

**Activity-Based
Teaching
in the
Art Museum**

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Art Museum**

Movement,
Embodiment,
Emotion

Elliott Kai-Kee, Lissa Latina, and Lilit Sadoyan

THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM
LOS ANGELES

Contents

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Introduction



The sougning wind blows gently through the dense leaves and solid stems of the irises. Our visitors sway side to side. They have embodied the flowers, imagining themselves inside Vincent van Gogh's Irises (fig. 1). They consciously tilt to the left, then to the right, aware of their bodies in space, as Lissa leans in to blow a gentle breeze from one end and Lilit returns the zephyr from the other. Back and forth they move in response to the sounds they hear and movement they see in the painting. Pausing for a moment, one visitors remarks: "I can almost feel the warm sun and light breeze touching my skin."

Most visitors think of art museums as places of quiet looking, where they might also read a little and exchange brief remarks with a friend. "What am I going to see?" they ask when they arrive, or "What am I going to learn?" This book asserts that visitors can do much more with works of art than they might realize. Engaging with art in the museum not only involves looking and learning but also requires visitors to take an active role in moving around the objects they find there and imagining a role for themselves in the spaces and situations the objects define. Each work invites the viewer to respond in a different way—in one case to investigate its meaning, in another to imagine being inside the space of a vibrant garden.

Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience (J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011) by Rika Burnham, head of education at The Frick Collection; and Elliott Kai-Kee, principal author of the present volume, focuses primarily on how museum educators can engage visitors with works of art through dialogue. In museums throughout the United States, and indeed the world, it is common to witness school groups as well as tours for adults that center around conversations in the galleries rather than merely listening to a lecture. The current volume is intended to complement *Teaching in the Art Museum* with an exploration of nondiscursive

FIGURE 1
Vincent van Gogh
Dutch, 1853–1890
Irises, 1889
Oil on canvas, 74.3 × 94.3 cm
(29¼ × 37⅞ in.)
Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum,
90.PA.20

ways to approach and engage with gallery objects. The emphasis here (albeit not an exclusive one) is on visitors' physical, sensory, and emotional responses to works of art and the range of ways in which viewers of any age might relate to them through action and feeling.

In 1992, when I was first employed as a gallery teacher at the Getty Villa in Malibu, a printed guide was being used at the time, titled "Some Guiding Principles: Gallery Teaching for School Students at the J. Paul Getty Museum." This leaflet directed education department staff to encourage active participation on the part of students by organizing lessons into gallery activities. The text defined a gallery activity as "a planned experience in which students will discover a concept, practice a skill, or analyze and practice behavior associated with an attitude." Activity sheets describing individual activities contained clear learning objectives categorized as attitudes, skills, and ideas. It was during that time when one of my most highly respected colleagues declared, "Just give me an idea, and I'll create an activity." Although the learning goals seemed to emphasize ideas, most of the activities involved physically engaging with the artworks. Examples included role-playing, writing, drawing, ranking, and so on. Eventually all the teachers contributed to the growing inventory of activity sheets, kept in a drawer where they were available for everyone's use.

Although the gallery teachers that were hired at the new J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Center, which opened in 1997, were no longer explicitly instructed to organize their lessons into gallery activities, this approach continued to have a prominent place in their teaching, as evidenced by the proliferation of "worksheets," although no guidance to the use of these materials was provided. I can recall attending at least two "activities workshops" in which gallery teachers and other staff members gathered to discuss and share ideas about best practices in creating and facilitating activities. The results of these meetings were unsatisfying, as most of the activities we discussed tended to be very general and applicable to a wide range of objects and were thus likely to lead to relatively superficial conclusions.

My growing unease about the quality of these activities was among my primary motivations for researching and writing about the subject. Since 2012, when the Getty began recruiting docents to teach in the galleries, the worksheets have continued to proliferate, along with questions about them, making a clear description and explanation of their use an even more pressing need. Although my own history with such activities may be unique, my discussions with colleagues from other museums con-

firm that they too have had many unanswered questions about the use of activities in the museum context.

The education staff at the Getty is passionately dedicated to the development of thoughtful, skilled gallery teaching, which is a daily subject of discussion at the Museum. Starting in 2013 two gallery educators at the Getty Center, Lissa Latina and Lilit Sadoyan, undertook a project to rethink their approach to teaching in the museum, focusing in particular on activity-based teaching as a way to expand beyond and complement the language-based approach that characterized their existing practice. The three of us began to discuss various questions and issues together, and as my ideas began to take form as chapters, I asked my collaborators to read and critique them. As they describe on the following pages, Latina and Sadoyan developed a process of creating and facilitating activities that enabled us to press forward with the development of both theory and practice. I invited them to write precise records of some of their experiences, and the narratives they produced are interwoven throughout this book, providing concrete examples of the theory developed in the book. Although the narratives illustrate ideas that are discussed in many different chapters, how many times did we say together, "This seems to fit perfectly here!?" Latina and Sadoyan describe the conception and development of this new array of gallery activities in "[Gallery Activities in the Getty Museum](#)" (see pages [XX-XX]).

This book is organized into three parts that move from history through theory to practice. Part I, "History," beginning with chapter 1, "The Modern History of Presence and Meaning," describes a philosophical shift from a language-based understanding of the world to direct, physical interaction with it. Chapter 2, "A New Age in Museum Education," offers a brief history of some of the innovative museum education programs developed in the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s that reflect the changes described in chapter 1. The sudden and widespread adoption of nondiscursive gallery activities during this period, especially but not exclusively in programs designed for younger students and school groups, expressed the spirit of the times.

