

Reasons for Looking

BY DAVID MASELLO



The day before I was to be put under by a surgeon for the first time ever, I headed to New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art to see my favorite paintings. I visited Bronzino's portrait of an imperious poet holding a volume of verse, I sought out George Caleb Bingham's scene of two men and a bear cub skimming the mirrored surface of the Missouri River, and I stood at the threshold of the room extracted from an 18th-century Syrian palace and listened to a splashing fountain, its source a play with faux sunlight streaming through stained-glass windows.

I wandered galleries with walls stacked with small, so-called "minor" 19th-century European paintings that depict men wandering in storms, moonlit Scandinavian ports, and figures milling about Roman ruins. I climbed the Louis Sullivan staircase from the former Chicago Stock Exchange, where my maternal grandfather had worked. I peered into cases of eerily modern, yet ancient, Cycladic figures, and I stood before Thomas de Keyser's mandolin-carrying musician, Pieter de Hooch's boy gathering sheaves of golden wheat, and Anthony Van Dyck's tall portraits of young gents wearing fanciful boots. And, for the first time, I noticed at eye level a well-shaped leg, lightly haired, of a male figure in a 16th-century Italian Renaissance picture.

The question I can only partly attempt to answer by addressing my own thoughts is: Why it is that people seek out paintings and other artworks, to look at over and over?

For me, this means figurative paintings with discernible details. I have almost no interest in abstraction. I might even disdain most of it. How is it possible, I wonder, to feel anything for the suggestions of ghastly, emaciated figures in a de Kooning or a graffitied Basquiat or any of an almost limitless supply of abstractions that fill galleries and museums' "contemporary" wings? Why would I want to look at an assemblage of colors, streaks, or indeterminate shapes? I won't even address the issues of technique or talent, but simply the visceral one of having to look at something that doesn't show anything. If I want to look at blocks of color, I'll examine the paint chart at Home Depot. For abstract sculptural shapes, I can shine a flashlight under my sink to illuminate the snakings of pipes and valves.

Attributed to Carlo Dolci (1616-1687)

The Blue Madonna

n.d., Oil on canvas, 21 x 15 1/4 in.

John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota

At a retrospective of conceptual art at the Brooklyn Museum, I saw "artworks" that included an index card with a piece of tape affixed to it, another that consisted wholly of a circle drawn in chalk on the floor and, beside it, a different "installation" of a dried pool of a quart of white glossy paint. At a Brooklyn forum for young artists, I was presented with a work that was meant to record the sound of dust, though the microphones in place were intentionally shut off (I can't remember why). When I read about the methodology of those works or the artists'





Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641)

Robert Rich (1587-1658), Second Earl of Warwick

c. 1632-35, Oil on canvas, 81 7/8 x 50 3/8 in., with added strip of 2 1/8 in. at top
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City

large enough to fill the expanse from floor to ceiling. Some were “streak” paintings, whereby she had applied thin paint to the top of the canvas and let it run as far as it would go, while others were, well, I can’t even recall them now, even though they hung in my home not so long ago. And, yet, to have those enigmatic works made me feel, to be honest, more sophisticated when people I didn’t know well came into my home. I never apologized for the abstraction in ways that I do still for realism.

MY FATHER KNOWS BEST

I remember when my father came to New York on a trip. At the time, he was 81, had taken the train from Florida to Manhattan, and was tired from the long trip. But the moment I brought him into my apartment, the first time he had seen it, he walked right over to the largest of the drip paintings and stood as close as possible — before even looking out my 18th-floor window at the East River. I told him that the works were by Mac’s mother, Betty Sapp Ragan, and was about to apologize for their abstraction — just as I sometimes hear myself apologizing now for realism when I suspect the looker is judging me.

I watched my father as he examined the painting in silence. After a few minutes, he turned to me and said, “I don’t understand it, but I can tell the girl’s got talent.” The girl, my mother-in-law, was 64. And when I told her about my father’s remark, she grinned with the joy of an artist whose work has been admired — as well as that of an older woman still called a girl.

I loved my father and we had a strong bond, but I would never have thought him a fan of abstraction. He was a first-generation Italian-American, a World War II vet, who had retired to a Florida townhouse in a working-class development called Bent Tree (“Talk about a misnomer,” he would complain, “not even a bent twig in sight”). Whenever I would visit him, I would drive us to Sarasota’s Ringling Museum of Art, a lovely Venetian-style complex with acres of manicured grounds. As we toured the galleries of Renaissance and Baroque artworks, my father would say, too loudly, as he was hard of hearing, “You can have your Frenchmen and Spaniards. When it comes to art, nobody beats the Italians.” And as other people would turn to see who had uttered such a remark, my father would continue, thumbs hooked in his belt loops, looking closely at the canvases, his favorite being Carlo Dolci’s *Blue Madonna*.

On other trips I took to his part of Florida, I brought my father to all of the major art venues, including the St. Petersburg Museum of Fine Arts and the Tampa Museum of Art. Every time, I would be surprised to see my father wandering ahead of me, carefully reading labels describing a Greek krater or English teapot or preliminary sketch of a cherubic angel. He was so used to living in a seemingly infinite landscape of fast-food franchises and car dealerships that, perhaps, to see something original — one-of-a-kind, handmade, non-commercial — captivated him, provided a visual relief.

I am grateful for having taken my father on such excursions, and when I think about our times together, I get especially wistful recalling the eagerness with which he would tour the galleries, so hungry for the goods on the walls that he couldn’t even wait for me to follow. I would often buy postcards in the shop to remind him of his favorite paintings; when I cleaned out his apartment after his death, I found them affixed to the refrigerator and arrayed on his bedside table, especially the *Blue Madonna*, which was as much a painting he admired as a domestic religious icon.

intentions, I can be mildly engaged, but to see them on their own, with no explanations of “meanings” and intents, and with no context for why they are what they are, I find that there is nothing to respond to — no beauty, no drama, no narrative, no color.

