

UNEXACTING CURATORS / GALLING GALLERY PERSONNEL

Why go to an art-museum? Or should I ask why even *bother* going to an institution where paintings, sculpture, videos and whatnot are on display? Most obviously the intent is to discover and experience art, with luck both revelatory and great. This, however, is becoming an increasingly difficult affair, fraught with so many irritations as to often make the venture more laden with annoyance than pleasure, not to speak of uplift or, in the rarest of cases, sensations of chills and inner pulsations.

One must needs arrive at the destination via biking or walking (if close enough); public transportation or driving (neither designed for good humour, particularly in a city you are unfamiliar with); settling into a cab (when sufficiently well heeled). Will you then stand in line, lamenting both the sudden windy drizzle and your omission to bring an umbrella? Once sheltered you will put on your airport-face and undergo a security-check, though not in Toronto, a city as yet not favoured by militant murderous messengers.

When deemed not a terrorist you must purchase a ticket – it will be expensive – or show your online printout or membership-card and let's hope you brought along salient identification, otherwise you will soon be back in the rain. Your wet coat must be checked, for a small fee, but don't count on being relieved of your bag, knapsack or briefcase as every museum's *vestiaire* will have its own rules concerning what may be deposited for safekeeping. Now you will go through the entrance hall and present your ticket which will be duly scanned, stamped or stub-removed.

Congratulations! You try to clear your mind, cast frustrations aside and are now ready to enter a gallery to finally have a look at what you came here for. Alas, you will now encounter new obstacles likely depriving you of the pleasure you definitely deserve: other people. With good fortune there will not be many of them. Most likely you will enter a bestiary. Humans are endowed with so many differing mind-sets. Some will wish to study carefully all they find interesting – they are respectful and quiet, only murmuring to a companion or oneself. Others will walk by each offering casting barely a glance: one wonders why they even bothered to “grace” the gallery – these will blithely walk in front of a painting someone else is carefully examining. Some prefer to have a conversation, not in the hallway, not in the café, not anywhere except *directly* in front of the painting, a glimpse of which has captured your interest.

It is truly excellent that schoolchildren are obliged to see art. For some it will open up new vistas, make them see in a fresh way, with good fortune provoke curiosity. Other students' non-interest is palpable yet being in rooms full of art is still a wonderful way of their passing time, chatting, flirting, texting and doing whatever else teens these days find necessary and amusing. On the other hand, this is life. Once of a certain age (that's me) and interested in classes full of

adolescents' studiousness, insouciance and vibrancy (that's me), a not particularly interesting art-exhibit can provide reminders of how times have changed (or not), meditations on one's own youth, the delight of gazing at a totally uncurated work of art, that *délice* standing motionless and frowning over a fascinating black-marble Camille Claudel ...

Throughout life I have derived inordinate pleasure from a wide spectrum of music, though assuredly most of it classical. Literature has repeatedly spasmed my mind into inchoate tears. Theatre and dance have both kept me sleepless for hours as I discuss and relive astonishing magnificence-spurts. Yet visual art has somehow lagged behind.

This is not to say I have not frequented some splendid museums. On the contrary. I will always remember the tranquility-cloak wrapped around me in Amsterdam's van Gogh museum. Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* was a humbling honour to behold in Milan. Astounded by painting-placements in staircases and sixteenth-century gold-infused portraits, the Uffizi gallery in Florence became my favourite, not only for the art but the stunning white building. This was all, however, decades ago, before *The Last Supper* was "restored", before the Mafia venomously car-bombed the venerated Uffizi *palazzo*.

One simply cannot do all one wishes, particularly when consumed with creating one's own sizable body of work. When DNA's death-rattle finally began, I found myself reading more art-history and -criticism than literature. It began to dawn upon me that my life's most gaping and irritating lacuna was art-ignorance. It may be helpful to read texts and look at reproductions. Nonetheless, this does not suffice. In order to take measure of any art one must be *present* – sitting in a hall inhaling a ballet, crouched in the forest imbibing an installation, perched on a chair hanging on to a live orchestra carve every Stravinsky-slash, tease out every Mozart-caress.

Determined to grow at least *some* vegetation in my wasteland, I recently made a six-week "pilgrimage" to Rome with that express purpose. About a year later, I journeyed to Paris, again for an equal duration, timing it brilliantly by leaving just before *les gilets jaunes* began their violent vehemence in venting their discontents.

Did these forays enrich my life? Without a doubt. Did they cause me endless aggravation? Without question. I propose now to share with you a number of my *own* discontents, not really to induce commiseration but rather to propose means of making gallery visits more agreeable, if not even wondrous, experiences. Most all my ailments have simple cures.

And this essay's tide will turn. Bliss-blossoms will be scattered and may those of your own descend upon you, in your own fashion, in your own time. Every

devotee deserves these unbidden blessings – otherwise why bother attempting art-suffusion?

Responsibilities – Curators

Curators have manifold obligations I am not aware of, never having been one or had a friend so employed. There is no doubt, however, they face enormous challenges and are obliged to make thousands of decisions every time they mount a show. No wonder years may be consumed between original conception and first public viewing. So as an outsider, I can comment only upon the visible, the apparent and listen to what my mind and body tell me.

Curators' first imperative is vision, from which all else necessarily flows. That vision must be clear, precise, of interest and have a strong likelihood of being brought triumphantly to fruition.

Clarity may take several forms: Will you focus on a particular artist? Or only on a segment of his work? Will you examine a particular style, say, the beginnings of Cubism or only *European* Abstract Expressionism? Or will you, instead, lean towards displaying 17th Century Dutch masters or rather an overview of 18th Century seascapes? In any case you must come to an agreement with your fellow curator(s) as rare is the exhibit, nowadays, with only one person in absolute charge.

Precision involves deep knowledge of your decided-upon exposition. What are the *critical* paintings essential to providing distinct understanding of your chosen subject-matter? Without at least some of them the show will be fatally incomplete and lack *gravitas*.

How can you generate interest when people's tastes so widely differ? No analogy comes to mind to ballet's perennial it-wouldn't-be-Christmas-without *The Nutcracker*. Can your publicity-department beguile me with explaining the fascination of a particular genre I had always imagined boring? Have you stumbled upon or intuited a potentially revolutionary idea: combining the work of artist A and artist B, though decades apart, separated by oceans, now under a single banner? The unlikely might now become apparent, the manner in which one, seemingly by chance or serendipity, influenced in turn the other and how, by virtue of shared artistic beliefs, they complement each other in ways previously unrealized? Or will you get downright lucky and have a devoted acolyte dump a trove of lifetime's collecting of a particular painter? This was the recent case of a fabulous donation – dozens of splendid paintings by James Morrice, covering various life- and style-stages, resulting in a scintillating exhibition in Ottawa's National Art Gallery.

Other instances will have less to do with fulfilling public's desires and more with institutions' recent catalogues; political correctness; diversity; making amends; and “relevance”. Over the past decades have your shows featured a preponderance of males? Most likely. Are said males “white”, old or dead? Probably. When did you last feature a person of “colour” retrospective? Devote

an entire show to a female? Explore recent developments in the Indigenous-peoples community? These may be important issues to specific community-shards but become serious concerns to Canadian institutions whose government-funding is tied to sensitivity in these matters. Running as I write is *Anthropocene*, a neologism coming into parlance in recent years, to indicate that humans' actions – and their inability or refusal to mitigate, curb and eliminate them – cause those signal effects on the planet to define our present age. Rooms were filled almost exclusively with super-sized high-tech photographs; the sight was impressive, depressive and occasionally illuminating. So Toronto's Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) has successfully checked the box of “relevance” – at least for now ...

The final consideration, the potential likelihood for success, is dependent on a number of factors. Is it possible the project's scope is excessively wide? Or too arcane to have any hope of attracting much audience? Will sufficient display-space be allotted? Is an uncomfortable deadline imposed upon you? If so, will you realistically manage to get the show up on time? Will the gallery part with eight million dollars to purchase that glorious painting you imagine as your exhibit's apex? And do you have the connections and goodwill to cajole, wheedle, promise favours in order to borrow those essential works your vision-execution so desperately begs and lusts for?

Curators are guides to our whole experience. This is tricky as the age- and education-range will be immense. People must never be talked down to but instead educated, stimulated, hopefully awed. They need to be reminded of the artistic context within which the art was created as well as the times' circumstances.

For sake of example, let us pretend the show deals with Surrealism. We will want to be told what this art-movement is; how it defined *itself*; what its goals were (including choice manifesto-quotes); where its physical centre was; who the major artists were and how its authoritarian major-domo, André Breton, was the self-styled arbiter. The above gives a rough, crude idea. Countless articles and books have been written about Surrealism in general; its origins; practitioners; Dadaists precursors; defectors; and influence on art that persists to this day. Interest may be tickled.

It is also helpful to be told Surrealism's heyday was between the two delightful World Wars and be given some idea of the populace's mood and economic condition. No matter what the exhibit, context may be heightened by concurrent references to particularly world-shaking events (the Titanic's sinking; Kennedy's assassination; the first man on the moon).

The most glorious contextualizing I've ever experienced occurred at an exhibit I do not remember – notes would have been taken had I known this piece would

be written, but for argument's sake, let's presume it was a retrospective of Jackson Pollock. Upon entering, stencilled high on the wall was a long list of more-or-less recent inventions (in appearance's order) in effect when Pollock entered the world (1912). Severely condensed: the telephone; toilet paper; Coca Cola; radio broadcasts; washing machines; and the first affordable cars. During his lifetime, the following were inserted into the landscape: televisions and "talkie" movies; electric razors and guitars; bikinis and the "pill"; helicopters and nuclear bombs. Due to his life-ending, murderous drunken car-crash (1956), Pollock missed out on the advent of commercial air travel; video games; Valium; cellphones; personal computers; not to mention the World Wide Web and all the other appurtenances that so delight and plague our lives today.

Context's contours established, in what manner do you wish to lead the public through your exhibit? Perhaps you'd like to group paintings according to themes explored over a lifetime. If the artist had favourite retreats you might want to divide the paintings into home and locales. On the other hand, you might wish to concentrate on his approach, style and subject matter. How do they develop? What seems to be a constant; what is jettisoned? Does he go through a watercolour period; is she fixated on portraits for a few years; will he veer towards *le style du jour* only to soon revisit previous concerns; do her paintings begin gradually to move away from strict life-representation to brave hints at unmistakable abstraction?

Does an artist's career begin with timidly muted colours only to later embrace bolder and flashier hues? Are the colours always brash but does the panoply's cornucopia begin to recede and become austere restrictive? Are "accidents" embraced, not effaced? Does the artist tire of excessive line-clarity and begin to seriously scumble? Is the early gentlest painstaking brushwork now replaced with obsessive layering, with impasto so bread-crusty you are tempted to snap off a bite and chew on it? Does old age bring serenity or an almost desperate wildness?

Once the requisite paintings are disgorged from subterranean vaults, canvases carefully removed from numerous cities' packing-cases and now all lined up, the procession of curator-questions continues. Is the allotted exhibition-space flexible? To what extent may it be shaped or divided into sections? What is the ideal colour and texture of the walls and will they remain uniform throughout?

Space-contours put in place and the walls' desired colour-shade achieved, many more decisions need to be taken involving sequence and placement. Each painting must be hung at precisely *this* height. Should the canvases be equally spaced? Might it be interesting to create shapes with four equi-sized miniatures forming a quasi-circle, enclosing an empty centre? Or would it be preferable to

have the four “babies” flank a medium-sized canvas, two atop each other on both sides, creating the suggestion of a triptych?

I always prefer the sequence to be more-or-less the order in which they were created so I can arrive at some idea of the artist's evolution. Shostakovich wrote fifteen string quartets over almost 50 years. Delving into them I would not press the “shuffle” button so my ears would be assaulted by #8, #3, #12, etc. I would much rather listen first to #1, probably several times for familiarity's sake, before moving on to #2 and after some months had passed I would finally arrive at #15.

During the 30-year relationship with model, then lover and wife, Hortense Fiquet, Cezanne painted an almost equal number of her portraits. Let's pretend, for the master's retrospective, the curators have gotten hold of six of them. I would prefer to see them amidst other works, showing his artistry's progression along with her concurrent aging. The curators might wish to group them all together as the subject matter is identical. It really is a matter of taste but this taste's execution demands coherency – well-considered, if not passionate, concussions.

