symbols and gestures to personal history. My uncle knew Beckman a little, had visited the artist in St. Louis and asked him at some point about the meaning of some image emerging on the easel before which they both stood. The parrot or the crutch or black bow tie or whatever it was that had piqued the dealer’s interest fairly begged for explanation. The painter declined to explain. Pressed, he refused again. Finally he said, in a warning shot across the bow for anyone who talks or writes about art, that the picture must speak for itself. “I *never* talk about my work,” he said. “*Niemals*. What’s here is here. Enough.”



In London, during the Second World War, such silence was put to the test. For good and sufficient reason, the treasures amassed in museums were dispersed and hidden in the countryside, since a single direct hit by Hitler's *Luftwaffe* on, say, the National Gallery of Art or the British Museum would have been a catastrophe. But Kenneth Clark—the man I would learn to call *Sir* Kenneth—proposed that they risk one painting or sculpture a month.

This became known as “Masterpiece of the Month” and was placed on brave solo display in the National Gallery. By all accounts it mattered hugely: Londoners on their lunch break or with that special, single work in mind streamed into the museum and were uplifted and consoled by Raphael or Ingres or whoever had been chosen as potential sacrifice. (Wanda Landowska did much the same, giving concerts in the gallery and comforting her audience with the piano music of Bach.) So I think of the place of the muses in that emblematic instance: it must have offered up some sense of lastingness, of focused attention on what has endured. The *museo* was making a hopeful assertion: this misery too will pass. It strengthened for the present and emboldened for the future those who stood in front of what had gone before.

Today we call it a “Blockbuster Exhibition.” Today it’s “Have you been to the A or B or C at the X or Y or Z?” The experience of seeing includes the act of being seen—to have been part of a multitude and made, as it were, the scene. There is nothing wrong with this; it’s collective witnessing, and it has its yield. The theater, for example, is more powerful and, in the case of comedy, more fun when there are others beside you and the room is full. But this member of the public prefers to go alone—or with a friend or loved one in the family. I like rooms better empty, and best in near-total silence. Because in the end that is always why I enter a museum: the chance for solitary contemplation of this month’s masterpiece in the midst of threatening war.

Think of Michelangelo in the Vatican or the Rothko Chapel in Houston or the Rivera in Detroit: three very different representations of reality and pictorial homage to the sublime. Each offers a sustained encounter with a single artist's work. Surely most of us, if given the chance, would elect some such communion with the muse—the uncluttered room and focused vision, no matter how “busy” the canvas or fresco that greets us from ceiling and wall. In some cases, indeed, crowd control is enforced in order to preserve the masterpiece at risk. The caves of Lascaux, for instance, or Leonardo's restored “Last Supper” in Milan may be looked at or breathed on only by limited numbers of folk at a time, and when you pass through those air chambers and sealed doors you have precisely that sense of difficult access: a formal, measured, slow approach, and then a goal attained.

But there's another kind of installation that museums also traffic in: the jumble, the exuberance, the cornucopia displayed. Let's call this the Pitti Palace Principle, where more paintings occupy a space than anyone can plausibly see or absorb. Often they're hanging far up by the ceiling, and always cheek by jowl. It's the obverse of the notion of a reverential progress toward a waiting icon; it's meant to dazzle, to cow. And it does. It says to us mere mortals that here is a godly abundance, superabundance, the museum as storehouse and warehouse of art. The room is full to overflowing, not reduced to its essential, and the very language that I'm using to describe it partakes of just such excess: *cornucopia*, *abundance*, *superabundance*, *storehouse*, *warehouse*, *cheek-by-jowl*. It helps explain, I think, why “a visit to the gallery” is often so demanding, a kind of sensory overload that is hard to sustain over time. And most museum goers wilt under the barrage. They feel weary, puny, reminded of inconsequence—“Hast *thou* created Leviathan?” as the voice in the whirlwind asks Job.

A final reference to my uncle, and I'll let him rest in peace. One of the paintings in his living room was an important early Rubens, an oil he had discovered in an estate sale somewhere when that sort of thing was still possible in England. He bought it in the 1950s and



Peter Paul Rubens, *The Fall of Phaeton*,  
Patron's Permanent Fund. Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees,  
National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

kept it for most of his life. It's an energetic canvas—"The Fall of Phaeton"—full of prowess and youthful extravagance, the young genius taking a subject and proving how much he could do. There are horses, clouds, the sun-shot sky, a chariot, the radiant muscularity of an overreaching hero soon to die.