To admit this is near blasphemy, especially from someone who writes about art. It’s as though you are not permitted to evidence a lack of interest in abstraction. To admire the figurative and representational is the mark of someone unsophisticated and conventional. I am sophisticated. And I don’t say that with the haughtiness evidenced in the pose of Bronzino’s aforementioned poet. I have met grad students studying art history who readily dismiss my admiration for new work that is representational. I know what the silence means from people I don’t know well who come into my apartment and look at my collection of decidedly representational paintings and say ... nothing. A distinguished art history professor, now retired, recently entered my living room, put on his half glasses even before I had finished hanging his coat, scanned my four walls, and, with no comment, took a seat and requested a drink. Not even polite praise for what I had chosen to have in my home.

For years, I lived with abstract paintings filling those same walls. The mother of my former partner, Mac, is a distinguished artist, and when he and I were still living together, every wall bore her works, many



Caravaggio (Michelangelo Merisi, 1571-1610)

The Cardsharps

c. 1595, Oil on canvas,
37 1/16 x 51 9/16 in.

Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

There is a lot of bad — really bad — representational art, so bad that it can depress you and leach any inspiration you may feel. That famous line by Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart about being able to know pornography when you see it applies to bad art, too. It's not always easy to articulate why you know an artwork is bad, but you know it right away.

But there is just as much, if not more, bad abstract, installation, conceptual, minimalist, and other “ist” art out there — though here I find it harder to determine the bad from the not-bad. I can hear explanations of why Jeff Koons's three basketballs floating in a tub of water at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art is important, or why I should marvel at it, but I will never seek it out again. Nor those plywood planks by John McCracken leaning against a wall in another LACMA gallery; apparently they qualify as art, though they appear to be something left by a lazy workman. We can all recite our own tales of absurd art, each a punch line — dozens of Slinkys set to march beneath rusted box springs; self-portrait photos of a woman's anus (one of them embellished with a hemorrhoid); chandeliers of wax-encased, taxidermied pheasants; toxic chemicals pooling on a tarp (one of the winners at the last Whitney Biennial, which spurred a little boy to ask, “Mommy, is it finished?”).

So why do I love paintings? Over the years, I have encountered facile descriptions of how paintings are like windows into other scenes. That is a convenient idea, and partly accurate. But it's not completely right, at least for me. I don't look at a gallery wall (or my living room's walls) as a kind of advent calendar of images.

I love paintings because they often show me something unfamiliar, but I can just as easily say I love paintings that show me something that *is* familiar — a New York cityscape, perhaps, or the kind of handsome young man I could easily spot on a Manhattan street who has been depicted by the artists Billy Sullivan or Elizabeth Peyton.

In part, I love paintings because they reveal the talent of an artist able to depict something with materials that, to me, seem unwieldy — brushes that bend and spread, canvases that bounce with the application of paint, pigments that bleed and run. So part of my love is simple admira-

tion for someone doing something that I cannot.

The right subject matter tells me, too, that a painter has a poetic sensibility, an attribute I admire above almost all others. That a painter chooses to depict, record, interpret, reveal a certain scene tells me that he or she had a kind of epiphany, and chose to work on articulating it, despite the inherent difficulty of doing so. I respect that. An 18th-century man sitting at a desk, reading by an oil lamp. A boy bringing bread to his mother in the courtyard of their house in 17th-century Amsterdam. A couple crossing a Parisian boulevard in the rain. A young man giving a piano lesson to a girl in a darkened parlor. There are many, many

scenes I can see before me that I saw in paintings and that I will always be able to recall — akin, in some ways, to the poems I have memorized and hear myself reciting in the dentist's chair or during a bumpy flight or just prior to a surgery. These are visual moments of poetry. There is, after all, that famous saying by the ancient Greek philosopher Simonides that “Painting is silent poetry and poetry painting that speaks.”

And there is the idea, too, that paintings are not just objects that appeal to the visual sense. Subconsciously, every sense is activated when looking at a great work of art. Overtly or discreetly, we smell and taste the foods arrayed on a table in a Dutch still life — just as, perhaps, we hear the voice of a figure we find appealing in a painting. When looking at a painting we love, a consortium of senses comes into play, vision simply being the first one activated.

While we do want definitive answers — and cures — for an illness, a happy ending to a movie, or an admission of love from someone we love, it seems that the best art is that for which answers are never provided. The subject matter itself is unfinished. Many of my favorite artworks are ones in which the action is ongoing, not finished. The cardsharp in Caravaggio's painting of that name is still playing with his naive charge. Rocketing cypress trees bend with the wind in a Hopper painting. The fountain is flowing in that Syrian palace room.

As for that (successful) surgery, I didn't “see” any of those works from the Met while I was under. As anyone who has experienced general anesthesia knows, you instantaneously enter a black void, and, well, if that's what death is like, it's going to be okay.

But when you awaken, you're so grateful that it's all done and you are so focused on opening your square of saltines and sipping your apple juice that thoughts of painted and sculpted figures don't immediately come to mind. You're happy instead to have your own body to care for, and to admire that friend who has come to take you home. What a painting that figure and scene would make. ■

DAVID MASELLO is a contributing writer to *Fine Art Connoisseur*. New essays and features by him appear in *American Arts Quarterly*, *The New York Times*, and *Milieu*, of which he is executive editor.