Juxtaposition may also present stimulating possibilities. Seeing as Fiquet was a professional model, it might be interesting to place a portrait or two by others beside those of Cezanne. Both Whistler and Monet had great fondness for water and fog. I, for one, would love to see a room full of Whistler's misty waterscapes with a couple of Monets thrown in – or vice versa. Surely they would complement each other. Or not. In either case the side-by-sides should be illuminating. Were you to devote an exhibit to Manet, without doubt you would wish to include the large iconic *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1862/63). Wouldn't it be fascinating, however, to see Cezanne's eponymous, tiny, severely encrusted “version” right beside it? (You would not want, however, Picasso's take on it as it would only detract.)

The matter of “evolution” is highly problematic. Artists bounce off each other. They will see work from many years ago or something made last week by a friend. They may well decide to incorporate some aspect(s) of it on their next couple of canvases before they revert to their usual selves. At the *Musée Marmottan Monet* I spied an unmistakable Paul Gauguin – which turned out to be an Émile Bernard, his travelling-companion that summer. Right next to it was a painting, the provenance of which was a mystery to me. Of course it was a Gauguin. Similarly at the *Musée de l'Orsay* there was a multi-spotted canvas, clearly a Klimt. No – a Pierre Bonnard.

To exacerbate my perplexity, certain artists can paint in any style whenever they wish – and do so well. Particularly difficult for me to identify was Gustave Caillebotte, whose facility with any subject or method is extraordinary. André Derain, however, apparently disconcerted his companions as no style of his seemed to last longer than a month, yet none of them of much interest. Rare is the artist like Seurat in whose work we can see the clear progression of small brushstrokes becoming smaller and smaller until ending in exquisite stippling. (I

want to avoid “pointillism”, a description he apparently despised.) Who knows, though, what direction he might have gone had he not died at age 31.

All “movements” begin with a momentum-burst, then become steady before losing energy and flaming out, leaving others to ponder them. Particularly fascinating are artists who foreshadow new forms of expression when painting in ways utterly unrecognizable to how we (began and sometimes still do) “identify” them. Again at the *Marmottan* I was stymied by a painting, the contours of which were bewildering. It really looked like a bit of mess. Only after reading its title did I discover it was a beach-scene. It took considerable minutes to finally recognize a rocky cliff, a sand-wedge and water. The painter was Henri Matisse prefiguring Abstract Expressionism. Likewise Monet, with severely problematic eyesight as he aged, would occasionally plaster so much paint on the canvas as to make it almost impossible to recognize his beloved Japanese bridge.

Curators also need to consider the first thing they want the public to see. You know what they say about first impressions. Do you want to greet visitors with one of the artist's most famous images? If the show concerns a time-period, you might wish to ease everyone into it by presenting helpful examples of work directly preceding those decades in order to show what painters were influenced by or rebelling against.

I will always remember the AGO's introduction to a wonderful AbEx overview. It was a bold choice. Before seeing a single canvas, one was confronted with a large Picasso depicting a Parisian dance hall at night, everyone dressed in elegant finery (*Le Moulin de la Galette*, 1900). It was stunning. I was further awed upon realizing this total command and assurance was executed by a mere youth of nineteen. True, *Le Moulin*, painted in very realistic fashion, did not give me any sense of the Pollocks, Rothkos, de Koonings I was about to see. Yet it provided a clear sense of what precisely those artists did *not* want to paint. Perhaps of greater importance, though, is the fact *Le Moulin* is a masterpiece. And the whole point of going to a gallery, for me, is to encounter truly great art.

Most painters care a great deal about light – though I am not referring to the light in their painting (if any) but rather to the light in which the final work is to be seen. Some desire brilliant illumination, others wish the canvas to be presented in mysterious dimness forcing the viewer to “struggle” while attempting to penetrate its secrets. Artists' desires should be accommodated whenever possible. General lighting may also create a mood, the attempted nature of which again falls into the curators' purview.

Another question to be addressed with each artwork is whether it needs a frame or not. Some look loveliest when plainly hung and others benefit from the

simplest frame girding the canvas – but then the issue rises whether said frame should be of some wood or metal and of what nature and colour. Often there is nothing to consider as old paintings demand glass-cover hermetically-sealed frames in order to protect them from moisture and ultraviolet light's colour-fading rays. Such frames will also act as protection from dust and human contact. Paintings, like most girls, do not tolerate continual caresses, being coughed or sneezed upon, never mind being vandalized.

I am sure this responsibility-list could continue for some time but for me the final issue to be touched upon is signage. What information do you wish to impart to the viewer? Certainly one wishes to know the painter's name but if an entire show is devoted to, say, Utrillo, then it becomes most tedious to have every mini-plaque say "Maurice Utrillo – Born: December 26, 1883 in Montmartre, Paris, France. Died: November 5, 1955 in Dax, France."

One certainly desires to know the painting's name and have it translated when not excessively *évident* along with when it was created and where (if apposite). I prefer to have the composition's materials listed as well as its measurements so one interested may have curiosity fulfilled. If the canvas is borrowed, curators have probably no choice but to acknowledge the gallery in which it usually hangs. Signage should always be discreet, not distracting from the artwork, as well as consistently placed (below the painting, to its right, etc.) so finding the information becomes a reflex. (The *Anthropocene* curators made an inspired decision whereby all details were on the floor, directly in front of each photograph.)

Some curators have the unfortunate tendency to deluge us with data-excess, which if read, saps the viewer's energy – very unfortunate as one goes, presumably, to a gallery to look at art, not be a crash-course victim. One may purchase the show's catalogue or if impecunious, then borrow books from the library with the alternative of finding much interest-satisfaction on the internet.

Yet there is a fine line to be walked. Recently at the *Orsay*, attending a show featuring Picasso's blue and rose period, I encountered a painting of a young man, with an ugly red blotch on his temple, lying in a coffin. I was unmoved until I read the 20-year-old was not only Picasso's compatriot but close artist-friend who had the misfortune of being girlfriend-spurned, then crowned by the impetuosity of shooting himself in a Paris café. I was grateful to the curators for providing me with this tragic background. A meaningless painting was suddenly emotion-fraught.

Responsibilities – Gallery Personnel

When I speak of gallery personnel, I refer almost exclusively to those visible, not the administrators, fundraisers, restorers, archivists, etc. whom no visitor knowingly ever sees. Most obviously, wandering-eyed security officers' task is to ensure the art's safety. I remember asking one of them – *Do you ever have the sense of seeing someone and thinking right away he's a problem, he may cause damage?* She smiled – *No, by far the biggest problem is children running around, left by their parents to frolic and silliness.* The security officers also have the unenviable task of picking up people's droppings to maintain cleanliness and safety. They must be treated with courtesy and respect – just like everyone else.

I wish there were at least one person who was the gallery's "guardian", the one whose job was to maintain the curators' vision. She would be obliged to walk through the entire exhibit, say, once every two hours to straighten any painting accidentally knocked askew by a shoulder, to remove that wad of chewed gum left beside the sculpture-encasement, to report any dimming or expired light to the maintenance staff.

My ideal gallery is quiet. The atmosphere is one akin to a library. No one is frantically running around, everyone is speaking softly, children are hushed. All readers are allowed to focus and concentrate on the text they are perusing without distraction. Reading is a solitary act. Calm induces both inspection and introspection. In *Reading for My Life*, the late, great literary critic, John Leonard, has this to say about the essential cocoon-nature of reading but for me it applies equally to assimilating art – *... books are where we go alone to complicate ourselves. Inside this solitude, we take on contours, textures, perspectives. Heightened language levitates the reader. Great art transfigures. And when we go back to it, it's full of even more surprises. We get older; it gets smarter.*

The problem, for me, is my ideal is almost never realized. Many people do not visit a gallery to see art, rather they feel the excursion to be an obligation – *When in Paris, one must go see the Mona Lisa.* Henri Loyette, a director of the venerable *Louvre* reported – *80% of the people only want to see the Mona Lisa* – (and I have heard that percentage to be even higher), thus dismissing the extraordinary treasures of this vast museum. I am not bothered by this. Stupid as gawking at a fine painting behind bulletproof glass may be, at least the grand *Louvre* is helping sustain itself by charging stiff entry fees.

What truly aggrieves me is attending an art exhibit, more and more, is seen as a social event, a form of entertainment. This will be addressed later on.

Feeding the Multitude

Certain museums – like Rome's *Galleria Borghese*, Philadelphia's Barnes Foundation – demand advance booking in order not to have visitor-excess at any given time. (At the *Borghese* one's stay is limited to two hours though I do not know if and how that is enforced.) Not so at the Vatican Museum.

The Vatican, comprising 44 hectares, must be the world's smallest country. It is also indubitably one of the world's richest institutions – but not yet having attained golden-calf status. Cupidity here knows no bounds. Its museum is vast, the collection spanning the pre-historic to the contemporary. There is an endless line of people snaking around its fortress-like walls, waiting for its glories to be revealed – and this was in January, the off-season. One simply *must* purchase an online-ticket and pay the extra 2 Euros to gain immediate entry.

I have no idea how many in dawn's line are immediately let in but it must be hundreds upon hundreds as upon my entry, around noon, the place contained a Mediterranean of humanity. “Over-crowded” does not give justice to the chaos. Everyone is constantly jostled and jostling someone else. At first I apologized to every person I bumped into but after a while I no longer asked to be pardoned. Pity the poor soul wishing to be blessed by the large tapestries on both walls of a long corridor. It was impossible to look at them. On the right was a horde of people constantly moving in one direction and on the left was an equally dense, five-or-six-people-abreast crowd flowing in the opposite direction.

I imagine the museum's principle attraction is the Sistine Chapel. The possibly peerless critic of his time, the late and insufficiently lamented Robert Hughes, was also a splendid writer – *Mass tourism has turned what was a contemplative pleasure ... into an ordeal more like a degrading rugby scrum. The crowd of ceiling-seekers is streamed shoulder to shoulder along a lengthy, narrow, windowless and claustrophobic corridor in which there is no turning back. At last it debouches into an equally crowded space, the Chapel itself, which scarcely offers the room to turn around. These are the most trying conditions under which I have ever looked at art – and over the past fifty years I have looked at a lot of art.* (from his succinctly-titled *Rome*, 2012)

The Chapel is located in the museum's bowels and Hughes has just described the pleasure of descending that stairs-series, though not mentioning something possibly new: at every level, signs inform one you are about to enter a sacred space and you must be respectfully quiet. No problem. But once inside the holiness one is met by guards shouting – *Move! Move!* It was difficult to “move” when the entire space was utterly jammed. Two walls are lined with austere wooden benches. Good luck getting a seat! (Goethe, in his *Travels in Italy*, writes some 200 years ago, of easily retreating to the Chapel's calm coolness to escape summer's oppressive heat. Yes, those were the days ...)

A visit to the Chapel today is really an ill-considered proposition. The view is unobstructed – however Michelangelo's masterpiece is so elevated – some 68 feet – it is near impossible to appreciate it. One would need a telescopic boom lift to make out details. In the end, one has no choice but to bend one's neck as far back as it can go and then stare for about ten seconds before moving it back to its natural position. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. How is it possible to perpend some 12,000 square feet of painting? Especially when you can't arrive at any clear images. It is far wiser to purchase an over-size fold-out print to examine at calm leisure.

As my body was getting progressively more tired and my neck progressively more sore I was seriously jolted by a very loud voice, transmitted by speakers, telling us we cannot take photos. This message was blasted *ad nauseam* in different languages. I just fled – but not before attaining understanding: we, the visitors, were obliged to display the highest decorum whereas the custodians were allowed to be as rude and crude as they wished. (If one is wealthy, however, it is possible to be part of a small group of 10 to 20 [costing, per person, 300 euros, twenty years ago] and enjoy a two-hour guided tour with a quarter of it in the Chapel – after the museum is officially closed.)

I then stumbled upon the modern art section which is a long slim winding corridor full of uninteresting art – though to be fair, I was not exactly in a fine mood by then. Nonetheless I encountered a drawing that astonished me: a study for one of Francis Bacon's *Screaming Popes* series (ca. 1950 – mid-sixties). If ever you have seen and contemplated (as I have) a few of them you would inescapably come to the conclusion this whole set is a searing indictment of the papacy as well as the Catholic Church. What were the curators thinking?