Art museums inevitably reflected the great social changes that occurred during the period of the 1960s and 1970s. This is exemplified by The Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1969 exhibition *Harlem on My Mind*, whose stated aim was to democratize the art museum but instead proved to be one of the most controversial exhibitions ever mounted in the United States (see chap. 1). In a similar vein, innovative museum educators in many

Gallery Activities in the Getty Museum

Our foray into a thoughtful, activity-based approach to teaching in the galleries, after combined decades of a dialogical and discursive approach, began with asking the question of whether or not those human endeavors on view within the spaces of a museum needed to be structured by language. Could they, in fact, be understood without words? The idea seemed too radical for us at first, as countless pages of art-historical writing shaped all of our knowledge about the works of art. Yet we felt there was something to be said about the deeply personal experiences we had with these works, which likewise formed a part of our knowledge—both independent and collective—of the objects.

As we (Lissa Latina and Lilit Sadoyan) began to team-teach, we felt the impulse to try something new and different. We encouraged each other to think about the ways in which we might engage with art objects to spark curiosity in our visitors. We had been teaching students and adults alike multiple times a week for several years, continuously refining our practice. We did not leave talking behind; rather, we worked to combine dialogical and activity-based modes synergistically, as we found quite often that gallery activities generated dialogue, and that our two-pronged approach engaged our audiences naturally. What surfaced was a reflexive process of fusing the discursive and nondiscursive components of the gallery experience.

When we started teaching with an activity-based

focus, we discovered a more effective way to capture the attention of our visitors: We would begin with a nondiscursive activity, which had the effect of reliably committing our audiences to the works of art we experienced together. This magnified viewers' curiosity and freed them to raise more questions about the objects. We thought of gallery activities as actions directed toward works of art and were inspired by the idea of engaging people with these objects holistically—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The process we developed of generating activities begins with spending time with the objects, sitting quietly for at least an hour in their presence, discovering them over and over again. We take our time, and start by quieting our minds and our breathing.

One of the most important things we do is to look at an object from different perspectives: from far away, close up, standing and sitting, from the right and the left, from beyond the threshold of other galleries, from below, from above (when possible), and so on. We find it important to remain aware of how our initial observations change and develop. We also consider an object's relationships, both spatial and conceptual, to other objects in the same gallery. Our verbal exchanges are vital to this process as we discuss the work and our reactions to it. We also ask questions of the object, and we allow it, in our imaginations, to ask questions of us. What is appealing about it? To whom is it appealing? Why and how is it appealing to them, or to me? How can we respond to

that appeal? We think about the various ways in which the object seems to ask us to respond to it. What is it allowing me to do with it? What is it asking me to do with it?

We formulate some initial ideas about what gallery activities we might undertake with visitors. Once we have completed this phase of close looking, we continue principally by researching the object, seeking to answer questions that occurred to us as we were looking. Thinking about the object's history, its "early life," is a crucial part of our process. It allows us to create effective and purposeful activities. What we can learn about an object's history may allow us to narrow down the number of activities we use to engage our visitors, though we remain open to what the object seems to ask of us and our visitors in the moment.

Our first reactions to objects, like those of our viewers, tend to be instinctual and visceral, as works of art inevitably elicit kinesthetic and emotional responses. The gallery activities we devise build upon such reactions by inviting visitors to interpret the work through physical responses and movement. We might, for instance, ask them how they might fit into the space of a painting, or invite them to engage with its material qualities by asking them to consider its size, or to imagine running their fingers over its textures or the details of its frame.

As we design specific activities, we insist that activities must grow uniquely out of the objects themselves. For example, when we ask students to act out a chariot race inspired by its depiction on an ancient, Attic Greek amphora, we conclude by pretending to award this prize vessel to the winners of our imaginary Panathenaic games.

Our students and visitors might not be accustomed to engaging with works of art in these ways, but gallery activities enable them to enjoy more-varied experiences of artworks than discursive approaches alone. They open new avenues of exploration and pathways to understanding. We have found that such activities are both liberating and revealing, prompting visitors to discover aspects and meanings of objects they did not originally anticipate.

Setting the proper tone begins with an introduction to our tours and lessons. Often we will ask our groups, "What do you do with your body, or how do you hold your body when you look at a work of art?" Our visitors frequently respond by putting their hands in their pockets so as to not touch the art or crossing their arms in the front of their bodies or holding their chin between thumb and forefinger as if deep in thought. "What if we told you that you are going to look at art in a different way," we ask—"in a way that no other visitor to the museum today will?" Excitement brews. They are curious about the possibilities and intrigued by what awaits them inside the gallery spaces of the museum.

In our experience, the most effective use of activity-based teaching is to begin a session with an activity rather than a discussion. Visitors are not always immediately ready to engage intellectually with works of art; once they are engaged physically, however, their curiosity is aroused and their questions—which can be a valuable sign of their engagement—come more easily. Nondiscursive and discursive approaches become intertwined and support each other.

