



CULTURAL ADVENTURES AT OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

or

How to Survive and Even Thrive on a
Visit to an Art Gallery

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"I could have done that." Rhetoric 150 student

"I don't get it." Woman in black coat.

As an occasional attendant for the Oakland University Art Gallery, I have the opportunity to observe the behavior of visitors both seasoned and novice. For first-timers, the gallery seems intimidating and many approach it as carefully as if they were stepping through a minefield. Newcomers cautiously poke their heads through the doorway, hesitating at the threshold. Others breezily walk in but jerk to a halt when they read the sign on the clear acrylic box that says *Suggested Donation \$2*. "Oh," they say, "there's a charge," and beat a hasty retreat. Bolder visitors gaze questioningly at me –I'm sitting behind a desk– as if to ask permission to enter. I give them a reassuring smile and invite them in. Some people huddle at the desk and talk in whispers. "You don't have to whisper," I say, smiling. "We're not a library." They laugh a small, embarrassed laugh. Thankfully, many visitors do make it past the donation box and attendant desk. The entry hazards behind

them, they can now stroll and take in what the space has to offer.

But once inside, new adventures await, adventures that some successfully negotiate and others do not. For many of the uninitiated, visiting an art gallery poses a special challenge: how to look at, understand, and maybe even (gasp!) appreciate a piece of art.

To be fair, I myself question some artwork even though I do my best to approach all art with an open mind. And yes, sometimes I thoroughly dislike an exhibit or a particular piece, or I'm just indifferent to it. I have my prejudices and preferences like everyone, but I also have the advantage of having taken classes in art appreciation, which, as the name implies, actually does help one understand and appreciate art. But mainly I just like to see what artists are up to these days and to walk through the doors of a gallery or museum with a spirit of curiosity and open-mindedness.

But after listening to select visitors' comments, I have concluded that many people's idea of art is limited to paintings, drawings or sculpture that depict realistic subjects, that is, no abstraction. Figures, portraits, landscapes, and other traditional subjects are *safe*. Everyone understands a bowl of fruit on a table or a man and woman in front of a house, the man holding a pitchfork. If the artist spent many hours toiling over canvas, painstakingly recreating every detail with each intimate brushstroke, then the painting is deemed *real art*. But if the subject is unrecognizable or if the painting or drawing is relatively *simple*, i.e. just a few lines or splotches of paint, then it's not *real art*. All too often I see visitors race through the gallery, spending a few seconds in front of a piece or not even stopping at all as they circumnavigate the space at gazelle speed. The final and ultimate dismissal becomes *I could have done that myself*. And the viewer walks away in disdain.

Critics of Oakland University Art Gallery exhibits aren't the only ones in history objecting to "questionable" works of art. The first public exhibit of work by a group of then-unknown artists including Cezanne, Monet, Degas, and Renoir

(*a bunch of lunatics* one observer of the time noted) received acerbic reviews. “Try to explain to Monsieur Renoir that a woman’s torso is not a mass of decomposing flesh with those purplish-green stains,” wrote art critic Albert Wolff in 1874 after the second exhibition of Impressionist paintings in France (Diepeveen 215). Having been rejected by the Salon—the annual French state-sponsored exhibition that offered a rare opportunity for artists to reveal their work to the public—the motley group of painters decided to take their fate in their own, oil-stained hands, and organized their own exhibition. One critic, Louis Leroy, first used the term “Impressionist” in critiquing Monet’s “Impression Sunrise.” The artist painted in what would become characteristically impressionistic—sketchy, short brushstrokes. “Wallpaper in its embryonic state is more finished,” Leroy wrote (Impressionism.info). *Real art* to the people of France had always been composed of hard edges, smooth surfaces, and symmetrical, idealized images and compositions. Who then did these art heretics think they were, slapping bright hues on the canvas and creating unfinished, blurry scenes? Today, the paintings of Claude Monet and his cohorts are prized and beloved by art lovers the world over. And they fetch millions. In 1998, Monet’s 1874 *Canotiers a Argenteuil* went for \$9.02 million at auction (Decker).