Thank heaven there still remain a few places that are not “hot” or “cool” or “must-sees”. In contrast to the Vatican fiasco, what pleasure I derived from the relatively humble permanent collection of the *Petit Palais* in Paris! It felt as though I had the gallery all to myself. In fact, I actually *was* alone in a room when marvelling at Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait in Oriental Attire with Poodle* (1631). This is a remarkable work oozing *élan* and *éclat*, all the more amazing considering the Dutch master was only 25 at the time. This experience was so agreeable I re-visited the gallery a week later. Standing again alone, embroidered in awe, I could not help but think of the humanity-mess, a couple of miles away, all clustered together in order to get an eyeful of that boxed-in mysteriously smiling *Mona*.

Lightsattack

Lighting art seems to confound curators – though it need not to. The trick is to never aim any light *directly* at the victim, in this case the sculpture or canvas in question. Sunshine descending in from a skylight illuminates evenly whereas artificial light aimed at glass-framed paintings will always be reflected. Now, when looking at such a painting, about the last thing I want to see is my own face. I am mirror averse; I don't care much for my countenance; vanity is never a priority – though I *do* prefer to look half-decent when I go out for dinner with Magda Vasko, DNA's Associate Artist, in which case she is in charge. In any event, I loath to do what I so often must: shift my position from in front to painting's side in order to avoid my mirror image. This is time-consuming, irritating and viewing paintings at an oblique angle is hardly ideal. When will an art gallery be (re)constructed so natural light may illuminate at least part of the collection?

Yet another reason I am often obliged to peer at paintings from the side is the ceiling light-fixture-reflections. I remember being bedevilled to find any position at all to avoid light-circles on Monet's iconic *Impression, Sunrise* (1874). It took literally minutes before finding the precise, relatively distant, place to stand in order to remove the blemishes. I wonder why curators pay no heed to this ever-present issue. Perhaps they shrug their shoulders – *The problem is intractable, unavoidable*. This attitude, if accurate, is unacceptable. After decades of paying great attention to light in my theatrical works I can say no problem is “intractable”. Ingenuity is required. And if the attitude is that such besmirchments are avoidable, then avoid them!

I have recently been thinking that curators possibly, unwittingly, develop one (or several) “blind spots”. Once the macro has been accomplished, the minutiae become overwhelming. I sympathise. When everything is almost ready for the public, mental fatigue must be overwhelming. (I know from my decades at DNA.) Yet one must somehow forcefully push on and not lose acuity. I sometimes feel curators become inured, lose perspective, due to excessive familiarity with the specimens given so much thought to. As a result, if I'm right, a dichotomy occurs between how intimately they know the work yet, through lack of fresh eyes or detail-oversight, they are unable to pass that intimacy on to viewers who are quite likely making first acquaintance with the work.

Do curators ever consider having a few art-infected people – not experts or board-members – tag along when they make final inspections through their “virgin” exhibits? “Outside eyes” can be most valuable. Surely they could point out viewer-unfriendly irritations which might be remedied at the last minute – or while a gallery is nightly closed to the public which has just begun to experience their efforts-culmination's wonders.

Those reflections vex me to no end. Some weeks ago, at the AGO, I was looking

at a glass-covered painting and saw four incredibly annoying green mini-moons shifting around every time I took a step to one side or the other. I looked up. All the lights were white. Where were these multi-greens coming from? Beginning almost to wonder if I was hallucinating I gently accosted a few people for confirmation. Yes, they also could see the pesky circles. They too looked up and around. No, they could not discern the source of these distractions.

Directly before exiting the AGO one finds a little booth with three helpful attendants. I stated my issue. They had no idea where these green dancing casino-chips originated from. They gave me an official card to fill out and I succinctly posed my question, adding I would appreciate a speedy response to my query as I was in the middle of writing a piece about art gallery experiences. I was told every one of these forms is carefully studied and acknowledged. I persisted – *When might I hear back from the “studier”?* One of them was assuring – *Oh, soon.* I went home pleased in the knowledge my mystery would be solved in a few days.

No clarifying email arrived. I re-visited the AGO and confronted the attendants in a mildly miffed fashion – *A couple of weeks ago I filled out this form, I was told careful attention would be paid to it and it would be dealt with soon. What exactly does “soon” mean?* More politely than myself – *“Soon” means they will get back to you in a month.* Now a little edginess – *I don’t understand. I asked one rather basic question. I stated I was writing on a time-line. Why could they not get back to me in a week? I run a tiny theatre company and I assure you if I get an emailed question I may not get back in the next couple of days but certainly in less than a week. And you guys have tons of staff. I have a part-time associate artist, that’s all.* Not exactly commiserating – *I am sure you will hear from them soon.*

Now it is some ten weeks later; the exhibit has been dismantled; I am in the final throes of editing – and still no email has popped into my Inbox (though they keep up a weekly flow concerning all the wonderful, exciting exhibits they have in store for me). Galling gallery personnel indeed!

I understand (expensive) “museum quality glass” exists – though I am not sure ever encountering it. Apparently there are other (mostly) non-glare, non-reflective glass-types available but technological ineptitude does not permit my understanding or explaining them. I believe, however, they are not necessary. Again, all that is needed is pin-point perfection in all lights’ aim. This can be done exceptionally well: at the extraordinary *Musée de l’Orangerie*, it was only on my second visit I noticed all the Renoirs had been “glassed” in.

Over the ensuing weeks I did a haphazard study and realized that light reflected off walls and ceilings continued to be the answer. Natural light is, as I said, the best solution, however it continually varies with the weather, seasons and clouds.

Nonetheless, I think it charming to have these mild variances, even minute to minute.

I don't know when I will ever forget what happened in the first room I entered at Rome's *Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo*, commonly known as *MAXXI*. The first piece on display – strangely enough – was a wonderful sculpture from centuries ago, the depiction of a naked boy slung over the shoulder of, no doubt, some god kidnapping him. The youth was young and ravishing. I slowly began to circle the towering white marble when one eye was suddenly pierced by a very powerful light-beam. It was painful. I recoiled. It was instantly obvious I would never be able to study the lovely boy's contours. Yet the solution could not have been simpler: remove that sharp-pointed dart and undraw the drapes from the floor-to-ceiling windows so soft light would come tumbling in. That boy may have been in terror yet I did not see why I should also be subjected to abuse, though of a different nature. Or was that the curators' intent?

Paris' *Musée Jacquemart-André* had a pair of very fine-lined, small Canaletto cityscapes, my first look at any of the great eighteenth-Century Italian's work. Wishing to revisit them, two hours later, it proved impossible. The sunlight was now so blinding as to be intolerable. In the brief moment my eyes were open, it was clear no one was in that room. Surely the museum-staff was, or at least needed to be, aware that starting around x-o'clock the sunbeams would begin to be of such intensity that the space would become uninhabitable. Again, we come to see art, not to be sun-scorched. I do not understand why an important museum-fraction should be made unavailable to visitors simply because gallery personnel did not remember to draw the curtains and turn on other light. The curators would not have been pleased – and this is why I advocate for the aforementioned “guardian”, only in this case a visit would be required every ten minutes or so in order to make the essential timely adjustments.

Old-fashioned frames jut out at all sides. As a result, almost inevitably a shadow-ribbon will fall over the painting. This is mildly annoying as one would like to view the entire painting, not just most of it. Canvases of a certain time are conceivably so framed in order to impart a sense of the period's custom. Paintings from other galleries no doubt come encased in the way they are hung at origin's point – and loaned surely under condition they must, under no circumstances, be removed from their fetters.

Mild annoyance in certain cases becomes serious aggravation. At the *Impressionism in the Age of Industry*, a fine exhibit at the AGO, one finds an absolutely exquisite *La Tour Eiffel* (1889) by Seurat. It was borrowed from the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, again most likely upon condition of its FedEx'ed frame-containment. Bewildering to me, however, was the choice of said frame: as though the tenacity involved in creating his work was insufficient, Seurat at one point began surrounding his paintings with borders. They are

wonders: meticulously composed of tiny multi-colour dot-clusters they sing and cavort around the canvas in changing hues. At one point this choreography melds into the image; Magda was convinced the left-side bulging effusion represented a tree. These borders are frames in their own right. They are splendid to behold. Paintings by artists who create their own within-painting frames should be dignified by not having additional frames imposed on them – or, if essential, then by canvas-protectors holding paintings' sides and angled backwards. As my eyes began to follow that rich rectangle I became infuriated when, at the top, that whole vibrant dots-streak was suddenly cast into shadow. Seurat's genius had been insulted.

The *Musée national des arts asiatiques Guimet* is a very large building housing one of the most vast collections of Oriental art in the West. I believe about a week would be needed to properly give consideration to all items on display. I imagine this is why the institute has the beckoning policy of allowing free admittance when you re-present your original ticket within three weeks. I took advantage of this generosity as you will later hear.

On my first visit, in the room dedicated to Indian artifacts, I noticed a certain dimness, looked up and counted at least six bulbs emitting no light. In the adjoining room another bulb had expired. Upon leaving the museum I went to the front desk and reported this. I even told them where and on which floor the problem lay, as Indian god-statues are on the ground floor and heaven knows if there are more things Indian lying about. I was told to fill out a form. I politely refused – one must make every attempt in France to maintain *politesse* – but inside I fumed – *What? This is your job. The Guimet is not my museum. I don't work here.* Something similar happened at the *Orsay*, too tedious to go into details.

At the *Borghese* everything was “enhanced” by a most-rapidly blinking powerful bulb making it intolerable to look at anything in that room. Yes, looking at art under “strobe” lights is my ideal. Right away I complained to a restorer in the room's corner. She said it would be repaired overnight. Fine, but why not have someone immediately flip a switch and turn off that light? Even if a circuit-break would have killed all the illumination in the room, open the curtains. I have come here all the way from Toronto. Have Romans lost common sense?

What a contrast to the *Orangerie*! In the second tiny Cezanne room appears a particularly fine portrait of his son and I wondered why it felt a little dark, difficult to make out details. I looked up and, sure enough, a light had gone out. Upon leaving I went to the ticket-counter and told someone about the issue – *Oh, thank you so much for informing us. We will make sure it is fixed by tomorrow.* When I returned a week later that portrait shone in its full glory.

Peculiar and Pointless Placements

In Greek mythology, Apollo (music-plus-god) is pierced with a love-desire arrow by archer Cupid (eros-god). Cupid also has *anti-love* arrows in his arsenal which, rather maliciously, he shoots around the same time at Daphne (a naiad), rendering her immune to male love. Dazzled by Daphne's beauty, besotted with desire, Apollo begins to relentlessly pursue the water-nymph as she, with equal passion, flees his ardour. When finally worn out, she prays to her father Peneus (river-god) and begs him to – *destroy the beauty that has injured me, or change the body that destroys my life* (from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*).

Peneus goes into action before prayer's end: Daphne's feet become roots fastened to the ground; her legs are slowly encased in bark; her raised arms are simultaneously turned into branches while her hands become leafy twigs. Before long she becomes a full-fledged laurel tree. Totally love-smitten Apollo remains undeterred; he caresses her new form and declares his forever-lost bride to be "his" tree of undying leaves. Thus the returning military commander, of yet-another victory, paraded through Rome's streets wearing a laurel-wreath; thus each new emperor's head was adorned in identical fashion when the freshly-minted coins appeared. Daphne's new incarnation was now the symbol for triumph and victory.

I have dragged you through this story in order to remind or inform. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, the magnificent sculptor and architect, chiselled and smoothed, in white marble, a most extraordinary sculpture based on this myth: *Apollo and Daphne* (1622-25). It captures a moment mid-transformation. I had seen a photo and was most eager to visit it, which is why I made the *Borghese*, where it resides, the first Roman museum I visited.

Entering the first room I immediately recognized it – at first overjoyed, then quickly appalled. The sculpture had been placed on a high pedestal. Now, I am not quite six feet tall. As a result I had the most marvellous view of Apollo's toes. Of course I had come to see the sculpture in its entirety but was most intrigued by the uppermost reaches where the fingers have already sprouted into large leaf-clusters. The sculpture is eight feet tall. So the very feature making this so unique, so famous, the finely-wrought hands demanding utmost perusal were made inaccessible, even to the tallest basketball players. This bewilders me. How does this serve the public, not to mention the aficionado?

Beyond cupidity, the Vatican is also obsessed with size and height. St. Peter's square contains over a quarter-million square feet. At its deepest centre one finds St. Peter's Basilica, almost 450 feet high – easily doubling the Colosseum's towering height – as it imposes itself on a sizable part of Rome. As God resides in Heaven, perhaps the goal was to get as near to him as possible (at that time).