We are aware of the ways in which the gallery activities we lead create a framework for our visitors' experiences, conditioning how they may respond to an object and how they express their responses. Our prompts—the invitations and suggestions we offer, the instructions we give, the questions we ask—all play a vital role in the overall experience. Clear instruction sets the stage, but freedom is equally important. A gallery activity must not be so highly structured or tightly prefabricated that visitors are unable to respond spontaneously to an object. We need to leave space for each person's inventions. Creating and refining these activities requires practice. We try them out with different groups of people and modify them according to each group's needs.

Since so many of the activities we create involve uncommon ways of experiencing art, our demonstrations and participation help to engage the participants.

Although we need to be sensitive and not suggest that our way of doing something is the “right” or only way to do it, we have found that we help to free the imagination and reduce inhibitions for both student and adult groups when we join in. We might do the activity with the group in the beginning just to get them going, we might join in intermittently to reinvigorate or refocus the group’s energy, or we might sustain our involvement throughout.

The activities we have created since 2013 have turned out to be remarkably congruent with the theory of activity-based gallery teaching developed in this book. As each of us read and discussed the ideas that Elliott Kai-Kee explores in the various chapters of this book, we began to see that the activities we created provided the practical expression of those concepts. Our interests not only dovetailed with one another’s but also clarified our respective investigations. A symbiotic relationship developed among the three of us that enabled us to better explain what each was exploring with gallery activities. At this point, it is difficult to separate those ideas from our practice, as they have provided the vocabulary with which we have come to describe and explain our gallery work.

Throughout this book the reader will find featured texts that describe various activities that we have devised for our teaching at the Getty Museum. All of the student programming for school groups that are detailed here took place at the Getty on weekday mornings between 2013 and 2018, whereas the adult activities are derived from the Getty’s regular weekday afternoon programs during the same period, and from a special Saturday evening series, Art Circles, in which a group of adults gathers to explore one work of art for one hour.

These activity narratives are included not as mere illustrations but rather as examples of how some of these ideas might take form in an individual museum educator’s practice and are intended to show what is possible in the galleries of an art museum. The narratives are direct accounts of our experience in activity-based teaching. The specific descriptions do not encompass

the whole of a group’s experience with a particular object; in all instances, complete sessions lasted from fifteen minutes to an hour and involved dialogue as well as activity.

We firmly believe that gallery activities are not age-specific. We found through our own experimentation that we could adapt every activity presented in this book to all ages, as long as we scaled it up or down according to the needs of the group—just as we normally do in dialogical teaching. For example, we meditate with adults as well as children (see chapter 12, “Mindfulness”), but while we might offer adults the prompt “Use your breath as your anchor,” with a school group we would be more likely to say, “Pay attention to your breath moving in and out.” The activity remains the same, but our expression of it differs; we modify it according to the group’s needs and vocabulary. Although the activity narratives provided here note the grade level of our student groups for the reader’s convenience, these gallery activities were not created with any particular age group in mind.

Even though student programming dominates in the educational programming of many museums, this book is not focused solely on school groups. Accordingly, we have included examples of activities we have led with groups of adults as well. In addition, we do not intend any of the specific activities described here to be construed as models to copy or even to emulate; we intend them above all to inspire gallery teachers in their own inventions and explorations appropriate to their own visitor and student constituencies.

Our hope is that the activities we have describe here, along with the theory discussed in the chapters, will provide both a concrete foundation and conceptual framework, respectively, for anyone who wishes to develop their own practice of nondiscursive, activity-based teaching in the art museum.

L.L. and L.S.

parts of the country launched programs that sought to engage audiences in new ways that they believed created greater access for the public. Such programs emphasized experience over information; specifically, “art experience” over instruction in art history. They were activity based and often improvisational, highlighting participants’ sensory perceptions rather than art-historical approaches to works of art. These programs were very short-lived, however, and virtually none survived to the end of the 1970s. Most proved to be vulnerable to criticism from many quarters, including some museum educators themselves as well as curatorial and administrative staff, who objected that although participants might be having fun, they were failing to learn anything substantial from the new approaches. One of the reasons that both enthusiasm and respect for these programs waned was that their creators failed to devise and articulate a pedagogical theory strong enough to support and explain what they were doing in practice.

The two chapters in Part II, “Theory,” examine the theoretical history and basis for the approaches described in this book. Chapter 3, “Starts and Stops,” describe two attempts that American museum educators made to articulate a theory for their new, nondiscursive programs: the first deriving from the early work of Project Zero, the Harvard Graduate School of Education program founded by the philosopher Nelson Goodman to study arts learning as a cognitive activity; the second stemming from the work of Viola Spolin, the acclaimed theater educator and coach whose teaching methods, embodied in a series of “theater games,” were detailed in her well-known book *Improvisation for the Theater* (1963).

Chapter 4, “A Theory of Play in the Museum,” takes up a thread suggested in these two early theoretical proposals and articulates a theory of play that forms the cornerstone of this book. This theory proposes that activities in the museum are primarily forms of play that take place in spaces (or “playgrounds”) temporarily designated as such by educators and their groups of adult visitors or students. *Play* is defined essentially in this context as *movement*—both physical and imaginary (metaphorical)—toward and away from, around, and inside and outside the works of art that are foregrounded within those spaces. Gallery activities conceived in this way, as play, respond to the possibilities that the objects themselves offer for the visitor to explore and engage with them. The particular movements characterizing an activity are crucially conditioned by the object in question; they constitute a process of discovery and learning conceptually distinct from, but supportive of, traditional dialogue-based modes of museum education, which they supplement rather than supplant.