The painting hangs now in our own National Gallery, in the nation's capital, and I visit it each time I go to Washington. It's a bittersweet encounter and, when I approach it, a long-shared history revives. There's the smell of pipe smoke, of cigars, of chocolate, and of schnapps and tea being poured; there's my childhood, then young manhood, the desultory chitchat of the elders of the tribe.

Most likely they're speaking in German; there's music and roses and chess. Somewhere there's a whiff of turpentine and linseed oil, somewhere Chanel No. 5. I've known this canvas all my life, leaned up against it often. But if I dared to touch the thing now the bells would whistle and a guard approach.

So possibly this too is what we find in museums: this thing I've called a privacy made public. Or call it an intimate distance, an ownership by adjacency, for I don't think it matters much that long ago and far away this particular Peter Paul Rubens hung in my uncle's house. Each of us can own a painting by looking hard and often enough; each of us can make it part of our personal history and, by extension, our family's lore. Ideally, and by extension, we each own it all.



Here, a brief digression and pet peeve. It is not an accident that I've mentioned the National Gallery in London or the Museum in Ann Arbor or the National Gallery in Washington. One of the things these museums have in common is that admission is free. I'm not consciously a skinflint and don't mind paying for a sports event or concert or the like. And I do understand how important the price of entry is to the operating budget of an institution, as well as the sense of value attached to something we pay to receive. If it costs ten or twelve or, more recently, twenty dollars, it must be worth it, we might say. But you don't have to be a tightwad to bridle at the cost of just ducking into a show or casting a quick glance around at the day's display. Sure, one can become a member; sure, museums are expensive to maintain. But I believe that something important is added to the experience of viewing when we know that everyone who wants to can afford it. I also believe that something important gets lost when turnstiles bar the door. For I'm not sure that penny-wise isn't pound-foolish; museum attendance is going up, yes, but it might have done so exponentially if it weren't such an investment to attend. Down in our nation's capital or in University collections or the few private museums so well endowed that entry is free, there's a very special sense

of collective ownership: this is the grove the muse inhabits, and here I am welcome to walk. I think it worth much more than ten or twenty dollars per visit to signal to the passerby: our gate is unlocked. Do come in.



My wife is a painter, and a first-rate one, though she's far too modest to call herself professional. Which is to say, she makes her paintings for pleasure—often, for the pleasure of others—but not for profit as such. In that sense she's an amateur, a lover of the enterprise, and while at the easel she's entirely focused, completely engaged. Lately I've found myself watching the way she watches the world, in particular its colors. Robert Graves, writing of writing, called that secondary set of eyes "The Reader Over Your Shoulder." In this case it's "The Viewer," and I try to see what she is seeing as, long years before, I tried to look the way my father or my uncle looked at what they made or sold.

This is, I think, another thing that happens in museums: the eyes take over. The sense of sight is engaged the instant we enter a gallery. There's much we glance at or gloss over in the daily round, much we don't look closely at or fail to scrutinize. But the faculty of vision, what we see and how we see it, is essential, quintessential, to this particular world.

There are certain rooms in a museum where painters set up shop and copy what's already there—taking someone else's work and more or less minutely replicating it. It's fine to see them looking and watch others watching while they do: a set of concentric circles radiating outward from what the painter saw. It reminds me of those self-portraits of an artist in his studio, surrounded by his collection and wares: a kind of advertisement that's not so much a *trompe l'oeil* as a trumpeting of what can be seen when studied closely and with a view to imitation. Much art in this regard is variation on a theme, and some of the most interesting shows I've seen in recent years acknowledge this fact and stress it—placing Manet and Velázquez side by side, or Picasso and Matisse. To see as others saw, to look over the

shoulders of Turner or Homer or Ruysdael, is, in an almost literal sense, to enlarge our vision and render sight more acute.