From the Basilica's facade extend two semi-circular colonnades which, according to Bernini, its architect, is meant to represent the church's world-embrace – though we all know whom the clergy has been most interested in “embracing”. The hundreds of columns are all 66 feet high and perched atop them are 140 statues – all by Bernini and his pupils – ostensibly depicting popes, martyrs, etc. From the square they seem the size of fat matchsticks. We have no clue as to their identity, though all this data is available somewhere, no doubt. Again, they too deserve closeness to God. Yet we mere mortals are denied access to them – I suppose we don't deserve to examine statue-scores by arguably the era's greatest sculptor – unless, of course, one is a cleaner bi-annually tethered to that pre-mentioned telescopic boom lift (though looking at all the pigeon-shit on the greying white marble, I'm not sure the chore is performed even so frequently).

Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne*, glorious as it is, may possibly be surpassed by another of his iconic works (though it is foolish to rank genius-masterpieces as merely one's temperament prefers Beethoven's Seventh over his Sixth). I refer to *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647-52) in the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria. This wondrous sculpture imagines a transfiguring vision in the life of Teresa of Avila (founder of the Carmelite Order) wherein, as she writes, a cherubim appeared holding a golden spear which – *he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he pulled it out, I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed with the great love of God. ... The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease, nor is one's soul then content with anything but God.*

Below the erect spear-aiming angel, all one sees is a face, limp arm and bare foot, the rest a commotion of volumes upon volumes of drapes shrouding and supporting her half-raised body; Hughes feels she – *is levitating, borne up on a marble cloud.* The half-open mouth has been seen as moaning in bliss; spiritual (and physical?) orgasm; relief over death being so near; straining to be in the presence of God. Its power might best be imparted by a usually-composed friend telling me that upon seeing it he burst into tears.

Problems still exist, however, in its viewing. In the background one sees an irregular cluster, probably brass, of slim “golden” rods meant to indicate sunshine. They strike me as unnecessary and distracting. Originally the illumination's source was the *actual* sun sending its rays through an unseen yellow-glass window (in the ceiling?). Said window, according to Hughes, is now so covered in dust and, yes, pigeon-shit, an electric light was installed. (I wonder why the window cannot be cleaned or replaced.)

The church-interior, even in sunny mid-afternoon, is dark. One is allowed relatively close to the saint yet the overall dimness prevents careful study. Oh, wait a minute, someone just dropped a two-euro coin in a slot and an electric light came on. That overhead bulb *did* create the possibility of better detail-

viewing though the artificial light was uneven and unsatisfying. Then the light went out, just as suddenly as it had gone on. Over an hour's course maybe four people slipped in a coin to provide two minutes of coarse light. I decided to slip my coins in the old beggar-woman's hands outside the church.

The Santa Maria church is small and humble. It does not stand out. Looking for it, I was pointed in *this* direction. No. I was pointed in *that* direction. Again, no. I finally went to the front of a swanky hotel – yet the footmen were clueless about the church's location though it was a mere half-block away. Explaining the reason I was in its search drew dumb looks. In the end, it might have taken me almost an hour to find it though I was continually in its immediate vicinity. Amazing it was to realize no one a couple of stone-throws away could direct me to a world-famous masterpiece, one created by one of their own people (albeit centuries ago).

When pondering this “anomaly”, the great Hughes came to mind – and so I will allow him, at some length, the last words of this section. This man who cared so deeply about art wrote poignantly about his fears concerning the Eternal City's future in *Rome's* epilogue – *The most astonishing thing about the city used to be, until most recently ... its deposit of art. People are apt to suppose that a nation which has been left enormous cultural legacies by its ancestors can be presumed to be highly cultivated in the here and now.*

Italy is one big proof that this is not true. Most Italians are artistic illiterates. Most people anywhere are; why should Italians be any different? Though once they pretended not to be, today most of them can't even bother to pretend. They like to invoke the splendours of their patrimonio culturale, but when it comes to doing anything about them, like turning their considerable energies towards preserving that inheritance in an intelligible way ... little or nothing is done and nothing or little happens.

What the Italian public really cares about is calcio, soccer. ... Not only does high culture not function as social glue in this country, it probably has less local pride invested in it than anywhere else in Western Europe. ... That is why most Italians can contemplate, with relative equanimity, the very real prospect that their Ministry of Culture's already beleaguered and inadequate budget will be slashed ... while its director has been replaced by a former chief of McDonald's. ... The cultural IQ of the Italian nation, if one can speak of such a thing, has dropped considerably and the culprit seems to be television, as it is in other countries. What is the point of fostering elites that few care about? ... In a wholly upfront culture of football, 'reality' shows and celebrity games, a culture of pure distraction, it is no longer embarrassing that Donatello ... is one of those things about which you, as a good molto tipico Italian and nice enough guy, do not personally give a rat's ass.

To every rule there seems to be an exception which probes it. Before my pilgrimage I had landed upon a photo of an extraordinary sculpture, *The Martyrdom of Saint Cecilia* (1600) by Stefano Maderno. I repeatedly stared at this white-marble-enrobed young female, lying on her side with face averted, and became a little obsessed with desire to see this tragic figure.

According to fifth-century legend, a daughter of Roman nobility, Cecilia, as a child, committed her virginity to God; she converted pagans; when she distributed all her possessions to the poor, the region's prefect was infuriated (god knows why?) and ordered her burned. The flames refused to comply and so she was decapitated. In the early ninth century, a pope discovered her relics in a catacomb and ordered them buried in the basilica which now bears her name. She became the patron saint of music. Her tomb was opened in 1599 and Maderno was commissioned to sculpt the (astonishingly) un-decomposed body exactly as it lay in front of him. At age 23 he could hardly have imagined he would be creating his life's masterpiece.

I duly went to the Church of Saint Cecilia, where I found her in the nave, centred directly in front of the altar, on the floor. She was encased in a glass box, illuminated by appropriately soft, warm lightning. Though she is petite, a long well-padded kneeling bench had been placed so one could move along it and look down at every inch of the fragility facing us. This was the most apposite presentation possible. We are allowed to be close to her, commune with her.

Now an irruption -- *Writing about music is like dancing about architecture*. We still cannot ascribe that famous line to any specific person. But yes, we can speak in metaphors though I try not to. Nonetheless it's all about art: when technicalities cannot hurdle barriers, one still has *feeling*, which rises above all things hard, material, concrete. And one *can* do one's best to talk about feeling.

Here is what I felt looking at Cecilia: I love you. You may be 23 but you look 16. For once I had zero desire to slip my hands under a lovely precocious girl's clothing. I have never had a child but I could feel she was my oh-so-precious daughter. All I wanted was to cry, hold her in my arms, cradle her, console her and though now dead maybe her soul was alive and she could hear me – *Oh my beautiful, vulnerable, hurt girl, I love you more than you can fathom, unless now that you are in another sphere you can, and I hope so, because it's all inexpressible to me. I don't have the same belief-system as you but I can't tell you how proud I am of you. You are so virtuous and I am endlessly sorry for all the indignities, the torment you have gone through. You never deserved this, you deserved just the opposite, your honour irradiating the world.*

That day the church was visited by only a handful. Quiet reigned. As people sat or kneeled behind the bench, no one spoke – the air was infused with reverence. Ataraxia-sodden, I was in the midst of my most glorious art-experience in Rome.

Less is More – but More is Preferable to Nothing at All

The Capitoline Hill, along with the Forum, lie essentially across the street from the Colosseum. I say “essentially” as the Colosseum is a small enclosed space in relation to the other's vast sprawl. Two entry points exist, one for the Hill and one for the Forum. But where are they? Maps will tell you but I am not competent at reading them. After hours in the Colosseum it was latish afternoon but I wanted a taste in order to be prepared for the next day, as my pass allowed entrance to all three places over two *consecutive* days. So I crossed the street and asked a tour-bus driver – *Over there* – he pointed. I then went in that direction looking for an official standing on the sidewalk, a ticket-stamper or a sign indicating entry-point. Nothing. Finally finding an opening in the wire fence I ventured forward.

My goal was to first have a look inside the *Museo Capitolina* – but was unable to find its location. While climbing part-way up a hill I encountered two German students – *Do you have any idea where the museum is?* They were not interested in it but agreed nonetheless to do a map-search, which, alas, was confusing to them as there was absolutely nothing to orient us – *We think it's over that way.* I trudged along until espying a building and only upon arriving at its portals did I realize I had arrived at the desired destination.

The *Museo Capitolina* is small, dedicated to giving a sense of ancient Roman living-ways and history. Its upper floor coddles interesting sculptures as well as a phenomenal marble-display. A team had combed through both the Hill and Forum and pried loose a little sample of every different kind of that magically-metamorphosed limestone. Each was cut to identically-sized small bevelled rectangles, glued to a glass-encased wall, in maybe ten neat vertical lines, each containing some dozen slices. Below each specimen was a number, moving in chronological order from uppermost left to the final line-end's right. If this sounds like a logical way to proceed, you are right. If you think this same logic is practised by all museums – well, you will soon find out how wrong you are.

Beside the glass case was a large map of Europe and northern Africa full of circled numerals, each number corresponding with a marble-species to show its place of origin. Nothing extraneous was cluttering up the map-side wall, no mini-dissertation on how the stone was quarried, how its heavy weight was transported, etc. This was a model display: simple, clear and elegant.

What a revelation! I had remembered marble as white and pink but was ignorant of the fact it existed in so many colours, covering the entire spectrum all the way to black. I knew marble could be veined but not blotched – and in such differing ways, reminiscent of lizards' skin-decorations. I sat skeined in awe, occasionally rising to peer more closely at anything stirring my fascination which could have held for hours had not the museum's shuttering-time arrived. Wishing for at least a glimpse of the Forum, before departure, I asked for directions – *Go down the hill but hurry as it is closing in an hour.* So I walked at a quick pace until I saw a

couple sitting on a bench. Sitting beside them I lit my *own* cigarette – *Do you know where the Forum begins?* One looked at me quizzically – *Actually I'm not sure but I think we already are in the Forum.*

It was all so confusing, downright confounding. You'd think by now I'd have wisened up but, naively, I really expected a sign saying you are leaving one and entering the other. Many people-rivulets were moving in all directions; I hardly knew how to proceed. So I plunked myself down and admired the weather-beaten crumbling ruins and soon loudspeakers told us everyone must leave within half-an-hour. Wandering around to get a closer view of those slender, ridiculously-tall pillars, I now knew not to bother looking for signage. I no longer even cared to know what was what, though amidst the grand Empire's remnants-magnificence I remember thinking – *I will be very sad if this part of Rome is hit by an earthquake.*

That night I was planning the next day: hours spent in the *Museo Capitolina* re-admiring the marble-starburst along with unexamined sculptures, followed by a leisurely stroll through the Forum, hopefully finding a few people who could answer questions. I awoke on time and decided to take a different route in order to see more of Rome. First mistake. A ten-minute walk took thirty, grace of people again pointing me in unhelpful directions. Once arrived at the Forum entrance, I presented my pass only to be told it was invalid. Why? It was explained that if one visits the Hill or the Forum on the same day as the Colosseum then the second day is “used up”. I pointed to the English text – *That's not what it says.* The pleasant, English-speaking guide studied said words and pointed out I was wrong – and then kindly agreed the wording was unclear and somewhat convoluted – *But that is what it is meant to say.* I re-examined the document and saw she was right: the text could indeed be parsed in the way she insisted.

I was denied entry and left thinking – *Why is this text so minuscule when there is so much blank space on the pass? Why could the pass-conditions not be expressed with extreme clarity? These were among Rome's most fabled sites.* A little worn out and disgusted, though temper kept in control, I walked away. Sufficient euros were in my pocket to gain entry but my mood had excessively soured. Suddenly remembering Rome's transit tickets are valid for two hours I hopped a bus and went back home to my inexpensive ex-cloister *pension* and spent the rest of the day in bed with Proust and Beethoven, having picked up wine and a hunk of lasagna.

In retrospect, do I regret my petulant action even knowing full well my chances of visiting Rome again hovered ever-so-slightly above zero? No, not at all. The city is excessively “eternal” and not for me: its slave-whipped grandeur holds no appeal. It may contain much beauty but this does not outweigh the continual frustrations and irritations. Italy has much more quaint cities and towns should I

ever choose to revisit the country. Besides, in my foul mood, I know I would not have really appreciated even those magnificent marble-marvels.