Part III, “Aspects of Play,” discusses specific aspects of engaging in such activities as means of exploring works of art. Chapter 5, “Embodiment, Affordances,” addresses the *embodied* nature of gallery activities. The idea of embodiment adopted in this chapter recognizes that both mind and body are joined in their interactions with things. Investigating works of art thus involves apprehending them physically as well as intellectually—in the sense of responding to the ways in which a particular work allows and even solicits the viewer’s physical grasp of them. Chapter 6, “Skills,” offers a corollary to this idea by addressing the ways in which objects present themselves to us, as viewers, and suggesting what we might do in response as they fit with the bodily skills we have developed over the course of our lives. Such skills might be as simple as getting dressed, washing, or eating; or as specialized as doing one’s hair, dancing, playing an instrument, or acting—all of which may allow us to “grasp” and even feel that we inhabit particular works of art.

Chapter 7, “Movement,” addresses how embodied looking is always looking *from* somewhere. We apprehend objects as we physically move around or in front of them; they reveal themselves differently as we approach them from different viewpoints. Viewers orient themselves spatially to both the surfaces of objects and to the things and spaces depicted in or suggested by representational works of art. Activity-based teaching encourages visitors of all ages to move among the objects—away from them, close to them, and even into them.

Chapter 8, “The Senses,” discusses the ways in which we explore works of art with our senses. Both adult visitors and younger students come to the museum expecting to use their eyes, yet “visual” art appeals to several of the senses at once, though rarely to the same degree. Sculpture, for example, almost always appeals to touch (whether or not that is actually possible or allowed) as well as sight. A painting depicting a scene in which people appear to be talking may induce viewers to not only look but also “listen” to what the figures might be saying.

Chapter 9, “Drawing in the Museum,” suggests that looking at art with a pencil in hand amplifies viewers’ ability to imaginatively touch and feel their way across and around an artwork. Contour drawing by its nature requires participants to imagine that they are touching the contours of an object beneath the tips of their pencils. Other types of drawing allow viewers to feel their way around objects through observation and movement.

Chapter 10, “Emotion,” addresses visitors’ emotional responses to art as a complex *process* with many components, from physiological to

cognitive, and suggests ways in which a particular work of art may elicit a wide range of emotional reactions. In this chapter’s main text and its sidebars, which provide specific activities in this regard, we suggest ways in which museum educators can go well beyond merely asking visitors how a work of art makes them feel. Chapter 11, “Empathy and Intersubjectivity,” hones in on one aspect of viewers’ emotional responses to art that is often taken for granted, if not neglected altogether: the empathetic connections that human beings make to images of other people. This chapter describes a number of theories behind this and advocates an approach that prompts viewers to physically engage with the representations of people they see.

Chapter 12, “Mindful Looking,” locates the practice of mindfulness within the framework of the gallery activities we discuss. Mindfulness involves awareness and attention, both as a conscious practice and as an attitude that gallery teachers can encourage in museum visitors. This is not solely a matter of cultivating the mind, however; it is also a matter of cultivating the body, since mindfulness is only possible when mind and body are in a state of harmonious, relaxed attentiveness. Mindfulness practice in the art museum actively directs the viewer’s focus on the object itself and insists on returning to it over and over; yet it also balances activity with conscious stillness. This meditative approach helps the practitioner cultivate the values of silence and stillness—values that provide a neat counterbalance to the active aspects of the majority of gallery activities.

Museum educators may employ a wide range of nondiscursive activities to engage visitors and students with works of art. It is the goal of this book to offer a range of perspectives that will enable them to ground their activities more securely and consciously in both history and theory. Above all, we hope to assist museum educators in answering the essential questions that arise every day as we plan and implement our gallery teaching programs: What constitutes a gallery activity? What makes a good activity for this object? How do I create and lead that activity? And how do I leave space for visitors and students to cocreate them with me?

E.K.-K.

7 | Movement



When most visitors come to the museum they expect to get a “fixed” view of the objects in the collections. When they arrive, they do indeed find most of the artworks set in their places in the galleries, attached to the walls, installed on pedestals, or laid out in cases. In many ways, the works have been displayed like scientific specimens, pinned and labeled. This scientific approach implicitly posits the objects’ independent existence, and it proposes to examine and explain them “objectively,” regardless of the prejudices and responses of an investigator. Visitors often assume that objects in the museum are presented scientifically and that what they will learn about them consists of reliable facts. This illusion is exploited by the contemporary artist John Baldessari in his *Specimen (After Dürer)*, based on Dürer’s small drawing of a stag beetle, which the artist has enlarged to gigantic proportions, installed against a wall, and pierced with a huge, stainless-steel pin (fig. 11).

It is a dream that a museum could ever make everything clear at a glance. We educators are keenly aware of the initial strangeness that greets newcomers to our museums when they first arrive. Merleau-Ponty points out that the perception of things is a process that often begins with vague, indeterminate impressions that coalesce only gradually, gaining shape and substance as we explore them. “Nothing,” he says “is more difficult than to know precisely what we see.”¹ When visitors enter the galleries, each individual will perceive the works of art differently, and their experiences will tend to change from moment to moment and from visit to visit—just the opposite of a “scientific” result. A viewer may make a valiant attempt to freeze the moments represented in photographs, but even then, the images are elusive as one picture replaces another.