Many who visit the gallery enjoy themselves and spend time communing with the offerings. Unfortunately, however, a significant percentage ascribe to the *I could have done that* school of thinking. A variation on this comment is *That looks like something my five-year-old did*, or the other all-important consideration, *I wouldn’t hang that over my sofa*.

What exactly does artwork demand of us? Isn’t it totally subjective, this business of judging art? How much time does one need to spend in order to “get it?” The answer to the third question depends, at least partly, on an artwork’s medium. If it’s a video production, for example, then one would have to watch the whole thing before rendering judgment. But with paintings, photographs, or other static objects, we decide how much time we need to absorb the work.

Occasionally someone asks my opinion of a piece s/he clearly does not approve of and I seize on the opportunity to suggest a few ideas. If I've spoken to the artist, I might say a few words about his or her personality or other tidbit I might have gleaned. I might wax eloquent about what the exhibit as a whole is saying and suggest looking at the piece within that context. Or I might point out how a piece was constructed. In other words, I encourage looking at the work from different perspectives, rather like walking around a sculpture to see it from various angles. I don't know if I've enlightened anyone with my mini lectures but it makes me feel good to play the part of art advocate. If art could climb onto a soap box, here is what it might say:

Even if you don't particularly like what you see, or if you hate it, or if you have no idea what you're looking at, at least take a look at the material used to construct it, or the technique the artist used. Can you imagine the artist making this piece in her studio? Someone made this with her own hands, was inspired to create it. There is something to be said for letting art speak for itself, but when all else fails, read the artist statement.

Remember that whether or not you would hang something above your sofa in your living room does *not* necessarily define art. Artists like to express themselves and react to the world at large. Their art reflects their particular time in history, so art can be political, social, or environmental in addition to decorative. Consider that the art might be trying to say something; its purpose could be more than to match the green carpet and peach walls. Give it a second chance and maybe even give it credit for being daring, distasteful, or downright disturbing. Don't let a little cow dung or a few tiny photos of buttocks on a canvas ruin your whole day.

And finally, some artwork *is* truly easy to take in at a glance, for example, say, a contemporary piece that depicts a single dot on a canvas. For these works you have my permission to spend no more than fifteen seconds. But other works de-

serve your full attention for a longer period of time. If it's a complicated piece and if there are numerous elements and obvious craftsmanship, a quick walk-by won't do. Stop, shift your weight onto one foot or whatever you do to get comfortable standing up, and start looking. Don't leave until your eyes have scanned the whole piece. The artist went to all that trouble to create the piece. The least you can do is get to know it. And really, why did you even come in the first place if not to give some of your time and attention?

You don't have to be an art history major or artist to appreciate an art exhibit, but openness and a tiny bit of curiosity are helpful. You don't have to love every work of art you see. Art is after all, much like anything else in life. Some art is good, some is awful, some is exquisite, and the exquisite stuff really sticks with you. I recall a sculpture I saw in a contemporary art museum in Los Angeles about 20 years ago that made a huge impression on me. It was a sculpture composed of a block of frozen pebbles shaped like an upside-down pyramid and suspended from the ceiling several feet over multiple guitar strings stretched out in a frame underneath. As the pyramid gradually melted and the pebbles intermittently fell to earth, they randomly struck the guitar chords and produced musical notes. It was a living work of art. I was mesmerized. Other artworks are almost like old friends that I reacquaint myself with periodically, like the Diego Rivera frescoes at the Detroit Institute of Art. Not everyone would agree on what constitutes awful art, or *good* art for that matter, but what would life or art be, without those gradations?

Here is my advice, then, to anyone, but especially to artshy people, on visiting an art gallery or museum. Walk in like you own the place, check your need for propriety, home décor, and realism at the door, read the artist statements and signs so you get an idea of what you are looking at, and saunter (no running allowed) through the space. After you've given something a fair shot, go ahead and say (to yourself) *I hate this!* Or *I like this!* Or *This is stupid!* You never know what you might find

at these places and you just might walk out a slightly different person.

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