I have already sufficiently limned the Vatican Museum's tumult but will now speak of yet another of this humanity-sea-surge's effect. The powers-that-be came up with a particularly inspired idea: place the signage on stands resembling mini-lecterns with arrows pointing at the art referred to. This solution is particularly efficacious as one "instrument" can take care of many paintings at once (they like to decorate all walls from knee-height to ceiling). It also obviates the necessity of attaching signs to walls; when the collection rotates it is much simpler to take the signage-plaques off the lectern and replace them with new ones.

This ingenious elucidation-method faces one problem – the wooden bases are not fastened to the ground. I suppose that is necessary as the lectern-edges are on the sharp side. The result is truly helpful. With all those people milling about, these light-weight stands are constantly bumped around so when you enter the room you find out that hanging on this wall (or is it another one?) are three Raphaels, a Michelangelo, two Brunelleschis and a Giotto – however it is impossible to discern which painting is which: pure shambolism.

Rome's *Museo Nazionale Etrusco* proudly holds the world's largest pre-Roman Italian antiquities-collection. It is in many ways a wonderful repository of vases, amphorae, jewellery, cooking utensils, various tools: the list is endless. Another of its virtues is its lack of popularity. I probably exaggerate – but not by much: the day I visited there seemed to be more staff than museum-goers.

For an ignoramus like myself – at least when it comes to all things Etruscan – it was staggering to see works of such extraordinary beauty, all made between the eighth and third century BC. The detail work was phenomenal. A vase-waist might be encircled by ////////////////, below it a slim line followed by \\\ with lllllllllllllllllllll in between. Repeat and repeat. And I am describing just the waist. The same pattern, or a variation, would be found on numerous places on vase's surface, all separated by black-paint scenes on ochre dye. The execution was so detailed, precise and time-consuming, the collection so vast, it made me wonder how people could be found to perform the quotidian tasks of preparing food, child care, collecting olives and pressing them for oil, as it seemed most of the population must have been engaged in creating staggering beauty.

On the bottom floor you are obliged to bend over in order to enter a particularly small room and this was worth the effort, even with a sore back. Door opened, you walk into a dimly-lit elaborately reconstructed burial place. The floor, ceiling, and all four walls were covered in multi-coloured patterns of tiles or paint – I don't recall which. I sat down, all alone, and was shaken with wonder. Before leaving

the museum I returned to the room and, again alone, stared at every square foot, marvelling at patterns' intricacy and colours' harmony. This burial place felt much more sacred than the Sistine Chapel.

Despite all the glories therein, the museum, as a whole, has a fatal flaw: excess. Directly upon entering, one encounters emptiness save for a glass-encased very large vase. A sizable sign informs us of the object's provenance, its importance, only to continue detailing the massive effort needed to wrench it back home from (I believe) New York's Metropolitan Museum. I spent a fair amount of time admiring this vase and imagined the great pleasure felt upon its rightful return.

Exiting the foyer, however, I was introduced to more vases, then many more vases, then many, many, many more vases. The effect of this inundation was wearying. They ended up all looking alike. I lost all interest and walked by quickly, not even bothering to glance at the endless arrays – *Oh, it's just more vases and amphorae*. Fascination had morphed into boredom, then mild irritation.

I understand the museum's pride over their fantastic collection. Yet surely the curators' desire was not to browbeat the visitor. I would have been more than content to examine closely, say, a dozen of these vases. But over a hundred? That's overkill, bound to inure one to such beauty and craftsmanship. Instead of cramming in as many vases as possible, rim to rim, why not judiciously choose a dozen or two and place them a few paces apart so each one can glow in its own glory? Give them room to breathe! And then rotate them every month or two.

I have no doubt the painted scenes express boundless subject matter, though difficult to decipher for one not steeped in Etruscan religion and history. I am equally certain there exist nuances in pigments, patterns, materials and styles over the course of six centuries, not discernible to the layman. These facets, however, are of consuming interest to art historians, authors, PhD students. Why not store much of the collection in the basement or an upper floor and give the scholars supervised private access? They are the ones most knowledgeable, appreciative and would doubtless be most grateful to spend endless hours examining, comparing and taking notes in calm surroundings.

I could be wrong. I regret never asking. It is possible only a fraction of the museum's wares *are* on display. Spaces not visible to us might be full of crates upon crates of vases and much else. Perhaps storage areas are so engorged the curators had no choice but to present the unwelcome, fatiguing cornucopia.

This imposing edifice also contains an overwhelming number of tiny objects: rings; bracelets; hairpins; combs; fragments and the like. The array is

dizzying. Seeing as I have just belaboured my feelings on this matter directly above I will desist further commenting.

On the matter of these often minuscule artifacts, however, a whole new issue arises: placement and, of course, signage. Imagine a glass box with each of the three shelves supporting over a dozen items. Each item is numbered so one can glean information about them on a plaque jutting out from the box's bottom. This sizable plaque pokes into your thigh as you lean over to peer more closely at an item of particular interest. Much more troubling, however, is the numbers' order – which bewilders.

I don't remember how the "system" worked exactly – again, I never anticipated writing this piece – but I do recall how annoying it was. Either the items on the bottom shelf were numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, 12, 14, 15, 21, 23, 24, 25, 29, 32 (with the missing numbers on the shelves above) – or the number-sequence on the shelves were in consecutive order but the plaque-numbers resembled the numeral-row above. Perhaps both shelves *and* plaque-numbering resembled Dadaist inspiration. Whatever the case, it was very trying to match object with identifier, even more so had there been people crowding beside me.

All I can hazard is the shelves all began with, say, rings with the first one containing 1-4, the one above 5-8 and the uppermost 9-11, all items on each shelf belonging to a certain time-period. Perhaps the curators considered this arrangement to be significant. I don't know. This is pure guesswork though it should not be. A museum's job is to elucidate, not mystify.

Visiting Paris' humongous *Centre Pompidou* is a daunting experience. It is easy to find as its 10 floors (each over 24,500 square feet) hover over a huge public square and its ducts, circulating air, electricity, water and people are placed outside the building and coloured in bright (garish?) blue, yellow, green and red. Those ducts are presently in serious need of a paint-job. I remember finding it curious when I first saw it in 1972 (a year after its completion) but now agree with apparently many Parisians who find it just plain ugly. The chief design-virtue of this eye-sore is enormous spatial flexibility, ideal for exhibiting art.

The *Pompidou* presents a number of challenges. There is one entry-point – but where is it? As a major tourist-attraction, you would think there would be no shortage of multilingual signs indicating its location. I did not see any. Once inside, new challenges emerge. The *Pompidou* is a multi-purpose institution, housing two cinemas, a public library, a performance space and much more. I came there to look at art. But how to find the modern and contemporary collections?

Having forgotten the existence of all the centre's prongs, I took the nearest elevator and landed in a huge room full of tables and people, books and

computers. I retreated quickly to the ground floor. If there was an information desk, I could not locate it. After asking several people I finally found the elevator which took me onto one of the highest floors. It perplexes me, in a building so complex, that missing are numerous major signs telling us which floor is meant for what purpose and how to ascertain the necessary elevator. Considering the exterior's multi-colour scheme, why not mimic it in the huge foyer, with red for books, blue for art and so on?

Exiting the elevator I found myself in a long corridor which spans the entire floor. I walked into the first room facing me which ended up having several interesting paintings, arguably the modernist collection's apogee. The standout was Matisse's sublime blue-dressed *Marguerite au chat noir* (1910). I wandered around for a bit, then wanted some order. Approaching a computer-staffed station, I asked where the first room was. I duly went there. Now, there was no room next to it so I crossed the corridor and went into the room facing it. Was this room two? No, it was room 6. I asked the security guard – *So where is room two?* He shook his head – *I don't know.*

The entire floor is a rabbit-warren. Multi-sized rooms lead into more multi-sized rooms. Complicating the matter further are poorly-lit mini-corridors alongside some of the rooms. I do not understand why each separate space cannot have a number painted on entry-point's wall – when there is not only one possible route forward (and backward). I like to enter a gallery and half-breeze through the entire exhibit, noting what demands further attention and then go back to the beginning in order to devote time to those arousing my interest – and in the process discover something I had overlooked.

In the *Pompidou* maze, this was impossible. Fortunately not much held my interest so, upon realizing the labyrinthine nature of the set-up, if I wished to re-examine a painting the only solution was to enter a new room to clear my head, look back to identify a marker (that orange horse) in order to know how to re-enter that room and soon return for another look. The *Pompidou* is confounding to navigate. I was lucky there was only one elevator so re-finding Matisse's simple but arresting daughter-portrait posed no difficulty.

The floor below, a crash of contemporary art, was a horror. Piece after piece, installation after installation was unbearable: a triumph of sheer ugliness and conceptual vapidness. Scurrying through the corridor, peering into rooms both right and left in hopes of stimulation, I found nothing, thinking – *This is what passes for art these days?* Going outside on a balcony where, mercifully, one is allowed to smoke, was a joy – not because of the nicotine but the fabulous view of Paris.

Still, beyond the view and Matisse, the aggravation was not a waste of time. To return to my lodgings I needed to enter the *Métro* station which abuts the *Hôtel de Ville*, Paris' City Hall. As I had never laid eyes upon it, I decided to have a

gander. Just as the Notre Dame Cathedral – never far from my mind this past week – this building has suffered severe fire damage and in its present incarnation the *Hôtel* is a deliberate, well-proportioned, large yet restrained structure.

I walked right up to it and was able to effortlessly see the life-size clear-featured sculptures embedded into its main facade and pavilions, each bearing a name. This is how Paris honours its country's great artists, politicians, scientists: Voltaire, Molière, Mme. de Staël, de Musset, de La Rochefoucault, Rousseau, among scores of others. What a contrast to the indistinguishable cigarette-stub-saints perched in the sky overlooking St. Peter's square!

The former gigantic Beaux-Arts railway station was converted into the *Musée de l'Orsay* in 1986 and with its incredibly high walls and semi-vaulted ceiling immediately became one of the world's most beautiful museums. The artworks therein made it also one of the world's *greatest* museums. My visits there were exhausting because one's eyes feast on so many superb paintings and sculptures. And I saw only a decent slice as the Picasso *Bleu et Rose* exhibit was eating up a fair amount of space. Nevertheless, staff told me every effort was made to not hide away the greatest works of the collection.

Yet amidst the sumptuousness there were frustrations. The rooms were out of any discernible order – some numbered, some not. In seek of clarity, I spoke with a most jovial security guard – *My wife always tells me the order doesn't really matter, you always find something interesting to look at. And don't miss the room with the pastels. It's over there.* (Of course I'd walked by it.) So the guard worked there, but was unable to define the paintings' organization.

Perhaps my education-lack did not allow me figure out we were moving from one “movement” to another but I don't think so. The pastel-room had, yes, only pastels – from different time periods. And by no means am I suggesting it was all a horrendous hodge-podge. The curators knew exactly what they were doing – only I was unable to follow their logic, their methodology. All I know is there would be a Vuillard in one room, two rooms later three more Vuillards, and down the corridor another one.

The ground floor right-hand galleries are, granted, all in a straight line. Nonetheless it's not as you can go from room to room. Every time you exit a room you are in a corridor, both walls of which are lined with paintings. To complicate matters further, every once in a while there are small steps down from that corridor. These lead to yet another series of rooms. So the “ground floor” is really a floor with three levels.

To be perfectly honest, the problems lie also within myself and the extraordinary art-quality. Very few canvases can be dismissed – but that, of course, is only *my*

taste. One becomes sucked in, swept away. The reason I missed that pastel-room was because I was entranced by works in the corridor. I remember trying to be disciplined, at first, but in the face of such a fascinating art-mass one becomes helpless. One succumbs. Overwhelming as it was, for once no complaints escape my lips about an excess of things to look at. I just wish I had a note-taker who could keep track of things and then, during a break – *You wanted to have another look at that little Bonnard, it's on the upper level in the third room; the Ingres you were fond of ...*

Nonetheless, improvements should be made in certain instances. At one point I came across a table underneath which were three paintings. I understand that at the time the Orsay was short of space but that still does not excuse anyone having to go on their knees to look at paintings under said table. As it was, I found two of extreme interest. They were landscapes by someone I'd never heard of, Antoine-Louis Barge (1795 – 1875) – with placid skies and a sun seemingly shedding no illumination. Fascinating. Even with that blank-face reticent sun, one felt a certain vagueness that seemed to herald Impressionism.