Valuing the visitor’s point of view is a guiding principle of museum education, and it is important to be mindful of the implications of that principle. In emphasizing the importance of visitors’ personal responses to

FIGURE 11
John Baldessari
American, born 1931
Specimen (After Dürer), 2000
Inkjet on canvas with UV coating,
mounted on fiberglass composite panel
with stainless steel T-pin,
436.9 × 350.5 cm (172 × 138 in.)
Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum,
2000.37

works of art, museum educators are taking what we might cautiously term a *phenomenological* approach. When Edmund Husserl, one of the founding fathers of phenomenology, called for a return “to the things themselves,” he was calling for an approach to objects completely different from the scientific approach. For Husserl, objects are instead to be taken as they are experienced. Phenomenology begins with an individual’s experience and emphasizes a first-person point of view of the world and its objects in contrast to a third-person, or external observer’s, perspective. For the phenomenologist, knowledge is derived first and foremost from the individual’s own experience and only subsequently through insight passed on by others. As Merleau-Ponty explained, “All of my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view.”² Scientific knowledge is not ruled out, but for both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, our concrete and intuitive grasp of the world is primary.

As embodied beings, our perception of an object is always partial, limited by where and how we locate ourselves physically. Objects in the world reveal themselves to us gradually, showing more of themselves as they are approached from different viewpoints. As Merleau-Ponty points out, “To see is, after all, always to see from somewhere.”³ Husserl suggests that when we perceive an object, our consciousness of any single perspective is accompanied by the consciousness of the object’s “horizon” of absent profiles. At any one perspective, we anticipate others.⁴

The philosopher Mark Johnson has remarked that “we are born in to the world as screaming, squirming creatures, and through our movements we get “in touch” with our world, taking its human measure.”⁵ The insight is not new. As early as 1896, John Dewey explained that perception always begins with sensorimotor coordination: “It is the movement which is primary . . . the movement of body, head, and eye muscles determining the quality of what is experienced.”⁶

Closely related to phenomenology is *enactivism*, a theory of mind whose proponents argue that cognition necessarily arises through dynamic interaction between people and their environment. From the *enactivist* perspective, perception is not conceived as the transmission of information but rather as the active exploration of the world. This is aptly described at the beginning of Alva Noë’s book *Action in Perception*, where the author provides an important exposition of enactivism:

Perception is not something that happens to us. It is something we do. Think of a blind person tap-tapping his or her way around a cluttered

space, perceiving that space by touch, not all at once, but through time, by skillful probing and movement. This is, or at least ought to be, our paradigm of what perceiving is. The world makes itself available to the perceiver through physical movement and interaction.⁷

This is precisely how activity-based teaching approaches works of art. Practitioners assume that each work allows a certain free movement around it, leaving viewers a space in which they may insert themselves in order to interact, to operate, to get a grasp on the work.

The *New York Times* art critic Holland Carter has described looking at a painting by Piero di Cosimo in the following way:

And there, underneath the formal polish, was his hand in action. In one area, he’s laying on color in chunky strokes, paint-by-numbers style. In another, he’s adding thin, raised lines of highlight with a calligrapher’s precision. Elsewhere, he’s impatiently smooching pigment around with his fingers. You can’t see all of this by standing directly in front of a picture. You have to move around, adjust your position, bend down and look up, catch the surface in different angles of light. In other words, to see a painting, you have to do a little dance with it, and take your time.⁸

In the same spirit, the art historian Michael Podro observes that we orient ourselves to two-dimensional depictions in two ways: to the surface and to the subject. At one point we are moving around in relation to the surface of a painting, at another point in relation to the objects and space depicted in it. What we see depends on our point of view in both cases.⁹

The content of certain paintings almost forces viewers to one position or another. In his book *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, the art historian Joseph Leo Koerner makes the case that the meticulously measured symmetries in Caspar David Friedrich’s landscapes are contingent on the viewer’s placement before the scene.¹⁰ In Friedrich’s canvas *Fir Trees in the Snow* (ca. 1828),¹¹ the perceived structure of the grove of trees is based on the particularity of the viewer’s placement before it. The picture’s strict symmetry, writes Koerner, “keeps us fixed in place before the picture,” since movement to the side, or into depth, “would throw the entire scene into chaos.”

By contrast, Podro points out that the subject matter in some paintings does just the opposite, refusing to be absorbed or summed up in one particular view. With images such as those the subject matter rewards viewing

from many positions, from outside the painting, and sometimes also from within it. A wooded landscape by Meindert Hobbema and Abraham Storck (fig. 12), for example, offers many sight lines to the viewer, and at least two pathways that meander through the painting. Many more sight lines can be identified with characters in the painting, who have gathered in private conversations with one another and interact with their animals throughout the scene. A woman standing sunlit in the middle of one of the pathways looks up at an approaching horseman and his page, whose backs are turned toward the viewer, but she may be peering out of the painting as well. The horseman has caught the attention of another man and his dogs, all three of which train their attention and movements from left to right across the painting, leading the eye to several more unrelated groupings of people and animals making their way along a different path.