The reader will perhaps have noticed that I've named a lot of names; this visit to the gallery is a survey and a rapid tour. I've avoided the principle of "Masterpiece of the Month" and entered the Pitti Palace instead, intending to ramble, not to pause. Any true painting enhances alertness and rewards repeated viewing. We see it first in its entirety and then in its component parts—the reverse of our procedure with a symphony or novel, which we cannot hear on the instant or deal with except over time. Any true artist deserves extended attention, of course, and a look at more than one example of her or his craft. That's the point of exhibitions and the purpose of collecting in a focused way.

But one of the pleasures of gallery-going is a canter through the field of art, the gift of covered ground. Where else can you move from France to Korea, from England to the Congo, from Italy to India at such an easy clip? And since this is a surface-scratch, necessarily constrained by time and space, it may suffice to say that what museums also offer is a chance to see the world. Take it while you still can manage, urged my father; take it, repeats the ghost of my uncle; take it, I tell myself now. Not all of us are fortunate enough to travel unimpeded, but all of us can enter the storehouse, the warehouse, of culture, and map out terrain on the walls.

♦ ♦ ♦

I began this essay with family stories, and I want to close with one more. My maternal grandparents knew enough to leave Berlin for Paris, as the Third Reich grew more threatening, though they left much behind. One of the things they took with them was a small oil painting by Alfred Sisley, and a well-documented one. It's a beautiful canvas—a boat hauled up on the shingle, in an open-air dry dock—called *Bateau en Réparation à St. Mammes* (Boat Being Repaired at Saint Mammes). It has Sisley's signature water, beach, buildings, and sky; it's brilliantly composed and colorful, a kind of motion in stasis my grandparents carried with them, I suppose, as an emblem of what



Alfred Sisley, *Bateau en Réparation à St. Mammes*.

might be saved. When it came time to flee Paris they entrusted the oil to a friend. It's a long and complicated history, with dealers' names like Cassirer and Durand-Ruel involved, with the thing hidden in an attic in the environs of Vichy and then somehow sent to New York and L.A. and just now fetching up for sale at Sotheby's in Manhattan.

I know about this because my grandfather did lodge a claim, as long ago as 1950, with the German government for reparation for confiscated art and household goods. And there are organizations that help with the recovery effort and are superbly competent at research. I know, for example, the train my grandparents attempted to take out of Paris, the date they were turned back and the date they succeeded in leaving; I know which camps they were interned in and when they were released. I know who attested to having seen the painting where, and the given names and middle names and surnames of those through whose hands it has passed. A cousin has a

lawyer and the lawyer stopped the sale. Soon enough, perhaps, we'll know to whom the Sisley now belongs.

To me, of course, this story is significant for both emotional and fiscal reasons. I think of that canvas, "Boat Being Repaired," and see the boats they—we—managed to travel on to this brave new world. But it's a very different kind of tale from the one about Peter Paul Rubens, and even if the Sisley ends in a museum it will not be a privacy made public in quite the same way. I never saw that particular painting hang on a family wall.

Rather, it's the trail of tears that many artifacts from many different cultures have been transported along—the shard of pottery from Arizona or bronze totem from Benin, the manuscript from Baghdad or piece of decorated rubble from what was once Bamiyan. All things that hang or stand in a museum collection were appropriated and, sooner or later, installed in some other environ. It's just as true of obelisks or the stones of leveled monasteries as of a canvas spirited out of the country in what became a lost suitcase; *transport* in its doubled sense is a necessary function of both the collector's impulse and the curatorial task. Here the exemplary instance is perhaps the Elgin Marbles: one culture arrogating the treasures of another and putting them out on display.

In that sense, as we've increasingly come to see, the story of museums is a complicated back-and-forth of provenance and preservation, of empire and acquisition, a playing out of the old adage that to the victors belong the spoils. We've traveled a long way by now from my early memories of monks nodding at the light switch while my father bribed them to turn on the light, but it's the same road, really: one person standing rapt in front of what another made. The linkage may be near or distant, and the connection may be difficult to prove. But it is, I think, another reason that museums are a sacred grove; in the end the way a painting comes to hang upon a wall—for what reason it was painted, by whom, when, where, who first commissioned or purchased it, who commandeered or stole it—is useful only as narrative and a kind of factual embroidery. What's here is here. Enough.