The frustration was caused by attempting to find out who had painted them. Unfortunately the table was draped with a number of figurines with paintings hung above them. This resulted in over a dozen plaques describing the items but never with great clarity. After a few attempts, a gentleman sat down with me in, what I assume to be, a successful deciphering. Beyond being a ridiculous proposition to place paintings – particularly stunning ones – underneath a table, one would have wished for better signage.

Why not make the viewer's life easier – I can only presume plaques' intent is not to complicate viewers' minds as that is art's job – and assign different colours for each art-form? If paintings were identified by, say, brass, sculpture by faded silver, decorative arts by light blue, I would quickly have known Barge was the curious fellow who painted some exotic work for his time.

More and more I realize my hometown AGO, in many ways, is truly splendid. Come visit the permanent collection spanning over a hundred years of Canadian art! You will see canvases on off-white walls, nicely spaced, allowing them all to “breathe”. All walls are unblemished by signage. If interested in details about any painting all you need do is find the wooden “pocket” attached discreetly to a wall. Reach in and take out one of several laminated sheets where you will find a mini-photo of every painting in that room, along with its provenance and other apposite data. Art here is displayed in its most glorious manner.

Contemporary Catastrophes

Recently I have noted a mania for the inclusion of contemporary artists' works within a main exhibit's framework. This inevitably mars, to a greater or lesser extent, the entire experience. I have no idea why this compulsion has grabbed hold of curators. Does it have something to do with funding? Whatever the reason, this degradation really should be stopped.

Toronto's Aga Khan Museum offers a deeply satisfying view into Islamic art as well as Muslim culture and civilization. One can admire old Korans' exquisite calligraphy; ceramics and wooden artifacts are decorated with loving care; Magda and I could not get enough of the free-flowing robes with their graceful shapes and vivid colours. Outside the museum one finds a pleasing expanse of trees, shallow rectangular water-pools and wild flower- and herbs-gardens: a tranquility-oasis.

Everything is infused with such welcome calm and beauty – until one enters the two rooms devoted to contemporary artists who were supposed to digest whatever they wished from the main collection and have it catalyse their own creations. The less said about the misbegotten results the better. Magda and I agreed, however, a couple of small fine-filigreed silverworks certainly had an affinity with what we had seen in the permanent collection. Here was sensitivity and sensibility.

Le Petit Palais had an exhibit devoted to historical figures and scenes from the City of Light, though not exactly interesting for me to look at portraits of important personages unknown to me. I was nevertheless drawn to a large painting, a corner of *Les Halles*, the sprawling food market Zola called *Le Ventre de Paris* (Paris' Belly). What hustle and bustle with people carrying and carting things, displaying raw chickens, the crowds of purchasers, all in cramped confines!: a slice of history I had read a little about but never seen as it was demolished before my student-day Paris-time. It is now a gargantuan shopping mall ...

In the first room I soon encountered a large coloured photograph. It was boring, glaringly out of place – *What the hell is this doing here?* Winding my way through the rooms, there seemed no end to these photographs cropping up. I quickly learned to ignore these nuisances amidst paintings from times long past. The effect was jarring – juxtaposition most misguided.

The *Musée de l'Orangerie* is astonishing. Despite the lavish praise I will soon bestow upon it, the curators allowed a little niche in the bottom floor to be filled with a contemporary “artist's” installation. Amongst rooms with nineteenth-century titans we have this vomit of dolls' bits and pieces glued together and

scattered about with a mish-mash of found objects. An attempt of scariness or horror seemed meant to be evoked. I could not find a correlation whatsoever with any works in the entire building. You might accuse me of not studying it more closely in connections-search – but I was in no mood to spend time with an abomination.

Backs and Bums

Curators must remember all gallery-goers are not in the flush of youth – nor are they all 60-year-old marathon runners. Some are of weak constitution, others may have a chronic condition or be just plain infirm. I found it a chore to get packed up, have detailed maps printed up in the lobby for both getting to and coming back from the museum *du jour* – Rome has a most complex transit system with a stupefying number of bus-lines and the route home was *invariably* different from the one delivering me. Then a 20-minute walk down an incline, up a stairs-set, cross the Tiber via bridge, find the correct bus-stop and wait.

Usually there was a seat but ascertaining my get-off stop was problematic as the pixillated stop-announcers *never* worked. I was at the mercy of helpful passengers. Once having gotten off at (usually) the right place, the next stress was finding the museum, often not an easy matter. Then stand in line, buy ticket, go through metal-detector. At this point all I wanted was to sit and have a glass of cold water. Yes, I felt relief but significant energy had been sapped. Sedulous study of paintings is both mentally and physically exhausting. One is inevitably obliged to climb numerous stairs-flights; one is constantly standing and often in awkward positions, bending over to read signage, examining brushwork or craning neck upwards to get some idea of what the hell that painting actually is.

I want to sit down, take a break and rest my by-now-getting-sore back. Yet I end up spending a distinct, though small, percentage of my time looking for that place to recover. Curators must consider we all need relief. Often the room's only chair is reserved for the security guard (though many a time I was allowed to sit there). I wonder why museums and galleries are so chary about providing seating. Is it to oblige us to patronize their always overpriced cafes? That's not fair. Every room should have seating for patrons in order to make the whole experience more welcoming and comfortable.

Rules-Annoyance

Institutions are fond of manufacturing rules, some sensible (no guns or explosives), others ranging between irritating and risible, interfering with the overall art-appreciation. And, of course, every gallery *must* have its own specific constraints.

The *Borghese*, for instance, will not allow visitors to bring water-bottles past the coat-check. I understand if glass or metallic containers are forbidden as some crazy may wish to hurl that “missile” at a painting and cause damage nigh-impossible to restore. But a *plastic* bottle? That does not seem to be exactly a menacing object. Our bodies are composed of comfortably more than 90% water; those stranded in remote wilderness need water much more than food to survive. It is salutary to imbibe water at regular intervals. Was I supposed to break my concentration and scutter about to find the nearest water-cooler or bathroom whenever thirst-attacked?

All watercolours on display are glass-covered for the most obvious reasons. A water-splash on a naked oil-canvas is hardly ideal but should not cause alarm as delicate cotton absorbs the liquid well and any residue (in unreachable crannies) evaporates speedily. Cleaners and restorers regularly use lukewarm water with a few lemon-juice drops to clean, with gentle cotton, the dust and grime that eventually forms a deposit on paintings: the result of constantly circulating people inadvertently gifting canvases with stale and polluted air.

And what about that keychain hanging from my pants' belt-loop? The *Borghese* had no problem allowing it to accompany me during my visit. Given the task of inflicting serious damage on an-unprotected masterpiece, I could have – but never would have – become an unbridled swashbuckler capable of numerous sharp-edged strokes in the five or ten seconds before security-guard's arrival. The tears the restorers would have shed! The calls to the insurance company! And my Rome visit would have come to an end as I would have gotten a sweet taste of the city's incarceration system ...

Just days ago, on my final visit to the aforementioned *Impressionism in the Age of Industry*, in the process of distractedly guiding my water-bottle to my mouth, the improperly screwed-on cap dropped to the floor and a considerable puddle began to form. I immediately left my friend to guard the area and went in search of a security guard who surveyed the situation and returned with two pieces of paper towel, not *remotely* enough to clean up my spontaneous postmodern water-sculpture. He mumbled something and my friend and I walked away with some dismay. I was there to report the mishap, not supervise its clean-up – though having been given a mop and some cloth I would have happily dried off the area thoroughly: I did not want to cause anyone's possibly disastrous slippage.

There is a Toronto fellow who calls himself an artist. He has gone to at least a couple of galleries and, at the appropriate moment, sprayed his vomit on a canvas or two. Yes, vomit. He is now barred for life from those places. I would prefer he be disallowed entry to *all* galleries and museums. I suppose he was trying to make a “statement” regarding art of the past or of a certain era – I don’t know, not having read his “vomitesto”, were it even to exist. As I opined to a friend – *It is far easier to puke all over a painting than to actually create one, even if the result was mediocre.*

Some 20 years ago I was ensconced for months in a Barcelona mini no-frills hotel, researching and struggling with my final play’s first draft. (I was aided by daily tastings of Rioja, the recent vintage of which was considered the preceding decade’s most succulent.) Being fascinated by Frank Gehry’s work, it was imperative I visit his newly-completed Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao, only a five-hour train-ride away.

As part of the permanent collection, a small niche had been devoted to Jenny Holzer, the rather subversive American installation-artist whose work is based on texts both profound and banal. *Truisms* (1977 / 79) consists of nine slim LED signboards, all equally spaced, with Spanish, Basque and English compacted words-bursts flowing very rapidly from floor to 40-foot-ceiling. When a sequence is completed all the final words stay still and blink, blink, blink for a moment. After a minute’s peace, the same (or new) sequence begins. The bravura effect is joyous; the energy-surge feels like a volcano-eruption. I was enthralled, gobsmacked.

I wanted to spend hours watching the variously rapidity-rate upward-thrusting aphorisms but my legs became weary. There were no seats so I sat on the floor. A guard came and told me to stand up. I stood up. He left; I sat down. He came back; I stood up. He left; I sat down. Over and over and over again. Now, I am not a porcupine with wall-puncturing quills. My clothes were clean, not leaving dirt-streaks on their pristine white walls. I cannot follow the world-famous museum’s logic: you permanently dedicate a special section to a unique artist and then don’t bother to provide seating, thus implying Holzer’s work was really not of much interest and no visitor would bother spending more than a couple of minutes following that spectacular, corybantic, phrases-ascent.

Conversely, why was that guard such a rules-stickler? I was obviously not causing any harm nor was I in anyone’s way. (During my extended time in the space, very few people passed by.) I was obviously deeply engrossed. Why could he not leave me in my mesmerised rapturous state?

Jade does not Jade

I have already expressed my astonishment at marble's all-encompassing colour-spectrum: soon I was to have a similar revelation concerning jade. I had always related that mineral to varying shades of green: malachite, celadon, aquamarine, chartreuse. How misguided I was!

Towards my first visit's end at the *Musée Guimet* I had caught a glimpse of two glass cabinets and determined to give them attention when not weary. My next down-hill trek had the express purpose of giving them a most careful "reading". Entering the *Guimet's* maze I asked how to locate the jade-display. Two guards had a protracted discussion – they agreed navigation presents numerous obstacles as signage on the upper floors is all but non-existent. With so many rooms and side-rooms one is never sure to have seen everything in any given section, leaving aside the clear possibility of missing entire sections on that particular floor – but in the end they gave me precise instructions. Luck also seemed to guide me: entering the directed-to gallery, the cabinets were directly facing me.

I was all alone in a big room. Right away I realized stooping low was necessary for extended perusal. Beside the cabinets, however, facing the room's entrance, were two lovely low leather-covered seats! Fetching one was not an easy task: the perch was heavy; I am not strong; but somehow I managed to pick it up and gently have it face the most-interesting cabinet's front.

An unimagined world began to unfold. Jade has its *own* exceptionally wide colours-range from the palest yellow (almost translucent) to implacable black. Marble-veins were replaced by irregularly- sized and spaced splotches. Jade is rarely without markings; it is usually mottled; sometimes seemingly nicotine-stained; my favourite was tiny-moody-blue-smudged: a *tranche* of blue cheese.

In blissful-contemplation midst I was wrenched back into reality. A big burly guard was furious; he almost yelled at me to get up. I did. He then proceeded, with hands and legs, to shove that seat back into place. A beautiful parquet floor was now scratched up ...

A Place of No Return

Seemingly every museum has an unbending policy: once you leave you may not return – unless you purchase a new ticket, of course. I understand the fear: I have made a deal with my friend whereby I enter the gallery at 12 noon and promise to meet her outside at 3pm. At the appointed time I exit and she proceeds to enter with my ticket. We will have both enjoyed visits and the museum is denied \$25.

I understand the financial department's chagrin at this “thievery”. This is why, as a Contributing Member of the AGO, I must present photo-ID along with my membership card. I would like to make, however, a little point in hopes of mollifying the money-counters. Those involved in such a ruse are bound to be impecunious – students and young artists. (It was so saddening to read in Patti Smith's memoir, *Just Kids*, how she and closest friend Mapplethorpe would alternate visiting galleries, the other waiting outside for a report.) I realize some galleries have student rates but, as entrance prices move steadily higher, even reduced prices are not really affordable to many. And we are all revulsed by hearing how an obscene portion of most nations' wealth is controlled by the tiniest population-fraction.