Whether our attention falls on the content of a painting or on its surface may sometimes depend on how close we get to it. As the art historian Georges Didi-Huberman has pointed out, when we are dealing with a painting, we are dealing with “colored matter.”¹² When we get very close, we are able to see in some paintings bits and splashes of paint that appear not to signify anything at all and that may therefore be difficult to describe. As Didi-Huberman remarks, “There is something other than iconic detail in pictures.”¹³

If you get very close to Monet’s *Portal of Rouen Cathedral in Morning Light* (1894) (fig. 13), all you see are paint marks, something Didi-Huberman terms an “occurrence of self-presentation of painting itself.” From up close the paint marks are not in the background; they are front and center, and not nameable as subject matter. The details, or parts, of this painting do not allow easy enumeration, although they have a fascination all their own. As James Elkins describes, “An ordinary square inch in a Monet painting is a chaos, a scruffy mess of shapeless glints and tangles. His marks are so irregular, and so varied, and there are so many of them, that it is commonly impossible to tell how the surface was laid down.” None of the marks on the painting have names, he says, “they are all irregular and none is like any other.”¹⁴ Acquiring a detailed knowledge of this painting is thus not as simple as getting closer, identifying and accounting for the parts or pieces, and putting them back together. *Portal of Rouen Cathedral in Morning Light* comes together in a remarkable way if we move back away from the picture, even though the details remain an enigma.

Merleau-Ponty suggested that there is an “optimal” distance for viewing a painting that people naturally find as they move around in front of it.



As we have seen, however, moving relative to an artwork is not simply a matter of moving closer, or moving away, or right to left. We might, in our imaginations, move *inside* the space depicted in the painting, and around within that space from one viewpoint to another. We might in fact arrive at an “ideal” spot from which to look, but most of the time, rather than finding and staking out the “right” spot, we and our visitors will have to move in many directions, as the subject matter or the surface of the work—or both—prompts us.

The art historian Alex Potts applies similar insights to sculpture. In Potts’s view, what makes a sculpture compelling is the way it lends itself to “an intensified visual and kinesthetic engagement.”¹⁵ His book on *The Sculptural Imagination* is a history of sculptors who sought and theorists who described such engagement. The late-eighteenth-century philosopher and critic Johann Gottfried Herder’s essay “Sculpture” (1778) establishes the theme of Potts’s book, with its description of the ideal viewer as one who is constantly on the move, slowly probing the sculpture’s form. Herder emphasized above all the medium’s tactile dimension, describing a way of viewing that involves, at least metaphorically, touching the surfaces of the work. “Look at this art lover,” he writes, “sunk deep in his unsteady circling

FIGURE 12
Meindert Hobbema
Dutch, 1638–1709
Abraham Storck
Dutch, 1644–1708
A Wooded Landscape with Travelers on a Path through a Hamlet,
ca. 1665
Oil on canvas, 97.5 × 130.8 cm (38¾ × 51½ in.)
Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum,
2002.17



FIGURE 13
 Claude Monet
 French, 1840–1926
The Portal of Rouen Cathedral in Morning Light, 1894
 Oil on canvas, 100.3 × 65.1 cm
 (39½ × 25¾ in.)
 Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum,
 2001.33

of the statue. What does he not do to turn his seeing into feeling, to look as if he were feeling in the dark?" For Herder, the ideal viewer of sculpture in a sense apprehends the artwork as a blind person might: "Thus he glides around—his eye becomes a hand, the beam of light a finger."¹⁶

Potts describes how Canova, working at about the same time as Herder, addresses the challenge of enlivening the viewer's engagement by carefully designing the stance of his figures and manipulating their address to the viewer and their self-presentation in ways that prompt a kind of viewing similar to that described by Herder. He gives, as an example, Canova's *Venus Italica* (1804),¹⁷ which depicts the goddess apparently in the moment of being taken by surprise by an unseen interloper (implicitly, perhaps, by the viewer as voyeur) while bathing, dressing, or undressing. Venus is taking a small step forward, turning to her right and shifting her weight onto

her right foot, as she tries to cover her nakedness with her hastily collected clothing while looking sharply back over her left shoulder so her face is at a right angle to the direction in which her torso is facing. Thus, for Potts, any attempt to position ourselves in relation to the statue is "relentlessly split," as we feel equally drawn to the forward and rightward energy of the figure's bodily motion and by the intensity of her startled backward and leftward gaze. Moreover, in response to her position on a pedestal that raises her head above our eye level, "the viewer is driven to circulate round the statue, forever slightly frustrated in the search for some single stable image in which the figure fully discloses itself." Yet all the while, says Potts, Canova's meticulous attention to the finishing of the surface also subtly draws the viewer's attention away from the overall image and into a "free-floating engagement with its variegated surfaces and vividly shaped parts."¹⁸

Those who write about how to look at art tend to assume that people naturally move and view sculpture from many angles. But each sculpture directs the viewer in different ways. In contrast to Canova's often coy figures, some of Rodin's single figures aggressively impinge on the space around them. Rodin's *Iris* (ca. 1895), as the figure is currently displayed at the Musée Rodin in Paris, appears to leap upward, legs splayed, grasping the right foot with the right hand, and boldly thrusting itself into the space of the viewer.¹⁹ It is possible to imagine some viewers experiencing a back-and-forth movement, as the sculpture—strangely headless, one-armed, thighs emphatically splayed—both repels and attracts. The surfaces of Rodin's sculpture play a forceful role in this dynamic. Whereas the sumptuous surfaces of Canova's statues reveal themselves only through close observation, the vigorous modeling of Rodin's work is so immediately absorbing that it takes on a force of its own, almost demanding that the viewer move closer.

Potts describes the movement required in relation to sculptures as a "repetitive looping,"²⁰ as the viewer is drawn to circle the work again and again: "One moves right round a work back to the position where one was first standing, or moves in closer and gets absorbed by various local effects of surface shaping and texture and shadowing and then steps back again."²¹ Such movement gives a temporal dimension to looking at a work of visual art that is especially enhanced by freestanding sculptures which, unlike most paintings, cannot be perceived as a whole in a single look. The artworks are fixed; the temporal dynamic arises from "moving round, scanning, shifting the focus of one's attention from this aspect or bit of the work to another, or entering or leaving the visual and spatial field where the work begins to assert itself."²²

Potts points out that sculptural works sometimes address the viewer in surprising or even contradictory ways. He notes that Alberto Giacometti's later work plants itself directly in our space and faces us, rather than sitting and waiting for someone to "come across" it.²³ Giacometti's standing female figures look out in one direction—straight ahead (see fig. 16)—which naturally brings the viewer around to face them. But their address fails natural expectations when the viewer perceives that the head is squeezed flat, reducing the frontal view and all its facial features to a thin slice of sculpted material (see "Moving Closer to Giacometti's *Standing Woman*," page XX).

Developments in modern art, particularly in sculpture, have made the admonition to move around in museum galleries a commonplace behavior. The practice of making self-contained sculptural objects has given way to an emphasis on site-specific installation and display that unavoidably involves the viewer spatially and kinesthetically as well as intellectually. The actual structure of a work of art is no longer entirely located in its form, but is instead partly defined by the viewer's encounter with it.²⁴ As Potts writes, "Now that we are attuned to envisaging sculpture as something existing in our space that activates a potentially endless flow of shifting apperceptions, it is apparent that earlier figurative or object sculpture often presented itself to be viewed in such a way."²⁵ Although the strong emphasis on installation in contemporary sculpture is relatively new, some writers anticipated Potts's insight some years before the installation wave hit museums. Rosalind Krauss's *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, for example, published in 1977, revisited Rodin's and Brancusi's objects to show how they could come alive for a present-day sensibility that brought into play contingent dimensions of viewing. Such considerations can open up our understanding of even earlier sculptures just as effectively. Giambologna's serpentine figures, for example, seems to have been purposefully designed to involve viewers in circular movement (see fig. 17). In Potts's view, it is precisely this "instability" of a viewer's encounter with a three-dimensional work that always "has been integral to any affective and conceptual power it might have."²⁶

Instead of presenting museum galleries as places to move and explore, we tend to treat them as places to be still and restrained. For "class management" reasons we are accustomed to asking groups of students to sit down in one place on the floor in front of a painting. But exigencies of class management ought not to determine how students experience the museum and the art on display there. When students are seated in a gallery, not only are they usually positioned several feet below eye level in relation to the works but also looking against light reflected off the surface of a painting or

the glass that covers it. Visitors' natural inclination will be to move, and we need to find ways to allow them to do so. Every work of art and its situation is unique, and the directions we give must take into account the particular characteristics of each one. One painting asks to be seen from up close, another coalesces only when seen from across the gallery. A sculpture may allow a viewer to walk inside, under, or through it (as some Calder stables do), or even above or on top of it (like Carl André's floor pieces). One demands a frontal view while another prescribes a circular path. A few, in fact, invite us to sit or stand in one place to contemplate them.

The culture of museums, with security guards at every threshold, tends to impose restraint on the way visitors move while inside the galleries. Thus a kind of slow-motion ballet occurs as people move around one another as well as among the works. How do we insert ourselves, our visitors, and our students into this movement? How much space do we take? How forcefully can we project our own motion into the space?

If we want visitors and students to engage with art objects and to explore them through movement, we must be clear in our own minds how that might occur. Movement actually starts from the moment a person arrives at the museum. Once a museum staff member greets adult visitors or students for a gallery tour or a school lesson, what path does the educator take to the first work to be observed? How quickly does the leader move? Do we walk right up to a particular piece or take a moment to observe an installation from across the room before moving forward? Will we ask visitors to change positions, to move back and forth, side to side?

The words we use to direct our groups are important. How do we ask them to move closer? Do we simply say, "Come closer"? Or "Take a little time to look from both close up and far away"? Or do we watch them move and then say "Stop!—Now take a look from close up and then far away"? Do we gather a new collective movement in an adjacent gallery and then continue it into the present one?

As exemplified by the student exercises described throughout this chapter and elsewhere in this book, museum spaces can be interesting places for moving around and exploring. As we look at and talk about a work of art, it quickly becomes a moving target, changing before our eyes. As facilitators, we have been moving, too—moving our heads and eyes as we scan each object, moving our bodies, too, as we travel around a work and sometimes into it. We move because we are not satisfied with a first impression and want to see more; we feel physically as well as intellectually restless. We move because the work of art moves us from one place

Moving Closer to Giacometti's *Standing Woman*

A group of high school students ascends the large staircase in the Getty Museum's entrance hall. We reach the top and line up along the railing. We ask the group to look out across the rotunda and share what they notice; their observations flow right out: windows, ocean, people, light, grids, plants, white walls, stone, columns . . . a sculpture. We invite the students to keep their observations in mind as we descend the stairs. We reconvene on the main level, forming a straight line perpendicular to and approximately twenty feet away from Alberto Giacometti's 1960 *Femme Debout I (Standing Woman I)* (fig. 16). "Very quickly," one of the leaders tells them, "Going down the line, we would like you to say the first words that come to mind when looking at this sculpture."