I would like to see the implementation of a new policy: a controlled system of complimentary and pay-what-you-can (PWYC) tickets. Anyone wishing to be a beneficiary would make a simple written request explaining why *she* cannot afford a full-ticket price; why it is so important for *him* to attend this exhibit. Limit these subsidies to 200 per month; don't allow any individual more than six tickets per year. These are mere suggestions – I don't know what would work best for any given institution. All I want is for that gateway to be opened. Many Toronto theatres have Sunday matinee PWYCs. DNA has never denied entrance due to inability to pay. The National Gallery in London has perpetual free admission – for everyone – with slotted plexiglass-orbs for donations.

Gallery directors should pose themselves these questions: do we really want to deny entrance to seemingly worthy and desirous art-lovers? are we ourselves in such straightened states as not to be occasionally kind to the poor? does not society benefit when the disenfranchised take part in live art's experience?

Eureka! It seems, unbeknownst to me, I have telepathic powers! I had finished writing the above section yesterday and checked emails today. There was one from the AGO telling me of a new policy starting in just days: all people aged 25 or under will be granted free entry all year, whenever the gallery is open! On top of that, anyone may purchase an annual pass for only \$35. (Consider the *Impressionism-extravaganza's* adult entry-price was \$25.)

Wow! The AGO is taking a terrific gamble. What is to stop me – and many others – from not renewing their membership and spending just the \$35? That will mean not bringing a guest for free, having to pay for coat-check and forgoing benefits like members-only previews. The mail went on to say this new policy was generated by members' “generosity” and hoped we all would continue renewing our regular-priced memberships. Well, count me in! I will certainly not disappoint an institution that follows my directive – even improves on it – via mind-reading!

I have already outlined what my ideal gallery-visit entails; towards its end I am mentally, and physically, seriously fatigued. I want to exit; clear my mind; have a few nicotine-jolts; breathe fresh air; feel sunlight; be in a different world, one completely disconnected from art. No, the gallery cafe will not do. It will be full of chatter. Simply put, I do not wish to look at art and feel imprisoned. I need solitude, somewhere to sit, anywhere, and if not in ideal quiet I have no problem being amidst life's everyday pell-mell. After awhile, with rested brain, I will be ready to make my final arduous lunge to re-immense myself – at that point my mind and body will not be capable of being caressed by more than the dozen-or-so pieces I found most fascinating and compelling. The problem is I will not be allowed to re-enter.

Why do galleries not have terraces? Don't architects and designers realize the experience-enhancement of visitors being allowed, at will, to slip outside and feel open-space's expanse-pleasures? The *Pompidou* has at least one spacious balcony where one can lean over and watch people picnicking and drinking beer; I preferred to gaze at the incredible panorama, all the way up the hill to Montmartre's effulgent *Sacré Cœur*. The *Orsay* also has a balcony; pity its access-door was locked ...

The problem is compounded when an institution hosts a special event requiring special-ticket purchase as was the case with the unwarrantedly-popular *Bleu et Rose*. I attended with an acquaintance. Here I met with the most egregious instance of debarment. I thought I was innocently stepping into the next room, caught a glimpse of people milling in the *Orsay's* foyer and began to move backwards to find my companion. I was immediately stopped by a uniformed attendant – *You can't go back. You've already exited*. She then pointed down where a thin black line of tape had been affixed to the floor – *Are you saying once I step across that line, I can't go back in?*

Fortunately I had no desire to re-visit any of the blues, pinks or ochres. So I calmly waited for my Picasso-comrade and we decamped for a beer on a sidewalk. But what if this had been my first walk-through and I had wanted to return to the first room? I would not have been allowed to. Was I supposed to inherently sense this was exhibit's last room? When people walk they generally look straight ahead, not with eyes perpetually directed at the floor in front of them. Why was there no large multi-lingual sign informing us once we stepped over that thin line we would not be allowed to retrace our steps to spend time with our favourite canvasses? And why was the attendant not posted *inside* the room warning us of the pitfall awaiting us instead of firmly informing us when it was already too late?

I figure my life is fraught enough directing, choreographing and writing. DNA Theatre performs at various venues; we don't have a "building"; I do not possess the competence to run one. Besides, the analogy is wobbly. When

people leave the theatre mid-performance it is usually because they feel ill or/and can't stomach the production. They certainly do not expect to step out for a coffee and then return to command the whole show to re-begin ...

Nevertheless, in our Age of Technology, there must be ways to allow people to exit and return without "defrauding" the gallery. I vaguely remember as a teen going to bars where bands were playing and a small fee was extracted from your purse. Unpalatable as it was, a rubber stamp pressed against your hand was proof of payment and you were now free to enter and exit whenever you wished – though after six weeks in Paris my hands would have looked like fading kaleidoscopes. Surely better solutions can be found.

Exceptions can and will be made. All one needs is some command of the local language, politeness, plus the acknowledgement you are asking for a favour. And the attendant's surliness-lack.

You will hear more about my love-affair with the *Orangerie* but here is another taste. I would approach the ticket-taker – *Bonjour monsieur* – this is *de rigueur* in France, even when encountering this person for the third time that day – and continued – *I wonder if you will be able to remember me*. A little puzzled – *Why would you want me to do that?* Quietly – *I am a little overwhelmed by Monet's beauty and feel like I badly need a break. I know one is not allowed to exit the museum and then return, but I was hoping you might remember me so you will know I have paid for my ticket and ...* He smiled – *I understand. I will remember you. You will have to go through the metal detector again and don't take too long. My shift ends in 15 minutes. My gratitude – Thank you so much. I will be sure to be back in time.*

A minute later I was in autumn's sunshine, sitting on an old wrought-iron bench, gazing aimlessly onto the vast *Place de la Concorde*. I wasn't thinking of anything; my mind gently floated. Soon I bestirred myself and was standing in front of that friendly ticket-taker – *Merci, monsieur* – and reached into my pocket to show my ticket. He shook his head – *That's not necessary. I remember you.*

Civic Narcissism

Years ago, John Delacourt, DNA's formidable dramaturge, was over for dinner and I complained – *It's just getting worse and worse. The other day I was on the streetcar and this guy was on his cellphone telling someone he was going to be a little late, but in a voice so loud everyone could hear him.* The often-aposiopetic John managed to be succinct – *It's civic narcissism.* I immediately fell in love with the phrase and have never forgotten it.

Civic narcissism takes a number of forms in art galleries but the worst, in my view, is selfie-mania. Many are the people for whom the art on display is a sideshow as visit's highlights are the multiple times a couple will hold hands, smile and press a button. The next step is to continue blocking everyone's view in order to make sure they're pleased with the result. If not, the whole procedure is repeated. This is accompanied by a lot of chatter, either an analysis of how their pixillated remembrance could be improved or, conversely, squeals of delight at how well they'd managed to pull off this moment's remembrance. Once satisfied, they wander off to find another suitable backdrop to commemorate their presence – all in order to fly home and tell friends – *Look. We were there.*

It gets worse. Sometimes a group of three or four will find they cannot manage a proper photo by themselves and one of them will have no qualms about approaching someone in the midst of gazing at a canvas to enlist him as photographer. And if the result is not deemed successful, the poor fellow will be pressed into service again, only this time told to make sure the ...

What is it about Impressionists that propel people into selfie-heaven? The *Orangerie's* two large oval rooms with Monet's almost wall-to-wall *Nymphéas* (Water Lilies) are selfie-magnets. I have spent hours there and I don't think five minutes ever go by without the intrusion of yet another annoying selfie-selfishness display. Monet would be horrified.

Every security guard I spoke with hates them. You might wonder why I spend time with them. Well, their job is both tedious and stressful and they find it agreeable to have someone crouch beside their chair and ask questions, rarely looking directly at the interlocutor as they must always be alert to what people are doing. For me these little chats are a lovely break from looking at art and inevitably I discover something interesting. And in Paris it allows me to practice my French.

So why is the irritating and disruptive selfie-craze allowed to even exist? One guard explained – *It's all in the hands of France's Minister of Culture. I don't know why but she has no problem with people taking photos. What I do know is apparently she doesn't really care about art.* You're the Minister of Culture and you don't care about art? What then *do* you care about? Just as I left Paris the minister Françoise Nyssen was replaced by Franck Riester. I wonder if his attitude will be more art-lover friendly. After all, Paris writhes with galleries, not to speak of the country as a whole, and art forms a major part of the *patrimoine* the French are ostensibly so proud of, though the money for proper cathedral- and museum-upkeep seems continually more difficult to come by ...

That same guard also expressed her outrage – *What really gets me is some people actually have the nerve to tell others to get out of the way so they can snap their selfie.* Perhaps my piece's title is a little misleading. Most guards and attendants, in fact, are friendly, welcoming and engaging. It's the multitude of boors who are much more continually “galling”.

During my final visit to the AGO Impressionist show I was sitting on a bench contemplating a stunning Monet waterscape painted in London. A man came to glance at it before reaching for his cellphone and talking to someone at a reverberating volume. I could contain neither myself nor my voice when I confronted him – *What on earth are you doing talking on your cellphone while standing directly in front of a Monet?* He apologized and walked away, still deep in quieter conversation. I sat back down on the bench where two older ladies greeted me with a nod, murmuring – *Thank you*. Civic narcissism: people who are utterly oblivious to their effect on others. Or they are aware but just don't care.

Selfies are here to stay. I fear it's inevitable. I do, however, have a proposal. All art institutions are closed for one day every week; in Paris it's usually Mondays. So why not publicly announce that on every other day, say Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, selfies are allowed whereas on the remaining days they are completely forbidden. Another possibility is declaring Selfie Hours from, say, 9 to 11 am. Those of us who wish to relish art's gifts amidst relative peace, calm and assuredly without photo-frenzy, will know precisely how to time their cherished gallery-visits.

Art is not Really Meant to be Looked at

Some years ago, at the AGO, I was startled and perplexed by a woman. She acted like an automaton. She moved methodically, efficiently from canvas to canvas, first taking a photo (on her iPhone) followed by a snap of the signage. Then stepping briskly to the next artwork, she would raise her camera and repeat the process. I watched in amazement for a whole minute, during which she must have "captured" at least four paintings. During that time I did not see her examine any piece at all to see if she found favour with it; she was on a mission and did a fine job executing it.

I had always thought one goes to an exhibit to *look* and *digest*. Well, I suppose there are those who take a different view. In any case, I thought she was an aberration – *Why even bother coming to an exhibition if all you're going to do is take photos. Much more efficacious would be to spare yourself the entry-cost and pick up a catalogue at the AGO book shop. The photos therein are taken by professionals in ideal light. They are usually sumptuous.*

I wanted to mention this curiosity: it certainly did not fall in the category of civic narcissism but then where? Silliness, stupidity, eccentricity? Imagine my delight, just hours ago, to accidentally land on an article written by Lindy in *Medium* called *Why you should stop taking pictures at museums*. It turns out that automaton was far from a freak – rather more the norm.

Lindy speaks of her experience attending a Michelangelo exhibit at The Met – *I couldn't help but notice that as many people as there was, nobody was really looking at the art. Most people were looking at it through the lens of their iPhone camera. ... We were in the midst of some of the greatest artwork ever, and nobody was really looking at it.* She calls these people – *Camera Tourists*.

She remembers being one herself – *It took me a while to realize it, but on the visits where I took a lot of photos, I actually remembered less about the trip. The artwork I'd seen seemed to blend together into a big jumble. And, later on, I didn't even really care to look over the fifty or hundred photos I'd taken ... there was nothing interesting or unique about them – they were just images of art. I didn't feel connected to any of it.*

She goes on to cite psychologist Linda Henkel who devised experiments to attempt figuring out if – *there's a psychological reason why you remember less when you take more pictures.* Her experiments' results: undergraduates, obliged to only *look* at 15 artifacts and *photograph* another 15, the following day had more distinct recall of those not photographed. The only exception was the people – *who took a zoomed ... shot of a particular detail ... [they] did indeed better remember the object as a whole.*

Lindy feels the camera is a memory-crutch, obviating concerns about retaining information, however people – *end up focusing on their phones rather than being present. They'll keep the photo, but lose the magic of the moment.*

Needless to say, she has forgone treating gallery-visits as photo-shoots – and is a less stressed person for it as she now can – *focus on what's transpiring around me.* She points out there's no reason to possess these photos as one can google most any artwork in the comfort of one's home. Personally, I spend far too many hours on my computer writing, for example, the text you are reading now, so I would rather not exacerbate the soreness in my back and eyes. I would prefer a handsome book. But to each their own.