One by one, the students state their observations: "thin" . . . "dark" . . . "tall" . . . "woman" . . . "skinny" . . . "primitive" . . . "naked" . . . "black" . . . "strong" . . .

Finally, we invite the students to come up as close as possible to the sculpture, taking time to circle around it. "Perhaps you will see something in this that you didn't notice until now," we suggest. They continue to circle the sculpture a couple more times. One student observes that the sculpture nearly disappears in its profile view. Another notices that the artist has worked on the back as much as the front, pointing out the sculptor's fingerprints preserved in the bronze casting process. Some notice anatomical details that suggest the figure's gender, such as the breasts and hips, yet another remarks, "I didn't even see a woman at all. The face looked so aggressive

and masculine to me, I wasn't even paying attention to the anatomy. Only when I got closer did I notice the shape of the breasts. But there's nothing feminine about it."

We start to parse out the meaning behind their observations. Lilit prompts the students, "I'm curious what resonates with you about this sculpture as you've moved from far away to close up, and now are circling around it."

"It's so tall," responds one student, "it looks like it could go on forever. And it's so overpowering."

"Yes," Lissa adds, "she towers over us, looming over this space. The artist has created a figure that—even in the grand entrance to the museum with hundreds of visitors going about—is compelling to us. She has a commanding and dominating presence. And part of the reason for this is because Giacometti originally intended this sculpture to be displayed in a very public space, the Chase Manhattan Plaza in New York City, where people would interact with the sculpture every day."

"It reminds me of a shadow," someone suggests.

"Yeah . . ." others concur.

"Funny you should say that," Lilit responds, "since Giacometti had a chance encounter in Paris, when he noticed the attenuated silhouette of a woman against a wall, and he was so deeply impressed by this moment that it transformed his work for the next three decades."

As the students change their physical positions, their perspectives on the sculpture alter as well. "From one angle, she looks powerful and godlike to me," says one, "but from the side it reminds me of starvation . . .



FIGURE 16
Alberto Giacometti
Swiss, 1901–1966
Femme Debout I
(*Standing Woman I*), 1960
Bronze, 267.3 × 34.3 × 54.9 cm, 54.8852
kg (105¼ × 13½ × 21¾ in., 121 lb.) © Artists
Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP
/ FAAG, Paris
Gift of Fran and Ray Stark
Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum,
2005.107

to another. We stop to discuss the work, but it eludes being conclusively fixed. We do not all agree on what we see. At times it might seem that we are looking at different objects, and we strive to reassure ourselves that we are not. We cannot hope to see any work exactly as it is, “behind the appearances.” As Merleau-Ponty reminds us, for an object “to reach perfect density, in other words if there is to be an absolute object, it will have to consist of an infinite number of perspectives compressed into a strict co-existence, and to be presented as it were to a host of eyes all engaged in one concerted act of seeing.”²⁷ Clearly, we never expect to attain such a goal. But through the points of view revealed by moving around the work, and through the exchange of perspectives with others, we hope to see it as fully as we possibly can.

NOTES

- 1 Cited by Komarine Romdenh-Romluc, in the *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology of Perception* (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), 22.
- 2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962; all citations are to the 2002 Routledge Classics repr. ed.), ix.
- 3 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 77.
- 4 Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 158, cited in Gallagher and Zahavi, *Phenomenological Mind*, 107.
- 5 Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 19.
- 6 John Dewey, “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology,” *Psychological Review* 3 (1896): 357–70; see also Gallagher and Zahavi, *Phenomenological Mind*, 109.
- 7 Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 1.
- 8 Holland Carter, “Tuning Out Digital Buzz, for an Intimate Communion with Art,” *New York Times*, March 16, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/19/arts/artsspecial/tuning-out-digital-buzz-for-an-intimate-communion-with-art.html>.
- 9 Michael Podro, *Depiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 61.
- 10 Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 105.
- 11 The canvas is in the collection of Neue Pinakothek in Munich (Ernst von Siemens Kunstfonds/Art Foundation, Bayerisch Staatsgemäldesammlung/Bavarian State Painting Collections). The full title in German is *Fichtendickicht im Schnee (Aus der Dresdner Heide I)* (Pine Thicket in Snow [From the Dresden Moorland I]), reproduced at <https://www.sammlung.pinakothek.de/en/artist/caspar-david-friedrich/fichtendickicht-im-schnee-aus-der-dresdner-heide-i>.
- 12 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 149.

- 13 Did-Huberman, 143.
- 14 James Elkins, *What Painting Is* (London: Routledge, 1999), 12–13.
- 15 Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 1.
- 16 Quoted in Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, 29.
- 17 This sculpture is in the collection of the Museo Correr in Venice, whose website offers no image of it. However, a good photograph of the work is available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Venus_Italica_by_Antonio_Canova_-_Museo_Correr_-_Venice,_Italy.jpg.
- 18 Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, 42.
- 19 This sculpture is in the collection of the Musée Rodin, Paris, and two images of it are at <http://www.musee-rodin.fr/en/collections/sculptures/iris-messenger-gods>.
- 20 Potts, 195.
- 21 Potts, 197.
- 22 Potts, 198.
- 23 Potts, 122.
- 24 Potts, 3, 8.
- 25 Potts, 12.
- 26 Potts, 23.
- 27 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 80–81.