La Musée de l'Orangerie

La Musée de l'Orangerie, after many incarnations over centuries, has become my favourite museum in the world, though, of course, I have not been inside most of them. It is compact, succinct, located on the fringes of *le Jardin des Tuileries*, that sprawling park beside the equally sprawling *Place de la Concorde*, in the centre of Paris.

It houses *La Grande Décoration*, what Monet came to call his series of *Les Nymphéas*, eight of which are there to exalt us, his gift to France on condition it

emerge victorious after the first World War's unfathomable hemorrhage. You enter through a high-ceilinged white blank ante-chamber. Don't rush. It is meant to give you pause; to make you grateful you are alive; to drift your mind towards absolute purity. *Le sacré vous attend.*

These two *Orangerie* rooms were reconfigured, at great expense, upon Monet's not request but demand. He insisted the *Nymphéas* must be viewed on curved surfaces and you enter two sizable oval rooms where each wall has one *Nymphéa*, not framed but permanently affixed via special glue, more correctly *marouflaged*. The eight bewitchments, of varying heights, together span almost 300 feet. Upon every viewing they will look a little different depending on the weather as the day's luminosity will descend through a skylight – just like in Monet's home-studios in Giverny (a then-village some 40 miles northwest of Paris).

Even though the elliptical rooms had been prepared for (a part of) *La Grande Décoration*'s arrival, many years would pass before installment. His greatest friend, Georges Clemenceau, two-time Prime Minister, slowly came to understand – as Monet delayed and delayed, feeling the paintings were “unfinished” due to his abysmal eyesight and never-adequate glasses, his rages, his depressions – he simply could not part with his greatest work. He finally told his most faithful supporter and goader – *When I am dead I shall find their imperfections more bearable.*

Monet, a lover of fine food and drink who ruined his eyesight by staring ferociously at light reflected off everything; whose health was impaired by working outside in abominable weather in order to capture the moment; with so many dozen canvasses lying about that by the time he found the one needing adjustments to capture *this* specific light, the luminosity had deliquesced ... His viscerally-unquenchable mania for persistently striving to paint the unpaintable, the almost-unpintable, resulted in violence: he attacked many of his canvasses with a knife; he threw them in bonfires. Possibly more Monets were self-destroyed than exist today. Even an *Orangerie Nymphéa* bears a slash on one side. To say he was not fun to live with, despite undeniable charm-moments, is a stomping understatement. He was essentially unbearable – and I know this all from Ross King's *Mad Enchantment*, a passionately researched and loving account of his life which concentrates on the sublime *Nymphéas*-creation.

Sublime? There really are no words to describe what I – and hardly only myself – feel when in the presence of this afflatus. Painters struggle to express. Manet once called him – *the Raphael of water*. Masson called *La Grande Décoration – the Sistine Chapel of Impressionism*. My ignorance should forbid me from commenting but I dare make one observation: Monet's seemingly crazed, slapdash brushstrokes in the *Nymphéas* are never in a straight line. They whirl,

they swirl, they skirl – water alive, painting as dance, infinity as perpetually frozen motion.

Monet's wish was to create – *a flowery aquarium in which [one] could relax and restore himself*. He desired a – *tranquil oasis ... an asylum of peaceful meditation ... to calm nerves strained through overwork*. Proust, a devotee, imagined the effect being spiritual cleansing – *analogous to that of psychotherapists with certain neurasthenics*. Gustave Geffroy, an early biographer, wrote that Monet wanted these “immense decorations” to be – *kept together ... on the walls of quiet rooms where visitors would come to seek distraction from the social world, to ease their fatigues, to indulge their love of eternal nature*.

When first installed, serenity was everpresent. To be sure, positive reviews did appear – though far outnumbered by scathing ones, too painful for me to quote excerpts. Even over a year post inauguration, Clemenceau noted, in great dismay – *There wasn't a soul there. ... During the day forty-six men and women came, of whom forty-four were lovers looking for a solitary spot*.

Almost a century later the *Orangerie* hosts some million yearly visitors. So much for serenity, tranquility, meditation. Remember when I wrote Monet would be horrified by the selfiedom we live in? How excellent he has not been granted resurrection as today, being the creator, he would be able to bypass the metal-detector only to deface his beloved *Nymphéas* in whatever way he felt most destructive. He would most likely rather wish to incinerate the whole building ...

Beyond the annoyance of people, I was taken aback upon finding out Monet wanted viewers to have sufficient space to step back and view each *Nymphéa* in its entirety. He at first wanted circular rooms so the canvases would be – *covering the walls, unifying them, giving the illusion of an endless whole, of a wave with no horizon and no bank*. Personally, I derived great pleasure from the *inability* to see most of the glorious Water Lilies with one fixed look. Their great wideness made me feel more immersed, more drowned in them.

In any case, so much for his wishes ... Today it is almost impossible to see any *Nymphéa* without people standing in front of it unless it is for a brief instant. How to deal with the delirium of visitors? One must allot time and be patient. In the middle of both rooms we can seat ourselves on super-elongated banquettes, wide enough to comfortably rest people back to back. You look at the painting-portion visible and, when it ceases to be, you look at another section. No, it's not ideal but given enough time – and it took me well over an hour before I ventured into the second room – the experience is still immensely satisfying. Besides, you are going to be the one impeding others' view when you go up close – and you can get very very close – to scrutinize some detail or other.

I guess selfies were not such a vogue when Hughes wrote his *Rome*. Nonetheless, he is capable great frustration which mounts into anger and acerbity – *Painting and sculpture are silent arts, and deserve silence (not phoney reverence, just quiet) from those who look at them. Let it be inscribed on the portals of the world's museums: What you will see in here is not meant to be a social experience. Shut up and use your eyes. Groups with guides, etc., admitted Wednesdays only, 11a.m – 4 p.m. Otherwise, just shut the fuck up, please pretty please, if you can, if you don't mind, if you won't burst. We have come a long way to look at these objects too. We have not done so to listen to your golden words. Capisce?*

Amen.

Nevertheless, we have an obvious solution to this problem, one which seemingly never occurred to Hughes: headphones. But then again, he was never a theatre sound-designer. Mine are expensive and totally-ears-covering with excellent sound quality. I never go to a gallery without them. Beyond blocking out blabber, the music enhances the experience. I usually choose a composer more-or-less contemporaneous with the works on display. Considering the cavalier attitude to art on many *Orangerie* visitors' part, I needed something both beautiful and soothing. Rachmaninoff's piano concerti fit the bill perfectly.

The *Orangerie*'s bottom floor contains selections from Jean Walter-Paul Guillaume's munificent 1966 gift of some 150 modernist canvases. They are all enclosed in smallish rooms and, almost without exception, swoon-inducing.

One begins with Renoir, that delicate-female-flesh idolater who clearly shows us the “white” race is not “white”, whose backgrounds are so rich with detail, brushstroke direction delineating surfaces with such precision – and, as flamboyant contrast, a bouquet of roses painted with unforgiving, glowing impasto.

A wall of Matisse encompasses a short period, roughly 1920 – 27, showing just how carefully, yet seemingly carelessly, he depicted patterns on wallpaper, carpets, coverlets, etc. The Picasso-cohort, Marie Laurencin, offerings I did not particularly care for, however they offered us a glint of what was to become Cubism. Along the way we encounter two Picasso harlequins of no particular distinction and close by are the first André Derain paintings I thoroughly liked – but they were both of his pretty pubescent niece he was in love with, so ...

Then we land upon the most delectable Modiglianis one could ever hope to stumble across – what inordinate pleasure to examine them at intimate range: the compressed colours-galaxy, the relentless, violent, compact brushstrokes!

Two entire rooms are Cezanne-infused: a stunning 1890 wife-portrait is shocking for her facial-expression's severity; the *nature mortes* are of such colour-complexity, either glowingly vibrant or more muted with every identical-patterned-wallpaper motif rendered somehow differently, making each one a *presence*; the severely-impastoed *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1876 - 77), so strange, so tiny; that son-portrait, finally seen in proper light, is the epitome of simplicity and unbearably succulent. Phenomenal. (Monet thought Cezanne was the greatest living artist; Cezanne said exactly the same thing about Monet. These words are not to be taken lightly as it was in the nature of neither to flatter.)

My only mild criticism is the lack of anything pointing me in the direction where more rooms contained selections from the Guillaume-gift: not really a serious problem as everything mentioned above, below the asterisks, suffices for an entire afternoon's perusal – the mind can take in only so much.

On another visit, I saw the “hidden” rooms. Utrillo was a revelation – I had never been impressed by him. How foolish of me! Now, seeing him mere inches from my eyes, I cannot imagine buildings' white walls to be more gripping: they contain so many colour-flecks, impasto-bubbles, countless sharp-tip knife-grooves. And how can a simple street be more paint-slathered yet contain the sharpest, tiniest precisions?

Then a roomful of Soutines – whose partially melting faces and wavy landscapes never interested me. Again, however, once face to face with them, disdain morphs into awe. I cannot say more – I begged for a few more minutes but was denied. In the presence of compelling, thought-altering art, time passes in an unearthly manner. The *Orangerie's* staff was obliged to herd everyone out.

You must be interested in art – otherwise you would not have gotten this far in my piece. In fact you would not even have picked it up. But seeing you are now at this point, I want to run your life. If in Paris, you must stay for at least two weeks and not concern yourself with the Eiffel Tower, not bother being in the horde fighting for a view of the bulletproof-glass-entombed *Mona Lisa*. Instead, you must plan for days devoted to the *Orsay*, but, above all, you must take your sharpest mind and best-rested eyes to the *Orangerie* – again and again and again.

The Otherworld

What I need to say now is so difficult because English – nor I doubt any other language – has words to describe my experience: transcendence. It was a liberation from the world, from existence as we know it: pure sensation. It was exalting. It was being in the unbelievable. It was what you can divine when

(soul-alive) dead or just at the apotheosis-moment, akin to what one can only imagine *Saint Teresa's* uplift. What happened was not ineffable as I can describe it, to a certain extent – but the *feeling* was indeed ineffable as I was, in a minute where, in a flash, existence, perception was suddenly, simultaneously, both magnified and molecularised. It was not an out-of-body experience – on the contrary, I was tingling with disbelief yet calm and analytical. It was spiritual levitation, an opening into an unfathomable vastness yet with the clarity of granular detail.

It was my ante-penultimate day in Paris. I was forced out of the *Orsay* as it closed. Exhausted, I stayed for an hour, close by, in conversation with a Dutchman who had copied Rembrandt and others over years. We were watching this charade of a clarinetist playing Mozart's concerto with boom-box orchestral accompaniment while a “clown” was harassing all the women walking by – without ever touching them. It was funny. It took my companion and I time to figure out this was a team. Still, how glorious to unexpectedly listen to a concerto for an instrument not exactly favoured by myself. The Dutchman was engaging and had interesting observations about the *Orangerie's Nymphéas*. In the ideal world I would have gone to a bistro and treated him to a pleasant collation. I was too tired, however, and began to trek home alone.

I had to walk the *pont* across the Seine, past the *Orangerie* and through the *Tuileries*, to arrive at the *Concorde Métro* station which would take me home. Halfway through the bridge-crossing I froze: I was *within* a painting. A large tree had become an Alfred Sisley, countless multi-green-shades, impasto weighing down the leaves – astonishment! I looked down at the Seine's calm water, no water lilies, no Monet, then up at the sky – beautiful sunset with clouds – in both cases the painter unidentifiable. There must have been other people on the bridge but they had all vanished. I was alone amidst this painting, not part of it. I was in a vista of real life transformed into art.

Sitting in the *Métro*, now feeling comfortable enough after weeks in the underground system to read my beloved *New York Review of Books*, I glanced up and saw a man. The apparition reappeared: he was a character in an unwritten novel. He held so much promise – all he needed was to be plumbed, fleshed out. I knew he was material not for me but someone else. This transcendence lasted over a minute.

I arrived back home. It was “home” because I had been staying for weeks at Ouilpean Ian Monk's flat along with his son, Abel. I intended to go back to the *Orsay* next day but was entirely drained. All I was capable of was packing, piecemeal, and then having dinner before resting and then Übering over to Charles de Gaulle airport.

I do not expect, ever again, to have those minutes of utter transcendence – but I hope you will. The sensation is unforgettable. I have flashes of it most every week. And despite the manifold irritations, the fatigue, the back-discomfort, I will

continue to travel and see art as long I have mobility, decent eyesight, and clarity of mind, until I die. Is there a better way to live?

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